

Commentary on the Gospel of John by Basil of Seleucia ¹

I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. For the sake of his flock the shepherd was sacrificed as though he were a sheep. He did not refuse death, he did not destroy his executioners as he had the power to do, for his passion was not forced upon him. He laid down his life for his sheep of his own free will. *I have the power to lay it down, he said, and I have the power to take it up again.* By his passion he made atonement for our evil passions, by his death he cured our death, by his tomb he robbed the tomb, by the nails that pierced his flesh he destroyed the foundations of hell.

Death held sway until Christ died. The grave was bitter, our prison was indestructible, until the shepherd went down and brought to his sheep confined there the good news of their release. His appearance among them gave them a pledge of their resurrection and called them to a new life beyond the grave. *The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep and so seeks to win their love.*

Now to love Christ means to obey his commands. The shepherd knows how to separate goats from sheep. The gospel says that *all nations shall be assembled before him and he will separate people from one another, as the Good Shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right hand, and the goats on his left, and he will say to those on his right hand, "Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."* What have they done to inherit this invitation? *I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me.* What you give to those who are mine, you will receive back from me. Because they are naked, strangers, homeless and poor, so am I, and in supplying their needs, you show kindness to me. It is I who am afflicted when they cry out. Win the judge over by gifts before you come to trial. Provide him with grounds for showing clemency, give him some reason to acquit you. Otherwise you will be among those on his left hand who hear the terrible sentence: *Depart from me with your curse upon you to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*

What are the sins for which we would be condemned with the devil? I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not welcome me; naked and you did not clothe me. Who could turn away from his own shepherd when he was hungry, or fail to notice when his future judge lacked necessary clothing? Who could condemn the future judge of the whole world to suffer thirst? Christ will accept even the gift of the poor and for a small gift grant remission of long punishment. Let us put out the fire with mercy and avert the sentence that hangs over us by showing love for one another. Let us be compassionate toward one another and forgiving, as God has forgiven us in Christ. To him be glory and power for ever. Amen.

¹Journey with the Fathers – Year B – New City Press – 1993 – pg. 54

04.23.18

A Discourse of Christ's Resurrection, by Symeon the New Theologian.¹

Most people believe in the resurrection of Christ, but very few have a clear vision of it. Those who have no vision thereof cannot even adore Christ Jesus as the Holy One and as Lord. As it is written, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit", and, elsewhere, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth". That most sacred formula which is daily on our lips does not say, "Having believed in "Christ's resurrection," but, "Having beheld Christ's resurrection, let us worship the Holy One, the Lord Jesus, who alone is without sin." How then does the Holy Spirit urge us to say, "Having beheld Christ's resurrection," which we have not seen, as though we had seen it, when Christ has risen once for all a thousand years ago, and even then without anybody's seeing it? Surely Holy Scripture does not wish us to lie! Rather, it urges us to speak the truth, that the resurrection of Christ takes place in each of us who believes, and that not once, but every hour, so to speak, when Christ the Master arises in us, resplendent in array and flashing with the lightnings of incorruption and Deity. For the light-bringing coming of the Spirit shows forth to us, as in early morning, the Master's resurrection, or, rather, it grants us to see the Risen One Himself. Therefore we say, "The Lord is God, and He has given us light" and we allude to His second Coming and add these words, "Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord". Those to whom Christ has given light as He has risen, to them He has appeared spiritually, He has been shown to their spiritual eyes. When this happens to us through the Spirit He raises us up from the dead and gives us life. He grants us to see Him, who is immortal and indestructible. More than that, He grants clearly to know Him who raises us up and glorifies us with Himself, as all the divine Scripture testifies.

These, then, are the divine mysteries of Christians. This is the hidden power of our faith, which unbelievers, or those who believe with difficulty, or rather believe in part, do not see nor are able at all to see. Unbelievers, those who believe with difficulty, or believe in part, are those who do not show their faith through works. Apart from works the demons also believe and confess Christ to be God and Master. "We know who you are", they say, "you are the Son of God", and elsewhere, "These men are the servants of the Most High God". Yet such faith will not benefit the demons, nor even humans. This faith is of no use, for it is dead, as says the divine apostle, "Faith apart from works is dead", just like works without faith. How is it dead? Because it has not in itself God who gives life. It has not laid hold of Him who said, "He who loves Me will keep My commandments, and I and the Father will come and make Our home with him, so that by His coming He may raise from the dead him who has attained faith and give him life, and grant him to see Him who has risen in him and who has raised him up. For this reason such faith is dead, or, rather, they are dead who have faith apart from works. Faith in God is always alive, and since it is living it gives life to those who come with a good intention and receive it. Even before they have practiced the commandments it has brought many out of death into life and has shown them Christ our God. Had they persevered in His commandments and kept them until death they too would have been preserved by them - that is, in the state to which faith alone had brought them. But since they "turned aside like a bent bow" and speared themselves on their former actions, they inevitably at once made shipwreck of their faith and miserably deprived themselves of the true riches, who is Christ our God. So I urge you. let us keep God's commandments with all our might, so that we may not share in their fate, but enjoy both present and future blessings, that is, the very vision of Christ. To this may we all attain through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

