

THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

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Sunday

OUR MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

A reflection taken from St. Cyril's Commentary on Second Corinthians

Those who have been born in the Spirit have a sure hope that they will live forever in Christ and in glory. They have taken hold of a future life even now in the present world. Such persons say, "Outward appearances are no longer my standard of what is good or in judging anything. My life is in the Spirit and is guided by the Spirit." The light of the Only Begotten has shown upon us and we are being transformed as though we had re-entered our mother's womb to be born as a new creature. Now the bonds of death and the fear of death no longer hold us or control us but we have been set free from our former condition.

Through the Heavenly Father's will and grace, the mystery of incarnation has been revealed to us. For our sake, the Only-Begotten Son became human and put an end to our misunderstanding of death. Through Christ, we have gained access to the Heavenly Father. There is no other path to the fullness of life. What is more, "It is God who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who has given us a ministry of reconciliation." Our new life is a ministering of God's love so all can be reconciled and enter life in its fullness.

None of us lives simply in the flesh anymore. We live and understand our lives and selves in a new way. As St. Paul taught us, "Once we thought of Christ as being in the flesh but we do so no longer". We know Christ in the divine love he lived and the works of that love. It is a love impossible to the flesh but given us in God's grace. Christ himself passed through death, but "*having died once he will never die again; death has no more power over him any longer. His death was a death to sin, which he died once for all. His life is life with God*". What he is we are to become and by the same path of loving service. This is our joy, a joy no work of the flesh can give.

Since Christ has in this way become the source of life for us, we who follow in Christ's footsteps must not think of ourselves as merely living in the flesh. We have passed beyond it. In us, Christ is conceived and is growing until he is fully formed in us and we become other Christs. That is what we must lead others to by our ministry of reconciling them to God but showing them what it means to say that God is love. "When people are in Christ they become completely different; their old life is over and a new life has begun." These aren't my words but those of St. Paul and God's Spirit. As Christ was born of Mary to save us all, so Christ must be born in us for the salvation of many. Believe and you will be transformed into the minister of life and reconciliation to which God has called you.

Monday

LORD, GRANT US TRUSTING FAITH

A reflection adapted from a text by Anselm Romb

Do you take Isaiah's prophecies literally or do you think of them as just hyperbolic ways of calling us to trust in God's love? "Lo, I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth..". What will it be like? It appears that no infant will die without growing up and adults who die without reaching 100 will be thought accursed. People will live at peace in their homes and eat the produce they raise because there will be no war to destroy homes and exile people and make their lives miserable. It will be a kind of paradise.

Some very optimistic people think that the behavioral and natural sciences combined with technology will bring in a Golden Age. Our new ability to engineer the genetic codes and manipulate biological processes and the endless energy from fusion power will, they think, make a life god physically while psychologists heal our emotional and mental wounds so we can love one another and eliminate crime, and so on. Unfortunately, these powers seem to be taking us farther from paradise rather than bringing us closer to it.

In the Gospel we hear about a royal official, in other Gospels said to be a centurion, whose son is mortally ill. The man has come a good distance to ask Jesus to heal his son. Jesus simply tells him: "Go home. Your son is well." He believes Jesus! He turns around and begins the journey home believing that all is as Jesus said.

What has been missing in our planning for an earthly paradise is the invitation to Jesus to become part of our lives. The royal official didn't make fancy requests or construct arguments. He only pleaded for the life and health of his child. He sought out Jesus and asked him to become part of his life by sharing his concern for the sick child. When Jesus did, the man accepted the fact and headed home. He was met on the road and told that his child was well.

When we become concerned about the sick state of our world to whom do we turn? If we turn to Jesus what is our response when he tells us: I'm taking care of it. It will all be well. Do we take him literally or do we interpret him like many do Isaiah's prophecies, as hyperbole? The royal official whose story we heard took Jesus' statement literally and went back to his home and work sure that he would find all was well.

