

THE FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

17-23 March 2024

&

THE SOLEMNITY OF ST. JOSEPH

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WE WISH TO SEE JESUS

From the Angelus Message of Pope Francis, 5th Sunday of Lent, 21 March 2021

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, the liturgy proclaims the Gospel in which Saint John refers to an episode that occurred in the final days of Christ's life, shortly before the Passion (cf. Jn 12:20-33). While Jesus was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, several Greeks, curious because of what he had been doing, express the wish to see him. They approach the apostle Philip and say to him: "We wish to see Jesus" (v. 21). "We wish to see Jesus". Let us remember this: "We wish to see Jesus". Philip tells Andrew and then together they report it to the Teacher. In the request of those Greeks, we can glimpse the request that many men and women, of every place and every time, pose to the Church and also to each one of us: "We wish to see Jesus".

And how does Jesus respond to that request? In a way that makes us think. He says: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified... Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (vv. 23-24). These words do not seem to respond to the request those Greeks made. In reality, they surpass it. In fact, Jesus reveals that for every man and woman who wants to find him, He is the hidden seed ready to die in order to bear much fruit. As if to say: if you wish to know me, if you wish to understand me, look at the grain of wheat that dies in soil, that is, look at the cross.

The sign of the Cross comes to mind, which over the centuries has become the symbol par excellence of Christians. Even today, those who wish to "see Jesus", perhaps coming from countries and cultures where Christianity is not well-known, what do they see first? What is the most common sign they encounter? The Crucifix, the Cross. In churches, in the homes of Christians, even worn on their persons. The important thing is that the sign be consistent with the Gospel: the cross cannot but express love, service, unreserved self-giving: only in this way is it truly the "tree of life", of overabundant life.

Today too, many people, often without saying so, implicitly would like to "see Jesus", to meet him, to know him. This is how we understand the great responsibility we Christians and of our communities have. We too must respond with the witness of a life that is given in service, a life that takes upon itself the style of God – closeness, compassion and tenderness – and is given in service. It means sowing seeds of love, not with fleeting words but through concrete, simple and courageous examples, not with theoretical condemnations, but with gestures of love. Then the Lord, with his grace, makes us bear fruit, even when the soil is dry due to misunderstandings, difficulty or persecution, or claims of legalism or clerical moralism. This is barren soil. Precisely then, in trials and in solitude, while the seed is dying, that is the moment in which life blossoms, to bear ripe fruit in due time. It is in this intertwining of death and life that we can experience the joy and true fruitfulness of love, which always, I repeat, is given in God's style: closeness, compassion, tenderness.

May the Virgin Mary help us to follow Jesus, to walk, strong and joyful, on the path of service, so that the love of Christ may shine in our every attitude and become more and more the style of our daily life.

Monday

MERCY WITH MISERY

From the Homily of Pope Francis, 29 March 2019

“The two of them alone remained: mercy with misery” (In John 33, 5). In this way, Saint Augustine sums up the end of the Gospel we have just heard. Those who came to cast stones at the woman or to accuse Jesus with regard to the Law have gone away, having lost interest. Jesus, however, remains. He remains because what is of value in his eyes has remained: that woman, that person. For him, the sinner comes before the sin. I, you, each one of us come first in the heart of God: before mistakes, rules, judgments and our failures. Let us ask for the grace of a gaze like that of Jesus, let us ask to have the Christian perspective on life. Let us look with love upon the sinner before his or her sin; upon the one going astray before his or her error; upon the person before his or her history.

“The two of them alone remained: mercy with misery”. The woman caught in adultery does not represent for Jesus a paragraph of the Law, but instead, a concrete situation in which he gets involved. Thus he remains there with the woman, for the most part standing in silence. Meanwhile, he twice performs a mysterious gesture: he writes with his finger on the ground (Jn 8:6, 8). We do not know what he wrote and perhaps that is not the most important element: the attention of the Gospel focuses on the fact that the Lord writes. We think of the episode at Sinai when God wrote the tablets of the Law with his finger (cf. Ex 31:18), just as Jesus does now. Later, God, through the prophets, promised that he would no longer write on tablets of stone, but directly on the heart (cf. Jer 31:33), on the tablets of the flesh of our hearts (cf. 2 Cor 3:3). With Jesus, the mercy of God incarnate, the time has come when God writes on the hearts of men and women, when he gives a sure hope to human misery: giving not so much external laws which often keep God and humanity at a distance, but rather the law of the Spirit which enters into the heart and sets it free. It happens this way for the woman, who encounters Jesus and resumes her life: she goes off to sin no more (cf. Jn 8:11). It is Jesus who, with the power of the Holy Spirit, frees us from the evil we have within us, from the sin which the Law could impede but not remove.

