

Friday (Jean Vanier)

We can understand Peter's reaction when Jesus wants to wash his feet. He cannot accept the fact that Jesus would kneel down before him and serve him. How can we understand a God who is so great that he can become little and vulnerable in order to touch people's hearts and to live in a relationship of love with each one? God's all-powerfulness is hidden in order to show that it is a power of love and in order to awaken the power of love in each one of us. If Jesus washes Peter's feet, then Peter, too, will be called to become little and vulnerable, like a servant. But in order to do that, he must give up certain ideas and even holy customs and traditions that give him security. He will have to let God guide him in all things and to new things. By becoming flesh, the Word makes all things new; he brings a new vision of humanity, a new way of being.

Scripture (Romans 5:15-17,21)

There is no comparison between the free gift and the offence. If death came to many through the offence of one man, how much greater the effect of the grace of God has had, coming to so many and so plentifully through the one man, Jesus Christ. One single offence brought condemnation, but now, after many offences, have come the free gift and so acquittal! So that, as sin's reign brought death, so grace was to rule through saving justice that leads to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

5th Week of Lent

Dreams without limits for His limited beings

There were numerous occasions when the Israelites could hardly complain if God decided he had had enough, put an end to the Covenant, and left them to their own devices. Isaiah, (42:18-19) recalls their past behaviour when they were 'blind and deaf' to prophecies; they have frequently broken the Covenant and have put themselves outside the Law. Their track record makes it obvious that they will continue to take God for granted and fail to live up to their part of the Covenant, (Is 43:22-26).

The sensible thing for God to do would be to find some other people who would respond faithfully and honour their commitment. But God doesn't act sensibly! His response, (Is 43:16-21) is extravagantly generous. When he reminds Israel of how his immense power so completely defeated the Pharaoh's mighty army to bring them out of slavery, it is not so that they are reminded of how much they owe him; instead, in saying 'No need to think of the past', the message is, "If you think that was good, wait until you see what I have in mind for you next!" ('See, I am doing a new deed.'). An image I have of God as he says this is one of him pacing up and down, unable to contain his excitement as he outlines his plans. The first Exodus was impressive, but will count as nothing compared to the new Exodus: the wilderness will be transformed by the water he will send, i.e. where there was desolation and death, he will provide life for his people; the wild beasts which don't know, or don't like, God will honour him, i.e. that which is outside God's Law, will come under God's Law, restoring the harmony broken by human disobedience. All this excited talk is to a people who clearly don't deserve it – but that seems to only increase God's enthusiasm!

This new Exodus leading to new life will be led by Jesus. All the ingredients of the Israelites' sins and of God's extravagant refusal to be limited by us are focused in the encounter between Jesus and the Woman caught committing adultery, (John 8:1-11). The adulterous woman - living beyond the Law - faces death. According to the Law, the scribes and Pharisees are quite right in the verdict they have reached: she is guilty and deserves to die. This is a test for Jesus, and as traps go, it is particularly clever: if he says 'Let her go', he is going against the Law of Moses; if he says 'stone her' he is acting according to human values of justice, which clearly fall short of the extravagant love he preaches. (The fact that the woman was 'caught in the very act' makes it clear that there was also a man there, but limited human thinking blamed the woman).

As a way out of a trap, Jesus' answer was brilliant – he invites them to recall their past, i.e. to apply the Law, (God's Law) to themselves: it soon becomes clear that all have sinned, so all stand in need of God's mercy, as did their ancestors.

Jesus' conversation after they have all gone is even more revealing of God's love. Jesus doesn't attempt to deny her guilt; nor does he sweep it under the carpet by saying 'let's say no more about it'; he doesn't even attempt to shift any blame from her by looking for mitigating circumstances. Instead, offers her a new life, ('go and don't sin anymore,'); once again, life can grow in the wilderness as he leads her out of her slavery to sin.

