

St. John the Compassionate Mission — Sunday Bulletins, January 2020

Fifteenth Sunday of Luke 26 January 2020

Tone 7

From today's Gospel of Luke 19:1-10

“At that time, Jesus was passing through Jericho. And there was a man named Zacchaios; he was a chief collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. ... And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaios, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

Jesus sees Zacheus and his heart. He did not say to him though what he needed to do, but rather took time to visit and be with him . Jesus met Zacheus in his desire to behold God and this moved Zacheus' heart to repentance.

Our morning cook is not Zacheus, even though his stature might have been the same, and our neighbour is our neighbor, even though from the care and concern he showed to our cook he resembles something that became a rare commodity these days. You can see his care in the gospel but this past Thursday it appeared on the streets of Toronto as well... What a nice surprise!

On Thursday morning, in front of the mission, I met a person who wanted to ask me a question. He said he lived up the street. He had seen our morning cook walking in pain two days before and he was visibly affected by that. He was saying that he had seen him many times working in front of the mission. He could not believe that a young man with a joy of life was struggling like that. He wanted to know what happened and if there was any way we could help him. He was happy to find out the cook's name and promised he would come back to talk more over a coffee. He did not stop there, he mentioned another person from our community who had just died recently. He was coming daily in the morning and during the day. He knew that he had pneumonia, and he signed himself out from hospital just to die in his basement room a day or two later. After saying this he became emotional and tears came to his eyes. He could not reconcile himself with the suffering and he said that this is not something that should happen in the world. And that maybe it is better for God to put a break on everything, to put all of us to sleep and when we wake up we will all be the same. No more rich and poor, hate and violence and suffering. A new world. He was a decent old man, who could not reconcile in his heart with the pain of people and he was praying openly for eternal salvation. We departed from each other after he remembered that he needed to pick up his truck and go to work to make a living. Before leaving, he asked again the name of the cook just to make sure he remembered the man.

Jesus saw Zachaeus and Zacheus wanted to see Jesus. And both took time to dine together and this made a rich man bring salvation to his house.

To notice, to see and care and to pray about it. This is what our neighbour did.

What needs to happen in a human soul for this to take place? Why do we spend, as somebody was saying, no more than 2 seconds with people in our hearts, before we discharge them in the unknown? Most of the time with a label or with the conviction either that we know what's going on or that we have no clue. Whatever helps sealing the tomb. At the mission, one of the risks is for us to get used to people suffering and to forget that they are alive and that takes care and attention and creativity; to take time to be with them reminding each other silently our need to see and be with Christ.

The encounter with any human being is a gift from God. It tells you something about your soul, about the other person's soul and about God. To shy away from it would keep us in ignorance. The real one, and this is a burden that God does not ask us to bear, but rather to learn to walk freely among men with a burning desire to learn more about who He really is. We all want to be seen by Him with hope, kindness and mercy. We see that happening when we take time to see others in the same way. And Christ will be staying with us at the table just as long as we are keeping our heart open to others. Or to put it within mission words - as I heard it this week - if you think you have no friend become a friend for others.

From Ps 16

“Thou has proved my heart, Thou has visited it in the night, Thou has tried me by fire, and unrighteousness was not found in me.

But as for me, in righteousness shall I appear before Thy face; I shall be filled when Thy glory is made manifest to me.”

At the Mission, we often happen to receive the things we need the most. Joanna has many stories about coffee coming through the doors in the morning when we realised we had just made the last pot. Since George is in charge, it is more difficult for that to happen because he takes such good care of what we receive and we share everything and we waste almost nothing. I have a personal story from a few years ago too. It was close to Christmas and I had promised to get some gingerbread houses kits for the Saturday Kids Club program, so the kids could assemble them together. I made that promise only to forget about it completely and as the day of the activity arrived, I had just realized that it was too late to do anything about it. I was saved though by somebody who brought exactly what the kids needed: gingerbread kits. The number of kids we would have on Saturdays was always fluctuating, so we never really knew how many children to expect. So the surprise was even higher when the number of kids that came that week matched exactly the number of gingerbread houses we had received.

