

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time – September 13, 2020

In recent weeks, all our focus has been on the credibility of Christ's Person. "Peter, who do you say that I am? Peter, careful who you suppose me to be!" Now our focus shifts to Christ's teaching, itself. At its heart stands the Sermon on the Mount – which the Church has been reading from all week – with its 8-step program for unbridled happiness, called the Beatitudes. This is the very charter of Christianity. On that Mount, Christ is revealed as the New Moses; and He gives a new law. Christianity knows this as the Golden Rule.

It replaces an old law, known as the *Lex talio* – often expressed thus: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. That old law said treat others as they treat you. It is a law of reciprocity. The problem with that is evidenced by our history of strife and conflict. An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind. Anger, wrath and violence perpetuate through the centuries, across the generations, like dominoes falling against each other. You strike me; I strike back. Hurt people hurt people.

Christ's Golden Rule calls for a different kind of reciprocity. Let me first put it in the negative. Don't treat others as they've treated you. Love those even who don't love you back; help those who won't help in return; to give to those who can never repay. Even if your loving of them – your giving – never changes them, you won't be wasting your time. You won't lose your investment because the rewards accrue in heaven. However, even the this-worldly results are amply verified in the history of our Church. For our first three hundred years, first the Jews, then the pagans, threw all their wrath and anger against the Church. Discovered to be a Christian, you'd lose your job and position in society, all your assets would be expropriated by the State, your wife sold into prostitution and your children into slavery. You, yourself, would be sentenced to punishing hard labor (often a death sentence) or made a spectacle in the blood-sports of the stadiums, where Christians were martyred in terrifying numbers (some 75,000 in the city of Rome, itself). Who would become a Christian? It was the greatest test of the Golden Rule in history but our fore-fathers were equal to the task. "*See how they love!*" became the response of the pagans, fully one-quarter of whom were themselves converted to our faith by this witness.

Christ's Golden Rule calls for a different kind of reciprocity. Let me now put it in the positive. Treat others as you would wish them to treat you. This applies to God, too. How can we expect God to be generous with us when we are stingy with Him? How can we expect Him to be merciful with us when we show others no mercy? It does not work like that! The Christian must be different. He or she must take the initiative and start the better standard. Why must this be the job of the Christian? Because God has *already* been like this to us. He treated us as He wants us to treat Him. He started first. For us to wait for others to deserve our reciprocity is therefore hypocritical on our part. For God loved us while we were still in our sins. God loved us when we were unlovely. God loved us lovely. God does not love us because we are great. We are great because God loves us. It's the other way round.

At the heart of the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer stands, as its centerpiece, our need for the Eucharist. "Give us this day our daily bread!" But immediately following that gift,

stands another. Give and forgive – these two verbs – one of which is conjoined to a preposition ‘for’. We call it forgiveness because it is given us for a purpose: for sharing. We received forgiveness ‘for’ that we may pass it on. This is an altogether different domino-effect which will literally transform the world. It already did for pagan Rome in one generation. In our own generation it falls to us to prove our mettle. If our generation is little forgiving it is because it has been little forgiven; or rather, has little appreciation for how much it has been forgiven by the Lord. Witness the almost disappearance of confession in most parts of the Catholic world outside of Lincoln. Those who are much aware of God’s mercy in their own life cannot help but being merciful for others – at the very least, to avoid hypocrisy.

## Triumph of the Cross – September 14, 2020

*We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you; because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world!*

With these words we greet each of the 14 Stations of the Cross. Christ has saved the world, redeemed us from our misery: and for this we ever adore and bless Him.

But of all the means God might have chosen to save us, it is through the wood of the Cross that our salvation comes: not by the sword or by an army, nor through magic or appeals to the spectacular. **The Cross** is the symbol of Christianity: the Cross is *the way* of salvation. It was by a tree that the curse came, in Eden (when our 1<sup>st</sup> parents ate the fruit of disobedience from the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil); & so also by a tree also wld salvation come, at Calvary (the promised Tree of Life, the fruit of which, that we must eat, is the Body of Christ).

In our liturgy today we hear how Moses fashioned a cure in the desert for those who had been struck by the serpent, the very symbol of evil. It was a serpent in a tree that tempted Eve to doubt God was trustworthy. So Moses fashioned a cure for the venom of the serpent with the serpent itself, raised aloft on a tree-branch: those who wld gaze upon it cld receive the anti-venom of grace & be cured.

Even today, this symbol (the serpent aloft) is the symbol of pharmacy, of physical healing. This symbol which Moses raised aloft *prefigured* that great emblem of Christianity, the Crucifix: and those who gaze upon the pierced one, aloft on His Cross, Christ the new Moses, will be healed of the toxin of iniquity & sin. Pharmacists can heal the body but man's greatest malady infects his soul.

To the Emperor Constantine spoke the vision: "*by this sign, conquer,*" in consequence of which the whole empire converted. Because of this, wherever the Roman faith has gone, it has planted the Cross, the tree of life: on top of every roof, delineating the boundaries of every farm & field, wayside crosses, mission crosses & classroom crosses. Let every one of our homes prominently display this Cross, our only hope. And let us look upon it and be healed of the curses of our enemy.

Constantine's mother, Helena, went to extraordinary lengths to locate the true Cross of Jesus Christ. She travelled to the Holy Land & excavated the Hill of Calvary to considerable depth, conserving the sacred soil which had caught the blood of the Saviour and the tears of the Mother of Sorrows. She housed the true Cross in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, but this was ransacked by the Persians when they captured Jerusalem and massacred its Christian inhabitants.

For 14 years it was held captive in Babylon before Constantine's successor, Heraclius, was able to ransom its release. In consequence, these sacred relics were brought to Rome to be housed in a massive basilica constructed near the Lateran Palace that Constantine had donated to the Pope. The new church was to be called "*Holy Cross in Jerusalem*": "*Holy Cross*" because it houses the relic of the true Cross; and "*in Jerusalem*" (though in Rome),

because under the pavements of the basilica was packed the sacred soil St. Helena had transported back from the Holy Land.

The discovery of these relics, their recovery from Persia & their transport to Rome occasions the appellation of today's feast: the Triumph of the Cross. For the Cross triumphed over heathenism and barbarism throughout the empires of history, just as it triumphs over the grimy darkness of sin and rebellion in our own lives. Let us gaze on its precious fruit, to be healed of our infirmities of heart and mind!

The Cross is triumphant: Christ, the victor, once for all, over sin. Victory is ours over the darkness, in Christ Jesus, if we but cling to Him with all our hearts & follow His Way of the Cross through death into life, even in the living out of our own lives.

None of our lives will lack the Cross, dear friends. *By this sign you, too, will conquer!* The triumph of the Cross is the triumph of its saving power in our own everyday lives of hardship and decision.