

SUN 03.29.20 Fifth Sunday of Lent

A Commentary on the Gospel of John by Peter Chrysologus [1](#)

On his return from the underworld, Lazarus comes forth from the tomb like death confronting its conqueror, an image of the resurrection to come. Before we can fathom the depths of meaning behind this miracle, we must consider the way in which our Lord raised Lazarus to life. This avtion appears to us as the greatest of all his signs; we see in it the supreme example of divine power, the most marvelous of all his wonderful works.

Our Lord had raised up the daughter of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue; but although he restored life to the dead girl, he left the law of death still in force. He also raised the widow's only son. He halted the bier, forestalled the young man's burial, arrested the onslaught of physical decay; but the life he restored had not completely fallen into the power of death. The case of Lazarus was unique. His death and resurrection to life had nothing in common with the other two. Death had already exerted its full power over him, so that in him the sign of the resurrection shone out in all its fullness. It think it is possible to say that if Lazarus had remained only three days in the tomb it would have deprived our Lord's resurrection of its full significance, since Christ proved himself Lord by returning to life after three days, whereas Lazarus, as his servant, had to lie in the grave for four days before he was recalled. However let us see if we can verify this suggestion by reading the text further.

His sisters sent a message to Jesus saying, Lord, the friend whom you love is sick. By these words they appeal to his affection, they lay claim to his friendship, they call on his love, urging their familiar relationship with him to persuade him to relieve their distress. But for Christ it was more important to conquer death than to cure disease. He showed his love for his friend not by healing him but by calling him back from the grave. Instead of a remedy for his illness, he offered him the glory of rising from the dead.

We are next told that *when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, he remained where he was for two days.* You see how he gives full scope to death. He grants free reign to the grave; he allows corruption to set in. He prohibits neither putrefaction nor stench from taking their normal course; he allows the realm of darkness to seize his friend, drag him down to the underworld, and take possession of him. He acts like this so that human hope may perish entirely and human despair reach its lowest depths. The deed he is about to accomplish may then clearly be seen to be the work of God, not of man.

He waited for Lazarus to die, staying in the same place until he could tell his disciples that he was dead; then he announced his intention of going to him.

Lazarus is dead, he said, *and I am glad*. Was this a sign of love for his friend? Not so. Christ was glad because their sorrow over the death of Lazarus was soon to be changed into joy at his restoration of life. *I am glad for your sake*, he said. Why for their sake? Because the death and resurrection of Lazarus was a perfect prefiguration of the death and resurrection of the Lord himself. What the Lord was soon to achieve in himself had already been achieved in his servant. This explains why he said to them: *I am glad for your sake not to have been there, because now you will believe*. It was necessary that Lazarus should die, so that the faith of the disciples might also rise with him from the dead.

[1](#)Journey with the Fathers – Year A – New City Press – NY – 1992 – p 44

MON 03/30/20

Continuation of a Sermon of St Leo the Great ¹

Let us take refuge in the ever present mercy of God, and so that we may with becoming reverence celebrate the holy Pasch of the Lord, let all the faithful seek to make holy their hearts. Let harshness give way to mildness, let wrath grow gentle, forgive one another your offenses, and let him who seeks to be forgiven be not himself a seeker of vengeance. For when we say *Forgive 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 their conscience, and gain the pardon of his own sins by forgiving those of others.

For when the Lord says: *If you will forgive others their offences, your heavenly Father will forgive you also your offenses*, 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 supplicant. For the Just and Merciful Receiver of the prayers of men 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. For when the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the sick assisted, are not the hands that minister but completing the help that God gives, and is not the generosity of the giver also a gift from God?

