

THE LENTEN WORD

The Fourth Week

Monday

The One You Love Is Ill

Is 65:17-21; Jn 4:43-45

Our relationships seem to have a sort of destiny about them - however hard it may be for us to read. Does God himself decree what we are to be to each other? Are “marriages made in heaven”, for instance? - because if they are, so must friendships be. If God decrees the *length* of our lives, surely he must also be involved in the *content* of our experience. I am sure he makes us for one another, and in some sense destines us to belong to each other. One thing is certain: when we learn to love someone, we are entering the divine realm: “Whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God lives in him.” That’s good enough for me.

One of the ways in which miracles are told in the Gospel seems to underscore this understanding of relationship. In many places Jesus is not only healing individuals, but healing those who love them too. The moving appeal of the father whose son is violently epileptic, the courteous approach of the centurion whose much-loved servant is ill, the harrowing experience of the death of Lazarus, the humble determination of those who lower their paralysed friend down through the roof: these are some of the moments where Jesus responds to the love of *others* for the one who is in peril. In the dignified voice of the father in today’s Gospel we hear the tones of a quiet desperation, a human love that is dying of fear. Jesus’ response is immediate and complete, and this is surely a revelation of the Father’s love for all who love.

Tuesday

Water of Life

Ezek 47:1-12; Jn 5:1-16

I love the great image of Ezekiel’s river flowing from the Temple, and growing to be a deep torrent of life and blessedness, fruitfulness, and healing. This river “too mighty to be forded” is a giant image of the glory of God, flowing indomitably through the human desert, slowly but surely sweetening even the bitterness of the ocean. This is surely our Baptism, the spring leaping to eternal life; a small trickle of water, in a forgotten babyhood; but a stream into which more and more waters flow through a lifetime. Every Lent leads us back to the Easter font, and the renewal of our Baptism. Every Easter teaches us more respect for the meaning of that cardinal moment when we were reborn in Christ. No deed in our lives will ever be more significant, not our marriage, not our election to the Presidency - or the Papacy - not even our death.

The man in the Gospel has been prevented from his “baptism” in the healing pool by a long paralysis. Jesus asks him what could be regarded as either a rude question, or a very deep one: “Do you *want* to be well again?” We could hear that question for ourselves. Do we actually want what our faith proposes to us? Do we really desire union with the Father, the hard path of Christ’s way, the constant indwelling of the Holy Spirit? Or is there a deep *refusal* of these gifts, paralysing us from committing ourselves?

The water is quietly flowing beside us, waiting for the moment when we decide to turn to it.

Wednesday

Lifegiver and Judge

Is 49:8-15; Jn 5:17-30

There are two echoes from the beginning of Lent today. On Ash Wednesday Paul said to us: “*Now* is the favourable time; *this* is the day of salvation,” quoting from the first reading today. On the second day of Lent we were offered a choice “between death and life”. Today this choice is given a very precise form: “Whoever *listens to my words and believes in the one who sent me*, has eternal life.” Jesus is arguing for our souls, and calls on us to put our faith in him. This faith has to be a comprehensive surrender of all other meanings and purposes; we are at a life-and-death issue, and there is no room for compromise solutions. For John, humanity is on the ledge of a burning building. We are being called to jump, and entrust ourselves to the salvation held out for us. *There is no other hope*. And the decision we now make will be our defining judgment, the last word on our life. “Without being brought to judgment, you have passed from death to life.” This disturbing urgency is softened for us by the most important fact about us, expressed in Isaiah’s beautiful words: “Zion was saying: *The Lord has abandoned me; the Lord has forgotten me*. Does a woman forget her baby at the breast, or fail to cherish the son of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you.”

Thursday

The Obedience of One Man

Ex 32:7-14; Jn 5:31-47

Today's reading from John continues the bitter struggle of Jesus against the rejection of his message. He is like an accused man pleading his cause in court. He summons the dead John the Baptist to be his witness. He calls the Scriptures to his aid. He even calls upon the great advocacy of Moses, bearer of the Law itself. *But the lives he is pleading for are those of his judges.* With great eloquence he tries to cut off their retreat, urging them to accept his own good faith and the truth of his appeal to them. We know how the verdict will come out, and it is all the more terrible to think of when we have read the urgency of his language.

Moses in the first reading is represented as standing before God to plead for the life of his people. This is a dramatisation, because God never repents of his choices or withdraws his favour; but the Scripture is very clear that the merits of Moses are weighty in God's eyes as he judges his unfaithful worshippers. This awareness that the goodness of one person can weigh against the iniquity of many others is at the heart of the atonement between God and humanity. It is a great mystery; but somewhere too deep for our perception the human race is rooted together, and the merits of Christ sanctify all who live, in a communion beyond fathoming. So our sins and our goodness affect all other lives. We must be open to this truth.

Friday

Sent By God

Wis 2:1, 12-22; Jn 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Jesus certainly knew the malice that was gathering about him. In this he resembles the prophets, whose lives are evoked in the first reading. The sophistication of the language is remarkable: "*Let us test him with cruelty and with torture, and thus explore this gentleness of his...*" Jesus was in this way "tested out" by his persecutors. The Passion stories all say, in their different ways, that he could have evaded the Cross; when he was dead, he had signed his name most definitively to his claims. No-one could say that he was insincere; one does not die in agony to lend credence to a pack of lies! In his determined refusal to return evil for evil Jesus was obeying a law higher than human nature alone. We should try to sense the exact way in which God sends Jesus to our world, and how it is that he is brought to the Cross. Behind the malice of the trials, and the treachery of Judas, and the politics of Rome and Jerusalem, there lies something much greater which Jesus does not want to question: that force to which he surrenders in the garden when he says: "*Your will be done*".

Saturday

A Sign that is Rejected

Jer 11:18-20; Jn 7:40-52

When Jesus was a child, Simeon said that he would be a sign of contradiction, and the Gospel today shows us the public confusion about him and his message. People cannot be unconcerned about Jesus. There is something about him that will not allow indifference. He has behaved in ways which, for some, have provoked the highest expectations of him. But some others of his hearers react with powerful opposition. What prevails over the turmoil is the sharpening sense of condemnation. We can see that strong coalition - the Pharisees and the chief priests and the Temple police - which will unite to crush his prophetic movement. Even among the Pharisees, however, there is a friendly voice - that of Nicodemus - and we are reminded that evil is a divided house. Perhaps our listening-in to this confusion should impel us to put our own house in order. We are entering Passiontide tomorrow, and the Lenten work must be done, whereby we harmonise our lives with the life of Jesus. On Holy Thursday, at the Last Supper, we shall sense a tremendous intimacy, as the Lord who is about to die opens to us his divine mind. We want to share with the Twelve the reverent silence of that sacred evening. We must get our lives together now, so that the Spirit can open our being to the salvation which the Cross brings us. May the good Shepherd lead us to the place of sacrifice, one in mind and heart with the Son of God.