All the same, evil is strong, it has a seductive power: it attracts and fascinates. Our own efforts are not enough to detach ourselves from it: we need a greater love. Without God, we cannot overcome evil. Only his love raises us up from within, only his tender love poured out into our hearts makes us free. If we want to be free from evil, we have to make room for the Lord who forgives and heals. He accomplishes this above all through the sacrament we are about to celebrate. Confession is the passage from misery to mercy; it is God’s writing upon the heart. There – in our hearts – we constantly read that we are precious in the eyes of God, that he is our Father and that he loves us even more than we love ourselves.

Tuesday

WHAT IS FAITH LIKE WHEN IT IS MATURE?

A Reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Even before Jesus was born, Joseph was a believer and mature in faith. The events surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus reveal how differently he behaved and struggled when he had to move toward a greater knowledge of God and a deeper faith in God's will, for him and for us. The Gospel uses two keywords to help us understand: "Her husband Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare her publicly, decided to divorce her informally".

The exegetes have devoted much time to the meaning of this statement since the text and its translations are not as clear as they might be. For our purposes, it is enough to say that even persons of honor, or in New Testament language, believers who are mature in faith and act out of charity) find themselves caught in anxious and difficult situations.

It seems, first, that Joseph's integrity led him to want to withhold his own name from a baby whose father he did not know. This was a matter of legal honor; Joseph can't give his name to a child that isn't his own. But, second, Joseph's integrity also insists on Mary's virtue, and so he refuses to expose to the rigor of the Law a mystery he did not understand; this is goodness. Naturally, this conflict of conscience caused him pain and distress. Joseph was well aware of the Law but at that moment, his mature faith and charity overcame it. He chooses the person, Mary, rather than the Law.

Can you think of how often Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their way of interpreting the Law? It was a form of hardness of heart. He doesn't criticize their attachment to the Law but their approach to justice; it lacked charity. Joseph, however, had struggled to reach a balance. He wasn't exempt from anxiety but took upon himself the decision to do the honorable thing, as he saw the matter. It was the fruit of charity. It was the fruit of his maturity in faith.

Joseph was open to the power of Divine grace and its illumination. An angel of the Lord came to resolve the situation in the end. Joseph had been afraid he wouldn't be faithful to God and the angel tells him not to fear. Then he reveals the deeper meaning of the event that so puzzled Joseph. He was probably filled with pure joy.

The figure of Joseph allows us to grasp a fundamental teaching. We need patient hope that can wait—as Joseph did. We need a hope that knows how to suffer through difficult situations with a humble spirit. We need a hope that is sure God will answer our genuine need. That is trusting faith. That is mature faith.

Wednesday

FOLLOWING JESUS INTO THE WILDERNESS

A Reflection from a Sermon by Bishop Alonso de Orozco

Beloved, I beg you, let us accompany Christ in seeking out the wilderness of repentance as quickly as we can. Let us be ashamed to go on spending our time seeking pleasure and diversion, especially in things like gluttony, when our Savior is engaged in prayer and fasting. Recall the soldier, Uriah, when King David asked him why he hadn't gone down to his home while in Jerusalem: "The ark of God dwells in tents and my Lord Joab is in camp fighting against the enemy", so should I indulge in ordinary pleasures? What about us? Shall we apply ourselves to prayer and fasting or to ordinary pleasure-seeking?

We know that Christ Jesus, who is the ark of God, and in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge of the Heavenly Father, is in battle with the devil in a kind of wilderness. Shall we take our rest and seek ordinary delights? We need to bravely resist the temptation to do this. We must say: "Not on bread alone does a person live, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God". We surely have to rely on the One who gives food to all who call upon him and doesn't even forget sparrows and crows when they call out for what they need.

We can perform all our actions for the glory of God. We can do everything in praise of our Creator. We must not tempt God, the Most Good. Scripture tells us, "You shall not tempt the Lord, your God". We must remember the word, "Whoever loves danger will perish in it". If we keep these truths in mind we will be able to escape not only ordinary dangers but the vainglory of thinking ourselves secure in God's love, no matter what we do.

A wicked king of Babylon erected a golden statue and called all to worship it. That is an image of the devil, the master of all who would follow their own will and convenience rather than seek the Lord and fear him. We would adore a monster if we became this sort of person. We have to imitate the courage of the three young men who refused to worship the devil or his many images. As Jesus said to the devil: "The Lord your God shall you adore, and only God shall you serve".

Those three brave young men chose to enter a fiery furnace rather than worship such an image. Do you believe that if you follow them an angel of the Lord will come to you and make that furnace into a place where a moist and gentle breeze of God's goodness blows? The fire won't be able to harm you. Instead, you will claim the victory over the enemy and sing with one heart and voice unwearied praise and thanksgiving to Christ our true Lord. He can rescue us from all danger. By his gift of grace, he has cast down the enemy and his pride. He will raise us up to heavenly glory. So let us bravely follow him into our own wilderness and then watch him overcome in us all evil attractions and grow in love of our God and of one another.

Thursday

WE ARE ONE BODY

Fr Thomas Merton OCSO

We are divided against ourselves and against God by our own selfishness, which divides us against our brothers and sisters too.

