

THE SEVENTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

WHAT OUR GOD ASKS OF US

A reflection from a homily by St. Bede the Venerable

Our Lord and Savior wants us to attain the joy of the Heavenly Kingdom. That is why he taught us to pray. He promises we will receive the gift of the Kingdom if we pray for it. *“Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you.”* Begin by asking to understand what these words mean for you personally. It is clear that they warn us not to be lazy do-nothings because only those who pray for the Kingdom, seek it by upright living and persevere in doing these things will enter that Kingdom.

Words aren't enough. We also have to work hard at discovering how we are to live so as to become suited to live in that Kingdom. We have all heard: *“Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord! Will enter the Kingdom of Heaven but only those who do the will of the Heavenly Father!”* So we have to pray without ceasing, constantly! We have to fall to our knees before our God and Maker with tears. Then we have to think carefully about how our Maker has commanded us to act and live. *“Let's seek the Lord and his strength; let's constantly seek his face”*. That's what we are told in Scripture. To become able to find God and even see God Scripture says we have to *“cleanse ourselves from all defilement of body and spirit”*, for only such persons are raised up to heaven on the day of resurrection. Only the pure of heart can contemplate the glory of the Divine Majesty.

If we want to know clearly what the Lord wants of us we need to listen to the Gospel: *“Seek first the Kingdom of God and its justice, and all these other things will be given you as well.”* To seek the Kingdom of God and its justice is to long for the graces of our heavenly homeland by giving constant thought to them and to the kind of upright living that obtains them. Listen to Scripture: *“The upright live by faith, mercy surrounds those who hope in the Lord, and to love is to fulfill the law for the whole law is summed up in the command: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* It is in this context that the Lord graciously promises that *“the Father will give the good Spirit to those who ask him”*.

The Lord says all this in order to show that those who of themselves are evil can be made good by receiving the grace of the Spirit. So he promises that the good Spirit will be given by the Father. Whether we pray for faith or hope or any other virtue that we long for we attain it only through the grace of the Holy Spirit. As we do our best, then, to follow in our Lord's own footsteps, let's ask God the Father for the grace of the Spirit to lead us along the path of the true faith—that faith which works through love.

This is the way we become to kind of persons who are fit to receive what they have so longed and prayed for. We have to strive to live in a way that will make us the kind of persons fit to be children of such a Father. We must strive to preserve inviolate in body and spirit the sacramental rebirth of our baptism. It made us children of God! So if we keep Almighty God's commandments then God will certainly gift us with eternal blessings. From the very beginning God has prepared these blessings as our heritage. God has done this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Jesus himself, with the Holy Spirit, is not only our help but the gift we are to receive in everlasting joy and glory.

Monday

REALLY BECOMING LIKE CHRIST

A reflection developed from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

The [mother of the] sons of Zebedee put pressure on Jesus by asking to be given the two highest places after his own in the Kingdom of Heaven. Listen carefully to his reply to them and ask what it implies about your efforts to follow Christ and become “another Christ”, as we say.

Jesus knows that they weren't looking for something that was purely spiritual. He also knows that they would be afraid to ask for what they did if they knew what it would take to prepare them for the places they wanted. He is quite explicit: “You don't know what you're asking for! Are you ready to drink the cup I'm about to drink or be baptized in the way I'm about to be?” They were thinking of rewards and honors and being exalted, but Jesus was thinking of struggles and difficulties and being rejected and scorned. They thought the time of rewards, the end time, was at hand but Jesus knew that this was not so and that their lives would be filled with dangers and pains and even martyrdom.

Notice how the Lord not only corrects them but draws them on to want to become like him and even suffer as he would suffer. He didn't talk about death and being martyred. He didn't say, Are you ready to shed your blood? but Are you ready to drink the cup I drink and be baptized with my baptism? He lures them on to want more intensely to become like him and do all that he was to do. He calls it a “baptism” to show there will be a great cleansing. And they replied as he hoped they would: We can! They were determined to do as he did.

What did the Lord do? He promised them that they would indeed do as he was about to do and suffer as he was about to suffer, but again by using symbolic language. He prophesied, in effect, great blessings—like the blessing of martyrdom that James would very soon suffer. He tells them that they will become fit to be martyrs and undergo a violent death for God. In this they will be partners with Christ. They will want only places that God has foreordained for them, and not worry about being more than or over others.

