

A Commentary on Gospel of St Matthew by St Hilary of Poitiers ¹

Christ commanded the apostles to leave everything in the world that they held most dear, adding: *Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.* For those who belong to Christ have crucified their lower nature with its sinful passions and desires. No one is worthy of him who refuses to take up his cross, that is to say, to share the Lord's passion, death and resurrection, and to follow him by living out the mystery of faith of the newly received grace of the Spirit.

Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. This means that thanks to the power of the word and the renunciation of past sins, temporal gains are death to the soul, and temporal losses salvation. Apostles must therefore take death into their new life and nail their sins to the Lord's cross. They must confront their persecutors with contempt for things present, holding fast to their freedom by a glorious confession of faith, and shunning any gain that would harm their souls. They should know that no power over their souls has been given to anyone, and that by suffering loss of this short life they achieve immortality.

Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. Christ gives us all a love for his teaching and a disposition to treat our teachers with courtesy. Either he had shown the danger facing those who refused to receive the apostles by requiring these to shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against them; now he commends those who do receive the apostles, assuring them of a greater recompense than they might have expected for their hospitality, and then he teaches that since he still acts as mediator, when we receive him God enters us through him because he comes from God. Thus whoever receives the apostles receives Christ, and whoever receives Christ receives God the Father, since what is received in the apostles is nothing else than what is received in Christ; nor is there anything in Christ but what is in God. Through this disposition of graces to receive the apostles is to receive God. Through this disposition of graces to receive the apostles is to receive God, because Christ is in them and God is in Christ.

¹Journey with the Fathers – Year A – New City Press – 1992 – pg 102

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From a Sermon by St. Peter Chrysologus ¹

When Thomas heard from his fellow disciples that they had seen the Lord, he answered: Unless I see the wounds made by the nails and put my hand into his side, I will not believe. Why did Thomas thus demand proof before believing? Why was he so devout toward the suffering Christ, but so resistant to the risen Christ? Why did a pious hand open again the wounds made by a wicked hand? Why did the hand of a follower strive to plunge anew into the side opened by the spear of a wicked soldier? Why did the pitiless curiosity of a servant renew the suffering caused by raging persecutors? Why did a disciple inflict these sufferings on the Lord, these pains on God, and test the heavenly physician by his wounds? When the Lord died, the devil's power collapsed, the prison of hell was thrown open, the fetters of the dead were broken, tombs were destroyed; when the Lord rose again death's nature was completely changed. The stone before the Lord's most holy sepulcher was rolled away, and the linen cloths were loosened; at his rising in glory death took to flight and life returned; his body arose never to die again. Why then, Thomas, were you the only one to make such a shrewd inquiry, demanding that the Lord's wounds be shown as the only way to convince you? Suppose those wounds had vanished with all the other marks of suffering – what danger to your faith would not your curiosity engendered?

My brothers and sisters, piety made this search and devotion these demands to ensure that impiety should not thereafter raise doubts about the Lord's resurrection. It was not only the doubts in his own heart that Thomas was healing, but everyone else's as well; and as he was to proclaim these things to the nations, this energetic advocate was diligently trying to discover how he could support the profession of so great a faith. Beyond question his spirit of prophecy was greater than his doubt. For why should he have made such a request unless he had learned from the Lord by prophetic inspiration that these wounds alone were to be retained as proof of the resurrection? Furthermore, the Lord of his own accord had shown the others what this man subsequently demanded. The text says: *Jesus came and stood in their midst and showed them his hands and his side.* For he who had entered through closed doors and was with good reason thought by the disciples to be a ghost could not prove himself to their doubting minds except by the wounds that told of his passion. Then he came and said to Thomas: *Put your finger here, and see my hands, and put out your hand and put it into my side, and be not faithless but believing.* Do this so that when you reopen these wounds which have already poured forth water and blood to cleanse and ransom all humankind, faith may pour out over the whole world. Thomas answered: *My Lord and my God!*

