

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

&

THE SOLEMNITY OF ST. JOSEPH

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Sunday

HOW CHRIST PREPARES US TO FOLLOW HIM

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Ephrem the Syrian

Jesus took three apostles up a mountain for three reasons. First, he wanted to show them the glory of his divinity. Second, he wanted to declare plainly that he is Israel's redeemer. Third, he wanted to prevent the apostles from being scandalized at seeing him endure the many sufferings he freely accepted for our sake. Note that he accepted them for OUR sake. All that he did applies as much to us as it did to the apostles.

The apostles knew Jesus was human but they did not know him as God. In their experience, he was the son of Mary, a human being who shared their daily life in this world. On the mountain, he reveals that he is the Son of God, that he is actually God. Peter, James, and John were familiar with the sight of their master eating and drinking, working and resting, growing tired and falling asleep, breaking out in a sweat, and experiencing fear. All these things naturally go with humanity, but not with divinity. That is why he took them up a mountain and enabled them to hear the Father's voice calling him "Son". He showed that he is truly the Son of God and himself divine. He does this for us as much as for the apostles.

Jesus took these disciples up the mountain so they would see his kingship before they witnessed his passion. He showed his mighty power before they watched him die. He revealed his glory before they beheld his humiliation. When he was taken captive and condemned to the cross, those who witnessed these things would understand that it was not due to a lack of power on Jesus' part but because he permitted himself to be crucified by his enemies. He does this for us as much as for the apostles.

Jesus freely chose to suffer as he did for the world's salvation. He takes us all up this mountain even before his resurrection and reveals the glory of his divinity so that when he was risen from the dead in that same divine glory all would realize that this was not something given him as a reward for his labors, as if he had previously been without it. That glory had been his with the Heavenly Father from all eternity, as is clear from the words he spoke as he approached his passion: "*Father, glorify me now with the glory I had with you before the world was made.*"

Those who follow Jesus must follow him to the cross as surely as to his glory. We must be prepared to accept our humanity as we acknowledge our sins. We must be prepared to take up our cross and carry it every day until we have suffered all that is required to "*fill up the sufferings of Christ for his Church*". We must believe that we will be raised up with Christ in the same way we suffer with Christ. We have not been saved from suffering. Because we share with Christ we need not be afraid of what we are to suffer. We too suffer with Christ for the salvation of the world and through this, we humans will share in the glory of divinity. Do not be afraid. Christ is with us always.

Monday

THE HOPE TRUST GIVES US

A reflection based on a text by Anselm Romb

Something like twenty-three centuries ago someone wrote the prayer which is the substance of the first reading at today's Eucharist. A Jew, living in exile in Babylon, and suffering all sorts of difficulties and trials, as a result, confesses that God knows how to bring great good out of suffering, including that of the entire Jewish community of faith. Think of all that Christians around the world, and the Church as a community, are suffering right now. Then pray this prayer.

Do you see the good that God is going to bring to all concerned out of what seems only tragedy today? None of us can say we do. But are will willing to hope, simply because we trust in God and God's love as revealed to us in Jesus' life, death and resurrection? If you can do this for the tragic events you read or hear about daily, can you accept the same hope for the sad events, tragedies, that happen to you and those you love? This is the kind of trust Jesus wants to give us. He learned it—as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us—"through suffering".

The Sacred Scriptures go on to tell us that Jesus counted all he suffered as unimportant in comparison to what was to come. But it comes only if one is justified in one's hope in God. We have to hope as Jesus did! When we stand before God to be judged no angel will come forward with a tape measure to see how much we have developed our brain capacity, how much religious and biblical knowledge we have. No angel will put that tape around our physical or spiritual muscles to see how much we have achieved for God and God's Church. What the angel will do is measure the largeness of our hearts—how they have grown in trust and hope, and compassionate and thankful love.

Jesus orders, in today's Gospel, not to condemn but be compassionate. Many waste time "condemning" God for allowing so much suffering; better to spend that time like Jesus loving those who need help here and now. Do we dare to hope that God is transforming not only our hearts but our world by showing us Jesus as he exercised compassion for the people of his time and place? We can hope so if—we are willing to walk in the same trusting hope Jesus did when he did deeds of mercy and kindness and healing.

