

08/26/18

A Commentary on the Gospel of st John by Cyril of Alexandria ¹

To whom shall we go? Peter asks. In other words, “Who else will instruct us the way that you do? Or “To whom shall we go to find anything better? *You have the words of eternal life*; not hard words, as those other disciples say, but words that will bring us to the loftiest goal, unceasing, endless life removed from all corruption. These words surely make quite obvious to us the necessity for sitting at the feet of Christ, taking him as our one and only teacher, and giving him our constant and undivided attention. He must be our guide who knows well how to lead us to everlasting life. Thus, shall we ascend to the divine court of heaven, and entering the church of the first-born, delight in blessings surpassing all human understanding.

That the desire to follow Christ alone and to be with him always is a good thing leading to our salvation is entirely self-evident; yet we must learn this from the Old Testament as well. When the Israelites had shaken off Egyptian tyranny and were hastening toward the promised land, God did not allow them to make disorderly marches; nor did the lawgiver let each go where he would, for without a guide they should undoubtedly have lost their way completely. They were ordered to follow: to set out with the cloud, to come to a halt again with it, and to rest with it. Keeping with their guide was the Israelites' salvation then, just as not leaving Christ is ours now. For he was with those people of old under the form of the tabernacle, the cloud and the fire.

They were commanded to follow, and not undertake the journey on their own initiative. They were to halt with the cloud and to abide with it, that by this symbol you might understand Christ's words: *Whoever serves me must follow me, so as to be with me wherever I am*. For being always in his company means being steadfast in following him and constant in cleaving to him. But accompanying the Savior Christ and following him is by no means to be thought of as something done by the body. It is accomplished rather by deeds springing from virtue. Upon such virtue the wisest disciples firmly fixed their minds and refused to depart with the unbelievers, which they saw would be fatal. With good reason they cried out, “Where shall we go?” It is as though they said: “We will stay with you always and hold fast to your commandments. We will receive your words without finding fault or thinking your teaching is hard as the ignorant do, but thinking rather, “*How sweet are your words to my throat! Sweeter to my mouth are they than honey or the honeycomb.*”

¹Journey with the Fathers – Year B – New City Press – 1993 – pg 110

8/27/18

ON THE PRAYER OF HIS MOTHER MONICA FOR HIS CONVERSION, from the Confessions of St Augustine¹

You, O God, sent down your help from above (ps 143:7) and rescued my soul from the depths of this darkness because my mother, your faithful servant, wept to you for me, shedding more tears for my spiritual death than other mothers shed for the bodily death of a son. For in her faith and in the spirit which she had from you she looked on me as dead. You heard her and did not despise the tears which streamed down and watered the earth in every place where she bowed her head in prayer. You heard her, for how else can I explain the dream with which you consoled her, so that she agreed to live with me and eat at the same table in our home? Lately she had refused to do this, because she loathed and shunned the blasphemy of my false beliefs.

She dreamed that she was standing on a wooden rule, and coming towards her in a halo of splendor she saw a young man who smiled at her in joy, although she herself was sad and quite consumed with grief. He asked her the reason for her sorrow and her daily tears, not because he did not know, but because he had something to tell her, for this is what happens in visions. When she replied that her tears were for the soul I had lost, he told her to take heart for, if she looked carefully, she would see that where she was, there also was I. And when she looked, she saw me standing beside her on the same rule.

Where could this dream have come from, unless it was that you listened to the prayer of her heart? For your goodness is almighty; you take good care of each of us as if you had no others in your care, and you look after all as you look after each. And surely it was for the same reason that, when she told me of the dream and I tried to interpret it as a message that she need not despair of being one day such as I was then, she said at once and without hesitation 'No! He did not say "Where he is, you are", but "Where you are, he is".'

I have often said before and, to the best of my memory, I now declare to you, Lord, that I was much moved by the answer, which you gave me through my mother. She was not disturbed by my interpretation of her dream, plausible though it was, but quickly saw the true meaning, which I had not seen until she spoke. I was more deeply moved by this than by the dream itself, in which the joy for which this devout woman had still so long to wait was foretold so long before to comfort her in the time of her distress. For nearly nine years were yet to dome during which I wallowed deep in the mire and the darkness of delusion. Often I tried to lift myself, only to plunge the deeper. Yet all the time this chaste, devout, and prudent woman, a widow such as is close to your heart, never ceased to pray at all hours and to offer you the tears she shed for me. The dream had given new spirit to her hope, but she gave no rest to her sighs and her tears. Her prayers reached your presence (ps 87:3) and yet you still left me to twist and turn in the dark.

¹THE CONFESSIONS, by St Augustine trans. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin Books 1961) pp. 68-69.

