

A Commentary on Gospel of St Luke by St Leo the Great ¹

In the presence of chosen witnesses, the Lord unveils his glory, investing with such splendor that bodily appearance which he shares with the rest of the human race that his face shines like the sun and his clothes become white as snow.

The primary purpose of this transfiguration was to remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of Christ's disciples; the greatness of his hidden glory was revealed to them to prevent their faith being shaken by the self-abasement of the suffering he was voluntarily to undergo. In his foresight, however, he was also laying the foundations of the Church's hope, teaching the whole body of Christ the nature of the change it is to receive, and schooling his members to look forward to a share of the glory which had already shone forth in their head. The Lord had told them of this when he spoke of his coming in majesty: *Then shall the just shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.* The blessed apostle Paul bears witness to the same thing: *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.* And again: *You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you will appear with him in glory.*

Still further instruction was to come from the transfiguration to fortify the apostles and perfect their understanding. Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets, appeared in conversation with the Lord. Thus through the presence of these five men the saying was fulfilled: *On the evidence of two or three witnesses every word shall stand.* What could be more firmly established than that the Word in whose proclamation the trumpets of Old and New Testaments sound in unison, and the writings of ancient witnesses are in perfect accord with the teaching of the gospel? The pages of both covenants agree with one another. He who had been promised beforehand by mysteriously veiled signs was now revealed clearly and distinctly in the radiance of his glory, as St John says: *The Law was given by Moses, but grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.* In Christ what was promised by prophetic figures and what was signified by legal precepts are alike fulfilled, for by his presence he teaches the truth of the prophecies, and by grace he makes it possible for us to obey the commandments.

May we all therefore be confirmed in our faith through the preaching of the holy Gospel, and let no one be ashamed of the cross by which Christ has redeemed the world. None of us must be afraid to suffer for the sake of justice or doubt the fulfillment of the prophecies, for it is through toil that we come to rest and through death that we pass to life. If we continue in the acknowledgment and love of Christ who took upon himself all the weakness of our lowly nature, what he conquered we too shall conquer, and the promise he gave us we shall receive. So then, whether it is to encourage us to obey his commands or to endure hardships, let the Father's voice always be ringing in our ears and telling us: *This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; Listen to him.*

¹ Journey with the Fathers = Year A – New City Press – 1984 – pg 38

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Lent as a Time for Conversion. From a Sermon by St. Bernard.²

"Be converted to Me with all your heart," says the Lord Almighty, "in fasting, and in weeping and in mourning. And rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn to the Lord your God." What does it mean, dearest brethren, that the Lord here commands us to turn to Him? For He is everywhere, He fills all things and at the same time contains all things. Where shall I turn that I may turn to You, O Lord my God? "If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I descend into hell, You are present". What do you require me to do? This, my brethren, is a secret of divine wisdom, a secret which is communicated only to the friends of God. It is a "mystery of the kingdom of God" which is revealed privately to the disciples. "Unless you be converted," said the Lord, "and become like little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven". Now I see clearly where He wants us to turn. We must turn to that little Child in order to learn from Him, because He is "meek and humble of heart".

But let us now see how we should turn to this little One, to this Master of meekness and humility. "Be converted to Me," He says, "with all your heart." My brethren, had His words been simply "Be converted to Me", without any addition, we might have replied: **That** we have already done; give us now another precept. As a matter of fact, however, He admonishes us here of a purely spiritual conversion which cannot be accomplished in a single day; and would to God we were able to complete it in the whole course of the life we live in the body! An external turning to God, unaccompanied by a conversion of the heart and spirit is worth nothing. It is only a formal, not a true conversion, "having the appearance indeed of godliness but lacking the power of it". Unhappy the monk who, devoting all his attention to outward observances, remains ignorant of his interior, for "thinking himself to be something, whereas he is nothing, he deceives himself". For as he looks only to the outward appearance, when that is found to be in order he judges everything secure, unaware of that secret worm that is consuming his being. The tonsure still remains, the religious habit is not yet put off, the regular fasts are observed as before, the divine praises are chanted at the appointed hours. Nevertheless the Lord says of such a one, "His heart is far from Me".