We believe that Isaiah prophesied in the name of God and that what he says will prove true—even if we're not sure just how to understand the process by which God will set things right, or the part we have to play in it. God has given us our orders: "Go about the work of your vocation. I have given it to you. Live your work in faith and do it in compassion and love. I will deal with what is too great for you." Is that what we're doing? We aren't to stop caring but only to stop trying. We believe that Isaiah prophesied in the name of God and that what he says will prove true—even if we're not sure just how to understand the process by which God will set things right, or the part we have to play in it. God has given us our orders: "Go about the work of your vocation. I have given it to you. Live your work in faith and do it in compassion and love. I will deal with what is too great for you." Is that what we're doing? We aren't to stop caring but only to stop trying to make the good things happen in our human way rather than relying on God.

Tuesday

HOW THE LORD LEADS US TO HEALING

A reflection excerpted from a homily by St. Bede the Venerable

Jesus had come to the pool named Probatica, and he saw there a person who had been sick for 38 years. The pool had five porticoes, reminding one of the five books of Torah and so of the Law of Moses intended to protect people from sinning. He had not been protected. It was likely also a pool where priests washed sacrificial offerings before burning them on the altar. In such a holy place of cleansing, it was believed, an angel came at times to stir the water and the first to enter after that stirring would be healed. But all the ill lying in the porticoes had been unable to get healed, just as they had failed to find the strength to avoid sin. They recognized their sin and Jesus had come to give the grace of forgiveness and inner healing. This applies to us as well.

Jesus came to one who had lain for 38 years unable to get the help needed to enter the waters and find healing. The number 38 is two short of 40, which is the and symbol for an entire lifetime, tells us how long it felt. How many of us are in this situation? Listen to the Lord, "*Get up, take your pallet and leave.*" If one has been waiting so long then it is time to listen to the Lord and do penance and find healing. What is the cure? One must help others as one needs others' help. No one had helped that poor man but now Jesus makes him able to help others. In doing this all the sins of his lifetime will be gradually healed.

Jesus' words mean we should renew our love for God. Love God with all your heart and soul and strength, and so make daily strides by good works. Never desert brothers or sisters in faith but try to help them toward the love of God and neighbor. "*Take up your pallet*" indicates that we should leave behind earlier sins and come to the aid of those who need our help. Be filled with hope for the coming of the glory of our Great God.

Yet some didn't help but only criticized. It was the Sabbath and they thought the healed one shouldn't "carry his pallet" on that day. They couldn't see a spiritual way of keeping the Law. By what he did the Lord suggested that whoever has been wasting away from a long-lasting habit of sin should take up the love of God and of neighbor. If you have suffered in this way, the gift of the Holy Spirit will enable you to rise up, especially on the Sabbath. Sin is what is most forbidden on the Sabbath; virtue is a path toward the healing of sinful ways.

Notice that later the Lord came into the Temple and saw the person who had been healed. Listen to his words, "*Look, you are healed! Sin no more lest something worse happen to you.*" He is not threatening or suggesting his illness was punishment for sin; Jesus points out that there are much worse things than physical infirmity. Sin leads to them. Do not torment yourself out of fear that every physical infirmity convicts you of sin. The Lord has forgiven your sin. He asks only that you cease to be paralyzed and unable to love God and neighbor. Do that and indeed you will live.

Wednesday

THE DAILY DEMAND OF BELIEVING

A teaching by Symeon the New Theologian

Many often say: If only we had lived in the days of the apostles and been counted worthy to gaze upon Christ as they did, we should have become holy like them. Such people do not realize that the Christ who spoke then and the Christ who speaks now, throughout the whole world, is one and the same Christ. If he were not the same then and now, God in every respect, in his operations as in the sacraments, how would it be seen that the Father is always in the Son and the Son in the Father, according to the words Christ himself spoke through the Spirit: “My Father is still working and so am I”?

No doubt someone will say that merely to hear his words now and to be taught about him and his kingdom is not the same thing as to have seen him then in the body. I answer that indeed the position now is not the same as it was then, but that our situation now, in the present day, is very much better. It leads us more easily to a deeper faith and conviction than seeing and hearing him in the flesh would have done.

