

THE THIRTY-FOURTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE
26 Nov – 2 Dec 2023

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Sunday

LONGING FOR WHAT OUR GOD HAS PREPARED

A Reflection by Hippolytus of Rome

The Holy Gospel clearly proclaims that the Son of Man will gather together all the nations and divide them into two groups, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats, and will say to the sheep: "Come, you lovers of the poor and of strangers. Come, you who fostered my love. I am love and peace and I bid you come, you who shared peace and love. Come, my Heavenly Father's blessed ones, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you."

You didn't make an idol of wealth. You gave alms to the poor. You helped orphans and widows. You gave drink to the thirsty. You gave food to the hungry. Come, then! You welcomed strangers. You clothed the naked. You visited the sick. You comforted prisoners and helped the blind. Come, you who kept the seal of faith unbroken and were swift to assemble in the churches to listen to my Scriptures. You longed for my words and observed my law, day and night. Like good soldiers, you shared in my sufferings because you wanted to please me, your heavenly king. Come, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!

Look, my kingdom is ready paradise stands open, my immortality is displayed in all its beauty. Come now, all of you, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. When we hear this will be astounded by such a great and wonderful thing. We will be addressed as friends by one whom the angelic hosts are unable to behold clearly. And you will replay, exclaiming: "But, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? Master, when did we see you thirsty and give you a drink? We hold you in great awe and how could we have found you naked so as to clothe you? You are the creator of all, so how could we see you a stranger and welcome you as though you were not always in your own place? How could you who are immortal be sick or in prison and needing a visit?"

You are the Eternal, without beginning like the Heavenly Father, you are co-eternal with the Spirit. You are the One who created all things from nothing. You are the king of the angels. You make the depths tremble. You are clothed in light as in a robe. You are our maker who fashioned us from the earth. You are the creator of the world invisible. How could we possibly have received your Lordship, your Royal Majesty, as our guest?

Then the King of Kings will say in reply: Inasmuch as you did this to one of the least members of my Body, to my brothers and sisters, you did it to me. Inasmuch as you received, clothed, fed, and gave drink to those members of mind, about whom I have just spoken and described as the poor, you did it to me. So, come and enter the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. Enjoy forever the gifts of my Heavenly Father, and of the most holy and life-giving Spirit. Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart imagined what God has prepared for those who love Him.

Monday

THE COURAGE OF DEFINITIVE CHOICES

From the Morning Meditation of Pope Francis, 25 November 2013

In his homily, the Pope commented on the first Reading of the day from the Book of the Prophet Daniel (1:1-6; 8-20), which recounts the story of the young Jewish men who found the courage to refuse the unlawful food imposed by King Nebuchadnezzar, and whom the Lord rewarded by making them physically and mentally more agile than the rest. The Pope began by noting that the young men “were in an extreme situation since they were slaves; in those days when someone fell into slavery, nothing was secure anymore, not even life”.

The Pope then turned to the Gospel passage from St Luke (21:1-4) which describes the poor widow who put two small coins in the offering box, thus giving to God all she had to live on. “Jesus tells us that she was poor. At that time women didn’t have their husbands’ pensions to live on, they were poor. They were in an extreme situation”.

Both the young men and the elderly widow were in an extreme situation then, when they had to make a crucial decision.

“The widow went up to the temple to adore God, to tell him that he was above all things and that she loved him, and she gave all she had to live on. Hers was more than generosity, it was something else”, the Pope said. “She had no thought for herself. She could have said: ‘Lord, you know I need this to eat today’. However, she chose to adore God to the very end”.

The young men in the Old Testament also had the possibility of finding “an emergency exit from their situation. They could have said: ‘We are slaves, we cannot fulfill the law here. We need to preserve our lives, not get too thin, not fall ill ... let’s eat!’” Instead, the Pope added, “They said no. They made their choice: the Lord. And they found a way to remain faithful, even under very difficult circumstances”.

The young men and the widow “took a risk”, the Pope continued, “and in their risk, they chose the Lord”. They acted from the heart, with no personal interest and not so as to attract attention to themselves, but rather “because they knew that the Lord is faithful. They entrusted themselves to his eternal faithfulness. The Lord is always faithful, for he cannot deny himself”.