We heard the prophet Daniel admit all the wrong things that Israel, as God's own people, had done. They had brought upon themselves disasters and all sorts of suffering. The exile (e.g.) was due to political machinations gone wrong; i.e., to trusting in self rather than God. Look what happened! Our opportunity to turn and return to God is today! Hope in God. God knows the way to abundant life, even from what seems a hopeless starting point. God has made a "merciful covenant" with us, a covenant of hope! Working together, the promise of that covenant will be ours and the entire world's.

Tuesday

GROWING SPIRITUALLY DURING LENT

Derived from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

There are many different ways of turning to God. All of them lead to heaven. So let's consider some of them.

The first is renouncing our personal sins. Scripture says, "Begin by confessing your sins if you wish to be justified." This prompted the prophetic words: "I said, I will confess my sins to the Lord, and you, Lord, have forgiven the wickedness of my heart". If we condemn our own sins we already have a good claim to forgiveness. By doing this we prevent ourselves from falling so easily into sin again. Make your own conscience your accuser if you want to avoid being accused before the Lord's tribunal on the Last Day.

A second way of turning to God is dismissing from our minds any injuries done to us, even those done by an enemy. To overcome anger, forgive the sins of your neighbor. Thus you shall be forgiven your own offenses against the Lord. Our Lord himself said, "If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive yours."

A third way of turning to God is open to you, if you are willing. It is to pray fervently and attentively from your inmost heart. And if you are interested in a fourth, I recommend to you the practice of giving generously to those in any kind of need. It is true, moreover, that if we live a life of simplicity and humility that will wear down our tendency to sin, and just as effectively as the four ways already mentioned. Recall the tax collector who had nothing to offer God but humility. It was enough to free him of a heavy burden of guilt.

I have now described five ways of turning to God, and showing your repentance. The first lies in condemning your own sins, the second in forgiving the offenses of others, the third in prayer, the fourth in giving help to those in any need, and the fifth is humility. This leaves no room for idleness. We have to walk these ways day after day. They are easy enough. Poverty or lack of this or that is no excuse. Even if one lives a life of destitution one is still able to restrain anger, to be humble, to pray unceasingly, and to condemn one's own sins, and to forgive others. In no way does lack of money or goods pose any difficulty. Recall the widow who had only two small coins to give. We give what God has given us. In doing this we live the mercy that we pray God to show us.

So we have before us the remedies for our ills and sins. All that remains is to put them to use, day after day and hour after hour. They will restore us to spiritual health. When we are restored we are ready to take part in the heavenly banquet, and with complete confidence in our welcome there. In great joy, we shall come face to face with the King of Glory. We shall gain everlasting blessings through the grace and mercy-filled love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Wednesday

ARE WE TRULY READY TO SHARE IN THE PASSION?

A reflection adapted from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

The Sons of Zebedee thought they had to be devious in asking Christ for the two most powerful positions in government of the Messianic Kingdom. "*Command that we may sit, one at your right hand and the other at your left.*" As the psalm says, with the devious the Lord is devious. Of course, the Lord is also wholly honest. "*You don't know what you are asking for!*", he tells them. Those who are greatest in the Kingdom are those who have given themselves most completely in service of others. Speaking indirectly, perhaps so as not to frighten them away, Jesus asks whether they are willing to drink the cup he will drink and be baptized in the way he will be.

James and John were thinking of power and prestige but Jesus could only think of hardships and service, of struggles and sweat. What do we think of when we imagine our life in God's Kingdom? Do we think clearly and carefully about the struggles and sweat it will cost us even to enter that Kingdom? James and John thought that with the Lord's resurrection the Kingdom would come, and in the way most Jews of their time imagined. It would be an earthly Kingdom with God's commands enforced strictly. For those in charge, under God and Jesus, there would be rewards and honors. These are what they wanted. But Jesus thinks of the Kingdom differently. Just as he will die for us, so many will die for the sake of that Kingdom before all struggle ends.

