

NT-MK24

02.25.18

A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark by St. Ephrem ¹

Jesus took the three apostles up to the mountain for three reasons: first, to show them the glory of his divinity, then to declare himself Israel's redeemer as he had already foretold by the prophets, and thirdly to prevent the apostles' being scandalized at seeing him soon afterward enduring those human sufferings which he had freely accepted for their sake. The apostles knew that Jesus was a man; they did not know that he was God. To their knowledge he was the son of Mary, a man who shared their daily life in this world. On the mountain he revealed to them that he was the Son of God, that he was in fact God himself. Peter, James and John were familiar with the sight of their master eating and drinking, working and taking rest, growing tired and falling asleep, experiencing fear and breaking out in sweat. All these things were natural to his humanity, not to his divinity. He therefore took them up onto the mountain so that they could hear his Father's voice calling him Son, and he could show them that he was truly the Son of God and was himself divine.

He took them up onto the mountain in order to show them his kingship before they witnessed his passion, to let them see his mighty power before they watched his death, to reveal his glory to them before they beheld his humiliation. Then when the Jews took him captive and condemned him to the cross, the apostles would understand that it was not for any lack of power on his part that Jesus allowed himself to be crucified by his enemies, but because he had freely chosen to suffer in that way for the world's salvation. He took them up onto the mountain before his resurrection and showed them the glory of his divinity, so that when he rose from the dead in that same glory they would realize that this was not something given him as a reward for his labor, as if he were previously without it. That glory had been his with the Father from all eternity, as is clear from his words on approaching his freely chosen passion: *Father, glorify me now with the glory I had with you before the world was made.*

¹Journey with the Fathers – Year B – New City Press – NY -1993 - pg 32

LNT-34
02.26.18

A Reading from a Sermon of St Leo the Great on Lent ¹

At the beginning of my sermon to you, beloved brethren, on this the greatest and most sacred of the fasts, what more fitting opening than to begin with the words of the Apostle, in whom Christ spoke, and declare again: Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold now is the day of salvation. For though there is no season that is not filled with the divine gifts, and though at each moment we have, through His grace, access to the Divine Mercy, yet now is the time in which the souls of all mortals should be stirred with greater fervor towards spiritual perfection, and inspired with greater confidence; now when the return of that day when we were redeemed invites us once more to the fulfillment of all our sacred duties, so that purified in body and soul we may celebrate the supreme Mystery of the Passion of Our Lord. Indeed such unending reverence and unceasing devotion is due to these sacred mysteries, that should we ever be in the Presence of God as we now are obliged to be for the worthy celebration of the Paschal Feast.

But since there are few that have this strength of soul, and since because of the weakness of our flesh, the more severe observance is relaxed, and since the manifold duties of the present life take up so much of our care, it will happen that even the most devout of heart are stained with the dust of earth. Accordingly, with great solicitude has this divine means been given us, so that these forty days of reflection may assist us to restore the purity of our souls, and so that during them we may by good works make satisfaction for our past sins, and by devout mortification purge ourselves of them.

As we are therefore beginning this sacred season, dedicated to the purification of the soul, let us be careful to fulfill the Apostolic command that we cleanse ourselves from all defilement of the flesh and of the spirit, so that restraining the conflict that exists between the one and the other substance, the soul, which in the Providence of God is meant to be the ruler of the body, may regain the dignity of its rightful authority, so that, giving offence to no one, we may not incur the punishment of evildoers. For the sum total of our fasting does not consist in merely abstaining from food. In vain do we deny our body food if we do not withhold our heart from iniquity, and restrain our lips that they speak no evil.

We must then so moderate our rightful use of food that our other desires may be subject to the same rule. For this is also a time for gentleness and patience, a time of peace and serenity, in which having put away all stains of evil doing we strive after steadfastness in what is good. Now is the time when generous Christian souls forgive offences, pay no heed to insults, and wipe out the memory of past injuries. Now let the Christian soul exercise itself in the armor of justice, on the right hand and on the left, so that amid honor and dishonor, evil report and good, the praise of men will not make

¹ The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, vol. 2, Henry Regnery Co, Chicago, 1958, pg. 29

proud the virtue that is well rooted, the conscience that has peace, nor dishonor cast it down. The moderation of those who worship God is blameless.

Continuation of the sermon of St Leo the Great on Lent ²

During this holy time we should not hear the sound of discord coming from those to whom the consolations of holy joy are never wanting. And when you are engaged in works of mercy, do not fear a lessening of your own earthly possessions. Christian poverty is ever rich; for that which it possesses is greater than that which it does not possess. Neither should he fear to work on in poverty to whom has been given to possess all things in the Lord of all things.

