

GOSPEL REFLECTIONS

Sunday, August 9 - Mt 14:22-33

St. Bernard of Clairvaux preached about three kisses in the context of our spiritual growth in Christ. The first is the *kiss of his feet*, when we become a repentant sinner like Mary Magdalene who kissed Jesus' feet and lavished them with expensive nard.

The second kiss is the kiss of Jesus' hand, which draws on today's Gospel. Jesus continually pulls us up from drowning in the sea of sin, as long as we hold his hand tight as Peter once did when he began to sink like a rock in the Sea of Galilee. Peter was safe when his focus was fixed on Jesus, but he began to sink when he focused on Peter and the hostile environment around him. Jesus, who gives us the grace to repent, must also give us the power to persevere. When we are truly aware of our utter helplessness, we rely less on us and more on Christ. That's the winning formula. Like John the Baptist, we must say: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). We are always safe as long as we cling to and kiss Jesus' hand in humble submission.

Finally, St. Bernard said, "It is my belief that to a person so disposed, God will not refuse that most intimate kiss of all, a mystery of supreme generosity and ineffable sweetness." This brings us to the third kiss, the kiss of his mouth. This kiss represents the full realization of our intimacy with the divine Bridegroom to which we are all called, but few realize. It's called holiness.

The first kiss represents the infant state of the spiritual life – the beginning of a genuine conversion. The second kiss represents progress in our love for God, as we move into spiritual adolescence and adulthood. At this stage virtuous living flows from Christ's living and acting in us. The third kiss, the kiss of the mouth, is the contemplative gift when our soul continually cries out in longing, "I'm yours," only to hear Christ respond, "Enter into the ocean of my love, for I am all yours!" May we be disposed to hear those words of love and mercy!

Saturday, August 15 – Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Lk 11:27-28

In the earliest existing biography of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *The Life of the Virgin*, written by Maximus the Confessor, who had both hands and his tongue cut off because of his faithfulness to Christ, a chapter was devoted to the dormition or the "falling asleep" of Mary. According to this narrative, Mary received the delightful news of her impending death from the angel Gabriel. She then informed John the Apostle and made this statement to the disciples: "Rejoice, O blessed children, and do not make my Dormition a cause for grief, but be full of the greatest joy, for I am going into eternal joy, and may the grace and mercy of the Lord be with you always." Peter, John and Paul were among those who gathered for her burial. The Apostle remained in prayer for three days at the burial site until Thomas arrived, for he came from India. When the tomb was opened so Thomas could see the body of the immaculate mother, it was discovered that her body had been assumed into heaven.

Pope Pius XII defined the dogma of Mary's Assumption on November 1, 1950 while leaving open the question whether or not Mary died. On this feast the Church chose a reading from Luke's Gospel that focuses on the source of Mary's blessedness, which was not primarily rooted

in biology but in her total submission to the will of God. No mere human loved God like Mary loved God, which is expressed here as hearing and observing the word of God.

Mary's Assumption is a reminder of Jesus' victory over death and serves to assure us that we, too, will share in his Resurrection when we will be gloriously assumed into heaven, body and soul. Death should have no fear over us, because it is the great encounter when we come face to face in paradise with the God who loves us. It doesn't get any better than that!

Sunday, August 16 – Mt 15:21-28

The exclamation, "O", recurs only five times in all four Gospels, always from Jesus' lips. In three of these five instances, Jesus' strong interjection punctuates very condemning reproaches beginning with the formula, "O faithless and perverse generation" (Mt 17:17; Mk 9:19; Lk 9:41). In the fourth instance Jesus mildly rebukes the disciples of Emmaus: "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe" (Lk 24:25). That means that the only place in the Gospels where "O" expresses Jesus' admiration is in today's narrative. This is remarkable because Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman seems to begin with rejection and silence. Furthermore, Jews despised their ancient enemies the Canaanite who descended from Canaan, the illegitimate son of Noah's wife and his son Ham.

It strikes me that this disposed of pagan woman anticipates and represents the flood of Gentiles that will enter into an intimate relationship with Jesus in his Church after Pentecost. Jesus addresses her with love: "O woman, great is your faith!" With these momentous words Jesus, the new Adam, is expressing his loving recognition of the humble person before him as the woman of his Heart, just as the old Adam uttered his joy when Eve was first presented to him: "This at last is bones of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman" (Gen 2:23). Jesus, the heavenly husband has called another lost person into the intimacy of his covenantal embrace.

Her surrender to the gifts of faith and trust was her entrance into intimacy with Jesus. Thus, the Catechism teaches: "Believing in Jesus Christ and in the One who sent him for our salvation is necessary for obtaining that salvation. Jesus declared: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (Jn 3:36). Faith is much more than an intellectual exercise. It is the surrender that says, "I'm yours!" Well, how vibrant is our faith?