Two weeks ago, something similar happened again. We were sharing ideas about how to give more life to the room on Saturdays. Someone suggested that we try to connect with people from the neighborhood through music and art. We thought about bringing in musicians to play for people.

George was really shocked one morning when one of his volunteers, who lives up the street, proposed to him the same thing. He plays music and he used to do that in different drop in places in the city. He said he could put together a group of people so they can come and play for free. He offered to tune the piano as well. That morning he was volunteering at breakfast together with his family (his young children were helping too).

At the end we don't know how this is going to be played out. However, it shows us that God sometimes speaks similar good things to the hearts of people.

Twelve Sunday of Luke 19 January 2020

Tone 6

From St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians 3:4-11

“Brethren, when Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you...which is idolatry...

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature...”

On Remembrance Day, remember not lie to God and to each other:

What is the measure of our honesty to God? St. Paul tells us not to lie to one another. But it is hard to do so if we don't give up on lying to God. I think honesty with Him burns the human soul with unquenchable fire for the sake of his own salvation. Honesty makes us vulnerable. The more honest you are with Him the more vulnerable you become in prayer, but in this way life wakes up within you more ardently. We take on the burden of honesty in prayer in order to receive the word from God; who comes in Truth always. He never labels you, coming up with a diagnosis, but He covers you with mercy and compassion and He sets before you a table. And with honesty you sit down.

As it is with the human soul, honesty with the community would take a similar approach. We look back at this time to our recent history and it is still hard to see beyond wounds still in need for healing. What speeds up the healing process is still the same need for more honesty. To see where we are and who we are; in order to receive the Word of God. To allow ourselves to be vulnerable and to remain like that. To bring a sign of life, a new one, to the community who is putting idolatry to death in order to prepare itself for the visitation and for what the Lord sets up ahead of it.

What is the taste of life that is about to blossom daily within the poor community? What is the Word we are receiving and asked to be faithful to?

We heard all kinds of opinions about how things are or should be, for better or for worse, with the poor community. From accusations of spiritual abuse to “poverty abuse”. From being too hard on people to being too soft on them, from praying too much to not praying enough, from cultivating blind obedience to being boldly disobedient: coincidentia oppositorum. At the time we received them in silence, today we give glory to God for all things. For real and with honesty.

However, apart from all the whispering, there is one question that we need to answer with honesty? What is this poor community to us? Do we really love it? And if we don't yet, do we really want to learn to love and care for it? Do we start learning to tend the sheep? Or rather we rush to our own houses quickly (Haggai 1, 9) and leave behind our first love to rest in dust? How much does it hurt us to see it in ruins? These are questions that open the door of honesty for us in order to burn the weeds left behind by the flood.

We can succeed or we can fail to stay honest in front of God in prayer. However, the community here stays for what it is... I was thinking this week in the chapel, after a beautiful morning prayer on Thursday, what we would have all lost if the mission had not existed at all? What would our lives have looked like? And their lives as well.

As our poor Laura was trying to make us understand on Wednesday at Bridges. That the gospel is alive and we can choose to live within it. The poor community here lives within the gospel and lets you taste from the living Word of it. Here the scriptures are fulfilled in our hearing.

Here you not only hear but you see that the poor are blessed. And also you know their names. And you understand why theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Here you get to meet those who are hungry and eating with them you get satisfied as well. Here you really laugh with those who weep because they share with you the hope that surrounds their lives. Here you get to experience being hated and despised and pray within your heart that this is for the sake of Christ and not because of your own sins which are so numerous. You pray and hope that's true, receiving comfort from those who were uncomforted. You are afraid to rejoice but you leap for joy when you see your brother nurturing within his heart the kingdom of heaven.

This is the word for us to do here: to be faithful to the poor community, to be faithful to the living gospel. So the scripture can continue to be fulfilled in people's hearing. For those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. For those who enter into the church in faith and reverence and with the fear of God.

God is the Lord and He appeared Himself to us

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.

From Friday's gospel **Luke 6:17-23** - the feast of St. Anthony, when we celebrated the divine Liturgy

"...Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven."

