

Gethsemani Abbey Vigils Readings

First Week in Lent

February 18-24, 2018

Sunday, February 18, 2018

A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark by John Justus Landsberg ¹

Everything the Lord Jesus decided to do, everything he chose to endure, was ordained by him for our instruction, our correction, and our advantage; and since he knew that the teaching and consolation we should derive from it was far from negligible, he was loath to let slip any opportunity that might profit us. And so when he was led out into the wilderness there is no doubt that his guide was the Holy Spirit whose intention was to take him to a place where he would be exposed to temptation, a place where the devil would have the audacity to accost him and put him to the test. The circumstances were so greatly in the devil's favor that he was prompted to capitalize on them. Here was Jesus alone, at prayer, physically worn out by fasting and abstinence. A chance indeed to find out whether this man really was the Christ, whether or not he was the Son of God.

From this episode therefore our first lesson is that human life on earth is a life of warfare, and the first thing Christians must expect is to be tempted by the devil. As Scripture tells us, we have to be prepared for temptation, for it is written: *When you enter God's service, prepare your soul for an ordeal.* For this reason, the Lord desires the newly baptized and recent converts to find comfort in his own example. Reading in the gospel that Christ too was tempted by the devil immediately after he was baptized, they will not grow fainthearted and fearful if they experience keener temptations from the devil after their conversion or baptism than before – even if persecution should be their lot.

The second lesson Christ desires to impress upon us by his own example is that we should not lightly expose ourselves to temptation, for we read that it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness. Mindful of our frailty rather, we must be on the watch, praying not to be put to the test, and keeping ourselves clear of every occasion of temptation.

¹Journey with the Fathers – Year B – New City Press – NY – 1993 – pg 30

Monday, September 19, 2018

Sermon of St Caesarius of Arles for Lent¹

¹St Caesarius of Arles, Sermons, vol.3, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 66, Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC, 1973, pg. 41

Behold, dearest brethren, through the mercy of God the season of Lent is upon us. Therefore I beseech you, beloved, with God's help let us celebrate these days, salutary for bodies and healing for the soul, in so holy and spiritual a manner that the observance of a holy Lent may lead to progress for us and not judgment. For if we lead a careless life, involving ourselves in too many occupations, refusing to observe chastity, not applying ourselves to fasting and vigils and prayers, neither reading Sacred Scripture ourselves nor willingly listen to others reading it, the very remedies are changed into wounds for us. As a result of this we shall have judgment, where we could have had a remedy.

For this reason I exhort you, dearest brethren, to rise rather early for the vigils, and above all to come to Tierce, Sext and None. Let no one withdraw himself from the holy Office unless either infirmity or public service or at least great necessity keeps him occupied. Let it not be enough for you that you hear the divine lessons in Church, but read them yourselves at home or look for someone else to read them and willingly listen to them when they do. Remember the thought of our Lord, brethren, when He says: Alif he were to gain the whole world and destroy himself in the process, what can a man offer in exchange for his very self?@ Above all keep in mind and always fear greatly what is written: AThe burdens of the world have made them miserable.@ Therefore busy yourself in your home in such a way that you do not neglect your soul. Finally, if you cannot do more, at least labor as much on behalf of your soul as you desire to labor for the sake of your body.

For this reason, dearest brethren, AHave no love for the world, nor the things the world affords,@ because Athe world with its seductions is passing away@. What, then, remains in a man except what each one has stored up in the treasury of his conscience for the salvation of his soul by reading or prayer or the performance of good works? For miserable pleasure, still more wretched lust and dissipation, through a passing sweetness prepare eternal bitterness; but abstinence, vigils, prayer and fasting lead to the delights of paradise through the briefest hardships. The Truth does not lie when He says in the Gospel: AStraight and narrow is the road that leads to eternal life, and how few there are that find it!@ Not for long is there rejoicing on the broad way, and not for long is there labor on the straight and narrow road. After brief sadness those who travel the latter receive eternal life, while those who travel the former, after short joy, suffer endless punishment.

For this reason, dearest brethren, by fasting, reading and prayer in these forty days we ought to store up for our souls provisions, as it were, for the whole year. Although through the mercy of God you frequently and devoutly hear the divine lessons throughout the entire year, still during these days we ought to rest from the winds and the sea of this world by taking refuge, as it were, in the haven of Lent, and in the quiet of silence to receive the divine lessons in the receptacle of our heart. Devoting ourselves to God out of love for eternal life, during these days let us with all solicitude strive to repair and compose in the little ship of our soul whatever throughout the year has been broken or destroyed or damaged or ruined by many storms, that is, by the waves of sins. And since it is necessary for us to endure the storms and

tempests of this world while we are still in this frail body, as often as the enemy wills to lead us astray by means of the roughest storms or to deceive us by the most voluptuous pleasures, with God's help may he always find us prepared against him

Therefore I beseech you again and again. During these holy days of Lent if you cannot cut off the occupations of this world, at least strive to curtail them in part. By fleeing from this world, through an expedient loss and a most glorious gain you may take away from earthly occupations a few hours in which you can devote yourselves to God. For this world either laughs at us or is laughed at by us; either we yield to it and are despised, or we despise it in order to obtain eternal rewards. Thus you either reject and despise the world, or you yield to it and are pursued or even trampled upon by it.

