

TWENTY-SECOND WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

THE REAL HEART OF THE MATTER

A reflection inspired by a retreat conference of Fr. Ronald Knox

Why did the Lord want to come to earth as a Jew, and then spend so much time and effort criticizing the observance of the customs that most perceived as proper signs of being Jewish? It was, I think, because he saw one primary failing as characteristic of the “lost of the House of Israel” to whom he had been primarily sent. They were lost because the way they observed the prescriptions of the Law treated them as values in themselves. Usually, we interpret this as critiquing all religious practice done for the sake of appearances. Yet the actual failing is common to the whole human race. How much of your life is dominated by a feeling that you have to keep up appearances and need to do what people expect? Are we better than the Pharisees Jesus took to task or just like them?

Put yourself for a moment in Jesus’ place when the Pharisees criticize him for letting his disciples ignore some of Israel’s many purity regulations. Today we still hear concern about washing one’s hands before eating. How would you reply? In effect, Jesus reminds his critics that purity is important only as it keeps one’s heart fixed on God and entrusts all one’s mind and heart and life to God. Yes, but isn’t that what one does in observing purity regulations? God gave them to us through our ancestors and sages and we do them, whether or not we see a deeper meaning in them, simply to obey God in every way and time and place!

But, Jesus adds, you are forgetting things like justice; i.e., like treating others as you want people to treat you—respecting and caring for them and treating them fairly. Are you praying to cover up the fact you are robbing widows of the little they have to live on? You see, actually, you often treat religious customs as though they were more important than justice. God has not only called you to love him with all your mind and heart and life but also to love your neighbors, and love them as God loves them. Unless your religious customs help you do this in deed and not just in thought you are not loving God but pretending to love God while you spend your time and energy on trying to build up yourself and make yourself more important socially. Do you want others to honor you or do you seek your honor from God? You seem to use a pretended honoring of God as a means to get honor from other people.

We are as God sees us. What’s wrong about seeking “human respect” is that it gets us into the habit of asking, “What will others think?” and forgetting to ask, “What will God think?” We are commanded to help one another. That means helping one another put God first and showing love for one another in ways that help them to put God first. As you observe customs of courtesy and mutual respect do you do this in ways that help all concerned recall God’s love for us and our need to love God by loving each other so that we all go steadily toward God and God’s Kingdom?

Monday

WHAT JOHN THE BAPTIST TEACHES US

An excerpt from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Jesus asked the crowd concerning John: “*What did you go out to see in the desert?*” Are you amazed that a person is living in the desert? Yet following John’s example, a new race will spring up who will make the desert their home. But, then, did people go to see in the desert? Was it a reed trembling in the wind? Rather they went to see a tree stronger than any storm and with its roots fixed in heaven. Let Herod be angry and Herodias lay traps; nothing will move him or prevent his condemning an incestuous marriage. When his disciples told him everyone was going after Jesus he only replied that he was not the Christ but sent before him. What did people go out to see? They saw one who had contempt for bodily comfort and persevered immovably in the mortification of the body. He did it out of the desire for the good things of the spirit.

As the Spirit says, this fits us to enter the Kingdom of God even though it involves many trials and tribulations. When the Lord praised John for the roughness of his garments he warned us that those who live in kings’ palaces aren’t preparing themselves to enter the Kingdom of God. You, then, perhaps can’t imitate John in the roughness of his garments or in his sparse diet, but you can strive at least to imitate him in this—you can be firm in the way of the Lord, lest the wind blows you this way and that and right off the face of this earth. A wind may come rushing, as it did upon the house of the children of Job, and bring great ruin and even death. We need a home that is built on a rock and we must be as firm as that rock is.

Scripture tells us that Behemoth liked to lie hidden in the reeds. Now he likes to lead us to love transitory things. But they aren’t things one can lean on in difficult times or perilous circumstances any more than one can lean on a reed. Yet the Lord in his patience doesn’t break us even if we are like a reed and are being blown every which way by shifting desires.