If we allow God to be excited about us, this season of repenting becomes a season of leaving old ways behind and contemplating a new future, not only beyond what we deserve but beyond what we can even dream of. Happy Lent! Martin Bennett

Monday (Fr. Austin Smith, CP)

When one sees the guest lists (the meal in the Pharisee's house, the invitation to eat with Zacchaeus, the meals at Bethany), one can see why the meals of Jesus became offensive to his contemporaries. He seems to have insisted on the presence of sinners. It is all very well to say that we live in a different world, but how boringly reasonable it has all become - a reasonable Kingdom explained by respectable interpretations to make present a reasonable and respectable God. The Word so seldom breaks out in that exciting foolishness with which Jesus shocked, and even angered his contemporaries. When I examine my own life, it is not so much my own infidelities to the ideals of the Kingdom of Jesus that I find disturbing, it is my imposition of mediocrity upon the Kingdom.

Scripture (Jonah 1:1-2; 3:8-4:3)

The Lord said to Jonah, 'Go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim to them that their wickedness has forced itself upon me.' Jonah said to the citizens, 'All must put on sackcloth and call on God with all their might; and let everyone renounce their evil ways and violent behaviour.' God saw their efforts to renounce their evil ways, and God relented about the disaster he had threatened to bring on them, and did not bring it. This made Jonah very indignant; he fell into a rage. He prayed to God and said, 'Isn't this what I said would happen? This why I first tried to flee, since I knew you were a tender, compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in faithful love.'

Tuesday (St. John of the Cross)

Nothing shall penetrate into the interior of the soul, renew it, fill it with love profoundly, as the knowledge of God does. For there are some acts of knowledge and touches of God, wrought by him in the substance of the soul, which so enrich it that one of them is sufficient, not only to purge away at once certain imperfections, which had hitherto resisted the efforts of a whole life, but also to fill the soul with virtues and divine gifts.

Scripture (John 8:3-5, 7-9,11)

The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery. They said to Jesus, 'Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and in the Law, Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind. What have you got to say?' Jesus said, 'Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone.' They went away one by one until Jesus was left alone with her. He said to her, 'Has no one condemned you?' No one, sir,' she replied. 'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus. 'Go away, and from this moment sin no more.'

Wednesday (Thomas Merton)

So much depends on our ideas of God! Yet no idea of him, however pure and perfect, is adequate to express him as he really is. We must learn to realise that the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good. We must learn to take the risks implied by faith, to make the choices that deliver us from our routine self and open to us the door of a new being, a new reality. The mind that is the prisoner of conventional ideas, and the will that is captive of its own desire cannot accept the seeds of an unfamiliar truth and a supernatural desire. I must learn therefore to let go of the familiar usual and consent to what is new and unknown to me. I must learn to "leave myself" in order to find myself by yielding to the love of God.

Scripture (Isaiah 55:7-9)

Let the wicked abandon their ways and the evil ones their thoughts. Let them turn back to the Lord who will take pity on them, to our God, for he is rich in forgiveness; for my thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not my ways, declares the Lord. For the heavens are as high above the earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts.

Thursday (Elizabeth Fry)

I desire that you may be upheld, that you may be strengthened, that you may find the grace of your Lord to be sufficient for you: and if we poor, frail, feeble, unworthy mortals can feel as we sometimes do for one another, oh, what consolation it is to remember that he who is infinite in mercy, infinite in love and infinite in power also feels for us; we have a High Priest who is touched with the sense of our infirmities. Through his unmerited mercy in Christ Jesus, we may humbly trust that when this passing scene is closed to our view, an entrance will be granted unto us, even abundantly administered unto us, into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Scripture (Psalm 103:1-2, 8-12)

Bless the Lord, my soul, from the depths of my being, his holy name; bless the Lord, my soul, never forget all his acts of kindness. The Lord is tenderness and pity, slow to anger and rich in faithful love; his anger does not last for ever, nor his resentment last for all time; he does not treat us as our sins deserve, nor repay us as befits our offences. As the height of heaven above earth, so strong is his faithful love for those who fear him.