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Sunday

HOW JESUS ENCOUNTERS & TRANSFORMS US

A Reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

This Sunday, we hear the story of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman. Jesus takes the initiative. He does so at the beginning by asking for a drink of water. She has come for water, as part of her human effort to make life meaningful and pleasant. But Jesus' mercy cuts across this human search and its vagueness. His words shape their encounter and ask her to reshape the desires that brought her to the well by expanding her awareness of what she, and all of us, seek.

The woman is looking for water, and Jesus invites her to think beyond the sort of water she initially wanted. As she listens, she senses that he bears the mysterious gift of prophecy – after all, he knows her past life. She tries to make sense of the meeting by relating him to well-known biblical personalities, here that of Jacob, who had the well dug. Jesus invites her to leave aside these ways of understanding what's happening. He suggests that what she really wants is salvation, and so the truth hinted at in the Bible's mysterious messianic prophecies.

Again, the woman tries to interpret what Jesus says in conventional ways; e.g., the controversies about whether Samaritans properly worship God. Won't the Messiah settle these matters? But Jesus wants her to think of herself and her quest for life rather than distract herself with such matters. He tries to broaden her perspective and make it personal. What's happening to her is a "saving opportunity", a *kairos* in the New Testament's Greek.

Jesus always starts from our concrete situation and opens it so that one glimpses a radical newness beckoning to us. It points us toward God's saving design. Jesus is the Truth; in him and in the Gospel, we encounter the full and total truth of ourselves in relation to our God. There is in us all a longing for this truth, and it is there even in the most ordinary situations, when they bring us to Jesus.

Think of what the Holy Spirit gives to one who believes in Jesus. The Spirit gives the ability to interpret the circumstances of life as opportunities to reflect on one's own and one's life's meaning, and to open oneself to the richer, deeper meaning offered us in Jesus and the Gospel. The Spirit gives us the ability to grasp the power of Jesus and the Gospel to unify us inwardly with Jesus as the center of our living. The Spirit gives us the ability to assimilate the power of the languages Jesus uses to speak with us – not only ordinary language but that of the Bible and the liturgy and theology – and without letting it sound banal; all are turned into talk about our relationships, starting with that to Jesus. And Jesus draws her toward the community created by faith in Him and his message and tells her it is the saving community she has sought in five marriages but not found. She is inspired to begin to share what she has experienced with Jesus by leading her friends and neighbors to encounter him as she did. "He knew all about me and showed me how to live. Don't you want this too?!"

Monday

LEADING ONE ANOTHER TO THE TRUTH

A Reflection from Degrees of Humility & Pride by St. Bernard

Knowledge of the truth is knowledge of Christ, and it is given to us in three degrees. In the first instance, we are led to seek truth in ourselves and about ourselves. In the second, we are led to seek the truth that is in our neighbor, and in the third, we are given truth in its own essential nature.

One begins to discover truth in oneself when one passes judgment on oneself. One is given truth through the neighbor when we suffer in sympathy with another. We are led to truth itself when we contemplate in purity of heart.

Notice the order in which truth is given to us. Before we can inquire into truth itself, the Truth has to teach us to seek it with our neighbor, and before we do this, we must be open to finding it in ourselves. The sequence of the Beatitudes listed in the Sermon on the Mounts put the blessing of being merciful before that of being pure in heart. The merciful are those who are quick to see truth in their neighbor when they reach out to others in compassion and identify with them in love. They respond to another's joys and sorrows as if they were their own. They make themselves weak with the weak, and they burn with indignation when others are led astray and harmed. They are always ready to share not only the joys of those who are rejoicing but the sorrows of those who are mourning.

The exercise of charity toward one's neighbor cleanses a person's inner vision. Those who are thus cleansed can delight in the contemplation of truth as such. It is, after all, love of truth that causes us to take upon ourselves the misfortunes of others. But can anyone find truth like this in relation to the neighbor if they refuse to support them in these ways? Suppose they scoff at tears or disparage joys. This seems to be insensitive to all feelings, but one's own. A popular saying illustrates it: "A healthy person can't feel the pains of sickness, nor can the well-fed feel those of hunger." The more familiar we are with sickness or hunger, the greater our compassion for the sick or hungry is likely to be.