Indeed, the call for justice and right may light a worldly life on fire. The Lord’s call and teachings are like fire and the voice of John, helping all prepare for the Lord’s coming to them, were words of fire fit to move the lazy and unfeeling heart. Like John, we too are called to prepare the way for the Lord and so we must give voice to his words. We must pray that the Lord will do in us what God did in John and that the Lord will use us as God used John. Isn’t the Lord’s voice in us? Haven’t we resolved to listen to his voice and follow him wherever he leads us?

We are certainly called to go out into the desert and there hear the word of the Lord and let it set our lives on fire. It will burn up everything in us that is merely worldly and help us cry out to others about all that our God would do in us and through us. Of ourselves, we can do nothing, but we are not left to ourselves. Christ has come to us and called us to follow him. We are to let him use our voices to call all to repentance and to a way of life that cleanses the mind and the heart so that God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, may come and dwell within us. God will work great saving deeds even through us, as small and weak as we may be.

Tuesday

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

We are easily distracted from what is essential. What is essential to the Spirit's Coming? It is not a matter of people of different language groups all understanding what is said in another language about God's wonderful deeds. It is not a matter of hearing the sound of powerful winds or seeing what looked like tongues of fire over their heads. We have been filled with the Holy Spirit and we are called to share something of what that means.

Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthian church, says the Spirit's Coming is an experience of love for God and for Jesus and for all who have yet to receive the Spirit. It is a matter of wanting to share the good news that God offers all a new and never-ending life, and one of service. We are all given abilities by God to help us serve and help others to a life like that of Jesus. The Spirit is Jesus' gift to us, as the Gospel today makes clear, and it enables us to forgive as God has forgiven us—without limit. It is a gift of mutual reconciliation.

One no longer seeks primarily the kinds of things people have to compete for but only God's love, which is offered freely to absolutely everyone. To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be filled with this love.

So the Spirit's presence needn't call forth emotional enthusiasm or excitement or special feelings of exaltation. When St. Paul listed what he considered gifts of the Spirit he included things that we do feeling very ordinary, like teaching or administering or caring for the sick. For the most part, we can know the Spirit is working within us simply by observing that we are more concerned with caring for people and the things that make people's lives better spiritually than with caring for ourselves or gaining praise. God is with us even when we are not excited or feeling special but even when we are down or depressed or feeling needy and unappreciated. It isn't our feelings that tell us of the Spirit's presence and working within us but our steady concern for the welfare, in every sense of the word, of others.

On Pentecost day the first disciples experienced something marvelous and extraordinary. But that only lasted for a few hours. Their lives of service, however, lasted many years, except for those who were martyred. Such lives involve many trials and sufferings. The Spirit's presence doesn't exclude bearing a cross but makes us see bearing one as an opportunity for love and service, to God and to one another.

Wednesday

THE HEALING OF OUR HOPE

A reflection by Fr. Ansfried Hulsbosch

“After Jesus left the synagogue, he entered the house of Simon. Simon’s mother-in-law was afflicted with a severe fever, and they interceded with him about her.” (Lk4:38) Our health depends on our relationship with God and yet our orientation to God depends on our contacts with others like ourselves. Recall what the Gospel says about this: *“If anyone who has enough to live on sees another in need and yet closes his heart against that person, how can the love of God be in such a one? Children, we must not make love a matter of mere words or talk. We must have a genuine love and show it in our deeds. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another God dwells in us, and love is brought to perfection in us. Here is the proof that we dwell in God and God in us. God has given us the Holy Spirit.”*

Now there is always an element of suffering in Christians’ love for each other. This love is measured by the extent to which we give ourselves—our persons and our possessions. There is a struggle between such giving and our fallen nature. Dying to self is a full-time job, where our natural tendencies are concerned. This is suffering, and it comes from within. We can be a burden to others, as they can be burdens to us. Think of persecution for one’s faith and the way it tests us as well as our love for those who persecute us. Dying for Christ is the highest form of self-affirmation and makes the greatest demands on our freedom, but also on our ability to continue to love those who harm us.