He who has no need of a helper to perform His works of mercy, so orders His own omnipotence that it by means of mortals that He comes to the aid of mortals. And rightly do we give thanks to God for the ministers of that charity whose works of mercy are seen in His servants. It was because of this the Lord Himself said to His disciples: *So let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*

¹ The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers – vol. 2 – Henry Regnery Co – Chicago – 1958 – pg 127

TUES 03.31.20

A Sermon of St Bernard on Lent ²

My loving concern for you, brothers, is why I speak to you. You should not wonder if I am concerned for you, since I find in myself much matter and cause for concern. As often as I think of my own miserable condition and perils of every kind, my soul is troubled within me. I must have no less concern for each of you if I love you as myself. You should not wonder that I have so much concern for you and that great anxiety disturbs me over every one of you when I see you in so miserable a condition and in such great danger. I am speaking of this flesh, born in sin, nourished in sin, corrupt from its very beginning, but made much worse by bad habits. This is why it lusts so sharply against the spirit. Constantly murmurs, is impatient of discipline, suggests what is forbidden.

This the cunning serpent approaches, this he assists, and this he uses to attack us. He has no other desire, no other occupation except to shed the blood of our souls. He it is who continually contrives evil, who stirs up the desires of the flesh, inflames lawless impulses, prepares occasions of sin, and does not cease to tempt the hearts of humans with a thousand harmful tricks.

But what good does it do to point out the dangers without pointing out also some consolation, some remedy that can be applied? The peril indeed is great, and grave is the struggle against an enemy of our own household. Great, too, are the stakes, for we have frequent – no continuous – fights against the tricks of the devil, the deceiver, whom we cannot see; the subtlety of his nature, combined with his long practice of malice has made him very clever.

It rests with us, however, to refuse to be overcome in this conflict; none of us is overthrown in it against his will. The enemy can arouse the impulse of temptation, but it rests with you, if you choose, to give or to refuse consent. You have the capacity, if you choose, to make your enemy your servant. So that all things work together for good.

This surely was what God was looking for, this was what he was working to lead us to, that, seeing our weakness and that we have no other help, we would run toward his mercy with perfect humility. Therefore I ask you, brothers, to have this safe refuge of prayer always at hand.

But whenever I speak of prayer, I seem to hear expressed in your hearts some human thoughts that I have also heard frequently from others and sometimes experienced in my own heart. Why is it, seeing that we never cease from prayer, that scarcely ever does any one of us seem to experience the fruit of his prayer? As we come to prayer, so we return; no one responds to us, no one gives us anything, but we seem to have labored in vain. But what says the Lord in the gospel? *Do not judge by appearance, but judge with right judgment.*

² Bernard of Clairvaux –Sermons for Lent and Easter – Cistercian Fathers Series - #52 = Liturgical Press – Collegeville, MN – 2013 – pg 44

What is right judgment but the judgment of faith. *The one made righteous by faith lives.* Follow the judgment of faith, then, and not your own experience, since faith is true but experience is false. What is the truth of faith if not what the Son of God promises: *Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and it will come to you.* None of you should think his prayer of small account, brothers. I tell you that he to whom we pray does not think it of small account. Before it has left your mouth he has ordered it written in his book. Unquestionably we can hope for one of two things, that he will grant either what we ask, or what he knows is better for us. *We do not know what to pray for as we ought,* but he has pity on our ignorance. He accepts our prayer in his goodness, but does not give us what is not expedient for us or what we should not be given so quickly. Therefore our prayer will not be fruitless.

It shall not be so long as we do as we are instructed by the psalm – that is, if we delight in the Lord. Holy David says, *Delight in the Lord, and he will give you your hearts desires.* Which of you has not often experienced the delight of a good conscience? Who has not savored chastity, humility and love? This is not the delight of good food or drink or anything of that kind – yet it is delight, and greater than all these others. This delight is divine and not of the flesh; when we delight in these things, plainly we delight in the Lord. No doubt a person of this kind fulfills completely the prophet's admonition to *delight in the Lord,* since he is not speaking of a feeling but of a practice. The feeling is of happiness, but the practice is of virtue.