This division cannot be healed by a love that places itself only on one side of the rift. Love must reach over to both sides and draw them together. We cannot love ourselves unless we love others, and we cannot love others unless we love ourselves. But a selfish love of ourselves makes us incapable of loving others. The difficulty of this commandment lies in the paradox that it would have us love ourselves unselfishly because even our love of ourselves is something we owe to others.

This truth never becomes clear as long as we assume that each one of us, individually, is the center of the universe. We do not exist for ourselves alone, and it is only when we are fully convinced of this fact that we begin to love ourselves properly and thus also love others...

Only when we see ourselves in our true human context, as members of a race which is intended to be one organism and one body will we begin to understand the positive importance not only of the successes but of the failures and accidents in our lives. My successes are not my own. The way to them was prepared by others. The fruit of my labor is not my own: for I am preparing the way for the achievements of another. Nor are my failures my own. They may spring from the failure of another, but they are also compensated for by another's achievements. Therefore, the meaning of my life is not to be looked for merely in the sum total of my achievements. It is seen only in the complete integration of my achievements and failures of my generation, and society and time. It is seen above all in my integration in the mystery of Christ.

Solitude, humility, self-denial, action and contemplation, and monastic life make sense only when we admit with the poet John Donne that no man is an island.

Friday

LENTEN CONVERSION

Sr Joan Chittister O.S.B.

The first gift of struggle is the call to conversion. It is a call to think differently about who God is and about who I am as an individual. It calls us to think again about what life really means and how we go about being in the world. These are deeply spiritual questions that touch on our notions of God as well as on our ideas of ourselves.

To live bent on conversion is to live welcoming a tomorrow that is already in embryo, rather than to cement today into eternity. Conversion does not expect to settle down, it expects only to become new over and over again. It sees change as the impetus to explore the other part of the self, demanding as that may be to do, difficult as that may be to begin, unwanted as that may be at this very time.

The kind of change that shocks us into new beginnings is the kind of change that gives us new life. Yes, it forces us down new paths and leads us stumbling through the recesses of the dark sides of the soul—angry, fearful, resistant, and unbelieving. But it also prods us from task to task in life until, in the end, we find ourselves full of grace.

Change is an invitation to see life differently now than I did before. It stretches my vision and opens my heart to what I could not see in life before life picked me up and put me down in the middle of it. I lose what I have clung to for my security for years and begin to see myself in a different way. Change converts me from being narrow, from being trapped in the small confines of my former self. I become a more expansive, more reflective, more flexible citizen of the world.

And so, when conversion comes, I finally discover that there is more than one way to be in the world, more than a “man’s way, more than my way of doing things.” When I convert, I open my arms to the rest of the world and the world reaches down and takes me in.

Saturday

THE PROCESS OF TEMPTATION

From the Homily of Pope Francis, Saturday, 4 April 2020

John says: “He did not speak in his own person, it was as high priest that he made this prophecy that Jesus was to die for the nation... From that day they were determined to kill him.” (cf. Jn 11:51-53) It was a process, a process that began with minor restlessness during John the Baptist’s days and finished here with the doctors of the law and the high priests. A process that continually got stronger, a process in which the decisions that had to be made became increasingly sure, but no one said clearly: “This man needs to be gotten rid of.” The way that the doctors of the law proceed is precisely a model of how temptation works in us, because it was truly the devil who was behind this, who wanted to destroy Jesus, and temptation in us truly works like this: it begins with something small, a desire, an idea, it grows, it infects others and in the end it justifies itself. These are the three steps of the temptation of the devil in us and the three steps of the temptation that the devil worked in the person of the doctor of the law. It began with something small, but it grew and grew until it began to infect others, it became real, and in the end, it justified itself: “it is necessary that one die for the people” (see Jn 11:50), the total justification. And everyone went home calmly. They said: “This is the decision we had to make”. And all of us, when we are conquered by temptation, we end up feeling calm, because we have found a justification for this sin, for this sinful attitude, for this life which is against God’s law. We should have the custom of identifying this process within us. That process that changes our hearts from good to bad, that leads us to a downward slope. A thing that grows, grows, grows slowly, then it infects others, in the end, it justifies itself. It is rare that temptations come all at once, the devil is astute. And he knows how to take this path, the same one he took to arrive at Jesus’ condemnation. When we recognize that we are in sin or that we have fallen, yes, we must go and ask the Lord for forgiveness, this is the first step that we must take. But then we must say: “How did I fall into this? How did this process begin in my soul? How did it grow? Whom have I infected? And in the end how did I justify myself in order to fall?” The life of Jesus is always an example for us. The things that happened to Jesus are things that also will happen to us: the temptations, the justifications, good people around us — and perhaps we do not listen to them — and bad people in the moment of temptation. We surround ourselves with them in order to allow the temptation to get stronger. But let us never forget: always, behind a sin, behind a fall, there is a temptation that began small, that grew, that infected us, and in the end, we find a justification to fall. May the Holy Spirit enlighten us in this interior awareness.