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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 GRACE OF SHAME

From the Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Monday, 9 March 2020

The Reading from the Prophet Daniel (9:4-10), is a confession of sins. The people recognize that they have sinned. They acknowledge that the Lord has been faithful with us, but that “we have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly, and have betrayed your commandments and your ordinances. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, our ancestors, and to all the people of the land” (vv. 5-6). There is a *confession* of sins, a recognition that we have sinned.

And when we prepare to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation, we must do what is called an “examination of conscience” and see what we have done before God: I have sinned. Recognize the sin. But this acknowledgment of sin cannot merely be an intellectual list of sins, saying “I have sinned”, then I will say it to the priest and the priest will forgive me. This is not necessary, it is not the right thing to do. This would be like making a list of the things I need to do, or need to have, or that I have done badly, but which stays in the head. A *true* confession of sins must remain in the heart. To go to confession is not just saying this list to the priest, “I did this, this, this and this...”, and then I go away, I am forgiven. No, it is not this. It takes a step, a further step, which is the confession of our miseries, but from the heart; that is, the list I have made of bad things comes down to the heart.

And this is what Daniel, the Prophet, does. “Justice, Lord, is yours; ours the look of shame” (cf. v. 7). When I recognize that I have sinned, that I have not prayed well, and I feel this in my heart, a sense of shame comes to us: “I am ashamed of having done this. I ask your pardon with shame”. And shame for our sins is a grace; we must ask for it: “Lord, may I be ashamed”. A person who has lost his shame loses his moral judgment, and loses respect for others. He is shameless. The same happens with God: “Shame belongs to us, righteousness belongs to you”. Shame belongs to us. “Ours the look of shame we wear today”, he. [Daniel] continues, “to our kings, our princes, our ancestors, because we have sinned against you” (v. 8). “To the Lord our God” first he had said “justice”, now he says mercy” (v. 9). When we have not only the recollection, the memory of the sins we have committed but also the sense of shame, this touches God’s heart and He responds with mercy. The journey that leads towards God’s mercy consists of shame for the bad, for the evil things we have done. In this way, when I go to confession, I will say not only the list of sins, but also the feelings of confusion, of shame for having done this to a God so good, so merciful, so just. Let us ask today for the grace of shame: to be ashamed of our sins. May the Lord grant this grace to all of us.

Tuesday

SINNERS, BUT IN DIALOGUE WITH GOD

From the Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Tuesday, 10 March 2020

Yesterday, the Word of God taught us how to recognize our sins and to confess them, but not only with the mind, but also with the heart, with a spirit of shame; shame for our sins as a most noble attitude before God. And today the Lord calls all of us sinners to dialogue with Him (cf. *Is* 1:10.16-20). Because sin closes us up in ourselves, it makes us hide, or hide our truth, inside. It is what happened to Adam and Eve: after sinning they hid themselves because they were ashamed; they were naked (cf. *Gen* 3:8-10). And the sinner, when he or she feels shame, is then tempted to hide. And the Lord calls: “ ‘Come now, let us talk this over, says the Lord’ (*Is* 1:18); let us talk about your sin, let us talk about your situation. Do not be afraid”. And He continues: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (v. 18). “Come, because I am able to change everything”, the Lord tells us. “Do not be afraid to come and speak. Be courageous even with your misery”.

I am reminded of that saint who was so penitent: he prayed so much. And he always tried to give the Lord everything the Lord asked of him. But the Lord was not pleased. And one day he got a little angry with the Lord because the saint had quite a character. And he said to the Lord, “But, Lord, I don't understand you. I give you everything, everything, and you're always dissatisfied as if something were missing. What's missing?” “Give me your sins: that's what's missing”. Have the courage to go with our misery and speak to the Lord: “Come, come, let's talk about it! Do not be afraid”. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (v. 18).

