

Sunday

THE FRUIT OF GENUINE CHRISTIAN LOVE

A Reflection from Works of Love by. S. Kierkegaard

“A good tree doesn't bear bad fruit nor does a bad tree bear good fruit, but every tree is known for what it is by its fruit”. Every tree is recognized by its proper fruit. It may happen, however, that two fruits are very much alike and that one is healthy and the other poisonous. Sometimes too, the healthy fruit is bitter tasting and the poisonous one good tasting. In a like way, genuine love is known and distinguished from false love by its proper fruit.

Why do people make mistakes? Either they do not know love's fruit or they do not know how to discriminate the genuine from the false. For example, one may make the mistake of calling what is actually self-love “genuine love”. One may loudly protest that it is impossible to live without one's beloved, but such a one may not want to hear about love's demands and tasks. Such a person has to practice self-surrender and give up calling things such as erotic self-indulgence love. One may easily make the mistake of calling such weak self-indulgence love or that of calling what is merely spoiled whimpering or a corrupting attachment or an indulgence in vanity or self-flattery or momentary attraction or a passing relationship by the noble name of love.

There is a flower which is named “the flower of eternity” and another which is quite remarkably called “the everlasting flower”. But these, like all perishable flowers, bloom once a year at a definite time and perish. What mistaken names! The flower, however, is so beautiful at the time of its blooming that people want it to last always or at least symbolize the beauty of the eternal. They exaggerate.

As every tree is identified by its proper fruit so the love of which Christianity speaks is known because it reveals that it has within it the truth of an eternal beauty. All other loves are passing, whether humanly speaking they wither soon or lasts for years! All other loves merely blossom in their hour, even if the hour lasts 70 years. Then they are gone. Christian love is really eternal.

If a Christian has genuine self-knowledge there is no possibility that person will say the love proper to Christianity is merely a passing blossom. No poet with true self-understanding would think of celebrating passing love in a song. When a poet celebrates something passing it must have a kind of anguish in it, and just because it is like a passing blossom.

Such love is like our present life. It is meant to blossom and perish. But Christian love abides. That is a reason why it is Christian love in its proper and special sense. It is a reality which has being always. We don't just sing about it, we believe in it, and we live it.

Monday

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

From the Homily of Pope Francis at the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, Philadelphia (Sept. 26, 2015)

Most of you know the story of Saint Katharine Drexel, one of the great saints raised up by this local Church. When she spoke to Pope Leo XIII of the needs of the missions, the Pope - he was a very wise Pope! - asked her pointedly: "What about you? What are you going to do?". Those words changed Katharine's life, because they reminded her that, in the end, every Christian man and woman, by virtue of baptism, has received a mission. Each one of us has to respond, as best we can, to the Lord's call to build up his Body, the Church.

"What about you?" I would like to dwell on two aspects of these words in the context of our particular mission to transmit the joy of the Gospel and to build up the Church, whether as priests, deacons, or members of institutes of consecrated life.

First, those words - "What about you?" - were addressed to a young person, a young woman with high ideals, and they changed her life. They made her think of the immense work that had to be done, and to realize that she was being called to do her part. How many young people in our parishes and schools have the same high ideals, generosity of spirit, and love for Christ and the Church! Do we challenge them? Do we make space for them and help them to do their part? To find ways of sharing their enthusiasm and gifts with our communities, above all in works of mercy and concern for others? Do we share our own joy and enthusiasm in serving the Lord?

One of the great challenges facing the Church in this generation is to foster in all the faithful a sense of personal responsibility for the Church's mission, and to enable them to fulfill that responsibility as missionary disciples, as a leaven of the Gospel in our world. This will require creativity in adapting to changed situations, carrying forward the legacy of the past not primarily by maintaining our structures and institutions, which have served us well, but above all by being open to the possibilities which the Spirit opens up to us and communicating the joy of the Gospel, daily and in every season of our life.