WED

04.01.20

From a Sermon of St Cyril of Alexandria ³

In the account of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac, the Bible portrays the mystery of our Savior in all its aspects. Because I want you to have a clear understanding of this deep mystery of our religion, I must show you the connection between the events that typified the truth itself, and explain how each part of the story should be interpreted.

The holy Abraham took his son and hastened to the place that God had shown him. The fact that the boy was brought to be sacrificed by his father is meant to teach us by way of type or sign that the Lord Jesus Christ was not raised upon the cross by any human power, nor by the wickedness of those who laid snares for him, but by the will of the Father, whose providential plan permitted him to suffer death for the whole world. The Savior himself said as much when he answered Pilate: *you would have no power over me if it had not been given you from above.* At another time, speaking to his Father in heaven, he said: *Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. But your will, not mine, be done.*

Abraham laid the wood for the sacrifice on his son's shoulders. In the same way, the Jews laid the wood of the cross on the Savior's shoulders and they did this with the consent, one might almost say the cooperation of the Father; for it is not possible to compel the divine power. The prophet Isaiah bears reliable witness to this when he says: *He bore the punishment which brings us peace, and by his wounds we are healed. We had all strayed like sheep, everyone had gone his own way and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

When the patriarch eventually arrived at the appointed place, he put all his skill into building a good altar. This too we are meant to interpret in a spiritual way and so to understand that what appears to the human eye as a cross and a gibbet is in fact in the eyes of the Father of the whole universe a vast and towering altar raised up for the salvation of the world, and blackened by the smoke of a pure and most holy sacrifice.

By his words, *I bared my back to the scourge, and let myself be struck on the face* Isaiah foretold the blows that his enemies would shamelessly inflict on the Savior's body, and their spitting upon it.

For there is one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever. Amen. Our Lord Jesus Christ, disregarding the shame, humbled himself in obedience to the Father, even to the extent of dying for our salvation. He died to give us life through the Holy Spirit and to raise us up with himself, to open the gates of heaven to us and to lead us in, thus restoring to the Father the human race whose sin had long ago made it fly from his presence.

³ A Word in Season – vol. II – Exordium Books – 1982 – pg 147

Therefore, beloved, let this great work of our Savior be acclaimed by every voice, let his praise be on every tongue. Let the sweet sound of that ancient song be heard again: *God has gone up with shouts of jubilation, the Lord has ascended with a fanfare of trumpets.* He completed the work of our salvation and then ascended, indeed he not only ascended but he also *led captivity captive and gave gifts to mortals.*

THUR 04.02.20

From a letter by St. Augustine ⁴

When the time came for the grace of the New Testament to be revealed through the man Christ Jesus, there was no question of his attracting us to himself with the promise of earthly happiness. This explains our Lord's willingness to undergo suffering, to be scourged spat upon, mocked, nailed to the cross, and to accept death itself like one conquered and humiliated. All this he endured so that those who believed in him might learn what recompense for their dutiful service they could ask for and expect from God who had made them his children. They had to learn to serve him without any eye to earthly prosperity, for to value their faith at so low a price would be tantamount to rejecting it and trampling it underfoot.

By his great human compassion and by appearing among us as a servant, Christ, who is both God and man, meant to teach us what we should spurn in this life and what we should hope for in the next. It was accordingly at the very height of his passion, when his enemies thought they had won such a mighty victory, that he gave voice to our human weakness which was being crucified together with our former selves to set our sinful bodies free; and his cry was *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

In taking up this expression of our frailty our Head is praying the psalm: *My God, my God, look upon me ! why have you forsaken me?* Here the suppliant feels abandoned; his prayer seems to be of no avail. Jesus made these words his own; they are the words of his Body, that is, of the Church which must endure the travail of conversion from unregenerate human nature into the new creation. Here is the voice of our human weakness, which has to be weaned from the good things of the Old Testament and brought to long and hope for those of the New.