See how scripture shows not only a human body but also, through the suffering this body endured, that Christ is, as Thomas acclaims him, God and Lord. Truly he is God who lives again after being dead, who rose after suffering a mortal wound; for although he endured so much suffering and received such great wounds, he lives and reigns as God for countless ages. Amen

¹A Word in Season – vol. IV – Augustinian Press – 1991 – pg 106

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The Social Teaching of the Catholic Church - from a Pastoral Letter of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops – 1990 ¹

In the Catholic social vision, the human person is central, the clearest reflection of God among us. Each person possesses a basic dignity that comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment, not from race or gender, age or economic status. The test of every institution or policy is whether it enhances or threatens human life and human dignity. We believe that people are more important than things.

Flowing from our God-given dignity, each person has basic rights and responsibilities. These include the rights to freedom of conscience and religious liberty, to raise a family, to immigrate, to live free from unfair discrimination, and to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family. People have a fundamental right to life and to those things which make life truly human: food, clothing, housing, health care, education, security, social services, and employment. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities – to one another, to our families, and to the larger society, to respect the rights of others and to work for the common good.

The human person is not only sacred but social. We realize our dignity and rights in relationship with others, in community. No community is more central than the family; it needs to be supported, not undermined. It is the basic cell of society, and the state has an obligation to support the family. The family has major contributions to make in addressing questions of social justice. It is where we learn and act on our values. What happens in the family is at the basis of a truly human social life. We also have the right and responsibility to participate in and contribute to the broader communities in society. The state and other institutions of political and economic life, with both their limitations and obligations, are instruments to protect the life, dignity, and rights of the person; promote the well-being of our families and communities; and pursue the common good. Catholic social teaching does offer clear guidance on the role of government. When basic human needs are not being met by private initiative, then people must work through their government, at appropriate levels, to meet those needs. A central test of political, legal and economic institutions is what they do *to* people, what they do *for* people, and how people *participate* in them.

Poor and vulnerable people have a special place in Catholic social teaching. A basic moral test of a society is how its most vulnerable members are faring. This is not a new insight; it is the lesson of the parable of the Last Judgment (see Matthew 25). Our tradition calls us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first. As Christians, we are called to respond to the needs of all our sisters and brothers, but those with the greatest needs require the greatest response. We must seek creative ways to expand the emphasis of our nation's founders on individual rights and freedom by extending democratic ideals to economic life and thus ensure that the basic requirements for life with dignity are accessible to all.

¹ Pastoral Letters & Statements of the U.S. Catholic Bishops – vol. VI – National Conference of Catholic Bishops – United States Catholic Conference – Washington DC – pg 217f

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A Reading about Kingly succession in Israel, from a book by Fr Eugene Malv.²

Leadership in Israel was traditionally determined by charismatic manifestations. This had been maintained in the case of Saul and, to some extent perhaps, in the case of David. The greatness of David's rule and its relative length would tend to consolidate both attention and power in his family, and indirectly to force the charismatic principle into the shadows. On the theological level the Nathan oracle would have canonized the principle of dynastic succession. In accord with that principle and with ancient Israelite custom concerning the rights of the firstborn, the tendency would also be to consider the oldest son as the most likely heir.

With this review in mind we can appreciate Adonijah's position. As the oldest son now, he was the heir presumptive, the presumption, of course, being principally his and others' interested in his cause. Aware, as Absalom before him had been, that the presumption was not universally shared and that his father especially had given no indication that he shared it (quite the contrary, in fact, if we can believe the report of Nathan that David had made a previous promise to Bathsheba: cf. 1 Kgs 1:11-14), Adonijah acted. The biblical author tells the story beautifully. After having told of the attempts to keep the aging David warm, he states abruptly, *Now Adonijah..exalted himself, saying, "I will be king;" and he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him.*