Then he appeared to the uncomprehending people of Nazareth as a man of lowly station. Now he is proclaimed to us as true God. Then he associated with tax collectors and sinners and ate with them. Now he is seated at the right hand of God the Father and is never in any way separated from Him. Now we are firmly persuaded that it is he who feeds the entire world, and we declare—at least if we are believers—that without Him nothing came into being. Then even the lowliest held him in contempt, saying: “Isn’t this the son of Mary and of Joseph the carpenter?” Now kings and rulers worship him as Son of the True God, and himself as True God. Now he has glorified, and continues to glorify, those who worship him in spirit and in truth—although he often punishes them when they sin.

Now he transforms us, more than could all the nations under heaven, from clay into iron. Then he was thought to be mortal and corruptible like the rest of humankind, for he was no different in appearance from others. The formless and invisible God, without change or alteration, assumed a human form and showed himself a normal human being. He ate, he drank, he slept, he sweated, and he grew weary; he did everything other people do except that he did not sin. So for anyone to recognize him and to believe that he was the God, who made heaven and earth and everything in them, that was very exceptional.

It is certain that anyone who now hears Christ cry out daily through the Holy Gospels to proclaim the will of his blessed Father, but does not obey him with fear and trembling and keep his commandments—such a person might have refused to believe in him then. If that person had been present and seen him and heard him teach, there is indeed reason to fear that he would have regarded Christ not as true God but as an enemy of God. Indeed, we are blessed! Let us walk daily in this blessing and so in faith.

Thursday

ADVICE FOR LIVING THE LOVE OF GOD

Reflection by St. Mechtild

If any obstacle arises in our service of God, whether due to the attitudes of others or from external circumstances or from our own desires or memories or from whatever it may be, we are best advised to take this as a messenger from God. So we should thank him for it, sending it back to God—so to speak, with praise and thanksgiving of the sender. God is very pleased by those who seek refuge only in Him when trial and tribulation comes, with those who walk with Him in truth and let go of all that upsets the heart; put it in God's hands alone. Next to this God is pleased by those who never abandon a neighbor in need, who excuse a neighbor's shortcomings and even sins in so far as possible. All is God.

When it is time to eat or to sleep, or whatever, say in your heart: Lord, in union with that love with which you created this useful thing and gave it to me, and in union with that love with which you yourself made use of it when you were on earth, I accept it and use it for your never-ending praise and for my bodily needs. Doesn't the Blessed Virgin tell us: "If you wish to be truly holy, stay close to my son, for he is holiness and makes all things holy."

We should be lovingly grateful not only for the spiritual blessings God gives us, but for all bodily needs like food and clothing. We should receive them with a sincere and thankful heart and consider ourselves unworthy of them. We should thank God for everything that He has given to his Mother, and to the angels, and to us.

Deeds which give no human satisfaction may nevertheless be very pleasing to God. What best pleases our God in members of religious orders is the purity of heart, holy desires, gentle kindness in conversation, and deeds of charity. When you are alone, raise your heart constantly to God and speak with God and direct all your desires to God with great intensity. You can never be in so large a crowd that you are not also alone with God.

Those who receive from the Lord the gift of a fine orchard still cannot taste the fruit until it is ripe. Likewise, when one receives a special grace, interior joy is not experienced until by the practice of mortification one has pierced through the hard rind of its merely earthly pleasantness. Pass through everything that is not God, even if it is joy, and cling to God alone.

Friday

THE GIFT OF WAITING FOR GOD

A reflection developed from The Virtue of Patience by St. Cyprian

Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, said that he had come to earth to do the Heavenly Father's will. Among the virtues that best revealed his divine majesty was that of waiting upon the Father's will. We call it "patience" or "endurance". We human beings have to wait patiently for the times and circumstances which the Heavenly Father has appointed to come, though we find it hard not to have him grant our petitions immediately. The Eternal Son became human and bore with these as well as all the other frustrating and difficult aspects of being human.