Entrusting oneself to the Lord’s faithfulness is a choice “that we too have the opportunity to make in our Christian lives”, the Pope said. At times this involves “a great and difficult decision”. Throughout the history of the Church, and even in our own times, there are men and women, young and old who make this decision. We realize it, the Pope continued, “when we read the lives of the martyrs, when we read in the news about the persecution of Christians today. Let us think about our brothers and sisters who find themselves in extreme situations and who make this decision. They live in our own day and are examples for us. They encourage us to offer the Church our whole livelihood”.

Then the Pope noted how the Lord “helped them and brought them out of difficulty; they were victorious and came to a good end”. The Lord also helped the widow in the Gospel, for “in Jesus’ praise of her, we find God’s praise ... and this is a victory”. Pope Francis added: “It will do us good to think about our brothers and sisters throughout history and even today who have had to make critical choices”.

Think about “the many mothers and fathers who make critical choices each day in order to continue on with their families, with their children. They are an example for us”. He then concluded: “Let us ask for the grace of courage, for the courage to continue on in our Christian lives, amid the day-to-day, and also in extreme situations”.

Tuesday

HOW SEEING SIGNS CAN LEAD US TO GOD

A Reflection from a Sermon by John Henry Cardinal Newman

As long as there have been Christians they have constantly looked for signs of the coming of Christ. They have found signs in the natural world as well as the world as created by human ingenuity. Some people make fun of this and claim only the uneducated and uncultured see signs everywhere, as though earthquakes, storms, harvest failures, and diseases were something extraordinary. In fact, the educated and the powerful often do this too, but they are thinking of wars, revolutions, and the like.

Actually, people see events as signs because their hearts are awake with longing for Christ and they see everything out of the ordinary as a reminder that God is the Lord of nature and of history and of all events. Since Jesus' own disciples did this too, we shouldn't find it surprising. And, indeed, Jesus himself shared these attitudes. He says that there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars and that on earth, there will be distress among nations and that people will get terrified by what is happening around them, and think this means that the natural powers of the world are failing and that means that what we know is passing away and will be replaced by the more immediate rule of God.

Clearly, there isn't anything ridiculous about such thinking and there certainly isn't any particular harm in it. When people live from faith, they imagine that what is happening within them, as they are transformed, is happening in the outer world too. Seeing signs in things and events only reflects a religious and faith-inspired way of understanding life.

Yet if, as we find in Scripture, the "world" is opposed to God and the "order of the world" as human beings create it, is opposed to the ordering of everything in terms of its relation to God. But how can things of that same "world" be signs of God's presence and transforming and redeeming power and love as well as dangers because they aren't God-oriented?

Granted all I have said, granted the vastness and mystery of the world and the ways it is borne in upon us, how could we not think that there is nothing here below that isn't connected to the Plan God has for saving and drawing all things into unity in Christ? For all we know each event has a connection with every other event.

Perhaps, then, God is teaching us and offering us insight and knowledge about his ways. If we are only willing to open our eyes maybe we can see the hand of God working for the good of all creation. The Scripture tells us that the very hairs of our heads are numbered by God. All things are ours and all things work together to realize our good and, in its own way, that holds true generally. Let's, then, look for the Lord's presence in everything that happens, no matter how trivial it may seem.

To the ears of faith even what sounds bad doesn't happen without the permission of God. We hear God's footsteps everywhere. Seeing signs of God's presence is a way of seeing signs of God's coming. More important, it is a way of causing us to keep watch for that coming which will bring all into the immediate presence of God. Keep watch and pray! We are commanded to do this.

Wednesday

THE VIEW FROM THE BOTTOM

from Scripture as Liberation by Fr Richard Rohr OFM

In almost all of history, the vast majority of people understood the view from the bottom due to their life circumstance. Most of the people who have ever lived on this planet have been oppressed and poor. But their history was seldom written except in the bible. Only in modern times and wealthy countries do we find the strange phenomenon of masses of people having an establishment identity.

