

St. John the Compassionate Mission — Sunday Bulletins, September 2019

Second Sunday of Luke - 29 September 2019

Tone 6

From today's gospel Luke 6:31-36

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ...But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; ... and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

On Friday morning a young homeless woman was sleeping on the floor of the mission at 6am. A few hours later I saw her crying on the steps of the mission. Her boyfriend had abandoned her at church that very morning. One could see different wounds on her body and soul, coming from needles and rejection. I couldn't talk to her at all because of a personnel crisis in the bakery. But Joanna spent most of the time with her, sharing with me afterward the details of her sorrow. Eventually she left, leaving some of her stuff under the church stairs with the hope that she would return later to pick them up. I have seen this before...

Could this be the deepest stage of a person experiencing rejection and abandonment? Or to put it in a way that Christians can relate with: how close does such an experience bring you to the cross? Where "...they give me hatred for my love and for my thirst vinegar to drink". Today Jesus tells us to love our enemy. Our abandoned guest didn't look like one - there are a few people at the mission who do. It's hard to welcome them back after having been banned for one year. This particular woman did neither looked as the enemy, not did she have somebody close to care for her.

The world where we live now resembles more to a place where people who know each other well- family, neighbors, friends- find it hard to stand each other. When we stop trying to love our enemy, all the kindness and care that we share with each other are at risk to perish. And they do so.

For the past couple of weeks we've been talking at Bridges about how the enemy (in C.S.Lewis' "Screw tape letters") uses its craft to make us turn our face away from God and bring us to a place that doesn't exist, to make us watch our wounds instead of beholding the kindness of God who brings healing to all, who is a father for the orphans and the abandoned.

P.N.

From antiphon 1:

O God, I direct my eyes to you in heaven. Show me mercy that I may live in you.

In the Holy Spirit is the cause of universal salvation.

If the Lord were not among us, none of us could have withstood a single battle with the enemy.

First Sunday of Luke - 22 September 2019

Tone 5

"Hell here I come!"

We buried Dean on Friday, and the words he yelled, coming out of the Mission on a cold winter morning, describes accurately the life he lived for the past 25 years or more, on the streets of Toronto, where he eventually died. He faced the madness of hell empty handed with no fear. But he carried his cross through hell with a lot of honesty and dignity. A life haunted by violence, rejection, addiction and many other things that hell had in its secret cells for him. But with all this, the system could not assimilate him. It did not break his back bone. It kept him on the streets but it could never take his heart because he never compromised with them. I remember when he talked to us a few years ago at the Mission about his life on the streets. He told us he had no ID, having been banned from all social programs and shelters. He had no person to rely on. We were really touched, together with Dn Pawel, by the way he spoke. With a lot of intelligence, articulate, without complaining, with dignity, sharing with people he met in church his experience of this life.

I did not know Dean in his life on the streets (people have many stories about that), but I knew him in church, where he spent more time than most of us. He was there almost every morning. His presence brought me a lot

of peace, the sense of real freedom and the boldness of a human being who, walking in the shadow of death left aside any fear because he knew the goodness of God.

Dean walked through hell, so that when he died on the streets the angels would carry him in the kingdom of God. That's what Jesus told us about Lazarus... Another beggar, despised like him, whom God loved so much that He shared with us his name. We knew Dean here in our broken community that tells us once again that the mercy of God did not abandon us like many others. We have the poor here with us so God can take care of all.

From the gospel on Friday (when we had the service for Dean)

Luke 21:12-19

The Lord said to his disciples, "Beware of men who will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be a time for you to bear testimony... You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death; you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives."

P.N.

Sunday after Elevation - 15 September 2019

Tone 4

From today's gospel (Mark 8:34-38; 9:1)

The Lord said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it".

On the 13th of September we celebrated Saint Cornelius, the first gentile (somebody who is not of our own?) received into the church. St Peter knows it was not easy. After baptism, Saint Cornelius joined the apostles in their apostolic work. Some say he died as a martyr, others that he died in peace. However, everybody agrees on the work he did in spreading the good news. A gentile who became one of "our own".

We live now in a time when men mark their territories more and more: culturally, ethnically, socially, politically, economically, religiously and so on. Consequently, there are people who find themselves within (in my territory) and outside, or without territory. But where is the church situated here? Does it mark its territory? Who are those within and without a church?