My brothers, consider carefully what is the object of your love and of your fear, what is the source of your joy and of your sadness, and you will find a worldly spirit under the habit of religion, and under the tattered covering of an exterior conversion a perverted heart. For the whole heart is made up of four affections, and it seems to me that it is with reference to them we must understand the precept to turn to the Lord with all our heart. Therefore, let your love be converted to God, so that henceforth you shall love nothing besides Him, or at least nothing except for His sake. Let your fear, too, be converted to the Lord, because every fear is perverse other than fear of Him or on account of Him. To Him let your joy also as well as your sadness be converted. This will happen when you no longer grieve or rejoice over anything except according to God.

The Lord then continued, speaking by the mouth of His prophet, "Rend your heart and not your garments." Is there any individual among you, my brethren, whose will tends to be attached too

²St. Bernard's Sermons for the Seasons & Principal Festivals. Bernard of Clairvaux. vol. II. The Carroll Press. Westminster, MD. 1950. p. 76.

tenaciously to some particular object? Let him rend his heart, let him cleave it with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Let him rend it, I repeat, and make haste to divide it into many fragments. For it is impossible for him to be converted to the Lord with all his heart until his heart has been rent.

Dearest brethren, let us therefore rend our hearts, in order that thus we may be able to keep our garments whole. Our garments are our virtues. One can understand this rending of heart in two senses: compunction rends the evil heart, while compassion rends the strong heart. Both rendings are undoubtedly profitable; for the poison of sin must not remain concealed in the heart and the depths of compassion should not be closed to a needy neighbor, so that we ourselves may obtain mercy from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon of St Caesarius of Arles for Lent³

Behold, dearest brethren, through the mercy of God the season of Lent is upon us. Therefore I beseech you, beloved, with God's help let us celebrate these days, salutary for bodies and healing for the soul, in so holy and spiritual a manner that the observance of a holy Lent may lead to progress for us and not judgment. For if we lead a careless life, involving ourselves in too many occupations, refusing to observe chastity, not applying ourselves to fasting and vigils and prayers, neither reading Sacred Scripture ourselves nor willingly listen to others reading it, the very remedies are changed into wounds for us. As a result of this we shall have judgment, where we could have had a remedy.

For this reason I exhort you, dearest brethren, to rise rather early for the vigils, and above all to come to terce, sext and none. Let no one withdraw himself from the holy Office unless either infirmity or public service or at least great necessity keeps him occupied. Let it not be enough for you that you hear the divine lessons in Church, but read them yourselves at home or look for someone else to read them and willingly listen to them when they do. Remember the thought of our Lord, brethren, when He says: *Alf he were to gain the whole world and destroy himself in the process, what can a man offer in exchange for his very self?*[@] Above all keep in mind and always fear greatly what is written: *The burdens of the world have made them miserable.*[@] Therefore busy yourself in your home in such a way that you do not neglect your soul. Finally, if you cannot do more, at least labor as much on behalf of your soul as you desire to labor for the sake of your body.

For this reason, dearest brethren, *Have no love for the world, nor the things the world affords,*[@] because *the world with its seductions is passing away*[@]. What, then, remains in a man except what each one has stored up in the treasury of his conscience for the salvation of his soul by reading or prayer or the performance of good works? For miserable pleasure, still more wretched lust and dissipation, through a passing sweetness prepare eternal bitterness; but abstinence, vigils, prayer and fasting lead to the delights of paradise through the briefest hardships. The Truth does not lie when He says in the Gospel: *A straight and narrow is the road that leads to eternal life, and how few there are that find it!*[@] Not for long is there rejoicing on the broad way, and not for long is there labor on the straight and narrow road. After brief sadness those who travel the latter receive eternal life, while those who travel the former, after short joy, suffer endless punishment.