If in accord with your usual practice you both willingly heed and strive faithfully to fulfill, dearest brethren, the truths which we are suggesting for the salvation of all by presuming on your obedience, you will celebrate Easter with joy and happily come to eternal life. May He Himself deign to grant this, who together with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Tuesday, February 20, 2018

A Homily of St Faustus for Lent ²

Our Lord and Savior exhorts us through the prophet and advises us how we ought to come to Him after many negligences, saying: ACome let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord who made us@; and again: AReturn to me with your whole heart, with fasting, with weeping and mourning@. If we notice carefully, dearest brethren, the holy days of Lent signify the life of the present world, just as Easter prefigures eternal bliss. Now just as we have a kind of sadness in Lent in order that we may rightly rejoice at Easter, so as long as we live in this world we ought to do penance in order that we may be able to receive pardon for our sins in the future and arrive at eternal joy. Each one ought to sigh over his own sins, shed tears and give alms in such a way that with God's help he may always try to avoid the same faults as long as he lives. Just as there never has been, is not now, and never will be a soul without slight sins, so with the help and assistance of God we ought to be altogether without serious sins.

Now in order that we may obtain this, if burdens of the world keep us occupied at other times, at least during the holy days of Lent let us reflect on the law of the Lord, as it is written, by day and by night. Let us so fill our hearts with the sweetness of the divine law that we leave no place within us devoid of virtues so that vices could occupy it. Just as at the time of the harvest or vintage, brethren, enough is gathered so that the body may be fed, so during the days of Lent as at a time of spiritual harvest or vintage we ought to gather the means whereby

² St Caesarius of Arles, Sermons, vo. 3, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 66, Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC, 1973, pg. 48

our soul may live forever. Whenever a careless person fails to gather anything at the time of harvest or vintage, he will be distressed by hunger throughout the entire space of the year. In the same way if anyone at this season neglects to provide and gather spiritual wheat and heavenly wine in the storehouse of his soul by fasting, reading and prayer, he will suffer forever the most severe thirst and cruel want. Know for sure, dearest brethren, that the soul which is not fed continuously by the word of God is like a body which receives food only after many days. Just as the body becomes thin and dehydrated, almost like a shadow, through hunger and want, so the soul which is not fed on God=s word is found to be parched and useless, fit for no good work. Consider, brethren, if every year we fill the barn and wine cellar and storehouse in order that our body may have food for one year, how much do you think we ought to store up so that our soul may be nourished forever?

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Thursday, February 22, 2018

From a homily by Paul the Deacon ¹

The early Church called today's feast Saint Peter's Chair because Peter, the first of the apostles, was said on this day to have taken his seat as bishop. It is quite right, therefore, that churches all over the world should observe the anniversary of that see which the apostle received for their salvation when the Lord said: *You are Peter, and upon this rock I shall build my Church.* Upon this rock means upon our Lord and Savior, who bestowed on his faithful witness a share in his own title.

And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The gates of hell are the tortures and flatteries of persecutors, which frighten some into losing their faith, and open the way to eternal death. Hell possesses many gates, but none of them prevails over the Church founded on the rock.

It is right, then, for all the churches to honor Peter. As head of the Church, firm as the hardest rock, he confounded the enemies of Christ by the authority of the Holy Spirit, conquering by the strength of tireless endurance. As was prophesied, the gates of hell did not prevail against him who made the eternal gates open to him by confessing the king of glory. The gateway of life could hardly remain closed to one who, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the inscrutable secret of the single majesty of God which unites the Father and the Son, and who also taught and made known that in one and the same Son of God there exists both the humanity he assumed and the divinity which was his by right. He actually heard the Savior himself saying: *I and the Father are one and Whoever sees me sees my Father as well.*

Peter's acknowledgement made him worthy of honor on earth and glory in heaven. It is the reason why the Lord called him the foundation of the Church. And so the universal Church gives recognition to this foundation upon which its structure rises to the heights. The Psalmist aptly says: *Let them exalt him in the gathering of the people, and praise him where the elders are installed.* It is fitting, then, for the Church to honor this foundation upon which it rises to heaven.

¹Word in Season – vol. IV – Augustinian Press – 1999 – 31

Friday, February 23, 2018

Continuing a reading on Lent from Thomas Merton ⁴

There is confidence everywhere in Lent, yet that does not mean unmixed and untroubled security. The confidence of the Christian is always a confidence in spite of darkness and risk, in the presence of peril, with every evidence of possible disaster. A Let us emend for the better in those things in which we have sinned through ignorance: lest suddenly overtaken by the day of death we seek space for repentance and are not able to find it. @ The last words are sobering indeed. And note, it is the sins we have not been fully aware of that we must emend. Once again, Lent is not just a time for squaring conscious accounts: but for realizing what we had perhaps not seen before. The light of Lent is given us to help us with this realization.