But be certain, dearly beloved, that the devil, the enemy of all virtue, will look with envy upon these pious practices to which we trust you freely give yourselves; and he will bring against them all the force of his malice, so that from piety itself he may weave snares against piety, so that those he could not destroy through despair he will seek to undo through vainglory. For standing close at hand to all our actions is the iniquity of pride; and vanity lies ever in wait for virtue; for it rarely happens that the praise of men is not given to those who live worthy lives, unless, as was written, Whoever glories, let him glory in the Lord@.

Let us therefore, dearly beloved, be watchful against the deceits of the devil, not only against the enticements of gluttony, but even in our very purpose of fasting. For he who knew how to bring death upon all by means of food, knows how to injure us even in our fast. For just as by a serpent he brought it about that what was forbidden was eaten by Adam and Eve, so by the same serpents he persuades mortals to shun what is lawful.

Whatever is given us as food and as drink is clean and holy, no matter what it may be. But if it is indulged in with unmeasured appetite it will dishonor both those who eat it and those who drink it. Yet it is not the nature of the food that defiles us. For All things are clean to the clean; but to those that are defiled and to unbelievers, nothing is clean, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled@.

But you, dearly beloved, the holy offspring of the Catholic Mother, whom the Spirit of God has taught in the School of Truth, use your freedom of action with right reason, knowing that it is good to abstain, even from what is lawful; and when you must practice self-denial, so abstain from food as merely putting aside its use, not as condemning its nature.

Enter then with pious devotion upon these holy days of Lent; and prepare for yourselves the works of mercy, that you may merit the Divine Mercy. Extinguish the fires of anger, wipe away all hate, love the bond of unity, give way to each other in the simplicity of true humility.

Rule your servants with justice, and likewise all who are subject to you. Let there be an end to vengeance. Let offences be forgiven. Let harshness be changed to mildness, disdain to gentleness, and discord into peace. Let us all strive to be modest, let all be gentle, all be kind, so that our fasting may be pleasing to God. To Him we shall offer a true sacrifice of self-denial and devotion if we keep ourselves from all iniquity; being

² The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, vol 2, Henry Regnery Co, Chicago, 1958, pg 30

helped in all things by almighty God, who with the Son and the Holy Spirit is One in divinity, one in Majesty, for ever and ever. Amen.

LNT-36

02.28.18

A Sermon on Lent by St. Maximus the Confessor ³

We must accept with all reverence, brethren, the sacred days of Lent, and not recoil because of the length of the season; for the longer the days of our fasting, the greater the grounds of our forgiveness; the longer the time of our self-denial, the grater the price paid for our soul=s salvation; the severer the treatment of our wounds, the more sure the healing of our offences. For God who is the Physician of our souls has instituted an appropriate time; sufficient for the just to make reparation and for sinners to ask for mercy; the one praying for peace, the other imploring pardon.

For the days of Lent are suited to our purposes; not short, so that we may plead in prayer; not long, for our need to gain merit. For in this fast of forty days any offence may be wiped out, and the severity of any judge softened. The time may be long and tedious for the one neither pleads for his sins, nor hopes for forgiveness. For he who despairs will neither confess his sins, nor hope in the mercy of the Judge.

Holy and salutary therefore is the time of Lent, in which the Judge is moved to mercy, the sinner to repentance, and the just to peace. For in these days the Divinity is inclined to be more merciful, the sinner to repent, and grace to be obtained. All things are now prepared: the heavens to pardon, the sinner to confess, the tongue to plead.

Mystical and salutary is this number forty. For when in the beginning the iniquity of mortals covered the earth, God, dissolving the clouds of heaven for the space of this number of days, covered the whole earth with a flood. You see then already that in this time the Mystery is put before us in Figure. For as it then rained for forty days, to cleanse the world, so now it also happens. Yet the deluge of those days must be called a mercy; in that through it iniquity was crushed, and justice upheld. For it took place out of mercy, to deliver the just, and that the wicked might no longer sin. We see clearly it was through mercy it came, as a sort of baptism, in which the face of the earth was renewed; that is, so that mortals who wallowed in the dreadful sin of those abandoned might come to grace in the dwelling of Noah, and so that he who was then an abode of iniquity, might become a dwelling of holiness.

Holy and dedicated is this time of forty days, which immediately from the beginning began to divide the just from the unjust; and by a kind of judgment separate the good from the bad. And this takes place even in our time of forty days. For in these forty days the good are divided from the bad, that is, the chaste from the unchaste, the temperate from the intemperate, the Christian from the heathen. The wicked, as I say, are separated from the good, that is, the sinner from the just, the devil from the saint, the heretic from the faithful. For those others are lost, as in the Flood, in the disaster of this world, while the Church alone, with all its virtues, is like the Ark sustained above the deep.

