

Friday (Caryll Houselander)

In life there are many secret resurrections. In our sin, we are the tombs in which Christ lies dead, but at the first movement of sorrow for sin he rises from the dead in us, the life of the world is renewed by our sorrow. It is not just the poor sinner licking his wounds and limping on, crippled by the past; it is Christ risen, alive, whole. There is no place he will not come: prisons, hospitals, schools, camps, cathedrals and little tin churches; he comes to them all.

Scripture (Galatians 2:16, 19-20)

We have learned that someone is reckoned as upright not by practising the Law but by faith in Jesus Christ; and we, too, came to believe in Christ Jesus so as to be reckoned as upright by faith in Christ, not by practising the Law: since no human can be found upright by keeping the Law. I have been crucified with Christ and yet I am alive; yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me. The life that I am now living, subject to the limitations of human nature, I am living in faith, faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

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26th Week of Ordinary Time.

A question for good and bad people: 'Can you change?'

When Ezekiel teaches that each person must take responsibility for their own actions, it is hard to see why the Israelites would say that God is being unfair, (Ezekiel 18). They are more familiar with the idea that the sins of the parents are visited on the children – and so is the goodness. When I spent some time thinking about their complaint, I find that I agree with them. Their problem is that the past does not have to count for anything if a person changes. Whilst I am happy enough with the thought that my past sins can be forgiven and count for nothing, I am not quite so keen when I realise that it also means that my good works and 'fulfilling my religious duties' may also count for nothing: if I've led a good life but then 'stray', my 'previous good character' should surely count for something?

This line of thinking is very confused: if I want to be able to rely on God's forgiveness when I turn back to him, i.e. repent, (have a change of heart), I am saying to him 'Don't look at what I've done, look where my heart is now'; if I turn away from him, I cannot then say to him, 'never mind where my heart is now, look at what I've done.'

This line of thinking portrays God as some sort of accountant who keeps a tally of 'right' and 'wrong'. At the end of the chapter, Ezekiel makes clear that it is the heart which God is concerned with, urging his people to turn away from their crimes and 'make a new heart and a new spirit': he is interested in a relationship.

When Jesus was talking about this to the deeply religious chief priests and the upstanding, virtuous elders, he made what to them was the shocking and deeply offensive statement that tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the Kingdom of God, ahead of them, (Matthew 21:28-32). It's important to note the present tense: this is about the Kingdom of God, the new Covenant, that Jesus is bringing, not about getting to heaven. In the Parable of the two sons, it would be clear to the priests and elders (and to the onlookers) that they were the son who said 'Yes, I'll work in the vineyard' but don't: Jesus is very clearly and provocatively saying that this son's relationship with the father has no substance – he says the right things, but does nothing.

If I was a priest or elder, I would be deeply offended, but would be able to dismiss Jesus as being ridiculous and playing to the crowd. How can these long time sinners be better than me who is very moral and fulfils all my religious duties?

The key point is that they aren't 'dyed in the wool' sinners – and neither are they dyed in the wool 'goodies'. When John the Baptist came inviting people to repent, to be ready for the Kingdom, the tax collectors and prostitutes were open to the new relationship and changed – they entered the Kingdom as changed people, (think of Zacchaeus joyfully giving half his money away and repaying more than he had taken; think of the woman of ill repute washing Jesus' feet with her tears). The priests and elders, though, held on to their belief that God's relationship with humans depended on a religion of sacrifice and rule keeping; it wasn't with the heart. These good people also needed to repent, to change their heart.

It was probably easier for the sinners to recognise their need for change than it was for the religious people, but when Jesus pointed out that they 'didn't even recognise the change in the tax collectors and prostitutes', he is pointing to their blindness: they were stuck with the accountant God, not the living, loving God.

Martin Bennett

Monday (Carlo Carretto)

That evening I had seen an old man trembling with cold. I thought of the night and I knew that I, too, would shiver. The little charity that was in me made me think that I had best give him my spare blanket. When I left the village, the blankets were still on the jeep. To have resisted love, not to have been capable of accepting the demand of this love is so serious that it creates an obstacle between me and God. What is the good of defending the truth, of fighting over dogma, of saying the Divine Office well, of sharing the Eucharist, if one is not impelled by love?

Scripture (Matthew 21:28-32)

Jesus said to the chief priests and elders, "A man said to his first son, 'Go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not go,' but later thought better of it and went. The man then went and said the same thing to his second son who answered, 'Certainly, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did the father's will?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said, "I tell you solemnly, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the Kingdom of God before you."

Tuesday (Cardinal Newman)

While we think of Christ, let us not forget to be up and doing. Let us beware of indulging a mere barren faith and love, which dreams instead of working and is fastidious when it should be hardy. This is only spiritual childhood in another form; for the Holy Spirit is the author of active good works, and leads to the observance of all lowly deeds of ordinary obedience as the most pleasing sacrifice to God.

Scripture (Micah 6:6-8)

With what shall I enter Yahweh's presence and bow down before God All-high? Shall I enter with burnt offerings, with calves one year old? Shall I offer my eldest son for my wrong doing? "You have already been told what is right and what Yahweh wants of you. Only this; to do what is right, to love loyalty and to walk humbly with your God."

Wednesday (Charles Peguy)

God speaks:

A salvation that was not free, that did not come from a free person, could not in any way be attractive to me. How do you expect me to be interested in that kind of thing? Does one care to be loved by slaves? In my creation which is endued with life, I wanted something better, I wanted something more. When you once have known what it is to be loved freely, submission no longer has any taste. All the prostrations, all the submission in the world are not equal in value to the beautiful straight soaring up of one single invocation from a love that is free.

Scripture (1John 3:18-24)

Children, our love must be not just words or mere talk, but something active and genuine. This will be the proof that we belong to the truth and it will convince us in his presence even if our own feelings condemn us, that God is greater than our feelings and knows all things. My dear friends, if our own feelings do not condemn us, we can be fearless before God because we keep his commandments and do what is acceptable to him. Whoever keeps his commandments remains in God and God in him.

Thursday (Brother Lawrence)

We must, during all our labour and in all else we do, even in our reading and writing, holy though both may be - I say more, even during our formal devotions, and spoken prayers - pause for some short moment, to worship God in the depth of our heart. Since you know that God is present before you whatever you are doing, that he is at the depth and centre of your soul, why not then pause from time to time at least from that which occupies you outwardly, even from your spoken prayers, to worship him inwardly. All these acts of worship must arise from faith, and the belief that in truth God is in our hearts; that we must worship him, love him and serve him in spirit and in truth.

Scripture (Luke 18:10-14)

A Pharisee and a tax-collector went up to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee stood there and said this prayer to himself, "I thank you Lord that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like everyone else, especially like this tax-collector here. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get." The tax-collector stood some distance away, not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast and said, God, be merciful to me, a sinner." This man, I tell you went home again, justified; the other did not.