⁴ EP. 140, 13-15; pl. 33, 543-544

A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans by Origen ⁵

St. Paul has told us that the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Now in his desire to demonstrate the power of that love more fully, he gives us the convincing proof that it was not for good people but for sinners that Christ died. It is indeed true that we were sinners before we turned to God and that our Lord Jesus Christ laid down his life for us before we believed in him. This he surely could not have done without an immense love for us, either the love that he himself showed by dying for sinners or the love God the Father showed by giving his only Son for our redemption.

Few people would give their lives even for a just person, and all of us face death with reluctance, even in a just cause. How great a Savior we have, then, and how deeply we ought to ponder his love for us! It is a clear proof of his divine goodness that when the time appointed came, he did not hesitate to suffer and die for the wicked and unjust. In the gospel it is said that no one is good but God the Father; and so unless our Savior had been his Son, sharing in the Father's very substance, he could not have shown such great goodness toward us/ By this proof, therefore, we can recognize in him that good man for whom someone might have the courage to die.

Once people have understood the extent of Christ's goodness toward them and his love has been poured into their hearts, they will long not only to die for this good man Christ, but to die voluntarily. In fact we often see this happen, when Christians whose hearts are overflowing with love for Christ present themselves before their persecutors of their own free will and with the utmost courage, confessing the name of Christ in the presence of angels and men for the whole world to hear. Not only do they have the courage to suffer injustice for the name of this good man, but for his sake they are even ready to give their lives. Few would do this even for a just person, since our love of this mortal life is so great that even in a just cause hardly anyone can bear to die. Only for God's sake will people have the courage to submit to death of their own free will. For any other reason they can scarcely endure it, even in the cause of justice and in obedience to the law of nature.

God has proven his love for us; it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. Since we are justified by the shedding of his blood, how can we doubt that he will save us from the wrath to come?

The Apostle has told us that at the appointed time Christ died for the wicked. Now he is showing us how this reveals God's immeasurable love for the human race. If the love of God for ungodly sinners was so great that he could give his only Son for their salvation, he says, how much more abundantly will his

⁵ Origen, Lib.4,10-11; PG 14, 997-999

love be poured out upon those who have turned to him in repentance and whom he has redeemed by his Son's own blood.

SAT 04.04.20

A Reading from a Meditation on Life in Death, by Gertrude of Helfta.

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O Charity, O Cherishing-love, for sinners you have done such a thing with the Virgin's Son that you have given all desperate people hope in you. Through your own graciousness you compel everyone to act trustfully toward you; and, so that none who are miserable may have a cause to plead against you, you turn the cause of all to salvation. O Charity, prepare for me, a destitute and derelict woman, a place of counsel in you, a nest of refuge, where my afflicted spirit may recline. Endure with me the cause of my sojourning here. Raise my fainthearted spirit. Relieve the anxiety of my heart by saying to me: I will not forget you. Ah, in saying so, let your word be inviolate. O Charity, and deign to call me to your calends because my soul yearns passionately for market days when, at your lovingly-kind markets, you may exchange with me my evil for your good. You hold my gentle salvation, so strongly fastened to the cross, that giving up his spirit under your hand, he dies for love.

O Charity, what are you doing? Whom are you assaulting? You neither spare anything nor rest until at length you bring help to those who are miserable. You do not measure love. You so afflict the fountain of life with thirst that to die once does not suffice for him; but dying now he so exposes himself still further to love that he yearns and thirsts for dying a fresh death for each single soul - redeeming those lost with a more costly pledge. O Love, your assiduousness has touched the nerve of my Jesus' heart so energetically that it withered away broken for love. O Love, may it suffice you now, may you set a measure now that my Jesus hangs dead before your eyes. Dead, plainly dead, that I might have life more abundantly. Dead that the Father might adopt me more dearly as a child; dead that I might love more happily.

⁶ *Spiritual Exercises* (CF 49), Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications, 1989, pp. 132-133