This is the Lord's invitation. But there is always a deception: instead of going to talk with the Lord, to pretend not to be sinners. That is why the Lord rebuked the doctors of the law (cf. *Mt* 23:1-12). These people do deeds “for people to see: Wearing broader phylacteries and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honor at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues, being greeted obsequiously in the market squares and having people call them Rabbi” (vv. 5-6). Appearance, vanity. Covering the truth of our heart with vanity. Vanity never heals! Vanity never heals. Rather, it is poisonous, and continues till it makes the heart ill, leading you to that hardness of heart that says to you: “No, do not go to the Lord, do not go. Remain alone...”.

Vanity is precisely the place where we close ourselves off from the Lord's call. Instead, the invitation of the Lord is that of a father, a brother: “Come! Let's talk, let's talk. In the end I can change your life from red to white”.

May this Word of the Lord encourage us. May our prayer be a true prayer: about our reality, about our sins, about our misery. He knows, He knows what we are. We know it, but our vanity always invites us to cover it up. May the Lord help us.

Wednesday

VANITY DISTANCES US FROM CHRIST'S CROSS

From the Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Wednesday, 11 March 2020

The First Reading, a passage from the prophet Jeremiah (18:18-20), is truly a prophecy of the Passion of the Lord. What do the enemies say? "Come, let us destroy him by his own tongue; let us carefully note his every word", "Let's contrive a plot against him". It does not say, "Let's conquer him, let's get rid of him", no. To make his life difficult, to torment him. It is the suffering of the prophet, but there is a prophecy of Jesus. In the Gospel (*Mt* 20:17-28), Jesus Himself talks to us about this: "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man is about to be handed over to the chief priests and scribes. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the pagans to be mocked and scourged and crucified" (vv. 18-19). It is not only a death sentence: there is more than that. There is humiliation, and hounding. When there is the dogged persecution of a Christian, of a person, the devil is there. The devil has two styles: seduction, with worldly promises, as he wanted to do with Jesus in the desert, to seduce him, and with seduction to make him change the plan of redemption; and, if this does not work, doggedness. The devil has no half-measures. His pride is so great that he tries to destroy. He destroys enjoying the destruction with dogged fury. Let us think of the persecution of so many saints, of so many Christians: their persecutors do not kill them at once, but make them suffer and try to humiliate them in all sorts of ways, to the end. We must not confuse a simple social, political and religious persecution with the dogged fury of the devil. The devil hounds in order to destroy. Let us think of Revelation: he wanted to devour the woman's child who is about to be born (cf. 12:4).

The two thieves who were crucified with Jesus were condemned, crucified and left to die in peace. Nobody insulted them: no one was interested. The insult was only for Jesus, against Jesus. Jesus tells the apostles that He will be condemned to death, but He will be "mocked and scourged and crucified"... They mock him.

And the way out of the devil's fury, out of this destruction, is the worldly spirit, what the mother asks for her children, the children of Zebedee (cf. *Mt* 20:20-21). Jesus speaks of humiliation, which is His own destiny, and right then and there they ask Him for visibility, for power. Vanity, the worldly spirit, is precisely the way the devil offers to distance oneself from Christ's Cross. One's own fulfillment, careerism, worldly success: they are all non-Christian roads, they are all roads for obscuring the Cross of Jesus.

May the Lord give us the grace to know how to discern when the spirit that wants to destroy us with doggedness is present, and when the same spirit wants to console us with the appearances of the world, with vanity. But let us not forget: when there is dogged fury, there is hatred, the vengeance of the defeated devil. This is how it is until today, in the Church. Think of so many Christians, and how cruelly persecuted they are. In recent days the newspapers have been talking about Asia Bibi: nine years in prison, suffering. It is the devil's dogged fury.

May the Lord give us the grace to discern the Lord's way, which is the Cross, from the way of the world, which is vanity, appearance, *maquillage*.