Are you among the disciples of Christ? When the companions of James and John heard what they had asked for they got angry and jealous. How imperfect they all were, just as we are. James and John had tried to get preferred to everyone else and made the rest jealous. But look at them a few years later when they were ready to be martyrs and to suffer all the things Christ had. Grace had reshaped them, James perhaps more than the others, since he was one of the first to die for Christ. Do you want to be first among your companions?

Tuesday

GIFTS ARE GIVEN THROUGH PRAYER

A reflection adapted from a discourse by St. John Damascene

Nothing is known about Jesus' maternal grandparents. But their daughter, the Virgin Mary, played by her faith and trust in God, such a part in redemption that they had to be special. So our ancestors made up two names for them, Anne, which means "grace" and Joachim, which means "God's preparation", and in them celebrated the heritage that formed Mary and Jesus and forms us. This is St. John's Damascene's version of this reflection.

"The Virgin Mother of God was born of Anne and of grace; nature could not anticipate what only grace made possible. Anne was barren until grace enabled her to conceive as a result of her prayer. From prayer was born Mary, from whom was born the "first born of all creatures" and "the one in whom all things hold together".

O blessed Joachim and Anne! All creation is in your debt, for through your prayers the noblest of gifts, a spotless mother, was prepared for Christ. O wondrous couple, she who was freed from sin was the fruit of your bodies, of your way of life, so pleasing to God. You sought only to do God's will and formed your beloved daughter to walk in this path. She was spiritually a virgin as truly as she was a physical virgin. She was a spiritual virgin in her love for you alone, and so conceived our savior. She was a spiritual virgin when she gave birth to Him and she forever remains such. Let all mothers endowed by God with fruitfulness say: Blessed be God who hears the prayers of those who turn to Him.

Let us too offer praise and cry out in the words of Scripture: How blessed is the one from whom you sprang, O Virgin, and in whom God was conceived without human seed. We have all become blessings because through graces given us Christ is born in others. Many know the new hope that leads us to endless joy. How should we not praise those who receive a revelation of the divine goodness and bring forth so marvelous a fruit—the sweetest of all fruits, our sweet Jesus?

Rejoice Joachim, and all you who labor so that Christ may come to the world and to unnumbered souls. You rejoice, Joachim, because through you was born the one through whom the Eternal Son came into the world. From Him was born the salvation of the whole world. Let all rejoice that Christ is born as savior in so many hearts that once were empty and cold and devoid of joy. You brought forth one who became the temple of the living God and by doing so offered the Trinity a sacrifice of praise greater than all others. You are named "God's preparation" and all follow you who live preparing the way of the Lord. In response God works wonders. All such people become temples of the Living God—all who answer God's call given in Christ.

O blessed Joachim and Anne, you teach us to pray with confidence. You show us how marvelously our God answers such prayers. What God gives is great beyond anything we could have imagined. Blessed be all those who walk in the footsteps of the Virgin and her parents. Blessed be all who teach others to walk always in the Lord's ways.

Wednesday

COMMENTARY ON THE PARABLE OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE By Edward Armstrong

“Jesus said: *The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone found*” (Mt.13:44ff). In ancient peasant communities there was a difficulty about storing valuables. The poor person's safe was the earth. During turbulent times wealthy people too buried their treasures and sometimes happen-stance or the ravages of war prevented them from returning to retrieve what they had buried. A treasure trove was uncovered every now and then, and tales about fortunate finders were retailed by wishful thinkers throughout the countryside.

In folktales the virtuous are sometimes rewarded by coming on hidden treasure, as in the rabbinic story of the good fortune which befell Abba Judah after he had generously given to the needy all he possessed, except a cow and a field. The cow stepped into a hole in the field and broke its leg, but as he tried to help it the Abba found an immense treasure.

In our society only children believe that a crock of gold is to be found at the end of a rainbow, but a fortunate farmer may still unearth treasure while plowing, as at Mildenhall in Suffolk, where magnificently ornate Roman silver dishes were found. In 1952 two heavily oxidized copper rolls were discovered at Qumran near the Dead Sea. The inscriptions recorded where treasures had been hidden but diligent search revealed nothing.

The parable of the peerless pearl is twin to the hidden treasure parable, and the two may have been told together, for parallelism is a characteristic of Hebrew style, both in short clauses and in more elaborate compositions: “*If a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand*”, and “*if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand*”.