¹ The Discourses, Paulist Press CWS, 1980. cp. XIII 90-160

Easter is the hour of our own deliverance: a reading from *Seasons of Celebration* by Thomas Merton.¹

[The season of Lent] summoned us to change our hearts, to effect in ourselves the Christian *metanoia*. But at the same time Lent has reminded us perhaps all too clearly of our own powerlessness to change our lives in any way. Lent in the liturgical year plays the role of the Law, the pedagogue, who convinces us of sin and inflicts upon us the crushing evidence of our own nothingness. Hence it disquiets and sobers us, awakening in us perhaps some sense of that existential Adread@ of the creature whose freedom suspends him over an abyss which may be an infinite meaninglessness, and unbounded despair. This is the fruit of that Law which judges our freedom together with its powerlessness to impose full meaning on our lives merely by conforming to a moral code. Is there nothing more than this?

But now the power of Easter has burst upon us with the resurrection of Christ. Now we find in ourselves a strength which is not our own, and which is freely given to us whenever we need it, raising us above the Law, giving us a new law which is hidden in Christ: the law of his merciful love for us. Now we no longer strive to be good because we have to, because it is a duty, but because our joy is to please him who has given all his love to us! Now our life is full of meaning.

Easter is the hour of our own deliverance--from what? Precisely from Lent and from its hard Law which accuses and judges our infirmity. *We are no longer under the Law*. We are delivered from the harsh judgment! Here is all the greatness and all the unimaginable splendor of the Easter mystery--here is the Agrace@ of Easter which we fail to lay hands on because we are afraid to understand its full meaning. To understand Easter and live it, we must renounce our dread of newness and of freedom!

Death exercises a twofold power in our lives: it holds us by sin, and it holds us by the Law. To die to death and live a new life in Christ we must die not only to sin *but also to the Law*.

Every Christian knows that he must die to sin. But the great truth that St Paul exhausted himself to preach in season and out is a truth that we Christians have barely grasped, a truth that has got away from us, that constantly eludes us and has continued to do so for twenty centuries. We cannot get it into our heads what it means to be no longer slaves of the Law. And the reason is that we do not have the courage to face this truth which contains in itself the crucial challenge of our Christian faith, the great reality that makes Christianity different from every other religion.

¹ New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965, pp. 145-146.

04.25.2018

**THE CHANGE FROM TIMIDITY TO BOLDNESS IN THE LIFE OF ST. MARK,
from a Sermon by Card. John H. Newman²**

The chief points of St. Mark's history are these: -first, that he was nephew to Barnabas, and taken with him and St. Paul on their first apostolic journey; next, that after a short time he deserted them and returned to Jerusalem; then, that after an interval, he was St. Peter's assistant at Rome, and composed his Gospel there principally from the accounts which he received from that Apostle; lastly, that he was sent by him to Alexandria, in Egypt, where he founded one of the strictest and most powerful churches of the primitive times.

The points of contrast in his history are as follows:-that first he abandoned the cause of the Gospel as soon as danger appeared; afterwards, he proved himself, not merely an ordinary Christian, but a most resolute and exact servant of God, founding and ruling the strictest Church of Alexandria.

And the instrument of this change was, as it appears the influence of St. Peter, a fit restorer of a timid and backsliding disciple.

The encouragement which we derive from these circumstances in St. Mark's history, is that the feeblest among us may through God's grace become strong. And the warning to be drawn from it is, to distrust ourselves; and again, not to despise weak brethren, or to despair of them, but to bear their burdens and help them forward, if so be we may restore them. Now let us attentively consider the subject thus brought before us.

²PAROCHIAL AND PLAIN SERMONS, John H. Newman, (Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1987) pp.336-337.