For this reason, dearest brethren, by fasting, reading and prayer in these forty days we ought to store up for our souls provisions, as it were, for the whole year. Although through the mercy of God you frequently and devoutly hear the divine lessons throughout the entire year, still during these days we ought to rest from the winds and the sea of this world by taking refuge, as it were, in the haven of Lent, and in the quiet of silence to

³St Caesarius of Arles, Sermons, vol.3, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 66, Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC, 1973, pg. 41

receive the divine lessons in the receptacle of our heart. Devoting ourselves to God out of love for eternal life, during these days let us with all solicitude strive to repair and compose in the little ship of our soul whatever throughout the year has been broken or destroyed or damaged or ruined by many storms, that is, by the waves of sins. And since it is necessary for us to endure the storms and tempests of this world while we are still in this frail body, as often as the enemy wills to lead us astray by means of the roughest storms or to deceive us by the most voluptuous pleasures, with God's help may he always find us prepared against him

Therefore I beseech you again and again. During these holy days of Lent if you cannot cut off the occupations of this world, at least strive to curtail them in part. By fleeing from this world, through an expedient loss and a most glorious gain you may take away from earthly occupations a few hours in which you can devote yourselves to God. For this world either laughs at us or is laughed at by us; either we yield to it and are despised, or we despise it in order to obtain eternal rewards. Thus you either reject and despise the world, or you yield to it and are pursued or even trampled upon by it.

If in accord with your usual practice you both willingly heed and strive faithfully to fulfill, dearest brethren, the truths which we are suggesting for the salvation of all by presuming on your obedience, you will celebrate Easter with joy and happily come to eternal life. May He Himself deign to grant this, who together with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

A Sermon on the Spirit of Lent by St Leo the Great ⁴

Apostolic teaching, beloved, exhorts us that we Aput off the old man with his deeds@ and renew ourselves from day to day by a holy manner of life. For if we are the temple of God, and if the Holy Spirit is a Dweller in our souls, as the Apostle says: AYou are the temple of the living God@, we must then strive with all vigilance that the dwelling of our heart be not unworthy of so great a Guest. And just as in houses made with hands, we see to it with praiseworthy diligence that whatever may be damaged, either through the rain coming in, or by the wind in storms, or by age itself, is promptly and carefully repaired, so must we with unceasing concern take care that nothing disordered be found in our souls, that nothing unclean be found there. For though this dwelling of ours does not endure without the support of its Maker, nor would the structure be safe without the watchful care of the Builder, nevertheless since we are rational stones, and living material, the Hand of our Maker has so fashioned us that even he who is being repaired may cooperate with His Maker.

Let human obedience then not withdraw itself from the grace of God, nor turn away from that Good without which it cannot be good. And should it find in the fulfillment of His commands something that is difficult to accomplish or beyond its powers, let it not remain apart, but rather turn to Him who commands us, and who has laid on us this precept that He may both help us and awaken in us the desire of Him, as the prophet tells us: ACast your care upon the Lord, and he shall sustain you@. Or perhaps there is someone who prides himself beyond due measure, and who imagines himself to be so untouched, so unblemished, that he has now no need to renew himself. Such a belief is wholly deceiving, and he will grow old in unceasing folly who believes that amid the temptations of this life he is safe from all injury to his soul. All things are filled with dangers, filled with snares. Desires inflame us, allurements lie in wait for us, the love of gain beguiles us, losses frighten us, bitter are the tongues of detractors, and not always true the lips of those who praise us. There hate rages against us; here the false friend cheats us; so that it is easier to avoid discord than to shun deceit.

And since there are few so steadfast that no trial disturbs them, and since not merely bad fortune but good also, corrupts many among the faithful, we must use earnest care in treating the wounds by which our human mortality has been injured. And so let us run briefly through these dangers with which the world is filled, since the Scripture says: AWho can say: my heart is clean, I am pure from sin?@. And let each one think within himself of the forgiveness he has need of for his sins, and of the medicine he needs for the restoration of his soul.

When, dearly beloved, should we more fittingly have recourse to the divine remedies than when we are once again reminded of the mysteries of our redemption? And that we may more worthily commemorate them, let us earnestly prepare ourselves by these forty days of abstinence.