Trials can also come in the form of illness and misfortune and this demands a martyrdom that is our witness to hope for eternal life. Our daily existence demands a continual reaffirmation of this hope. When our hope is vivid external things, or even internal trials, can’t control us or harm us. They even become benefits. *“We know that in every way God works for good with those who love.”* If we are genuinely upheld by hope in Christ nothing can threaten us any longer. *“What can separate us from the love of Christ—affliction, or hardship, persecution, hunger, nakedness, or the danger of violent death? For God’s sake, we are being killed all the time and are treated like animals set aside for slaughter. Yet in all this, we are more than mere conquerors, through Christ who loves us. I am convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or super-human powers, in the present world or that to come, in the forces of nature or in heights or depths—nothing in all creation, that can separate us from the love of God given us in Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

We can endure every sort of test and trial, and emerge victorious because Jesus has already done so. He is our hope, and everything can be faced because he is with us. If you need your wounded hope healed, stretch out your hand like Peter’s mother-in-law and take the hand of Jesus. He will raise you up.

Thursday

PREPARING FOR A GREAT ADVENTURE

A reflection based on a text by Fr. Gerald Vann

Jesus was standing by the Sea of Galilee with a crowd pressing around him to listen to the Word of God. He noticed two boats close at hand; the fishermen were washing their nets. Before Jesus came along and asked to use the boat, the fishermen had spent a night in fruitless effort. Maybe they were getting ready to go home and rest. But they agreed, and even went along to listen; they knew that sound carries over water and that people couldn't block one another's view or hearing if Jesus used the boat as his platform.

You wouldn't think this was the dramatic introduction to a vocation story. But it is every bit as fascinating as the story of Isaiah's call to be a prophet, which is the topic of the first reading at this Sunday's Eucharist. It certainly doesn't sound as exciting as Paul's reminder of how the resurrected Jesus suddenly appeared to him. But think of what our Lord said to Simon after he finished speaking: Put out into deeper water and lower your nets for a catch!

These are words Jesus addresses to us right now. If you are tempted to think of your faith or its practice as something added to the ordinary business of living then you will miss the adventure that is a life of faith. Jesus says to us too: I am going to teach you to catch people. That's our vocation!

So faith isn't a mere addition to life but the door into an entirely new dimension of life and reality. The temptation is to live on the surface of life, without bothering our heads about anything deeper or higher. That means failing to live fully. So Jesus calls us: Go out over your head!

The first time to dive into the sea can be a frightening experience but once you are in and swimming the fright vanishes and you enjoy a thrill, a sense of freedom in a strange element suddenly becomes friendly, bearing you up in spite of its immensity. That is what religion is meant to be like. It means knowing the Presence, the Love, that is in and all around all things. It means plunging into the Divine Life as a diver plunges into the sea. That is what our Lord calls us to when he invited us to come to him and find life, and a more abundant life.

We are called to leave behind the narrowness of self and its ordinary shallowness. We move into the immensity of God's call to love others in Jesus' way. So he says: Don't be afraid. His hand is always there to support us—as it was to Simon Peter when he answered Jesus' call to walk on the waters. In today's Gospel, he responds to Jesus' directions: If you say so Master I will let down the net. And something marvelous happened that stupefied him.

Jesus calls us to things we seem wholly unprepared to do. He says, Follow me and I will make you People Catchers! Fish they understood, but this was way over their heads, and perhaps yours and mine. Nobody expects an adventure to involve nothing but effortless ease. Jesus invites us to the greatest adventure of all. Yet, through God's mercy, it will reveal to us the life in a fullness we had never imagined—if we answer his call. You can't yet see either the cost or the reward. You can trust in Jesus! He never fails us.

Friday

BECOMING NEW SKINS FOR NEW WINE

A reflection by Thomas Keating, OCSO

The disciples of John came to Jesus, asking: Why do we and the Pharisees fast often but your disciples do not? Jesus responded: The wedding guests can't mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. The patch pulls away from the cloak and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins destroyed. New wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.