Just as pure truth can be grasped only by the pure in heart, so the sufferings of our fellow men and women are truly felt best by those who know suffering themselves. We can't sympathize with the wretchedness of others – spiritual as well as physical – if we don't first recognize our own. So we start by receiving the truth about ourselves. Then we are prepared to understand the feelings of others by what we have personally felt. Then we know how to come to their help through the help we have received. Our Savior suffered himself so that we might know his compassion, and he accepted affliction so we might know his mercy. Scripture says he learned what obedience costs through suffering. In all this, our Savior has shown us the path that leads to genuine contemplation. We have only to follow him.

Tuesday

THE GIFTS OF DELIVERANCE

A Reflection excerpted from a sermon by St. Bernard

We have all heard the Scripture: "He has delivered me from the snare of the hunter and from the sharp word." If we would understand and give thanks for our deliverance, we have to understand who the hunters are, what their snares are, and what the sharp word is.

Who are the hunters? They are people who should lead us to God but lay snares to lead us to merely worldly goods. We have all been led to God and given a new life. We are like young plants that need special care. For instance, we need to be trained to distinguish what is good from what is evil. For instance, we have to learn not to luxuriate in sensual pleasures. I beg you, then, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God and obey the words of those who have been taught by long experience and daily practice how to know what pleasures lead away from God and life. This is what happens when we learn to see snares.

Listen to what St. Paul tells us: "Those who desire to be rich in this world, fall into many temptations and the devil's snare." Are these riches snares? How few want to be delivered from them and even regret not being caught in more. Are we ready to recognize that it is better to follow the Son of Man who had nowhere to lay his head? If so, give thanks with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and sing, "He has delivered me from the snare of the hunters!"

In order to know how great this deliverance is, listen to the sharp words of the Lord. "Away from me, you evil doers!" He speaks to those who didn't love him because they didn't love their neighbor but loved only themselves. Knowing this, how do you react when called to do penance? Jesus said: Unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have no life in you. Many went away, remarking it was a hard saying. The point of it is that when the bread of the Eucharist enters us in order to dwell in our hearts through faith, then justice and righteousness enter. Is this a hard saying? It is a momentary affliction working within us to produce an eternal weight of glory. The word 'repent' is not a sharp word compared with "Depart from me!"

Have you, brethren, cast the love of riches out of your hearts? Is poverty more precious than all this world's treasures? Think, by the labor of your hands, you can feed Christ! Give thanks and say, "He delivered me from the snare of the hunter and from the sharp word"! Is there anything you should still fear? Just one thing, apostasy, the sin of Judas! So dwell on the Lord's promises! Eye has not seen the things you have prepared, O God, for those who love you. Beneath the shadow of our God, we are protected, we are refreshed, we are fed and nurtured. The Lord has hidden us away from so many evils. Shouldn't we rejoice in this hiddenness? Yet we must never, on that account, cease from entreaty and repentance. If we wander from our God's shadow, we may grow cold like a chick outside its mother's care. We must never wander away but abide always in our God's care and love and warmth.

Wednesday

THE JOY OF PRAYING THE PSALMS

Excerpts from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

The Scriptures address us in the words of the bridegroom of the Song of Songs, saying: "You who dwell in the gardens, let me hear your voice". He may be inviting those who love him to sing psalms and pray. So let us begin by considering the discipline of heart and body we ought to employ when we sing psalms or pray in the sight of the angels. We don't want to send away the angels who came to carry our prayers up to God and bring back down to us God's gifts. Our bridegroom himself stands at the door and knocks; if no devotion answers him from within us or opens the door of our heart for him, he may go away complaining and saying, "I have given heed and listened but no one speaks what is good; there is no one who repents of his sins but they are all set on their own courses like horses with no rider to guide them."

O Jesus, true gardener, effect in us what you ask of us. For without you, we can do nothing. You are the true gardener, the Creator who cultivates and protects your garden. You plan it by your word, water it with your Spirit, and give growth by your power. Mary Magdalen wasn't mistaken when she thought Jesus, who came to her at the empty tomb, was a gardener. He is the gardener of the whole world; he is the gardener of Heaven; he is the gardener of the Church, which he plants and waters here until its growth is completed, and he transplants it into the land of the living near the streams of eternally living water. There it will not be afraid when heat comes, and its foliage will always be green, and it will never cease to bear the fruit of love and praise. Blessed too are we who dwell in these gardens; forever we will praise the Lord.