It was not, of course, all that simple, but we must remember that the ancient authors *interpreted* history as they wrote it, and their artistic methodology is a frequent clue to their interpretation. At any rate, our author was just as aware as we are that what he recorded was the climatic act in a palace intrigue that had doubtless been brewing for some time. Adonijah, if he had any political *savoir faire* at all, knew that he would need powerful collaborators for any public claim on the throne. He had too many ambitious brothers and half-brothers, not to mention their jealous mothers, to make such a claim lightly. Our author provides us with the needed facts. Adonijah had succeeded in enlisting Joab, the military commander, and Abiathar, one of the high priests, on his side; both were powerful representatives of two of the principal facets of Israelite life and government. Finally, he gave religious sanction to his edict by offering sacrifice, in the presence of those members of the royal family and royal court sympathetic to his cause, at the sacred spring of En-rogel, just outside Jerusalem.

The fact that Adonijah did act while his father was still alive could argue that another faction was already in existence. This faction would be centered around Solomon, by no means one of the older sons of David. His only claim, apparently, was a reported promise made by David to his mother, Bathsheba, that her son would succeed him. Again, our biblical author provides the names of those who constituted this faction. The list is even more formidable than that of Adonijah's faction. It includes Zadok, the priest, and Benaiah, the leader of the mercenaries. But more than this there is Nathan, the prophet, whose court influence was demonstrated more than once, and, presumably, *David's mighty men*. The favor of these last was extremely important; there is no record of their having lost a campaign! Finally, of course, there was Solomon's mother, Bathsheba. On Nathan's urging and with his counsel, she came before the king and informed him of Adonijah's treasonous acts, at the same time reminding him of his promise regarding Solomon. She was still speaking when Nathan, by prior arrangement, entered, confirmed the report and repeated the request of Bathsheba. The stratagem worked. David called in the principals of Solomon's faction and gave command that Bathsheba's son be anointed king at the sacred place of Gihon.

²"The World of David and Solomon", Englewood Cliffs 1965, pp 108-110.

From a Sermon by Saint Anastasius of Antioch, bishop³

"To this end Christ died and rose to life that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But God is not God of the dead, but of the living."

That is why the dead, now under the dominion of one who has risen to life, are no longer dead but alive. Therefore life has dominion over them and, just as Christ having been raised from the dead, will never die again, so too they will live and never fear death again. When they have been thus raised from the dead and freed from decay, they shall never again see death, for they will share in Christ's resurrection just as he himself shared in their death.

That is why Christ descended into the underworld, with its imperishable prison-bars: to shatter the doors of bronze and break the bars of iron and, from decay, to raise our life to himself by giving us freedom in place of servitude.

But if this plan does not yet appear to be perfectly realized - for people still die and bodies still decay in death - this should not occasion any loss of faith. For, in receiving the first-fruits, we have already received the pledge of all the blessings we have mentioned; with them we have reached the heights of heaven, and we have taken our place beside him who has raised us up with himself, as Paul says: In Christ God has raised us up with him, and has made us sit with him in the heavenly places.

And the fulfillment will be ours on the day predestined by the Father, when we shall put off our childish ways and come to perfect manhood. For this is the decree of the Father of the ages: the gift, once given, is to be secure and no more to be rejected by a return to childish attitudes.

There is no need to recall that the Lord rose from the dead with a spiritual body, since Paul in speaking of our bodies bears witness that they are sown as animal bodies and raised as spiritual bodies: that is, they are transformed in accordance with the glorious transfiguration of Christ who goes before us as our leader.

The Apostle, affirming something he clearly knew, also said that this would happen to all peoples through Christ, who will change our lowly body to make it like his glorious body.

If this transformation is a change into a spiritual body and one, furthermore, like the glorious body of Christ, then Christ rose with a spiritual body, a body that was sown in dishonor, but the very body that was transformed in glory.

Having brought this body to the Father as the first-fruits of our nature, he will also bring the whole body to fulfillment. For he promised this when he said: I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.

³ Oratio 5, de Resurrectione Christi, 6-7,9: PG 89,1358-1359. 1361-1362. From the Liturgy of the Hours vol. III, p. 1886.