Notice how Jesus corrects and draws James and John to seek to share what he is about to undergo. If they can drink the cup they can shed their blood and if they can share Jesus' baptism they can give their lives as he is about to do. He is not speaking only to James and John but to us as well. We have our eyes fixed on rewards and what our Lord and Savior sees is the self-sacrifice that makes us capable of living those rewards.

God is love and utter self-giving. We are to become as God is. Without understanding, perhaps any better than they did, we will reply as they did. Yes, we are willing to drink Jesus' cup and be baptized as he was. Haven't we said this? Yet it's easy to talk about "dying with Christ" but that doesn't make it easy to do. Jesus treats martyrdom as a blessing and itself a kind of reward. Is that how we think of it? As for the positions, they don't involve the sort of power or prestige James and his brother imagined. God will show them what it is really like to have a "high" place in the Kingdom. He will show us as well. We must not look away when he describes it.

When the other special disciples of Jesus heard about this conversation they were immediately jealous. They didn't understand. They all thought that prestige in the Kingdom was competitive matter; and if one is raised up someone else is put down. That isn't the way things work with God. Jesus went to the cross, died and was raised up. What they expected didn't happen. James' high position in the Jerusalem church only made him die for Christ the sooner. Is that a special grace? Jesus speaks to all of us, inviting us to long for every suffering that can advance the coming of the Kingdom. Now it's our turn

Thursday

WILL GOD TREAT US AS WE HAVE TREATED OTHERS?

A reflection developed from a text by Rev. Helmut Thielicke

“There was a rich man who dressed in purple and feasted magnificently every day, and at his gate lay a poor man, covered with sores.” The mercy of God is boundless, but it is not offered without expectations. We live by the grace of God and the merit of Christ but one day comes finality, period. What if God then treats you as you have treated others? How have you treated those who, like Lazarus, needed your help? Have you ignored them? Then when they are in Abraham’s bosom they will not be able to come and help you.

The hour of God’s mercy will pass and how will you be found when it does? The merciless Rich Man is in hell and he feels something like love for his five brothers. But he can’t do anything about it any longer. The brothers carry on, living as he did without reflecting that their eternal destiny is at stake. It is a torment to have to imagine his brothers as with him in hell. But the dead can’t warn the living, though they could before they died.

Are we like the young people who won’t listen to their elders and so ignore one another’s needs? Am I one of the five brothers? Do I imagine a messenger will come from the beyond to confirm the truth of what I read in Scripture? The Rich Man was reminded that the Scriptures are there for his brothers, but how can he get them to pay attention to them and take them seriously? He can’t, once he has died. Yet if one returned from the dead, wouldn’t they just think they were hallucinating? Besides, God isn’t a shock therapist. God loves you and waits patiently for the free gift of your heart.

So we can’t look for one to appear to us from the dead. There will be no voice from heaven, no kind of miracles to force us to believe. We—you and I—have only the Word of God, that word made flesh and crucified. It is an almost nameless and quiet Word and it came in one who was as poor and despised as any brother or sister of ours, like Lazarus. In Jesus God truly wants to be our brother and sister, and that’s why there is no brass band to march before him and rivet our attention on his message. He is one of the despised and ignored.

Jesus wants to show us the despised and ignored, and those treated unjustly and deprived not only of rights but of even basic human respect. He calls us to love and help them. What you do to the least noticed, you do to me. And the hour when we will have to answer for what we have failed to do is coming and cannot be avoided. How are you preparing?

Friday

MATTHEW 21:33ff

Commentary by J. Danielou, S.J.

“Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people, Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, fenced it in, dug a wine-press in it, built a watchtower and then leased it to tenants and went abroad.” From the time of Moses to that of Solomon, the vine of Israel grew until it spread from the Lebanon to Egypt, and from the Jordan to the sea. That is the way God honors promises.

God’s hopes were all set upon this vine, that it should bear grapes. This is the key-signature of the Song of the Vine. Its theme turns wholly upon the hope that God has in human beings, the mystery of the divine expectations, primarily Israel’s expected response. Israel was the vine of the Lord’s planting and God looked to have grapes from it; but besides this all humankind is involved. The vine of Israel is a symbol for each one of us.\

The entire drama of sacred history is in the contrast of human unbelief and God’s fidelity. Just how far the chosen people would go in ingratitude is shown by St. Matthew in the parable of the wicked tenants. After waiting patiently for two thousand years, God at length sent the Son, in person, to save the vine at any cost. God thinks, “At least they will respect my Son”. But now, after all God’s disappointments throughout Sacred History, here is the crowning disappointment of them all.