We dwell in such a garden when we meditate on the Law of the Lord day and night, and walk about in as many gardens as we read books, and pick the apples of fine thoughts we are given there. Blessed are those for whom all these apples, old and new, are kept safe. They are the words of prophets, of evangelists, and of apostles, and through them we taste the sweetness of our bridegroom. We search the Scriptures even as we sing psalms, drawing wondrous thoughts of love for our God and his Christ as we do it. We walk about in the garden of Scripture and must not be heedless and let our minds wander, but rather be busy bees gathering honey from every flower, reaping the Spirit from the words we sing. After all, Jesus says: My words are sweeter than honey.

The garden within us shall flourish in the springtime, the day of Resurrection, when Jesus will call us forth. The just shall then bloom like lilies and blossom forever. We indeed are already people who dwell in the Lord's gardens and delight in their wonders. From these gardens, the Bridegroom will lead us into others where rest is more hidden and enjoyment more blessed and beauty more wonderful. Absorbed in God's praises with accents of exultation and thanksgiving, we will dwell within God's very House. Even now, he calls us to "come and see", taste the joy of the unapproachable light.

Thursday

DISCIPLINE AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

A Reflection from Show Me the Way by Henri Nouwen

The spiritual life is a gift. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who lifts us up into the kingdom of God's love. But to say that being lifted up to the kingdom of love is a divine gift does not mean that we wait passively until the gift is offered to us. Jesus tells us to set our hearts on the kingdom. Setting our hearts on something involves not only serious aspiration but also strong determination. A spiritual life requires human effort.

The forces that keep pulling us back into a worry-filled life are far from easy to overcome. "How hard it is," Jesus exclaims, "... to enter the kingdom of God!" And to convince us of the need for hard work, he says, "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me." Here we touch on the question of discipline in the spiritual life. A spiritual life without discipline is impossible. Discipline is the other side of discipleship. The practice of a spiritual discipline makes us even more sensitive to the small, gentle voice of God. The prophet Elijah did not encounter God in the mighty wind or in the earthquake or in the fire, but in the small voice. Through the practice of a spiritual discipline, we become attentive to that small voice and willing to respond when we hear it.

From all that I said about our worried, over-filled lives, it is clear that we are usually surrounded by so much inner and outer noise that it is hard to truly hear our God when he is speaking to us. We have often become deaf, unable to know when God calls us and unable to understand in which direction he calls us. Thus, our lives have become absurd. In the word absurd, we find the Latin word *surdus*, which means "deaf." A spiritual life requires discipline because we need to learn to listen to God, who constantly speaks but whom we seldom hear. When, however, we learn to listen, our lives become obedient lives. The word obedient comes from the Latin word *audire*, which means "listening."

A spiritual discipline is necessary in order to move slowly from an absurd to an obedient life, from a life filled with noisy worries to a life in which there is some free inner space where we can listen to the Father, always attentive to his voice, always alert for his directions. Jesus was "all ear." That is true prayer: being all ear for God. The core of all prayer is indeed listening, obediently standing in the presence of God. A spiritual discipline, therefore, is the concentrated effort to create some inner and outer space in our lives, where this obedience can be practiced. Through a spiritual discipline, we prevent the world from filling our lives to such an extent that there is no place left to listen. A spiritual discipline sets us free to pray, or to say it better, allows the Spirit of God to pray in us.

Friday

HOW PRAYER GETS WINGS

A Reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

If I am not mistaken, you have often experienced the fact that fasting gives devotion and confidence to prayer. Think how intimately they are joined. As it is written, “brother helps brother so that both are comforted”. Fasting demands the virtue of fasting, and fasting gains the grace of prayer, but prayer sanctifies fasting and offers it to the Lord. What profit do we get from fasting if it remains on earth? We must lift up fasting, then, on the wing of prayer.

But one wing may not be enough. The prayer of the just, says Scripture, pierces the heavens. Our fasting needs two wings, prayer and justice. What is justice but giving to each what is proper? Do not pay attention to God alone. You are also indebted to others, to those over you and those who serve with you. Perhaps you have been thinking: What do the opinions of human beings matter to me? But God is in no way pleased by anything that gives scandal to others.