Only by solidarity with the sufferings of other people can comfortable people be converted. Otherwise, we are disconnected from the cross- of the world, of others, of Jesus, and finally of our own necessary participation in the great mystery of dying and rising. In the early Christian Scriptures, the New Testament, we clearly see that it is mostly the lame, the poor, the blind, the prostitutes, the drunkards, the tax collectors, the sinners-that really hear the teaching of Jesus and get the point and respond to him. It is the leaders and insiders, the priests, scribes, Pharisees, the teachers of the law, and the Roman leaders who crucify him.

We often miss the core point about how power coalesces and corrupts. Once Christians became the empowered group, we kept this obvious point from hitting home by blaming the Jews, the heretics, and then sinners. But arrogant power is always the problem, not the Jews or any group we scapegoat. When any racial, gender, or economic group has all the power it does the same thing. Catholics would probably have crucified Jesus if he had critiqued the Catholic Church the way he did his own religion.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the first Christians went underground. They were the persecuted ones, meeting in secrecy in the catacombs. The Church of that time was largely of the poor and for the poor.

The turning point, at which the Church moved from being at the bottom to the top, was the year 313AD when Emperor Constantine supposedly did the Church a great favor by beginning to make Christianity the established religion of the Holy Roman Empire. That's how the Apostolic Church became the established church. As the Church's interests became linked with imperial world views, our perspective changed from the view from the bottom, the persecuted and the outsiders, to the view from the top where we now were the ultimate insiders with power, money, status, and control. Emperors convened and controlled most of the early church councils. So, in the creeds that emerged the words used were highly abstract and there was no mention of love, justice, and peacemaking. These creeds were a far cry from the creeds spoken by Jesus 3 centuries before That's what happens when we lose the view from the bottom.

Thursday

TAKING UP THE CROSS TO FOLLOW CHRIST

A Reflection from a Sermon by St. Bernard

If we celebrate this feast of St. Andrew lovingly, we will find much that builds us up. Have you noticed how St. Andrew, when he reached the place where a cross had been prepared for him, began to utter burning words through the Spirit? The love that burned within him flashed forth like a flame, expressed in these words: "O cross, so long desired and now ready for my eager spirit! With joy and confidence, I come, so receive me gladly as the disciple of one who hung on you, for I have always been your lover and have longed to embrace you!" Those are words all of us would want to utter if the grace were given.

What is the source of such unheard-of joy and exultation? Where does such great constancy and confidence come from in the midst of human fragility? How can a mere human experience such spiritual ardor and such burning love? Certainly, it doesn't come from Andrew's own strength! It is a perfect gift coming down from the Father in Heaven who is the source of all light and alone does such great wonders. It was indeed the Spirit who came to the aid of Andrew's weakness and poured into his heart that love which was stronger than death. Grant that God give us all a share in it!

If we grow weak and fall asleep instead of praying then our own fragility explains it. But what God did for Andrew, on the cross and in his death, God will do for us in our toil and our penance and our efforts to pray. Not only will these things no longer seem a burden but they will become a delight. My spirit, says the Lord, is sweeter than honey. Nothing can take away that sweetness if only our Lord will give it to us.

So, we seek this Spirit. Let us do our utmost to receive the gift. Don't we want to possess Jesus, and his Spirit, more than anything else? He is already dwelling in us and now we ask him to dwell there more and more fully and completely. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of God, Scripture says, is not God's and doesn't belong to Christ. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit which is from God. It is given so we may understand and live the gifts bestowed on us by our God.

What we have to do is take up our cross along with St. Andrew, and even more with the One whom Andrew followed. He is our Lord and Savior. The cause of Andrew's joy and exultation, even as he prepared to die, was not only for having Jesus as Lord but for being given the gift of suffering and dying with Jesus. Do you want to be crucified with Christ? Listen to Christ's words: "If anyone would come after me, let that one take up the cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24). In the cross is our salvation, provided we cling to it firmly. The cross, as St. Paul reminds us, is folly to those who are perishing. But to all who are being saved, it is the power of God! Accept the gift of that power and you too will be with Christ in joy forever.

Friday

WHAT HAPPENS BEYOND DEATH?