The territory of the church is the heart of man. Which is renewed today, in the midst of the earth, through the cross. The sacrificial love of God, which today we can behold with no escape, because it is crucified within our flesh, human flesh. What the angels knew from the beginning of time, that God is love, we behold today on the cross. Even if we close our eyes and turn our face away, out of pain, we still see Him in our hearts. There is nothing else that man can negotiate now. There was a time when, being young and foolish, the man would walk wherever he wished. Not today, because the Holy Spirit draws the humankind to the midst of the earth, where the cross is. And on the cross is God. In a solitary place, surrounded by people, who are coming to take his clothes after stripping Him down, but in return they receive his love.

Not even life and death mark their territories when Christ is on the cross, but the cross itself: to lose one's life to follow Christ towards his solitary place. To become one of his own, for the sake of His love, for the sake of the world,

Church is a place, where all those who have no territory resemble Christ in the flesh with a renewed heart, through the victory of the cross. Being in the midst of the earth, the church has no territory, because it is not of this world but for the salvation of the world. Paradoxically, it embraces something that is foreign to her. And that can take away everything you know from you. But this is the path of the cross, and who would dare not to follow the traces of the Beloved.

I was talking to somebody this week who came just a second time to "our" church. He could not describe the church in a different way but that is felt like the place where he needed to be. It made sense to be there. You just see that, he says. That is because in "our church" the people who walk in everyday resemble God in the flesh.

Where the cross renews their hearts in a way that we cannot see, but sense. And that's why we cannot but continue to look for the path Christ walked, just to set a foot on it. To start the journey to the solitary place where God dwells.

P.N.

From Psalm 74:

O God, why has Thou cast us off unto the end?...Remember Thy congregation which Thou has purchased from the beginning.

And they that hate Thee have boasted in the midst of Thy feast....They said in their heart:....Come, let us abolish all the feasts of God from the earth.

But God is our king before the ages, He hath wrought salvation in the midst of the earth.

Thine is the day and Thine is the night;...Thou has made all the borders of the earth

O deliver not unto beast the soul which doth confess Thee; of the soul of Thy Paupers be not forgetful unto the end.

Let not the humbled and shamed man be turned away; the beggar and the poor man shall praise Thy Name.

This Sunday we can venerate the true relic of the cross. The Mission was granted this relic at its start 33 years ago. Is it the real cross? Historically the relic is for sure a piece of the cross Helen the mother of Constantine found. Is the cross of Jesus? Only faith can know that. We believe it is. When we venerate it we are close to this mystery that was revealed to us on cavalry. The love that is crucified, this love we seek to bear witness every day especially among those who suffer without knowing this love.

P.R.

Birth of the Holy Theotokos - Sunday before Elevation - 8 September 2019

Tone 3

From today's Gospel (Luke 10:38-42; 11: 27-28)

“...you are worried and troubled by many things. But one thing is needed..

Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it.”

There is only one single need that a human heart would recognize...because there is one single real desire. How many times do we find ourselves being caught within the list of needs that our mind makes up? And if we don't, we still hear everywhere around us that this is what really matters. And if the needs are not met, somebody is going to be blamed. And, in the end, that would be God - (the woman you gave me told me to eat from the tree). In order for the lie to manifest itself, a slight adjustment of the truth is needed. It could not exist in itself, but it needs to piggyback on what is truthful. The Truth however does not need any adjustment because God created everything in goodness and beauty. What the Truth needs though is to be listened to by the heart and for the heart to ponder on Him.

To understand our need we first have to accept our desire. And the truth is that in every moment and in every time of our life, in joy or in despair, the desire is to abandon ourselves to God completely. Because the Word is coming to us not in order to quench the desire but rather to increase it. He lets us grow in our broken love without measure, from the moment we incline our ear to Him.

This one and only thing is needed. We don't and we should not start by something else but by changing slightly the inclination of our heart and instead of piggybacking the lie to receive the Word of God. If we are on the mountain, on the mountain, if we are on the depths of the earth, on the depths of the earth, if we are in prison locked by ourselves or by others to receive Him in freedom. Because this is what we need, what we already have because it is not from us, but from God to us: God alone.

One thing that touched my heart during my trip was a poem written in prison by a person who was locked in because of his faith, during the communist regime. I saw the poem written on the wall, in a museum that used to be a real prison for people who stood up for the Truth and could not lie to themselves. It was about the Word of

God coming to visit him in his cell, where the room was flooded with suffering and despair. The Word came not to free him from prison, but rather to leave on his arms the marks of the nails. The sign of real love.

This week at the mission I met with a person who used to come in the past to listen to the gospel with us. He said to me that he stopped coming, that he relapsed on his addictions and that he was ashamed. And then he told me horror stories from his building, how those who keep the addiction going take over the apartments and kick people out on the street. And how the authorities know the stories and don't do anything about that. He came for a coffee actually, he ended up confessing his sins and then he stayed for prayer. In the end he left leaving me the hope that I would see him again.