Think of the phrase: “Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly!” That requires that we maintain unity, cherish peace, and love one another. The proud Pharisee kept a fast and gave thanks to God, but he separated himself from others. I am not like others, he said. His fasting had only one wing, and so didn’t rise to Heaven. Take care that your fast has two wings.

Seek holiness and peace, without which we know that no one can please God. Join your fasting to pure intention and devout prayer that you may make an acceptable offering to the divine majesty. Mortify the flesh while maintaining unity of heart with all of the community of faith. The more efficacious the prayer, the more gravely hindered it is by cowardice of spirit and excessive fear. This happens when one thinks of one’s own unworthiness as not to keep the eyes fixed on God’s kindness. God’s deep mercy calls to the depths of human misery. If iniquity is great, God’s loving kindness is infinitely greater. When your soul is troubled, remember God’s mercy and be refreshed by it.

But as there is a danger that prayer will be too timid, there is likewise a danger that it be rash. I wouldn’t take away from sinners their confidence in prayer, but have them pray as people who sin. We should pray with a contrite heart and a humble spirit, like the Publican rather than the Pharisee.

But don’t let your prayer be lukewarm. Let it flow from a deep feeling. If it is lukewarm, prayer grows weak in its upward flight; it falls back, it meets resistance, and far from winning grace, this deserves punishment. Prayer that is faithful, humble, and fervent will undoubtedly pierce Heaven. It will certainly not return fruitless. Be not afraid. Act boldly in your devotion, and God will bring you to His Heavenly Home.

Saturday

REPENT

A Reflection from The Letter of Pope St Clement I to the Corinthians

"Let us fix our thoughts on the blood of Christ, and reflect how precious that blood is in God's eyes, since its outpouring for our salvation has opened the grace of repentance to all mankind. For we have only to survey the generations of the past to see that in every one of them, the Lord has offered the chance of repentance to anyone who was willing to turn to him. When Noah preached repentance, those who gave heed to him were saved. When, after Jonah had proclaimed destruction to the people of Nineveh, they repented of their sins and made atonement to God with prayers and supplications, they obtained their salvation, notwithstanding that they were strangers and aliens to him.

All those who were ministers of the grace of God have spoken, through the Holy Spirit, of repentance. The very Lord of all himself has spoken of it, and even with an oath: By my life, the Lord declares, it is not the sinner's death that I desire, so much as his repentance; and he adds this gracious pronouncement, Repent, O house of Israel, and turn from your wickedness. Say to the children of my people, Though your sins may stretch from earth to heaven, and though they may be redder than scarlet and blacker than sackcloth, yet if you turn wholeheartedly to me and say 'Father', I will listen to you as I would to a people that was holy.

Thus, by his own almighty will, he has confirmed his desire that repentance should be open to every one of his beloved.

Let us bow, then, to that sovereign and glorious will. Let us entreat his mercy and goodness, casting ourselves upon his compassion and wasting no more energy in quarrels and rivalry, which only end in death.

My brothers, do let us have a little humility; let us forget our self-assertion and braggadocio and stupid quarreling, and do what the Bible tells us instead. The Holy Spirit says, The wise man is not to brag of his wisdom, nor the strong man of his strength, nor the rich man of his wealth; if a man must boast, he should boast of the Lord, seeking him out and acting with justice and uprightness. More particularly, let us remember what the Lord Jesus Christ said in one of his lessons on mildness and forbearance. Be merciful, he told us, that you may obtain mercy; forgive, that you may be forgiven. What you do yourself, will be done to you; what you give, will be given to you; as you judge, so you will be judged; as you show kindness, so it will be shown to you. Your portion will be weighed out for you on your own scales. May this precept, and these commands, strengthen our resolve to live in obedience to his sacred words, and in humility of mind; for the holy word says, Whom shall I look upon, but him that is gentle and peaceable, and trembles at my sayings?

Thus, there exists a vast heritage of glorious achievements for us to share in. Let us then make haste and get back to the state of tranquillity which was set before us in the beginning as the mark for us to aim at. Let us turn our eyes to the Father and Creator of the universe, and when we consider how precious and peerless are his gifts of peace, let us embrace them eagerly for ourselves."