A Reflection based on a text by Dianne Bergant

There is no doubt that human beings are sinful. We not only do wrong things inadvertently, but sometimes we do evil things deliberately. Yet we know that everyone is not either a saint or a sinner but that all struggle throughout life to keep our attraction to what is bad in check and to strengthen our love for what is good. It is probably most accurate to say that there is good and bad in us all and that all of us struggle to maintain balance when faced with conflicting attractions. Fortunately or unfortunately, there is no universally agreed upon determination as to how to do this or about what the “right” balance is. Add to this the religious conviction that only the truly righteous may stand in the presence of God, the all-holy, and you see how badly all of us need to reform, and do it before death comes!

This is a way of picturing life, and the “judgment” we believe follows death. It is a way of picturing what happens beyond death, probably based on Jesus’ parable of the final judgment as a separating of sheep from goats. From this point of view, the common teaching on what we call “purgatory” is a way of imagining how God’s mercy deals with those who die before they have completed the process of reform. The teaching proclaims that God’s merciful love for us is never thwarted, even by death. As the Book of Wisdom puts the matter, even for the dead there is a hope “filled with immortality”. Clearly, the meaning is that the never-ending life of those who are with God in the Kingdom of Heaven is a gift that God will give us in spite of the fact that we can’t make ourselves perfect or worthy to be in His presence. Hope is grounded not in any deed or capacity of our own but in God’s love for us. That truth is embodied in the teaching on purgatory.

This is why the commemoration of all the faithful departed, created first by our monastic forbears, teaches us such important truths. It reminds us, first of all, that we must reform our lives. This is what made monastic life a model for all Christians, as the Eastern Church has so strongly emphasized. Again, it reminds us that death separates us neither from God nor from one another. It reminds us forcefully that our love for one another finds its fulfillment only when we love God with all our heart, mind and strength. In that love, we find the fulfillment of our love for each other. The commemoration invites us to trust in God’s never failing love. It doesn’t answer people’s questions about what life beyond death will be like, or even what continued purification will be like. It calls us rather to just trust God and walk steadily toward God, until we find ourselves in the eternally embracing arms. Walk confidently but with a confidence not coming from yourself. Walk in love, but in a love that is really Christ’s. Walk in peace, and as St. Augustine said, sing praise as you walk.

Saturday

MARY'S GIFT OF NEW LIFE

A Reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

There is a person who, under the cross fully lives the reality of our redemption. That person is Mary. She represents an immense treasure that Jesus wishes to share with us. Jesus makes her the custodian of this gift, a saving gift, and shows in her and through her a fully human response to unlimited divine love. As we seek to contemplate Mary at the foot of the cross when need to try to grasp what happened to her at that moment.

Mary is experiencing surrendering her son to God's will and she does it for the sake of all humanity. In that deed she receives all humanity as a gift; i.e., she loves all and so she receives the gift of being the mother of all. She has followed God's plan completely and made it her own; it is her way of reaching the total giving in faith to which all are called in the footsteps of Abraham. She has placed her entire self into God's hands and abandoned herself entirely, together with all that she could ever think of as her own. That includes her own dear son. She receives from God what is most dear to God; i.e., the Church as the Body of the Son. This Son will live in the Church born from the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Mary is given to us as the one who more than any other understood the personal meaning—for her—of Jesus' sacrificial offering, of Jesus' love for humanity, and of the fullness of dedication to God's plan that this offering implies. More than anyone else she can thus receive the gift of a new humanity and a new way of being fully human.

Human history is moving towards an ideal unity and harmony with God but is shot through with conflict. Progress is made only through a clear determination of history's goal, by a constant effort for good against all adversity and misunderstandings, and by recognizing all the disguises of evil and rejecting them. What part does the woman play in this vision of history? She represents all humanity because she is the one who receives the Word of God and from whom the Son of God is born in Jesus. In her, we see our point of departure and our arrival in reconciliation and eternal life. We are all called to share these with Mary. She is the living symbol of humanity on the move. She is a woman reconciled with herself and her mission. She is the sign of renewed humanity, one in which woman regains her place and role and leads all to universal reconciliation—with God and with one another. We are to learn how to do this in our own life and mission. She is a living model for us to follow as we journey toward our goal, the goal with share with her and all humanity.