Nevertheless the liturgy of Lent is not focused on the sinfulness of the penitent but on the mercy of God. The question of sinfulness is raised precisely because this is a time of mercy, and the just do not need a Savior. Nowhere will we find more tender expressions of the divine mercy that at this season. His mercy is kind. He looks upon us A according to the multitude of Your tender mercies @. In the Introit for Ash Wednesday we sing: A You have mercy upon all, O Lord, and hate none of those which You have made, overlooking the sins of all for the sake of repentance and sparing them, because You are the Lord our God. @

How good are these words of Wisdom in a time when on all sides the Lord is thought by mortals to be a God who hates. Those who deny Him say they do so because evil in the world could be the work only of a God that hated the world.

But even those who profess to love Him regard Him too often as a furious Father, who seeks only to punish and revenge Himself for the evil that is done A against Him @ - One who cannot abide the slightest contradiction but will immediately mark it down for retribution, and will not let a farthing of the debt go unpaid.

This is not the God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself A hides @ our sins and gets them out of sight, like a mother making quick and efficient repairs on the soiled face of a child just before entering a house where he ought to appear clean. The words of the Lenten liturgies know Him only as the A God who desires not the death of the sinner @, A who is moved by humiliation and appeased by satisfaction @. He is everywhere shown to us as A plenteous in mercy @.

And from the infinite treasure of His mercies He draws forth the gift of compunction. This is a sorrow without servile fear, which is all the more deep and tender as it receives pardon

⁴Seasons of Celebration - Farrar, Straus & Giroux - NY - 1965 - pg. 118

from the tranquil, calm love of the merciful Lord: a love which the Latin liturgy calls, in two untranslatable words, *serenissima pietas*. The God of Lent is like a calm sea of mercy. In Him there is no anger.

This Ahiding@ of God=s severity is not a subterfuge. It is a revelation of His true nature. He is not severe, and it is not theologically accurate to say that He becomes angry, that He is moved to hurt and to punish.

He is love. Love becomes severe only to those who make Him severe for themselves. Love is hard only to those who refuse Him. It is not, and cannot be Love's will to be refused. Therefore it is not and cannot be Love=s will to be severe and punish.

But it is the very nature of Love that His absence is sorrow and death and punishment. His severity flows not from His own nature but from the fact of our refusal. Those who refuse Him are severe to themselves, and immolate themselves to the blood-thirsty god of their own self-love.

It is from this idol that Love would deliver us. To such bitter servitude, Love would never condemn us.

Saturday, February 24, 2018

A Reading from a letter by St. Maximus the Confessor ⁵

God=s will is to save us and nothing pleases him more than our coming back to him with true repentance. The heralds of truth and ministers of divine grace have told us this from the beginning, repeating it in every age. Indeed God=s desire for our salvation is the primary and preeminent sign of his infinite goodness, and it was precisely in order to show that there is nothing closer to God=s heart than the divine Word of God the Father, with untold condescension, lived among us in the flesh, and that he did, suffered, and said all that was necessary to reconcile us to God the Father when we were at enmity with him, and to restore us to the life of blessedness from which we have been exiled. He healed our physical infirmities by miracles; he freed us from our sins, many and grievous as they were, by suffering and dying, taking them upon himself as if he were answerable for them, sinless though he was. He also taught us in many different ways that we should wish to imitate him by our own kindness and genuine love for one another.

Thus he proclaimed that he had come to call sinners to repentance, not the righteous, and that it was not the healthy who required a doctor, but the sick. He declared that he had

⁵ A Word in Season - Monastic Lectionary - vol. II - Lent - Exordium Books - 1982 -

come to look for the sheep that was lost and that it was to the lost sheep of the house of Israel that he had been sent. Speaking more obscurely in the parable of the silver coin, he tells us that the purpose of his coming was to reclaim the royal image, which had been coated with the filth of sin. AYou can be sure that there is joy in heave@, he said, Aover one sinner who repents.

To the same lesson he revived the man who, having fallen into the hands of brigands, had been left stripped and half-dead from his wounds; he poured wine and oil on the wounds, bandaged them, placed the man on his own mule, and brought him to an inn, where he left sufficient money to have him cared for, and promised to repay any further expense on his return.

Again, he told of how the father, who is goodness itself, was moved with pity for his profligate son who returned and made amends by repentance; how he embraced him, dressed him once more in the fine garments that befitted his own dignity, and did not reproach him for any of his sins.

Then there was the time when one of the hundred sheep in God=s flock went astray. When he found it wandering in the mountains and hills he did not exhaust it by driving it back to the fold, but placed it on his own shoulders, and so in his compassion restored it safely to the flock.

His teaching was the same when he cried out: ACome to me, all you that toil and are heavy of heart. Accept my yoke@, he said, by which he meant his commands, or rather the whole way of life that he taught us in the Gospel. He then speaks of a burden, but that is only because repentance seems difficult. In fact, however, Amy yoke is easy@, he assures us, Aand my burden is light@.

Then again he instructs us in divine justice and goodness, telling us to be like our heavenly Father, holy, perfect and merciful. AForgive@, he says, Aand you will be forgiven. Treat other people as you would wish them to treat you.@

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