The discoverer of the treasure trove was a comparatively poor man who chanced on the money. The pearl merchant came on it in the course of business and was relatively wealthy; he sold his whole stock to acquire it. One person enters into the joy of the kingdom unexpectedly, another gains it through the maturing of a lifetime's endeavor. Unlike the rich young man, when the supreme opportunity presented itself, the pearl merchant was ready to invest everything. We are given to understand that his life had been devoted to acquiring ever more perfect pearls. Each in turn was a joyful attainment. This was the climax.

So should the Christian's life be attuned to anticipation of the insights and inspirations God gives as life goes on, confident that God always has still finer gifts to give. We may not all have unexpected and glorious mystical experiences, but we should aspire after ever clearer insights. Some of them may have at least a little of the quality of that ecstasy enjoyed by Pascal, who when he lay dead, was found to have sown into his undershirt a testimony which reads: “Certitude, perception, joy, peace, ...joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.”

Thursday

ACTING ON EACH MOMENT'S GRACE

A reflection by Carroll Stuhlmueller

The last lines in today's Gospel complete Jesus' first discourse and give Matthew's teaching about bringing forth the old and the new. He seeks to bridge the Hebrew Scriptures' message with its fulfillment in Jesus, and in the Christian community. The pearl of great price has been found in the field of the ancient faith and everything must be sacrificed for its possession. The next parable, of the dragnet, tells us to cast away the useless and keep the useful. That is how it will be at the end of the world and how it is in all the days of our lives.

But it is no easy matter to judge what is right and good and what useful and useless. We need to pray as Solomon did: "I am a mere youth, inexperienced .. Give your servant an understanding heart to distinguish what is right from what is wrong". Review the interaction between the old and the new, between God and yourself. There are two movements. In one we initiate and follow through, and in the other God acts first. Our move is more visible, but God's is hidden in the depths of our being.

We are looking for a buried treasure. We look by means of prayerfully reading the Bible or conversation with another. Then the heavens open! We have a flashing insight. But the dark clouds close in again; the intuition and inspiration seem buried. The moment may not be repeated. The memory may become blurred and forgotten. It is necessary to act at once, when the "skies open". Like the person who found a treasure or one really valuable pearl, it is necessary that we promptly put up all we have to get that pearl.

Moments such as this come at times such as when we perceive our vocation or the opportunity for an apostolate, or when we face serious sickness or some physical accident leaves us crippled. In all such moments we must leave the past behind us and accept the new as "God's treasure". Our entire future hangs in the balance. A firm, decisive move must be made in the right direction. All that is useless for carrying it out is to be thrown away, as in the parable of the dragnet. This new life extends into the eternal reign of God in our heart. If we pray as Solomon did God cannot refuse our request. His reply will be abundant and overflowing. "I give you a heart so wise and understanding that there has never been anyone like you up to now!"

God has already taken the initiative. God has hidden the treasure within the field of Scripture and of our life. By our good intentions and desires we discover it and are thrust into a moment of decision. *God will again come to our aid. The chain reaction is stated clearly by St. Paul: "Those God foreknew he predestined to share the image of his Son, Jesus, the first-born of many brothers and sisters. Those God predestined are likewise called, those who are called are likewise justified; those who are justified are in turn glorified"*. Paul states the key truth: *"For those who love God, God makes all things work together for their good"*. Lord, I love your command more than any treasure. Comfort me in your kindness and compassion and I will live, and discover this day's pearl of great price.

Friday

WELCOMING JESUS TO OUR COMMUNITY

A Sermon by St. Bernard

“Jesus entered into a certain town and a woman named Martha received him into her house” (Lk.10:38) How is it that of three persons living in that house only one is said to have received the Savior, and she not its owner? Martha seems to have been the elder and, as is obvious enough, salvation’s beginning belongs rather to action than to contemplation.

“And she had a sister named Mary, who sitting at the Lord’s feet, listened to his word”. Observe that the Savior was received by all three, but each in a different way. One received him in his bodily presence, another in his word, and the third in the spirit of repentance. *“Martha was busy about much serving, and she said: Lord, are you not concerned that my sister has left me alone to do the serving?”* Are we to suppose that the sound of “murmuring” is heard in the house where Christ is hosted?