Bridges on Wednesday

We start to look at a series of parables from the gospel of Luke; trying to understand what would it have been like for Luke to be a doctor at the time.

If you want to come earlier on Wednesday for Bridges come from 2:00 pm. We read the gospel with the poor. This past Wednesday Elizabeth thanked God she did not have leprosy. Bothering people with an ongoing question about children suffering. Why? And she told us the story of a disabled child and his mother who gave all her life and time to care for him. Why? How is that good? Poor lady...I thought she was trying to tell us in fact the immense amount of love people would discover within their heart if they would not pass with indifference by those who suffer.

Sunday after Theophany 12 January 2020

Tone 5

From the Gospel According to Matthew 4:12-17:

"...The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

From Isaiah chapter 8:

"Why do you seek the dead on behalf of the living? ...

"There will be severe despair and darkness, so dark one cannot see. And the one who is in despair shall be perplexed, but only for a time"

For there are different degrees of darkness; I know it from a long time friend of our community who needs to take needles in his last good eye so he can see a little bit. With one eye, because the other one is good for nothing. He was telling me this week how once, after an injection was done wrong, everything got black. And he got terrified. The darkness lasted for a while, in which time he thought he had become completely blind. His panic was even higher because the darkness was greater than the one he was experiencing with the bad eye. He said he could not see anything at all, it was pitch black dark. It was as if even the memory of light had been completely erased. It was not that he could see only darkness, but it looked like the light itself had disappeared. Kind of like an "unnatural blindness", he said. The other thing about his blindness was, as he thought, that it was unnecessary. He thought that the doctor, who was new at the clinic, tried a new treatment on his good eye, with the injection, doing more damage than good. Ever since then, he needs to take the needle once in a while, because the doctor says that his eye is no longer able to see without the treatment. Our long time friend is a stranger in this land without much access to free health care, who would trust and comply with any medical attention he receives. When the light came back for him though, after the temporary blindness, it was like never before. And the joy as well, when he realised he could still see. I learned from him that with an eye you see less but the joy of seeing is much greater.

The verses from Isaiah (Is.8: 19; 22-23) describe the darkness where the light shines forth. Where Jesus comes first to speak about repentance and the coming of the kingdom of God. In a territory by the sea, Galilee of the Gentiles, where second class citizens were seduced to seek death instead of life. People who lived by the sea of Galilee were not part of the religious cultural establishment at the time, their cultural heritage being mixed with others. People of the sea are those who are outside the system being burdened by it. They live in darkness but they are the first to see the light shining and moving. Because they are the first called to repentance. To be liberated from the oppression of darkness, to be freed from captivity, being led by God on a safe path. Out of many waters they are called to walk on the safe and firm path on the bottom of the sea. We think at times that repentance is a personal matter, when we try to become morally better and we get stuck in our lack of faith asking for understanding and complicity. When in fact repentance is to come out of darkness in joy and walk towards the light. From now on, when I think of repentance I think of our long time friend, who was completely blind for a while and he recovered his sight after that . And with one eye, he enjoys the light so much more. Without measure. Because he knows that darkness can blind you completely, but in Christ, it is only temporary.

From St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians 4:7-13:

"Brethren, grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ...Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ".

Theophany is like a homeless young person who struggles with addictions, losing his home and family because of it, experiencing rejection from all sides. Having no place to lay his head, being chased from public places, he ends up in a cemetery to sleep at night. He is blinded by lack of light from within, and lack of hope from outside. The despair from within is mingled with the darkness from outside making him unable to see and receive kindness, seducing him to abandon more to it. If the light is life giving, darkness seduces you with death. A cemetery, in a situation like that, is a safe place to be and adds veracity to the story. Blind and in despair you wait for the light, without being conscious of it; because you think there is a misunderstanding and darkness within your soul. But you wait on life, being alive, and this is the face of hope in the darkness from within. Theophany is when you see and listen to the goodness of God. The first time you receive Him completely without questioning. Somehow and somewhere God touches your soul unconventionally and you

somehow and somewhere receive his goodness inexplicably. And then you understand that it is not you that need to figure out, but rather stop for a moment and take a rest in the light. Without Theophany everything we see within ourselves and around us is blinded by darkness. In the light of Christ we see first His face and this takes you so much deeper within yourself and in the world. The taste of joy in the land of the living. And then, we struggle to find a shelter there in order to share the land with every living being.