Thursday

POVERTY AND MERCY

From the General Audience Address of His Holiness Pope Francis, 18 May 2016

[Today, let us consider] the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus. The lives of these two people seem to run on parallel tracks: their life status is opposite and not at all connected. The gate of the rich man's house is always closed to the poor man, who lies outside it, seeking to eat the leftovers from the rich man's table. The rich man is dressed in fine clothes, while Lazarus is covered with sores; the rich man feasts sumptuously every day, while Lazarus starves. Only the dogs take care of him, and they come to lick his wounds. This scene recalls the harsh reprimand of the Son of Man at the Last Judgement: "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was [...] naked and you did not clothe me" (Mt 25:42-43). Lazarus is a good example of the silent cry of the poor throughout the ages and the contradictions of a world in which immense wealth and resources are in the hands of the few.

Jesus says that one day that rich man died: the poor and the rich die, they have the same destiny, like all of us, and there are no exceptions to this. Thus, that man turned to Abraham, imploring him in the name of 'father' (vv. 24, 27). Thereby claiming to be his son, belonging to the People of God. Yet in life, he showed no consideration toward God. Instead, he made himself the center of all things, closed inside his world of luxury and wastefulness. In excluding Lazarus, he did not take into consideration the Lord nor his law. To ignore a poor man is to scorn God! We must learn this well: to ignore the poor is to scorn God. There is a detail in the parable that is worth noting: the rich man has no name, but only an adjective: 'the rich man'; while the name of the poor man is repeated five times, and 'Lazarus' means 'God helps'. Lazarus, who is lying at the gate, is a living reminder to the rich man to remember God, but the rich man does not receive that reminder. Hence, he will be condemned not because of his wealth, but for being incapable of feeling compassion for Lazarus and for not coming to his aid.

In the second part of the parable, we again meet Lazarus and the rich man after their death (vv. 22-31). In the hereafter, the situation is reversed: the poor Lazarus is carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom in heaven, while the rich man is thrown into torment. Thus the rich man "lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom". He seems to see Lazarus for the first time, but his words betray him: "Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame". Now the rich man recognizes Lazarus and asks for his help, while in life he pretended not to see him. Before, he denied him even the leftovers from his table, and now he would like him to bring him a drink! He still believes he can assert rights through his previous social status. Declaring it impossible to grant his request, Abraham personally offers the key to the whole story: he explains that good things and evil things have been distributed so as to compensate for earthly injustices, and the door that in life separated the rich from the poor is transformed into "a great chasm". As long as Lazarus was outside his house, the rich man had the opportunity for salvation, to thrust open the door, to help Lazarus, but now that they are both dead, the situation has become irreparable. God is never called upon directly, but the parable clearly warns: God's mercy toward us is linked to our mercy toward our neighbor; when this is lacking, also that of not finding room in our closed heart, He cannot enter. If I do not thrust open the door of my heart to the poor, that door remains closed. Even to God. This is terrible.

Friday

LET US NOT FORGET THE GRATUITOUSNESS OF REVELATION

From the Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Friday, 13 March 2020

Both of the readings are a prophecy of the Passion of the Lord. Joseph is sold as a slave for twenty silver pieces, and delivered to the Gentiles (cf. *Gen* 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28). And Jesus's parable clearly speaks in symbols of the killing of the Son (cf. *Mt* 21:33-43.45). This story tells of a landowner "who planted a vineyard" - the care with which he did so - "he fenced it round, dug a winepress in it and built a tower" - he did it well. "Then he leased it to tenants and went abroad" (v. 33). This is God's people. The Lord chose those people; there is an election of the people. They are the chosen people. There is also a promise: "Go forth. You are my people" - a promise made to Abraham. And there is also the covenant made with the people at Sinai. The people must always keep that election in their memory - that they are a chosen people; the promise - so they always look ahead in hope; and the covenant in order to live daily in fidelity.