New wine is a marvelous image of the Holy Spirit. As we move to the intuitive level of consciousness using contemplative prayer the energy of the Spirit cannot be contained by old structures. They are not flexible enough. They may have to be left aside or adapted. The new wine as a symbol of the Spirit has a tendency to stir people up; for that reason, the Fathers of the Church said the Spirit's action results in "sober intoxication". Although exuberance may be subdued it breaks out in forms that cannot be put into neat and ready-made boxes.

Jesus points out to John's disciples, and to us, that one can become too attached to good practice, as to fasting as a structure for one's spiritual life. The wine of the Spirit that Jesus brings did not fit into such narrow ideas, as was indicated by their question. So they must expand inwardly; otherwise, the new wine of the Gospel will give them trouble. It bursts the narrow confines of one's mindset and both what one has and what one is trying to receive are lost.

Jesus suggests a solution: Put the new wine into new wineskins. The new wine of the Gospel is manifested by the fruits of the Spirit which St. Paul speaks of. They are really nine aspects of the mind of Christ as he reaches out to others and accepts the gifts of the Spirit into his ministry. If the new wine is to be preserved then new structures have to be found in the mind and heart; they must be ones more appropriate than the old to the new life Christ brings. Are we ready and willing to actively cooperate in letting this be done in us?

Saturday

THE ESSENTIAL WORK THAT IS PATIENCE

A reflection from On Pastoral Care by St. Pope Gregory the Great

All of us are sick, at least spiritually, and we need to be helped to learn patience. We need to think, for instance, of how great the evils our Redeemer had to bear at the hands of the very beings he had created out of love. Think of the horrible insults and criticisms he had to bear. How many slaps did he receive from scoffers? Yet what he was doing was snatching from the power of the ancient enemy the souls of those he held captive. We have to bear the pain of this process and so we must look to Our Lord for an example of patience.

The Lord silently endured scourging as a way to set us free. He cleanses us with the water of salvation but its power comes from the love that didn't screen his own face from the spittle of treacherous people. He freed us by the mediation of his torments so that we would not have to bear eternal torment. He endured blows to free us for everlasting honor enjoyed amid the choirs of angels. He offered his own head to bear a crown of thorns and didn't shrink even from this to free us. He drank bitter gall so that we might be inebriated with the wine of everlasting sweetness.

Think of the patience that enabled him to endure mocking adoration. He held his peace and in doing it he adored the Heavenly Father for us. Though he was equal to the Father in divinity and was life itself, he was willing to pass through death that he might prepare us for everlasting life and actually bring us to it. We were dead in spirit but by his patience, we have been brought to life.

Why do we think it so difficult when he has to bear illness and pain? Aren't these simply punishments that God gives us by way of discipline? We have done evil and deserve what we get. But God himself was willing to bear the same for us when he didn't deserve it at all. If God endured such great evils, and it was as though they were a response to his good deeds on our behalf, then how could we be ungrateful? If we are grateful, how can we fail to patiently bear all that will bring us to our redeemer and eternal lover?

Everyone who would proclaim the Gospel, as our God has called us to, must do so by deeds more than by words. We must do this by our righteous way of life. When we do this we leave footprints that others may follow and even walk in. If we are to do this then we have to be awakened and stirred up by what we bear for the sake of others and follow the example of Christ. If the head languishes the members of the body have neither vigor nor direction. Christ never languished and has always been ready to bear whatever might be necessary to lead us to the Heavenly Father and eternal salvation.

We can only follow in these footsteps if we allow ourselves to be corrected and set in order and on the right path. We should regard all we suffer as only penance done to make us ready to proclaim in our deeds the saving love of our God. We have to lead one another in patience if we are to do what God calls us to do. Let us, then, pray with all our heart to receive the grace by which we may become patient as the Lord was. That is what we can show daily in all we do, and especially in all we suffer.