Think of how Christ bore reviling and reproach, insult and mockery and even crucifixion and the shedding of his blood, and all for offenses he was not guilty of committing. Tormentors spit in his face and scourged him and denied the truth of almost all he had taught. He, the innocent one, the just one, was treated as an evil-doer, was slandered, and treated as of no worth because he would not defend himself immediately, as would most humans if they could. In short, he acted as though he were powerless and helpless because that is what human beings are like.

Every act that Jesus performed, from the moment of his appearing among us, bore the stamp of human endurance and patience, as though he were not capable of putting to confusion and defeat those who wronged him. He did not disdain the human condition but showed all human beings that it is possible to please and trust God utterly no matter what may happen to one or to that one loves. He saved us by doing what the Heavenly Father asks all of us to do. It is, after all, an especially wonderful way to show one's utter dependence upon God. It is a particularly marvelous way of entrusting oneself and one's future to the loving providence of God.

Jesus fasted for forty days precisely to show that we live primarily by the Word of God and have it most richly when it seems human to be wholly absent. He went to John the Baptist to show us all how to turn wholly to God and how to renounce everything which doesn't turn us to God from the depths of our hearts. When he had to contend with the devil he did it with mere words, as we humans have to do. And in all these things he conquered. Thus, most of all, he showed us the path to victory in all things.

Christ didn't treat his disciples as masters treat their slaves but was kind and gentle, and even declared us his friends. He showed how we should deal with both peers and those of lesser station. He bore with people like Judas, even though he knew Judas would betray him, and with a kiss. He gave us a wonderful example of how to wait upon the times determined by our God and to do it with love. We have only to follow his example.

Saturday

OUR DECISION ABOUT JESUS

A reflection by Laurin Wenig

Who is Jesus? In the long run of life, this is the question everyone must answer. What role is Jesus to play in my life? What does Jesus have to do with me? In the many encounters with Jesus described in the Gospels people have to decide who Jesus can be for them, how they will accept and respond to him.

John's Gospel shows us a group of people, an angry one, making decisions about Jesus. They are talking about who he is, where he comes from, whether he is a prophet or the messiah. John also shows us the religious leaders, the ones who should have recognized Jesus but who opposed him? Did he threaten them? Was it because he was not "properly" educated yet had incredible knowledge about God? Was it because he came from rural Galilee and not from the aristocratic Jerusalem nobility? Was it because his charismatic leadership outshone that of the religious establishment? Was it all of these reasons?

Only one of the leaders seems to have defended Jesus, Nicodemus. He alone spoke up for an honest evaluation of Jesus. The others were so convinced that Jesus had to fit into their categories of religion and theology that there was no room in them for change.

There's a keyword! Change! It's a Lenten word. It calls us to be open to the new initiatives God is making in our lives, as well as in our community, in our church and in our world. There are many who will always oppose change due to their vested interests in what already is. Good theology will always demand openness to new understandings of truth, of what God is doing. What a pity if a group feels so threatened that it must insult others and close itself off to the very grace God seeks to shower upon them by the new thing God is doing.

Our Lenten fasting may empty our stomachs, but we need as well to empty ourselves of any sort of narrow-mindedness or smug security about our own interpretations, our own understandings, of our faith. The temple guards in John's story tell more truth than their educated bosses: "No one has ever spoken like this before!" That is their response and they speak the truth, God's truth.

We need Lent to hear this truth all over again. It is needed before we can decide who Jesus is for us, in our lives. Lent causes change in my life in surprising ways—sometimes in spite of myself. Lent thus shows that I can grow. I can let Jesus challenge my understanding of my faith and so challenge me. The readings at our Eucharists tell us how close-minded people can be. That is an appeal to open our minds to God's revelation. We have to believe no matter what others think or may think, then we persevere in faithfulness to what we have learned. This is what Jesus asks of us. We can't decide rightly who Jesus is without letting this happen. We can't follow Jesus if we are closed to the changes he has been sent to bring us.