(Paraphrasing a letter received by George from a homeless person who comes for breakfast at the Mission and wanted to share with us part of his life. Paraphrasing in the light of Theophany).

Bridges this coming Wednesday at 6:00pm

We look together at the icon of Theophany and share what we see.

New

We are trying to find a way to visit people in the hospital up the street. Please let Fr Nicolaie know if you want to start visiting the sick. We'll give you support and guidance.

We are about to start renting a gym at the school up the street on Saturdays, from 1pm to 3pm, for children and families who want to spend some time running after each other in a safe environment. Please talk to Br Luke if you want to join.

Sunday before Theophany 05 January 2020

Tone 4

From The Gospel According to Mark 1:1-8

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’ John was baptizing in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins...”

It is not easy at times to see clearly in the light of the desert. The eyes can be blinded in the overwhelming light. But this is the place where the voice is heard. The voice is crying in the wilderness, asking for repentance in exchange for forgiveness. Preparing thus the encounter with the Lord, when we see and hear and touch: “That hand of yours that touched the immaculate head of the Master, with the finger of which you pointed Him out to us, lift it up to Him on our behalf...” (from the Royal Hours).

The wilderness is the place where life got wild because it was abandoned by man. Where the authority of man, entrusted to him by God, was lost. Man forgets to nurture. He forgets to ask for blessing and to bless: “*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. ..., and forget not all that He has done for thee (Ps 102)*”. Without being nurtured, life gets chased away by humanity who starts to build without a blessing. To make up without creativity. Then the desert is the only place that remains honest to the transgression of man. It does not hide and it does not make itself pretty on the outside. But it is waiting to blossom for real. So the desert becomes the place where the guilty silence is broken. The wilderness becomes the place where people are asked to come for repentance. And they do come. From all Judea and Jerusalem. To leave behind their made up settings and to learn from God to be human. In a place where none can hide because forgiveness can be seen, heard and touched.

It is the voice that brings hope because it speaks out of a territory that is afflicted in its heart. A heart that encountered plenty of familiar affection but cannot settle but within the love of God. A voice that takes us out from our own city, from our own home, from our comfort zone in order to learn to repent. In order to learn to be forgiven.

We said many times that our city is a desert when it comes to real human community. We recognize that we live among people who are on the edges. One of the temptations here is to listen to the voices of those who make an apology of the desert. Dissecting its appearance with skepticism; being obsessed with the causes and the effects of an experience of life estranged by authority (This week I listened to an articulate man speaking on how we

have no hope and we are doomed. “This is the end my friend”). To listen and to live accordingly, allowing the grief to overshadow the hope.

The call in the desert though is to hear the real voice who speaks to the heart about repentance. And when we go to the desert, the place where the community dwells, to come with joy. For the encounter with the Lord asks for repentance. And the desert is the perfect dwelling for man to start learning that. For it is given to us from God to listen, to see and to touch Him. Because life only is not enough for us. But it asks for humility, love and redemption. It asks for what life needs and receives from God in Christ.

From Antiphone I and III

Whosoever has acquired hope in the Lord is superior to all whatsoever might grieve him.

Whereas one has filial affection for his mother, for the Lord we ought to have a love even more fervent.

A Practical Question:

What should we do with the surplus of the holy water?

Every year before Theophany we have plenty of holy water left in the church. From the year before. Even though this year we used more than in the past. Out of necessity. When we felt the evil was trying to make lairs in the heart of our community. We bless the water on Theophany and we take it home but somehow, most of us forget to use it throughout the year. It is something that reflects our understanding of holiness. How much is for me and how much should I use? How much should I save? There are though people during the year who came to the church to ask for holy water. Most of them people who come here for food and comfort also during the week. Those who live deeper within the desert where the thirst is much stronger. They do not really ask themselves these questions but only live with a burning desire for something holy to touch their soul.