Oh, happy that house, blessed for ever that community in which Martha has reason to complain of Mary! Yet, in another way, it would certainly be shameful, even sinful on the part of Mary, to envy Martha. For where in the Gospel do we find Mary complaining of Martha and saying to the Lord, “My sister has left me alone in the enjoyment of contemplative repose!”? Far be it from us, far be it that one who has ample leisure for prayer should ever wish to exchange it for the distracted life led by those members of the community who are busy about external things!

For Martha, indeed, it would be well that she should always seem to herself to be insufficient and unsuited to the task assigned her, so that she should desire that the office she holds be transferred to some other. I am not sure whether it is permissible to suspect any such thing of Martha, but doesn’t she seem to regard as idle the sister whom she asked to have given to her as her helper? Yet one who reproves a contemplative soul for want of activity is evidently one of those whom St. Paul calls “sensual” persons who *“do not perceive the things which are of the Spirit of God”* (I Cor.2:14)

We must consider how rightly ordered charity distributes the three spiritual employments of this house of ours. To Martha is allotted external administration. To Mary is allotted interior contemplation. To Lazarus is allotted the practice of penance. It is true that all three occupations are found united in every perfect soul. Nevertheless, different souls seem to be intended more particularly for different functions. Some are called to the repose of prayer. Some are called to the exercise of charity. Others again are called to the practice of penance.

Such a division appears to be clearly necessary. So Mary’s mind may be occupied with loving and lofty sentiments directed to God. Martha’s mind may be filled with compassionate thoughts for the neighbor. And the mind of Lazarus may think of nothing but the abjection and miserableness of sin. Let each and all of us consider our call to the occupation which is proper to our seeking of God in our community.

Saturday

CHRIST'S LOVE SHOWN IN GIFTS OF LIFE

A reflection from The Reed of God by Caryl Houselander

"I have come that all may have life and have it more abundantly". (Jn 10) Have you ever considered how this is realized in the case of Christ's mother? *Even* before Christ was born his presence gave life and his mother found joy in it. With what piercing shafts of joy the story of Christ unfolded in his mother's life! First in the conception of her child, and then in the fact that her child brought joy to another mother and child, making that child leap for joy in his own mother's womb. A quickening of life can be felt as a leap of joy.

If we practice the contemplation taught and shown to us by Our Lady, we will find that our experience is like hers. If Christ is growing in us, if we are at peace, if we are recollected then we know that however insignificant our own life may seem to be, Christ is forming himself in us and that is never insignificant.

If we go with eager wills, in haste, to wherever our circumstances compel us, because we believe that is what He wants—that He wants to be in that place, we will find that we are driven more and more by the impulse of his love.

And there are the answers we get from others as the Christ life in us awakens impulses of love in them. They are awakened to into a leap of joy at the life they find is growing within them as well.

It isn't necessary, at this stage in our contemplation, to speak to others about the mystery growing in us. It is only necessary to give ourselves over to that life in all that we are. We pray without ceasing, almost without noticing it. It isn't a continual effort to concentrate our minds but a growing awareness of Christ taking form within our lives and transforming who we and what we are becoming.

We must trust Christ in this because the time hasn't yet come to see his face. We must possess Christ in secret and in darkness, as the earth possesses a seed. We mustn't try to force Christ's growth in us, but let ourselves be filled with deep gratitude for the light burning secretly in our darkness. We must fold our concentrated love upon Christ like the earth as we nourish the seed within.

We need to be swift to obey the impulses of Christ-love as we carry Him to wherever he longs to go. Those who recognize his presence will be stirred by a new life within them. They will know Christ's presence, not by anything special about us, but in the way the bud knows the presence of the light, by an unfolding in themselves. They are putting on the new beauty God is giving them as bearers of Christ.

It seems to me that this may be Christ's favorite way of being recognized. He prefers to be known, not by his own human features but by a quickening of his life in the hearts which respond to his coming within them.

After the Resurrection he wasn't known by the familiar features people had once known. He was now known by the love in the hearts of others, as in the heart of Magdalene. He was known by the fire in the feet of the travelers to Emmaus as they hurried return to Jerusalem to tell about him. He was known by the wound in his side and heart, as touched by Thomas. He is known in the deeds of love he does in and with us. That's how we imitate Our Lady in showing him to all the world.