In the tenth century the Covenant had been strengthened and given concrete form by the appearance of the idea of the Kingdom. After the abortive attempt by Saul, who had been consecrated as by Yahweh, David succeeded in founding the Kingdom, taking advantage of the fall of the great empires of his day and setting himself up in a new capital. Jerusalem, which was destined to become the political and religious center of the nation. Its success had been ratified by Yahweh. Yahweh had made an eternal covenant with its king when he had announced to him, through the prophet Nathan: "Through the ages, far as thy thought can reach, dynasty and royalty both shall endure; thy throne shall remain for ever unshaken." Until then Yahweh had been the King of Israel, without any intermediary: now He had a second-in-command, entrusted with the job of watching over His people:
I have anointed my king
upon the hill of Sion, my sanctuary.

We know what disillusionments followed. Despite the sensible plans that laid down their duties for them, the kings turned out to be far from perfect, from both the moral and the religious point of view. The prophetic books resound with the passionate admonitions directed against them; and later, Ecclesiasticus was to make the melancholy assertion:
David, Ezechias, Josias, these three only
were exempt from the guilt of their line.

The experience of the empiric Kingdom came to an end with a defeat, and though its demise in 587 was regarded as a national disgrace the Prophets were not long in discovering its religious significance: the hand of God had been laid on Israel when the nation's sin had reached its limit. One day, when the purifying trials had been lived through, God would be able to take up the idea of His Kingdom again on a new level.

The way in which Yahweh will establish this Kingdom is not very clear. Will it open in an atmosphere of catastrophe or by a slow process of diffusion of the Torah? Will Yahweh reign alone or will He have a delegate like David or someone more mysterious still?

Here it is sufficient to have noted the gradual purification and progressive elevation of the idea of the Kingdom. It is the sphere of the action of God, and also the gift of God...And on the eve of his death Jesus is to say: "My kingdom is not of the world."

⁴The Key Concepts of the Old Testament, trans. G Lamb, Sheed & Ward: NY 1955, pp.40-44.

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From a Letter of St. Bernard of Clairveaux to Pope Eugenius

The tidings of the great things which the Lord has done for you "have been heard in our land" and universally discussed. "Seeing I have once begun, I will speak to my lord". I no longer dare to call him my son, because the son has been made the father and the father has become the son. He who came after me, "the same is preferred before me". However, I do not envy him, because that which was wanting to myself, I now possess (as I trust) in him, who came not only after me, but through me as well. For if you will allow me to say so, I have in a manner "begotten you by the Gospel". "What, therefore, is our hope, our joy, our crown of glory?" for so it is written, "A wise son is the glory of his father". Yet you shall no longer be called son, but "you shall be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord has named". "This is the change of the right hand of the Most High", and many shall rejoice in it. For just as of old Abram was changed to Abraham, and Jacob to Israel; and to present you with examples from among your predecessors - just as Simon was changed to Cephas, and Saul to Paul, in the same way has my son Bernard been changed into my father Eugenius, by what I hope is a joyous profitable transformation. "This is the finger of God", Who "raises up the needy from the dust, and lifts up the poor from the dunghill, that he may sit with princes and hold the throne of glory".

It remains now that, father this change in yourself, she also who has been committed to your care, I mean the Spouse of the Lord, should be changed for the better, so that she may no longer be called Sarai, but Sara. For you must not regard her as in any sense your own, although you should be ready, if necessary, to lay down even your life for her. If you have been truly sent by Christ, you will consider yourself to have come not to be ministered to but to minister, and to minister not only your substance, but even your very life. The true successor of Paul will say with Paul, "Not because we exercise dominion over your faith; but we are helpers of your joy". And Peter's heir will listen to Peter's voice where he says, "Neither as lording it over the clergy, but being made a pattern of the flock". For thus, she - the Spouse - being no longer a slave, but free now and even beautiful, shall at last be admitted through you to the coveted embraces of her beautiful Bridegroom.