Some are naturally impetuous and active; others love quiet and readily yield. The over-earnest must be sobered, and the indolent must be roused. The history of Moses supplies us with an instance of a proud and rash spirit, tamed down to an extreme gentleness of deportment. In the greatness of the change wrought in him, when from a fierce, though honest avenger of his brethren, he became the meekest of human beings on earth, he evidences the power of faith, the influence of the Spirit on the heart. St. Mark's history affords a specimen of the other, and still rarer change, from timidity to boldness. Difficult as it is to subdue the more violent passions, yet I believe it to be still more difficult to overcome a tendency to sloth, cowardice, and despondency. These evil dispositions cling about a person, and weigh him down. They are minute chains, binding him on every side to the earth, so that he cannot even turn himself or make an effort to rise. It would seem as if right principles had yet to be planted in the indolent mind; whereas violent and obstinate tempers had already something of the nature of firmness and zeal in them, or rather what will become so with care, exercise, and God's blessing. Besides, the events of life have a powerful influence in sobering the ardent or self-confident temper. Disappointments, pain anxiety, advancing years, bring with them some natural wisdom as a matter of course; and, though such tardy improvement bespeaks but a weak faith, yet we may believe that the Holy Spirit often blesses these means, however slowly and imperceptibly...

St. Mark's change, therefore, may be considered even more astonishing in its nature than that of the Jewish Lawgiver. "By faith," he was "out of weakness made strong," and becomes a memorial of the more glorious and marvelous gifts of the last and spiritual Dispensation.

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04.26.2018

**THE UNBOUNDED LOVE OF GOD LAVISHED UPON US THROUGH CHRIST'S VICTORY,
from the book *Seasons of Celebration* by Thomas Merton³**

If we look carefully at the famous contrast made by St Paul between the "law of God in his mind" and "the law of sin in his body" we will see a little more in it than just these two. It is true, St Paul says he is "delighted with God's law according to the inner man," with his "mind he serves the law of God but with his lower nature the law which allures him to sin"(Rom 7:22ff). Ordinarily this text is not interpreted fully. Very often for instance, we take it to mean that there is nothing else for us but to accept this inevitable conflict, to try to keep the law of God in spite of the bias of concupiscence that draws us toward sin. To accept the conflict in a spirit of Christian resignation is all that is required of us as Christians.

Do we not see that this leaves us purely and simply captives of the Law? If this is all there is to it, then Christ's victory is not complete in our lives. There is a third possibility, and this is the right one. It is the grace of God in Christ our Lord or, to be more succinct, *it is Christ himself in us*. It is our new life in Christ. By our life of love and hope in Christ we rise above the dilemma and thus resolve it. The Christian solution is not merely to continue struggling against temptation in order to live according to the Law. This is nothing new. It is exactly what had to be done before the coming of Christ. The Christian is no longer bound by the law of the flesh, and he is no longer obliged in a spirit of fear to keep the Law of God considered as a formal code imposed on him from without.

He may still be tempted by the flesh. He resists temptation and is saved not by various practices and stratagems but *by the spiritual force of love itself, and of the new life that is in him*. He lives by the "Spirit of him who raised Christ Jesus from the dead," and by that Spirit he "puts to death the deeds prompted by the animal instincts, and so lives. (Rom 8:11,13) In other words, it is not dutiful observance that keeps us from sin, but something far greater: it is love. And this love is not something which we develop by our own powers alone. It is a sublime gift of the divine mercy, and the fact that we live in realization of this mercy and this gift is the greatest source of growth for our love and for our holiness.

This gift, this mercy, this unbounded love of God for us has been lavished upon us as a result of Christ's victory. To taste this love is to share in his victory. To realize our freedom, to exult in our liberation from death, from sin and from the Law, is to sing the *Alleluia* which truly glorifies God in this world and in the world to come.

³SEASONS OF CELEBRATION, Thomas Merton (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, NY 1965) pp. 155-157.

Simplicity of heart, from the writings of the Blessed Br. Rafael Arnaiz Baron. ⁴

I see, Brother, that the path you follow is the simple life. God does not require more of us than simplicity without and love within. The truth is that the real pathways of God are very easy and very simple when we walk along them full of the spirit of trust and with free hearts fixed on God.

Happy, indeed, is the Trappist who is not merely a Trappist externally, but whose interior life is marked by the simplicity that makes the real Trappist.

People of the world could think us somewhat complicated. I do not know how to explain myself, but I have come to realize what Jesus means when he says: "Unless you become as little children..."

The ways of the Lord are simplicity; his yoke is easy and his burden is light. We die to the world in order to be born to God. The self-denial of a life of silence and solitude blossoms into the exuberant joy of a heart which counts its blessings in terms of simplicity and integrity. Those who follow Christ, do so along the way of the Cross. I think that when we love the Cross all is gained.