"What about you?" It is significant that those words of the elderly Pope were also addressed to a lay woman. We know that the future of the Church in a rapidly changing society will call, and even now calls, for a much more active engagement on the part of the laity. The Church in the United States has always devoted immense effort to the work of catechesis and education. Our challenge today is to build on those solid foundations and to foster a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility in planning for the future of our parishes and institutions. This does not mean relinquishing the spiritual authority with which we have been entrusted; rather, it means discerning and employing wisely the manifold gifts which the Spirit pours out upon the Church. In a particular way, it means valuing the immense contribution which women, lay and religious, have made and continue to make, to the life of our communities.

Tuesday

A LETTER: THE RISEN CHRIST, HOPE OF CHRISTIANS

By St. Braulio of Saragossa

"Lazarus, our friend, is sleeping." In saying this, Christ who is the hope of all who believe, refers to the departed as those who are asleep. By no means, does he see them as dead. So Paul the Apostle doesn't want us to grieve about those who have fallen asleep. Our faith tells us that all who believe in Christ will never die; indeed faith assures us that Christ is not dead nor shall we die. The Lord himself will come down from heaven and there will be the command of the archangel's voice and the sound of the trumpet; then those who were united with Christ in death will rise. Let the hope of resurrection encourage us because we shall see again those whom we lose here below.

Of course, we must continue to believe firmly in Christ; we must continue to obey his commandments. His power is so great that it is easier for him to raise the dead to life than it is for us to arouse sleepers. As we say these things, some unknown feeling causes us to burst into tears; some hidden feeling discourages the mind which tries to trust and hope. Such is the sad human condition; without Christ, all life is utter emptiness.

O death! You separate those who are joined to each other in marriage. You harshly and cruelly divide those who friendship unites. But your power is broken. Your horrid yoke has been destroyed by the One who sternly threatened you when Hosea cried out: "O Death! I shall be your death!" With the words of the Apostle we cry out: "O death! Where is your victory? O death! Where is your sting?" Your conqueror redeemed us. He handed himself over to the wicked so that he could transform the wicked into a person truly dear to Him. It would take too long to narrate all the consolations intended for our benefit in the Scriptures. But by focusing our attention upon the glory of our Redeemer there is sufficient hope for our resurrection. Through faith, we know that we are already risen from the dead. The Apostle writes: "If we have died with Christ, we believe that we are at the same time living with him." "We do not really belong to ourselves. We belong to the One who redeemed us. Our will should always depend on his. For this reason, we say in the Lord's Prayer: "Your will be done". Confronted with death, the sentiments of Job should be our own: "The Lord gave and the Lord took away. May his name be blessed!" Let us repeat here and now what Job said, lest we turn out to be unlike him when our time comes.

Wednesday

THE GRACE THAT COMES WITH OUR FASTING

A Reflection by a Carthusian

The theme of the first week of Lent is that of turning to God, symbolized traditionally by the call to fast. Fasting, radically understood, is the removal of the obstacles to our profound conformation to Christ. Last Sunday's liturgy called us to join Christ in his fast in the desert by looking carefully at our temptations. Monastic tradition tells us that this aims at making the desire for God the deepest longing of our spirit and its guiding light.

In response to his own temptations, which are those not only of ancient Israel but of every person who would follow God, Jesus sets out the principles that would guide all he did in ministry and would lead him to the Cross. First, there is absolute obedience to the will of God. Second, there is trust in God without demanding evidence or proof that God can be trusted. Third, there is placing allegiance to God first, before every other allegiance or loyalty.

Jesus is to proclaim good news to the marginalized and poor and is to use spiritual means to do it. He is to continue doing this no matter what happens and how unsuccessful his labors seem to be. He is to reject reliance on anything and anyone other than God, including the idol that is his human ego.

In the person of Christ, it is the new People of God who overcome. It is the faith of the entire Church which struggles against human weakness, solitude, lack of support, and every need to succeed. We are to do it now. The second reading last Sunday announced, "Now is the acceptable time!" The liturgy is the irruption into our lives of a reality that transcends time and space. It bursts in upon us when we gather with Jesus to renew the offering of self we have made "in the desert". We will do it for one more day, week, or year.