But what happens in this parable is that when the time came to reap the fruits, these people had forgotten that they were not the masters: "The tenants seized his servants, thrashed one, killed another, and stoned a third. Next he sent more servants to them, this time a larger number, and they dealt with them in the same way" (vv. 35-36). Jesus clearly shows here - He is speaking to the doctors of the law - how the doctors of the law treated the prophets. "Finally, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come on, let's kill him and take over his inheritance'" (vv. 37-38). They stole the inheritance, which belonged to another. A story of infidelity, of infidelity to their election, of infidelity to the promise, of infidelity to the covenant, which is a gift. The election, the promise and the covenant are a gift from God. Disloyalty to God's gift. Not understanding that it was a gift and taking it as though it were their possession. These people appropriated the gift. They took away the aspect as gift to turn it into their property. And the gift that is wealth, openness, blessing, was closed up, caged in a doctrine of laws, many of them. It was "ideologized". And so the gift lost its nature as a gift and ended up as part of an ideology. In particular, as part of a moralistic ideology full of precepts, and indeed ridiculous as it lowers itself to sophisticated arguments for everything. They appropriated the gift.

This is the great sin. It is the sin of forgetting that God made a gift of Himself to us, that God gave us this as a gift and, forgetting this, becoming owners. And the promise is no longer a promise, the election is no longer election, and the covenant comes to be interpreted according to "my" opinion, becoming an ideology.

Here, in this attitude, I see in the Gospel perhaps the beginning, of clericalism, which is a perversion, which always denies God's gratuitous election, God's gratuitous covenant, God's gratuitous promise. It forgets the gratuitous nature of revelation; it forgets that God manifested Himself as a gift, He made Himself a gift for us and we must give this, make others see this as a gift, not as our possession. Clericalism is not something that belongs only to these times. Rigidity is not something of these days. It already existed in Jesus's time. And then, Jesus goes ahead in explaining the parable - this is chapter 21 - He goes ahead up to chapter 23 with the condemnation, where we see God's wrath against those who take the gift as if it were a possession and reduce its richness to the ideological whims of their own mind.

Saturday

THE UNSUSPECTED POWER OF HUMILITY

A Reflection taken from a Sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

O happy the humility of those who repent! O blessed the hope of those who confess! How mighty you are if you are with the Almighty! How quickly the dread judge is revealed as a devoted Father. Think of the prodigal son. By merely intending to humble himself he obtained a pardon that some seek with tears and strive for by confession.

Scripture proclaims: "I will confess my transgression to the Lord and you forgive the guilt of my sin"! Everywhere mercy triumphs. It preceded the very will to confess by inspiring it and then preceded the words of confession by forgiving all. When the prodigal was far off the Father ran to meet him. The Father was more anxious to pardon than the son was to be pardoned.

Where sin abounded, grace abounded more. Not only is their forgiveness but the sinner is given the sanctification of the Spirit—the "best robe". The Father breathed himself into the sinner's heart that the two might become one spirit. God couldn't bind us more closely, couldn't make us more intimate with Him, than by incorporating us into himself. By charity and by ineffable power God unites us with himself. If such is the grace accorded to the repentant what will be the glory of those who reign with Jesus? God gives us so much while we are still on the way, so what treasures is he keeping in store for us in the Kingdom?

You blessed sinner—blessed not because a sinner but because of repentance! The human heart is too narrow. The love it experiences must be expressed in groans, sighs and tears. When you consider all this what comes to birth in your mind and heart? An inexpressible fire of love blazes up. It comes of shame and sorrow and of joy and love all together. O happy sinner, keep carefully and watchfully this spirit. Keep the humility that brought you to your God. There is no greater gift of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing more health-restoring among the sacraments. Keep the humility by which you planned to say, "Father, I am not worthy!" This justifies sinners, perfects the just and brings justice to fullness.

Mercy has welcomed you with kindness, revived you with love and fear has been taken away. Hold fast to humility! You have chosen to be of little account and so you have been advanced beyond your imaginings. Always take the last place, or at least desire to. Humility is the greatest of all virtues, although it doesn't look upon itself as a virtue. It is the root and seed-bed, the tinder and incentive of all love. From it begin discipline and loving service of others. From it all other virtues begin and through it they make progress and in it, they are perfected and preserved. It is humility that makes all the virtues what they are, and if any are lacking it is humility that compensates. In it, you find salvation and love and joy beyond your dreams. Rejoice in the lowliness of your service because it exalts you without your becoming exalted. If you cling to it you have the most marvelous of God's gift, saving only the gift of God's very self.