Sunday, August 23 – Mt 16:13-20

It is significant that Jesus identified the human head of his Church at Caesarea Philippi, because the pagan shrines there represented the Roman Empire's preoccupation with power, sex and wealth. In response to Jesus' first question, the apostles answered that the people placed Jesus in the Hebrew hall of fame. When Jesus asked, "But who do you say that I am?" (16:15) the heavenly Father prompted Peter to reply, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

In response Jesus named Peter the future head of his Church when he said, "You are Peter [*Petros*], and on this rock [*Petra*] I will build my church and the powers of death shall not

prevail against it.” Peter will become the human foundation of the Church, but Jesus is the builder that supports the foundation. Then citing Isaiah 22, Jesus stressed that Peter would hold an office in his kingdom as the chief steward, and in that office he would give him the absolute authority to make definitive decisions in matters of faith and practice: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” This authority to bind and loose is the biblical basis of papal infallibility, because God cannot bind and loose in heaven anything that is false. The change of Simon’s name to Peter [*Petros*], is also significant because it indicates that Jesus was installing Peter into a new office and task. Matthew gave the feminine Greek word for rock *petra* a masculine ending, “*petros*,” as is required in Greek grammar for a man’s name.

Peter exercised his infallible authority at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 that addressed the issue of circumcision and the Mosaic law. Peter declared: “We believe that we shall be saved though the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Peter had spoken; the matter was settled. “And all the assembly kept silence.” The debate was over!

Sunday, September 6 – Mt 18:15-20

This passage addresses how disciples, especially those in leadership positions, should reprove those who sin. The Church is holy because Christ her Head is holy. However, sin is often the choice of Christ’s members who are in constant need of conversion. Don’t we see this reality reflected in our own life? The attitude conveyed is *inadequately* expressed by words like “reprove,” “correct”, and “admonish”. These words all suggest a critical judgment. Rather, the idea here is to reason with the sinner in a loving way that draws him back into God’s sheepfold. Jesus commands a recipe of fraternal correction that has equal portions of kindness, love, mercy, humility and truth. The idea is to ignite the sinner’s heart with remorse, not inflame his anger with resentment.

St. Paul gives two instructions that echo this teaching. He charges Timothy, “preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching... As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” This advice certainly applies to parents. To the Galatians Paul wrote, “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal 6:1). Then he adds these words of warning, because spiritual pride always lurks at the door, “Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted... For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal 6:1,3).

Jesus gives four steps in restoring a brother. First, approach him on a one-to-one basis. This step attempts to save his dignity, but win his heart. If that fails make a second attempt with two or three witnesses. Thirdly, if he does not repent, “tell it to the church.” Finally, if he does not listen “even to the Church” he is to be treated “as a Gentile and a tax collector.” In other words, he is to be condemned! May we who need mercy extend mercy!

Sunday, September 13 – Mt 18:21-33

The parable of the Unforgiving Servant contains some of the most beautiful ideas in the Christian vocabulary: *forgiveness, entreaty, forbearance, compassion, mercy, heart, and brother.*

It begins with Peter asking, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus’ amazing answer infuses into our fallen nature the Father’s infinite capacity to forgive: “I say to you seventy-seven times” – meaning always!

The unforgiving servant owed his master “ten thousand talents.” In relationship to the economy of the time this is an amount so vast as to be unimaginable. The mere thought of it must have shaken the apostles. I did the math once. Based on a fair wage to support a family, it’s a debt that would take 2,739 years to repay (with about 749 years to go). Obviously, no one is capable of repaying such a debt. This immense sum is an apt depiction of the vast debt of sin God readily forgives. The unforgiving servant addresses the king as “the Long-suffering One,” which aptly depicts both the enormity of human indebtedness and the Father’s heart that is so often neglected. Yet, this loving, merciful king is powerfully moved, literally: “The Lord of that servant was viscerally moved to compassion.” His response springs from his infinite mercy. He does not negotiate. He does not make the servant squirm and feel helpless. He does not reduce the debt partially. He just forgave the entire debt. No wonder the Psalmist exclaimed: “Thou, O Lord, art good and *forgiving*, *abounding* in steadfast love to all who call on thee” (Ps 85:5).

In contrast, the money owed the unforgiving servant was negligible, an amount equivalent to the wages earned in four months! Yet, he seized the man who owed him this relatively small debt and choked him. What could be more obnoxious than his refusal to give to another what he has just freely received? The lesson of the parable is that the Christian vocation is to ignite conflagrations of love and forgiveness. It would change our world, if we would live it.