³ The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, vol. 2, Henry Regnery Co. Chicago, 1958, pg 92

LNT-37
03.01.18

A Sermon on the Spirit of Lent by St Leo the Great ⁴

Apostolic teaching, beloved, exhorts us that we Aput off the old man with his deeds@ and renew ourselves from day to day by a holy manner of life. For if we are the temple of God, and if the Holy Spirit is a Dweller in our souls, as the Apostle says: AYou are the temple of the living God@, we must then strive with all vigilance that the dwelling of our heart be not unworthy of so great a Guest. And just as in houses made with hands, we see to it with praiseworthy diligence that whatever may be damaged, either through the rain coming in, or by the wind in storms, or by age itself, is promptly and carefully repaired, so must we with unceasing concern take care that nothing disordered be found in our souls, that nothing unclean be found there. For though this dwelling of ours does not endure without the support of its Maker, nor would the structure be safe without the watchful care of the Builder, nevertheless since we are rational stones, and living material, the Hand of our Maker has so fashioned us that even he who is being repaired may cooperate with His Maker.

Let human obedience then not withdraw itself from the grace of God, nor turn away from that Good without which it cannot be good. And should it find in the fulfillment of His commands something that is difficult to accomplish or beyond its powers, let it not remain apart, but rather turn to Him who commands us, and who has laid on us this precept that He may both help us and awaken in us the desire of Him, as the prophet tells us: ACast your care upon the Lord, and he shall sustain you@. Or perhaps there is someone who prides himself beyond due measure, and who imagines himself to be so untouched, so unblemished, that he has now no need to renew himself. Such a belief is wholly deceiving, and he will grow old in unceasing folly who believes that amid the temptations of this life he is safe from all injury to his soul. All things are filled with dangers, filled with snares. Desires inflame us, allurements lie in wait for us, the love of gain beguiles us, losses frighten us, bitter are the tongues of detractors, and not always true the lips of those who praise us. There hate rages against us; here the false friend cheats us; so that it is easier to avoid discord than to shun deceit.

And since there are few so steadfast that no trial disturbs them, and since not merely bad fortune but good also, corrupts many among the faithful, we must use earnest care in treating the wounds by which our human mortality has been injured. And so let us run briefly through these dangers with which the world is filled, since the Scripture says: AWho can say: my heart is clean, I am pure from sin?@. And let each one think within himself of the forgiveness he has need of for his sins, and of the medicine he needs for the restoration of his soul.

When, dearly beloved, should we more fittingly have recourse to the divine remedies than when we are once again reminded of the mysteries of our redemption? And that we may more worthily commemorate them, let us earnestly prepare ourselves by these forty days of abstinence.

⁴ The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, vol 2, Henry Regnery Co., 1958, pg 125

LNT-38

03.02.18

Continuing the Sermon of St Leo the Great on the spirit of Lent ⁵

Let us then, dearly beloved, observe these venerable practices of this most acceptable time, and with anxious care clean the windows of our soul. For however chastely and soberly we live in this mortal life, we shall yet be soiled by some dust in the course of our earthly journey, and the brightness of our soul, formed to God=s image and likeness, is not so remote from the smoke of every vanity that it will be unclouded by any stain and never need to be polished. And if this is needed for even the most guarded souls, how much more is it needed for those who pass almost the whole year in carelessness and perhaps in total neglect? Let us with all charity remind such as these not to flatter themselves, because we cannot see into their consciences, since not even the walls of houses, nor remoteness of place, can conceal anything from the eyes of God. And not alone are thoughts and actions known to Him, but all that shall yet be thought and done. Such is the knowledge of the supreme Judge, such is the power of His sight, to whom all that is solid is open, all that is secret is laid bare, to whom things hidden are clear, to whom the dumb answer, the silence cries out, and the soul speaks without voice.

Let no one despise the patience of God=s goodness because his own sins go unpunished; and think that because he has not felt the wrath of God he has not offended God. The days of grace of this mortal life are not prolonged, nor the time allotted to the foolish of heart before they cross over to the pains of eternal punishment, unless while justice holds its hand they seek for the medicine of penance.

Let us then take refuge in the ever present mercy of God, and, so that we may with fitting reverence celebrate the holy Pasch of the Lord, let all the faithful seek to make holy their own hearts. Let harshness give way to mildness, let wrath grow gentle, forgive one another your offences, and let him who seeks to be forgiven be not himself a seeker of vengeance. For when we say: AForgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors@, we bind ourselves in the most enduring bonds unless we fulfill what we profess. And if the most sacred contract of this prayer has not in every respect been fulfilled, let every person examine his conscience, and gain the pardon of his own sins by forgiving those of others.