⁴ The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, vol 2, Henry Regnery Co., 1958, pg 125

LNT-38

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Continuing the Sermon of St Leo the Great on the spirit of Lent ⁵

Let us then, dearly beloved, observe these venerable practices of this most acceptable time, and with anxious care clean the windows of our soul. For however chastely and soberly we live in this mortal life, we shall yet be soiled by some dust in the course of our earthly journey, and the brightness of our soul, formed to God=s image and likeness, is not so remote from the smoke of every vanity that it will be unclouded by any stain and never need to be polished. And if this is needed for even the most guarded souls, how much more is it needed for those who pass almost the whole year in carelessness and perhaps in total neglect? Let us with all charity remind such as these not to flatter themselves, because we cannot see into their consciences, since not even the walls of houses, nor remoteness of place, can conceal anything from the eyes of God. And not alone are thoughts and actions known to Him, but all that shall yet be thought and done. Such is the knowledge of the supreme Judge, such is the power of His sight, to whom all that is solid is open, all that is secret is laid bare, to whom things hidden are clear, to whom the dumb answer, the silence cries out, and the soul speaks without voice.

Let no one despise the patience of God=s goodness because his own sins go unpunished; and think that because he has not felt the wrath of God he has not offended God. The days of grace of this mortal life are not prolonged, nor the time allotted to the foolish of heart before they cross over to the pains of eternal punishment, unless while justice holds its hand they seek for the medicine of penance.

Let us then take refuge in the ever present mercy of God, and, so that we may with fitting reverence celebrate the holy Pasch of the Lord, let all the faithful seek to make holy their own hearts. Let harshness give way to mildness, let wrath grow gentle, forgive one another your offences, and let him who seeks to be forgiven be not himself a seeker of vengeance. For when we say: AForgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors@, we bind ourselves in the most enduring bonds unless we fulfill what we profess. And if the most sacred contract of this prayer has not in every respect been fulfilled, let every person examine his conscience, and gain the pardon of his own sins by forgiving those of others.

For when the Lord says: AIf you will forgive men their offences, your heavenly Father will forgive you also your offences@, what he is here asking is close to each one of us: for the sentence of the Judge will depend on the clemency of the suppliant. For the Just and Merciful Receiver of the prayers of mortals has laid it down that our own generosity is the measure of His fairness to ourselves; so that He will not treat with strict justness those whom He finds not eager for revenge. And generosity is becoming to kind and gentle souls. Nothing is more fitting than that a person imitate his Maker, and that as best he can he is a doer of the works of God.

He who has no need of a helper to perform His works of mercy, so orders His own omnipotence that it is by means of mortals that He comes to the aid of mortals. It is

⁵ The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, vol 2, Henry Regnery Co., 1958, pg 127

because of this the Lord Himself said to His disciples: ASo let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven@, who with the same Father and the Holy spirit lives and reigns God forever and ever.
Amen

From a sermon by St. Peter Chrysologus on prayer and fasting⁶

There are three things, my brethren, by which faith stands firm, devotion remains constant, and virtue endures. They are prayer, fasting and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains, mercy receives. Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other.

Fasting is the soul of prayer; mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. Let no one try to separate them; they cannot be separated. If you have only one of them or not all together, you have nothing. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others you open God's ear to yourself.

When you fast, see the fasting of others. If you want God to know that you are hungry, know that another is hungry. If you hope for mercy, show mercy. If you look for kindness, show kindness. If you want to receive, give. If you ask for yourself what you deny to others, your asking is mockery.

Let this be the pattern for all peoples when they practice mercy: show mercy to others in the same way, with the same generosity, with the same promptness, as you want others to show mercy to you.

Therefore let prayer, mercy and fasting be one single plea to God on our behalf, one speech in our defense, and a threefold-united prayer in our favor.

Let us use fasting to make up for what we have lost by despising others. Let us offer our souls in sacrifice by means of fasting. There is nothing more pleasing that we can offer, as the Psalmist said in prophecy: AA sacrifice to God is a broken spirit; God does not despise a bruised and humbled heart@.

Offer your soul to God; make him an oblation of your fasting, so that your soul may be a pure offering, a holy sacrifice, a living victim, remaining your own and at the same time made over to God. Whoever fails to give this to God will not be excused, for if you are to give him yourself you are never without the means of giving.

To make these acceptable, mercy must be added. Fasting bears no fruit unless it is watered by mercy. Fasting dries up when mercy dries up. Mercy is to fasting as rain is to the earth. However much you may cultivate your heart, clear the soil of your nature, root out vices, sow virtues, if you do not release the springs of mercy, your fasting will bear no fruit.