The desert confronted Jesus with the choice of a way to accomplish his messianic mission—especially to confirm his acceptance of the role of Suffering Servant. For us, there is also a special grace like this in Lent and each week of Lent. It is a quite individual grace that will never return and must be grasped now. It is linked in some mysterious fashion to this day and these circumstances in which we live and move and have our being in God.

The formulary of the Eucharist was composed largely of verses from Psalm 91, a cry to trust in God in the face of every sort of Satanic pressure to turn to other resources. We were to listen to Deuteronomy's call: "*Seek the Lord, your God. You will find God if you search after him with all your heart and soul. Because the Lord, your God, is a merciful God.*" (Deut. 4: 29f) God invites us to trust, but at the same time calls upon us not to hide from the demands following Jesus has made and will make upon us, and upon our community of faith.

What is happening in our lives is not mere play-acting, any more than were Jesus' temptations. We are undergoing a real test. Our decisions shape our lives just as those of Jesus shaped his ministry. Our ministry, in fact, is living out a response in faith and trust to just this testing.

Thursday

LET GOD STRETCH YOU & MAKE YOU LIKE JESUS

A Reflection by Fr. Carroll Stuhmueller

Today's reading from Deuteronomy tells us that obedience with love brings life. Today's reading from Luke tells us that we must take up our cross daily in order to follow Jesus; i.e., to live in the same obedience in which he lived. Of all the books of the Bible, Deuteronomy reflects most often on obedience and the choice it asks us for is that we be obedient. It also repeats that this is really a life or death choice, whether we pause to realize this or not. After all, at the heart of Deuteronomy is the prayer and command: *"Hear, O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength."*

Wherever love is total, spontaneous, and springs from the depths of one's life, its every wish is a command. Obedience expresses the deepest law of existence in the person who loves as totally as God loves us and commands us to love in return. Disobedience, even in a small matter, can be disastrous. This is because it can disrupt a basic attitude, a fundamental disposition.

Love normally expresses itself in small, delicate ways. Not to obey such impulses in ourselves is to tear out of ourselves the roots of Jesus' way of life. *"Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live by loving the Lord, your God, by heeding his voice and holding fast to him."* That's how Scripture puts it.

Jesus tells us in today's gospel passage not to choose life in the literal sense, but to choose to lose our lives for him, because only in this way will we find them. When Deuteronomy calls upon us to choose life it doesn't mean we should seek a selfish, narrow, biased existence, but rather a life of compassion concern, and of help for one's neighbors. When the laws of Deuteronomy are compared with laws in other books of the Bible, Deuteronomy is marked by exquisite thoughtfulness. It modifies (e.g.) the third commandment about resting on the Sabbath—even if one is a slave, by adding the reminder that *"you too were once slaves in Egypt"* and you too longed for a day of rest.

Perfection and loving obedience brought Jesus to the cross, seeming to lose his life but really so that we might rise to a new and greater life at the end of our way of the cross. Jesus loved to quote from Deuteronomy and brought its message to a new fullness. It calls heaven and earth to serve as witnesses to love and to real obedience, precisely as calling us out of tiny, narrow, selfish ways of living into the breadth of all heaven and earth. We are to die to narrow concerns and prejudices. Break down barriers to justice and neighborly love. God tells us to come to total love! The narrow-minded and false life leads to death. But we must rise from the dead to true life. *"Happy are they who hope in the Lord; they are like trees planted near running water, that yield fruit in due season and whose leaves never wither"*. That is God's call to us this Lent.

Friday

PUT ASIDE EVERYTHING BUT CHRIST

A Reflection from On the Incarnation by Henry of Friemar

The Eternal Word willed to stoop to great poverty in order to enrich us in great abundance with heavenly gifts. He enriched us precisely by poverty, endowing us through his indigence. We should take this very seriously. We should reflect on the ways that he did it.

Listen to St. Paul: *“Brethren, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: though he was rich he became poor for our sake so that we might be enriched by his poverty”*. St. Paul teaches us this in II Corinthians: *“You know the race of our Lord Jesus Christ; that though he was rich he became poor for our sake, in order that we might be enriched by his poverty”*. It is truly marvelous that by poverty and need he has enriched us in bodily as well as in spiritual ways.