For when the Lord says: AIf you will forgive men their offences, your heavenly Father will forgive you also your offences@, what he is here asking is close to each one of us: for the sentence of the Judge will depend on the clemency of the suppliant. For the Just and Merciful Receiver of the prayers of mortals has laid it down that our own generosity is the measure of His fairness to ourselves; so that He will not treat with strict justness those whom He finds not eager for revenge. And generosity is becoming to kind and gentle souls. Nothing is more fitting than that a person imitate his Maker, and that as best he can he is a doer of the works of God.

⁵ The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, vol 2, Henry Regnery Co., 1958, pg 127

He who has no need of a helper to perform His works of mercy, so orders His own omnipotence that it is by means of mortals that He comes to the aid of mortals. It is because of this the Lord Himself said to His disciples: ASo let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven@, who with the same Father and the Holy spirit lives and reigns God forever and ever.
Amen

LNT-31

03.03.18

A Sermon of Bl. Gueric of Igny for Lent ⁶

O happy the humility of those who repent; O blessed the hope of those who confess. How mighty you are with the Almighty; how easily you conquer the unconquerable; how quickly you turn the dreadful judge into a devoted father. We have heard to our great edification of the prodigal son=s sorrowful journey, tearful repentance and glorious reception. He was so gravely guilty and had not yet confessed but only planned to; had not yet made satisfaction but only bent his mind to it. Yet by merely intending to humble himself he immediately obtained a pardon, which others seek for so long a time with such great desire, beg for with such tears, strive for with such diligence. The thief on the cross was absolved by a simple confession, the prodigal by only the will to confess.

AI said,@ Scripture says, AI will confess my transgression to the Lord; and you did forgive the guilt of my sin.@ Everywhere mercy precedes. It had preceded the will to confess by inspiring it; it preceded also the words of confession by forgiving what was to be confessed. When he was still far off,@ we read, AHis father saw him and was moved with compassion, and running to meet him fell upon his neck and kissed him.@ These words seem to suggest that the father was even more anxious o pardon his son than the son was to be pardoned. He hastened to absolve the guilty one from what was tormenting his conscience, as if the merciful father suffered more in his compassion for his miserable son than the son did in his own miseries. We do not mean to attribute human feelings to the unchangeable nature of God; we intend rather that our affection should be softened and moved to love that supreme goodness by learning from comparison with human feelings that he loves us more than we love him.

See how where sin abounded grace abounds still more. The guilty one could scarcely hope for pardon; the judge, or rather not now the judge but the advocate, heaps us grace. AQuick,@ he says, Abring forth the best robe and clothe him in it, put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet; fetch the fatted calf and kill it, let us eat and make merry, for this son of mine who had died has come back to life.@ To pass over all these: the best robe, that is, the sanctification of the Spirit with which the one who is baptized is clothed and the penitent clothed afresh; the ring of faith by which he pledges his loyalty; the shoes by which he is fortified to trample on poisonous serpents or to preach the gospel; the fatted calf which he offers in sacrifice on the altar; those festive days enjoined for the son=s reception and celebrated by all the host of heaven; to say nothing of all these and leave them to be treated by the more learned, let us consider only that embrace and kiss of the devoted father. What a wealth of graciousness and sweetness, what an abundance of most blessed joy, what torrents of most holy delight do they not contain? AHe fell upon his neck and kissed him.@

When he thus showed his affection for him, what did he do by his embrace and his kiss but take him to his bosom and cast himself into his son=s bosom, breath himself

⁶ Gueric of Igny - Liturgical Sermons - vol. 1 - CF #8 - Cistercian Publications - Spencer, MA - 1970

into him, in order that by clinging to his father he might become one spirit with him, just as by clinging to harlots he had been made one body with them? It was not enough for that supreme mercy not to close the bowels of his compassion to the wretched. He draws them into his very bowels and makes them his members. He could not bind us to himself more closely, could not make us more intimate to himself than by incorporating us into himself. Both by charity and by ineffable power he unites us not only with the body he has assumed but also with his very spirit. If such is the grace accorded to the repentant what will be the glory of those who reign? If such are the consolations of the wretched, what will be the joys of the blessed? And since he gives us so much in advance while we are still on the way, what treasures is he not keeping stored up for us when we arrive in our fatherland? Indeed, what has not entered into the heart of man: that we should be like him and that God should be all in all.