A reading about the greatness of the Christian vocation, from a homily by St. Augustine on the anniversary of his Episcopal consecration. 1

Concern with my charge as a bishop has unceasingly preoccupied me since I have had placed upon my shoulders this burden of which I have rigorously to give account. But what is there to fear in this gift of being a bishop? It is that I may be carried away by the perilous honor that it comprises for us, rather than by the fruitful salvation which it brings to you. Come to my aid, then, with your prayers, so that he who did not disdain to confer my burden upon me may deign to bear it with me. Now, when you offer this prayer, it is for yourselves that you are praying. For, this burden of mine of which I speak, what else is it, if it is not you? Pray that I may be strong, as I, for my part, pray that you may not be heavy. Our Lord Jesus Christ would never, indeed, have called his burden light if he were not carrying it with the bearer. And you, also must uphold me, so that, in accordance with the command of the Apostle, we may bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. If he does not bear it with us, we succumb; if he does not bear **us**, we fall.

If what I am on your behalf terrifies me, what I am with you reassures me. **For** you, indeed, I am the bishop; **with** you I am a Christian. Bishop, that is the title of a charge which one assumes; Christian, that is the name of the grace which one receives. A perilous title; a saving name. In any event, we are tossed about in the whirlwind of this activity as though in an immense sea. But, remembering with what blood we have been redeemed, and rendered tranquil by this thought, we come as though into a sure haven; toiling at a charge which is personal to us, we find rest in the blessedness that is common to all. If it is more pleasing to me to be redeemed with you than to be your head, I shall be more fully your servant as the Lord ordains. And so, may I never be in debt for the price, thanks to which I have succeeded in becoming your fellow-servant.

I must indeed love my Redeemer, and I know what he says to Peter: *APeter, do you love me? Feed my sheep.*@ He says it once, twice, three times. He questions Peter on love, he prescribes the work to be done, for the greater the love, the less the toil. *AWhat shall I render the Lord for all his bounty to me?*@ Should I dare to say that I will repay him by leading his sheep to pasture? I do so, to be sure, but not I; it is the *Agrace of God towards me.*@ Where, then shall I find what is my due, if from every direction he forestalls me?Y One could in fact ask no payment of one whom one loves freely, if the payment were not the very person whom one loves.

John the Baptist – the Precursor of Christ in birth and death -
From a Homily by St Bede the Venerable 2

As a forerunner of our Lord's birth, preaching and death, John showed in his struggle a goodness worthy of the sight of heaven. In the words of Scripture: "Though in the sight of men he suffered torments, his hope is full of immortality." We justly commemorate the day of his birth with a joyful celebration, a day which he himself made festive for us through his suffering and which he adorned with the crimson splendor of his own blood. We do rightly revere his memory with joyful hearts, for he stamped with the seal of martyrdom the testimony which he delivered on behalf of our Lord.

There is no doubt that blessed John suffered imprisonment and chains as a witness to our Redeemer, whose forerunner he was, and gave his life for him. His persecutor had demanded not that he deny Christ, but only that he should keep silent about the truth. Nevertheless, he died for Christ. Does Christ not say: "I am the truth?" Therefore, because John shed his blood for the truth, he surely died for Christ. Through his birth, preaching and baptizing, he bore witness to the coming birth, preaching and baptism of Christ, and by his own suffering he showed that Christ also would suffer.

Such was the quality and strength of the man who accepted the end of this present life by shedding his blood after the long imprisonment. He preached the freedom of heavenly peace, yet was thrown into irons by ungodly men; he was locked away in the darkness of prison, though he came bearing witness to the Light of life and deserved to be called a bright and shining lamp by that Light itself, which is Christ. John was baptized in his own blood, though he had been privileged to baptize the Redeemer of the world, to hear the voice of the Father above him, and to see the grace of the Holy spirit descending upon him. But to endure temporal agonies for the sake of the truth was not a heavy burden for such men as John; rather it was easily borne and even desirable, for he knew eternal joy would be his reward.

Since death was ever near at hand through the inescapable necessity of nature, such men considered it a blessing to embrace it and thus gain the reward of eternal life by acknowledging Christ's name. Hence the apostle Paul rightly says: "You have been granted the privilege not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for his sake." He tells us why it is Christ's gift that his chosen ones should suffer for him: "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us."

As Nehemiah was seeking to make plans and decide who should reside in the city that they had built, the seventh month arrived, for it was not far off. For since the wall had been completed on the twenty-fifth day of the sixth month, not more than five days remained until the beginning of the seventh month. The whole of this seventh month, from the first day until the twenty-second, was consecrated with ceremonies prescribed by the Law; when these had been duly celebrated, only then did he return with the leaders and common people to decide who should be the residents of the rebuilt city. The point to note here is the devotion and also the like-mindedness of the people who as one person (that is, with one and the same faith and love) came together at the Lord's temple; and they themselves asked their pontifex to bring the book and recount for them the commandments of the Law that they must observe, so that along with the rebuilt city, a structure of good works pleasing to God might spring up in case, just as before, neglect of religion should lead to the ruination of the city as well. And it is appropriate that the city was completed in the sixth month and that the people gathered in it to hear the Law in the seventh; for in the Law there are six days for working and a seventh for resting. And this, after we have done good work, is the form of our rest that is most beloved and acceptable to the Lord: to abstain from servile work (that is, from sin) and devote ourselves to hearing and fulfilling his commandments with due diligence. This is why the Feast of Trumpets, by whose blast the people, amid their prayers and offerings, were more fervently moved to remembrance of the divine law, was placed in the beginning of this seventh month also.