When you fast, if your mercy is thin your harvest will be thin; when you fast, what you pour out in mercy overflows into your barn. Therefore do not lose by saving, but gather in by scattering. Give to the poor, and you give to yourself. You will not be allowed to keep what you have refused to give to others.

⁶ The Liturgy of the Hours - vol. II - pg. 231 - Catholic Book Publishing Co - 1976

TM-LNT47

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From a Lenten Homily by Pope Benedict XVI ⁷

Lent renews in us the hope in the God who made us pass from death to life. Lent, fully oriented to the mystery of Redemption, is defined the “path of true conversion”. I would like to reflect on prayer and suffering as qualifying aspects of the liturgical season of Lent. In the encyclical *Spe Salvi*, I identified prayer and suffering, together with action and judgment, as “settings for learning and practicing hope. We can thus affirm that precisely because the Lenten season is an invitation to prayer, penance and fasting, it affords a providential opportunity to enliven and strengthen our hope.

Prayer nourishes hope because nothing expresses the reality of our God in our life better than praying with faith. Even in the loneliness of the most sever trial, nothing and no one can prevent me from addressing the Father “in the secret” of my heart, where He alone sees, as Jesus says in the gospel.

Two moments of Jesus’ earthly existence come to mind. One is at the beginning and the other almost at the end of his public ministry: the 40 days in the desert, on which the Season of Lent is based, and the agony in Gethsemane.

Prayer alone with the Father face to face in the desert; prayer filled with “mortal anguish” in the Garden of Olives. Yet in both these circumstances it is by praying that Jesus unmasks the wiles of the tempter and defeats him. Thus, prayer proves to be the first and principal “weapon” with which to win the victory in our struggle against the spirit of evil.

Christ’s prayer reaches its culmination on the Cross. It is expressed in those last words which the Evangelists have recorded. Where he seems to utter a cry of despair: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Christ was actually making his own the invocation of someone beset by enemies with no escape, who has no other than God to turn to and, over and above any human possibilities, experiences his grace and salvation.

With these words of the Psalm, first of a man who is suffering, then of the People of God in their suffering, caused by God’s apparent absence, Jesus made his own this cry of humanity that suffers from God’s apparent absence, and carried this cry to the Father’s heart. So, by praying in this ultimate solitude together with the whole of humanity, he opens the heart of God to us.

There is no contradiction between the words in Psalm 21 and the words full of filial trust: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”. These words, also taken from Psalm 30, are the dramatic imploration of a person who, abandoned by all, is sure he can entrust himself to God. *(over)*

⁷ L’Osservatore Romano – February 13, 2008 – pg 7

The prayer of supplication full of hope is consequently the *leitmotif* of Lent and enables us to experience God as the only anchor of salvation. Indeed when it is collective, the prayer of the People of God is a voice of one heart and soul, it is a “heart to heart” dialogue, like Queen Esther’s moving plea when her people were about to be exterminated: “O my Lord, you only are our King; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you.” ... “for a great danger overshadows me”.

In the face of a “great danger” greater hope is needed: only the hope that can count on God.

Prayer is a crucible in which our expectations and aspirations are exposed in the light of God’s Word, immersed in dialogue with the One who is Truth, and from which they emerge free from hidden lies and compromises with various forms of selfishness. Without the dimension of prayer, the human “I” ends by withdrawing into himself, and the conscience, which should be an echo of God’s voice, risks being reduced to a mirror of the self, so that the inner conversation becomes a monologue, giving rise to self-justifications by the thousands. Therefore, prayer is a guarantee of openness to others: whoever frees himself for God and his needs simultaneously opens himself to the other, to the brother or sister who knocks at the door of his heart and asks to be heard, asks for attention, forgiveness, at times correction, but always in fraternal charity.

Thus prayer is never self-centered, it is always centered on the other. As such, it opens the person praying to the “ecstasy” of charity, to the capacity to go out of oneself to draw close to the other in humble, neighborly service. True prayer is the driving force of the world, since it keeps it open to God. For this reason without prayer there is no hope but only illusion.