In communism as in capitalism nowadays, atheism locks people in. It used to lock them in prisons in the "good old times", if you dared to speak against the system. Today it locks you within yourself or within your own building through all kinds of addictions, chopping life with a desire to terminate it. For the sake of money. "... for they prepare arrows for the quiver, to shoot down in a moonless night the upright of heart". The truth is that even when being locked in a building or within yourself, the Word of God cannot be silenced. And our ear just needs to incline to Him. The Mother of God received Christ in the purity of her heart, making possible for all of us to welcome Him within our messy lives. A mess made at times by others, at times by ourselves. Even if we could not clean too much so far, let us not postpone receiving Him because of uncleanness. But let us rather allow Christ to help us with our cleaning. By listening to Him. Who speaks today with us with joy about hope being born.

PN

Hearken O daughter, and see, and incline thine ear; and forget thine own people and thy father's house. And the King shall greatly desire thy beauty... (Ps 44, 10-11)

Apolytikion of Nativity of the Theotokos

Fourth Tone

Your birth, O Theotokos, brought joy to the whole world, for from you dawned the sun of righteousness, Christ our God. Freeing us from the curse, He gave us His blessings. Abolishing death, He granted us eternal life.

Kontakion of the Nativity of the Theotokos

Fourth Tone

In your holy birth, Immaculate One, Joachim and Anna were rid of the shame of childlessness; Adam and Eve of the corruption of death. And so your people, free of the guilt of their sins, celebrate crying: "The barren one gives birth to the Theotokos, who nourishes our life."

Eleven Sunday of Matthew - 1 September 2019

Tone 2

The Narrow Gate- part 2

September 1 starts the new church year. The gate to a new liturgical year. Where does the 'constricting way, the narrow gate,' lead us to? Sometimes we may be tempted to think that this leads us to a world of rigorous doctrines, rules of close knit friendship; a world where only a few can belong. Orthodoxy can thus be understood as a precise set of doctrines and canons. We are, in some circles, even cautioned about praying for non Orthodox. Is this the 'constricting way, the narrow gate' that Jesus wants us to follow?

The way and the door is Christ himself present in the lived experience of his commandments.

As the psalms sing this constricting way leads us to a very spacious place *"He brought me to a wide spacious place" psalm 18:36*

The narrow gate opens us to freedom *"I will walk about in freedom" psalm 119:45*

It reshapes our hearts constricting them so they can be enlarged *"I will run the way of thy commandments when thou shalt enlarge my heart" Psalm 119 32*

Not every narrow door leads to freedom or enlarges our hearts. Only the way of Christ leads us to place of radical freedom where we can love as God loves. Love out of fullness and not out of need. The commandments

of Christ ask us to love those whom no one loves, who cannot repay our love and who may even hate us. I watched all week George, our Cellarer, serve and feed so many people with such attention. It felt to me that he was looking at each person as if they were the only ones in the refectory. Yet most of his care went unnoticed. I have witnessed even how some people try to attack him physically. He walked before my eyes the constricting way, the narrow gate of humility, unassuming service and love.

I have sadly witnessed how our community is slandered by "false brethren" 2Cor.11:26. I believe this is a real moment, a real call for the community of St. John the Compassionate to go deeper into the "constricting way and through the narrow gate". Such contradictions by "False brethren" are not a call to close ourselves, or to despair, but rather to renew in us the courage to love more, not because we succeed in this but simply because He, the Beloved, asks us to.

One of the temptations I sense these days at the Mission is to be tricked into believing that what we try to live each day is wrong, useless, or that others could do better. To walk the "constricting way ... narrow gate" does not always feel good. We, of course fail each day at everything and of course others could do it better. Yet there is in this poverty an explainable joy, a hidden joy, this secret quiet joy that Brother Luke was sharing with me this week. Yes, our hearts get broken, people we love move on, or die or even turn against us and yet, yet there is at the core of the constricting way and the narrow gate at the Mission, at the core of our hearts, there is an inexplicable joy.

P.R.

From the Rule of St Basil the Great

(Micro Asketikon)

Interrogatio 43

I. What does a Christian deserve who slanders or listens to someone else slandering and tolerates it?

R. To be excommunicated. For "one who slanders his brother in secret," it says, "against him I took vengeance (PS 100.5) and elsewhere, "Do not listen willingly to a slanderer lest perhaps you are cut off." (Prov 20:13)