God always lets his light shine on anyone who loves and seeks him in simplicity. We have to find our way along many winding paths before we arrive at the simple straight one. What causes us more distress than complicating things! How we human beings love to complicate everything for ourselves! Unless we keep ourselves under control by the practice of virtue, repeatedly, with our complicated way of existing we drive far from us everything that is simple.

Time and again, we fail to grasp the greatness hidden deep down in an act of simplicity. We want to seek greatness in complexity and think that only when things are difficult have they anything worthwhile to offer.

Perhaps I am not making myself clear, but I do see clearly now that what I previously saw as confused and complicated is really clear and simple. Virtue, God, Interior Life - difficult values to live out! It is not that I have attained virtue, nor that my knowledge of God and my life in the spirit are totally clear, but that I have seen that to achieve something in these matters I need to be free from complexity and contortion, from clever speculation and technicalities.

I have seen that we reach God by just the opposite. True knowledge of Him comes through simplicity of heart and integrity. An act of love is not difficult at all. What is really hard is the effort to attain knowledge of God by penetrating his mysteries. The act of love brings us to God; the other way leads us nowhere.

Virtue, yes, it's for saints. Rather difficult to put into practice, certainly, but not quite like entering a competition or taking up a course of higher studies. Sometimes the simple resolve is enough, even the mere engagement of the will. Why, at times, do we miss out on virtue? Because we are not simple; because we complicate our objectives, because the weakness of our will makes

everything we desire seem difficult. We pander to this weakness when we let our will satisfy itself with what is pleasant, consoling, distracting and, oftentimes, plain passion.

If anybody were to spell out to me what I had to do to be holy and pleasing to God, I think that, with the help of God and his Blessed Mother, I would do it.

With Jesus at my side nothing seems difficult to me, and the path to holiness seems simpler every time I look at it. Better -- it seems to consist in going forward and leaving things behind rather than in acquiring anything new, stripping back to simplicity rather than adding things on.

In so far as we go forward turning our back on so much inordinate love of creatures and of ourselves, it seems to me that we are drawing closer to that one real love, that sole desire, that unique aspiration of this life: the true holiness which is God.

04.28.2018

A Reading about our Redemption in Christ, from *The Eternal Year* by Karl Rahner.⁵

We children of the earth may love the earth; we must love her, even when she terrifies us and makes us tremble with her misery and her destiny of death. For ever since Christ, through his death and resurrection, penetrated the earth for all time, her misery has become provisional and a mere test of our faith in her innermost mystery, which is the risen One himself. Our experience does not tell us that he is the mysterious meaning of her misery; by no means! It is our faith that tells us this. The faith that offers blessed consolation to all that we experience in life, the faith that can love the earth because she is, or is in the process of becoming, the "body" of the risen One. We do not need to leave her, for the life of God dwells in her. When we want both the God of infinity (how can we help wanting him?) and the familiar earth, as it is and as it shall become, when we want both for our eternally free homeland, there is *one* path to *both!* For in the resurrection of the Lord, God has shown that he has accepted the earth for all time. *Caro cardo salutis*, said one of the Fathers of the Church in an untranslatable play on words: the flesh is the hinge of salvation.

The hereafter to every exigency of sin and death is not somewhere in the life hereafter; it has come down to us and lives in the innermost reality of our flesh. The most sublime religiosity of seclusion from the world would not fetch the God of our life and the salvation of this earth from the distance of his eternity; and it would not even reach him in his world. But he himself has come to us. And he has transformed what we are and what we still want to consider as the gloomy, earthly dwelling place of our "spiritual nature": he has transformed *the flesh*. Ever since that event, mother earth bears nothing but transformed children. For his resurrection is the beginning of the resurrection of all flesh.

One thing, of course, is necessary for this event - which we can never undo - to become the blessedness of our existence: he must burst forth from the grave of our hearts. He must rise from the core of our being, where he is as power and promise. He is there, and yet something remains to be done. He is there, yet it is still Holy Saturday, and it will continue to be Holy Saturday until the last day, until that day that will be the cosmic Easter. And this rising takes place beneath the freedom of our faith. It is taking place as an event of living faith that draws us into the colossal eruption of all earthly reality into its own glorification, the splendid transfiguration that has already begun with the resurrection of Christ.

⁵The Eternal Year, Helicon Press: Baltimore MD 1964. pp.93-95.