Where the prophets had failed, Christ himself was to fail. God’s patience has been strained to its farthest limit in this tragedy of Christ, the Lord of the vine-yard’s own Son. The Son is rejected by the tenants, crucified, treated as a stranger and cast out by God’s own people. But from these lowest depths arises a sudden hope. God will let out the vineyard to other tenants, and they will pay what is due in the proper time.

The tragedy of God Friday, when Israel rejected the One who was sent, in God’s plan becomes the means whereby the vine planted in Israel will break out in a new and vigorous growth. In fact, it was to bring forth for the first time the fruit expected of it. Now through the passion and resurrection of Christ the true and faithful vine bears fruit. “I am the vine, you are its branches; if you live in me and I in you then you will yield abundant fruit; separated from me you have no power to do anything”.

The whole burden of the story of the chosen people was that humans are powerless to achieve for themselves the result that God expects of them. The purpose of the story is to deepen human desire and longing for the true vine. Then the true vine appeared, in the person of Jesus Christ. The grace of God bears its plenitude of fruit in Jesus. God can rest forever from his labors, now that human nature is bringing forth this incomparable harvest of holiness. The response which the people of Israel had never been able to give is now given in perfection by God in the humanity of Jesus Christ. All God’s pleasure is in Jesus Christ—the everlasting vine, the eternal source of satisfaction. “This is my beloved Son in who I am well pleased.” Jesus offers to share this with us. Follow Jesus. Become like Jesus.

Saturday

PREACHING BY DEEDS

A reflection by St. Pope John XXIII

Very often St. Joseph has been called the silent saint. That is because he never speaks in Scripture. What he does is work to fulfill God's will fully and exactly. If he thinks of calling off his marriage to Mary, it is because that seems God's will, as expressed by the Law of Moses. But then he is reminded in a dream that Mary is pregnant—or so she says—by the Holy Spirit. He is reminded he has to trust her faith and her honesty and so he changes his mind and dedicates the rest of his life to caring for her and Jesus.

It stirs me deeply to imagine Joseph's endless little deeds of caring for his family. Everything he does is seen as a way of fulfilling God's will for those he helps. Think of what this taught Jesus and how it affected what Scripture calls his growth in wisdom! This silent teaching will transform all we do daily if we follow it. We are shown what following God truly means and how much more there is to its meaning than the merely earthly results that work achieves. God chose to teach us this through Joseph.

Joseph also teaches a great lesson in serenity and trust. He had no more special revelations than any other person might have. He had to figure out what God was asking of him by carefully considering what he dreamed about. So, he accepted Mary into his home as his wife, then carried Jesus and Mary into Egypt and then used his skills to earn a living for them there. He didn't complain. When he dreamed the time had come to go back to Nazareth and start over once again, he did that without complaint. Whatever he concluded was God's will for him "now" he did generously and lovingly.

Most of us fear upsets in our lives. Joseph was ready to accept any change, no matter how unexpected it might be so long as he could see it as a way of doing God's will. A person of faith, as he shows us, doesn't hesitate in the face of fear and even uncertainty, let alone in the face of strangeness and situations never faced before. That is genuine trust in God. If God wants this or that then God can be trusted to show us how to use our skills and abilities to obey God and accomplish what God commands in spite of personal limitations.

Thinking of all this we see how faith makes us humble and how we find confidence precisely through that humility. Joseph lived as a collaborator with God in carrying out God's Plan of Salvation. He didn't have to understand anything more than that God was asking him to do this or that.

We kneel in reverence before the hidden glory of Joseph's family—before its real treasures of humility, self-sacrifice, openness to learning and to being responsive in love. There was also acceptance of trials and sufferings and unquenchable trust in God, no matter what was asked. How many people need these riches even more than food and drink and better housing. Let's not forget we are asked by God to share these inner treasures along with the more ordinary ones. We are called to share them first by living them, by deeds more than by mere words.