Even today too, according to the spiritual meaning, the construction of the holy city should be followed by divine reading and the frequent sounding of trumpets, no doubt because it is necessary that when a people has been initiated into the heavenly sacraments they should also, as occasion requires, be carefully instructed by divine discourses how they should live. Now he says that the people assembled "in the square that is before the Water Gate." I think that by the Water Gate is meant the gate in the courtyard of the priests that surrounded the temple on all its sides in a square, especially on the temple's eastern side, where there was the bronze sea for washing the hands and feet of those going into the temple, the ten bronze washbasins for washing the victims and the altar of burnt offering between which and the temple Zechariah son of Berechiah was stoned to death. The people did not have permission to enter inside the gate of this court but only the priests and ministers of the Lord; the people were accustomed to stand outside of this gate and especially in the square that is at its eastern side, in order to listen to the word or pray. Therefore, it is appropriate that the people gathered before the Water Gate, because they were to be given spiritual drink by their high priest from the streams of Scripture.

Spiritual Canticle - Stanza 11 by St. John of the Cross⁴

The soul is right in daring to say: "may the vision of Your beauty be my death", since she knows that at the instant she sees this beauty she will be carried away by it, and absorbed in this very beauty, and transformed in this same beauty, and made beautiful like this beauty itself, and enriched and provided for like this very beauty.

David declares, consequently, that the death of the saints is precious in the sight of the Lord. This would not be true if they did not participate in His very grandeur, for in the sight of God nothing is precious but what God in Himself is.

Accordingly, the soul does not fear death when she loves, rather she desires it. Yet sinners are always fearful of death. They foresee that death will take everything away and bring them all evils. As David says, the death of sinners is very evil. And hence, as the Wise Man says, the remembrance of it is bitter. Since sinners love the life of this world intensely and have little love for that of the other, they have an immense fear of death.

The soul that loves God lives more in the next life than in this, for the soul lives where it loves more than where it gives life, and thus has but little esteem for this temporal life. She says then, "may the vision of Your beauty be my death." "For the sickness of love is not cured except by your presence and image."

The reason love sickness has no other remedy than the presence and the image of the Beloved is that, since this sickness differs from others, its medicine also differs. In other sicknesses, following sound philosophy, contraries are cured by contraries, but love is incurable except by what is in accord with love. The reason for this is that love of God is the soul's health, and the soul does not have full health until love is complete. Sickness is nothing but a want of health, and when the soul has not even a single degree of love, she is dead. but when she possesses some degrees of love of God, no matter how few, she is then alive, yet very weak and infirm because of her little love. In the measure that love increases she will be healthier, and when love is perfect she will have full health.

The soul does well to call imperfect love "sickness." for just as the sick is too weak for work, so is the soul, feeble in love, too weak to practice heroic virtue. It is also noteworthy that the soul who feels the sickness of love, a lack of love, shows that she has some love, because she is aware of what she lacks through what she has. The soul who does not feel this sickness shows that she either has no love or is perfect in love.

⁴Collected Works of St. John of the Cross. ICS Publications, 1979, pp. 452-453.

MY-61

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A reading about bearing Christ in our hearts, from a sermon by Gueric of Igny.¹

That you may know more fully that the Virgin's conception has not only a mystical but also a moral sense, what is a mystery for your redemption is also an example for your imitation, so that you clearly frustrate the grace of the mystery in you if you do not imitate the virtue of the example. For she who conceived God by faith promises you the same if you have faith; if you will faithfully receive the Word from the mouth of the heavenly messenger you too may conceive the God whom the whole world cannot contain, conceive him however in your heart, not in your body... Behold the unspeakable condescension of God and at the same time the power of the mystery which passes all understanding. He who created you is created in you, and as if were too little that you should possess the Father, he wishes also that you should become a mother to himself. "*Whoever*", he says, "*does the will of my Father, is my brother and sister and mother.*" O faithful soul, open wide your bosom, expand your affections, admit no constraint in your heart, conceive him whom creation cannot contain. Open to the Word of God an ear that will listen. This is the way to the womb of your heart for the Spirit who brings about conception; in such fashion are the bones of Christ, that is the virtues, built up in the pregnant womb.

Thanks be to you, Spirit, who breathe where you will. By your gift I see not one but countless souls pregnant with that noble offspring. Preserve your works, lest anyone should suffer miscarriage [of] the progeny he has conceived of God.

You also, blessed mothers of so glorious an issue, attend to yourselves until Christ is formed in you.... Guard your heart with all vigilance, for from it life will come forth, that is, when the offspring is ready for birth and the life of Christ which is now hidden in your hearts will be made manifest in your mortal flesh. You have conceived the spirit of salvation, but you are still in labor, you have not yet given birth. If there is labor in giving birth, great consolation comes from the hope of offspring. For he who is now conceived as God in our spirits, conforming them to the Spirit of his charity, will then be born as man in our bodies, conforming them to his glorified body, in which he lives in majesty, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

¹Bl. Gueric of Igny, "The Second Sermon for the Annunciation", *Liturgical Sermons*, (vol.2), Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971, pp. 44-46.