He enriched us in bodily ways because there is nothing more precious in the entire treasury of the Church than the mean and worthless rags in which not only the poor Christ but poverty itself is wrapped. Is there anything more precious than the manger in which Christ was laid? Is there anything more glorious than the cross on which he suffered? That is why Bernard rightly says in a sermon: *“The poverty of Christ is our wealth; the Savior’s rags are more precious than any purple; the manger is more glorious than the gilded thrones of kings, and the poverty of Christ is richer than all wealth and treasures.”*

Christ’s poverty enriches us spiritually because he shows us how to handle physical things. He gave himself for us by shedding his blood and by laying down the life he loved for us. He poured out all heavenly blessings for us. When the tiny wallet which was his body was pierced by five wounds it poured out upon us in abundance the heavenly treasures it contained generously.

All this is clear from the fact that he unsealed those five fountains of grace and blessing in his own body and lets us drink freely from them all sorts of heavenly blessings. At our own pleasure, we can draw ceaselessly the waters of saving grace from these fountains. Isaiah tells us of this invitation: *“Draw water with joy from the wells of the Savior!”*

Once we have tasted fully of this water, it utterly kills all transitory thirsts in us, as St. John also says quite clearly. May the Lord Jesus give us a taste for this water. It is offered to us during the Lenten season when we busy ourselves in putting aside all other things. People imagine many things can satisfy their bodily and spiritual thirsts but only Jesus can.

The Lord Jesus laid aside every sort of earthly advantage and yet brought immeasurable benefits to the world. He invites us to imitate him. This requires effort and much training. That is one of the gifts that the Lenten season offers us. Lay aside all things except for obedience and love toward the Lord our God. His Only Begotten Son has become incarnate to teach us to do this, and show us how to do it with gladness and joy.

Saturday

OUR LENTEN OBSERVANCE

A Reflection from a Sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Blessed be God, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolations; it is he who consoles us in all our tribulations. Many are the tribulations of the just but the Lord delivers them from everyone. We suffer, in fact, two kinds of tribulation. The reason is that we have a two-fold nature; we are fleshly and we are spiritual. As a result, we live on both these levels. We are, as long as we are in this world, partly carnal and partly spiritual in our behavior. According to our progress, or lack of it, we become more spiritual and less carnal or more carnal and less spiritual. Hence our two-fold tribulation. What is carnal in us is grieved by hardships while what is spiritual is grieved only by evil doing. If there were nothing carnal in us then no adversity would bother us, indeed there wouldn't be any adversity. The sadness we experience from hardships comes from what is carnal in us. The sadness we experience because we find iniquity in us is spiritual.

We seek both carnal and spiritual consolations. But when earthly consolation abounds, we should be more humble and cautious. When we have bodily health or when the weather is fine, we must use these things to help one another do what is spiritually good. No matter whether we are blessed by God with external or internal consolations we must seek to live in the joy of hope. If we share in Christ's sufferings we shall, after all, share in Christ's Kingdom.

As for the tribulations that we suffer interiorly because of iniquity unless the Lord helps us our foot would slip and we would fall. We are like Peter called to come to the Lord over stormy waters, weighed down by our earthly self but help up by our spiritual contact with Christ. The Lord gives us the support of his hand, even when we fall. We confess our sins and we gladly accept the tribulations that cleanse us inwardly. You need not fear the one who will come as judge if you have humbly confessed your weakness to Him and accepted the hardships of our life as suitable remedies for our seeking what is not God.

What we want is to burn with the fire of love, and to burn now rather than later. This is a fire that purifies. Behold, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation. Let us listen to the words of St. Paul: While we have time let us do good to all. Woe to those who burn but not with the cleansing fire of love.

We are daily burned by our strictness of life, as by a purifying fire, and woe to us if we are not cleansed thereby of our iniquities. However, why should I fear? We have many consolations and we know we are being purified and made more fully spiritual. We shall be truly happy if we recognize our wretchedness and grieve over it in longing for the Lord, and for an all-consuming love of Him. We need not fear if we always live in reverence for the Lord and if we walk in caution and love.