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The Second Sunday in Lent

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THROUGH THE DARK VALLEY PART I

In Lent we walk through the "valley of the shadow of death." The darkness is exposed on several different levels each of which has to do particularly with you and me. These shadows are the actuality of our sins, the presence of evil, and ultimately the death of Jesus.

None of us relishes the discovery of sin in our lives. It is the discovery of what we did not know was there, or that we keep safely out of the reach of our conscious minds, that strikes us at the heart.

In one way we are well adjusted to the sins that we know of, and others know of us, which we joke about, or claim as our peculiar problem. It is in the sins that we know that our sinfulness becomes manageable, and after all seems not so very sinful. We know what they are, and we are prepared to contend with them, at least partially. In one way, exceedingly perverse, we delight in them as if they distinguish us. But in this we are deceived. For while laughter is indeed abhorrent to the devil, it is not the laughter which makes light of his hold on our hearts. It is the laughter of true joy that makes the devil cringe and rage with envy. He is quite happy for us to make light of the sins we know of, while he does all he can to reinforce our more heinous sins of which we are not aware or that we suppress.

Pride is the great sin that is hidden and as such it is the root of all sin. Gregory the Great imagined pride as the "queen" of sins, that which rules and governs all our sinful behavior. To take St. Gregory's portrayal a bit further we might say that this queen is not beautiful and honorable, but as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, will not submit to a higher rule, and is driven at one time by her dark will, at other times by ignorance, and still at other times by weakness or passion.

St. Thomas described pride as that which seeks excellence above its due measure. At every turn, by what we desire, by what we say and do, we strive to be excellent above what we truly are. Such is the inordinate measure which we attribute to ourselves in every conceivable form. It is the result of the fact that we are made in the image of God, and instead of being content with that image and reflecting his glory, we wish to become glorious ourselves.

We do not want to discover this. Our judgments and analyses and prescriptions for how we and others ought to live are to us simply evidence of our reasonable and well adjusted lives. We may say that we are not righteous and readily admit as much, but deep down in the

shadows of the heart we are quick to respond to things said or done, and to modify and replace their inadequacy by the instinctive brilliance of our own insight. Such is the character of hidden pride and the deepest darkness.

We come face to face with this absence of light in Lent, that is, if we are willing to go deeper, beyond the tiresome, superficial, "sacrifice" of giving up alcohol or chocolate or whatever it might be that eventually will complement our vanity anyway.

Isaiah says that all our righteousness is as "filthy rags." His entire prophetic thought is to the point. "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are as filthy rags; and we do all fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away" (64:6).

The true benefit of Lent is not the accomplishment of our "sacrifice" but the realization that "there is no health in us." The darkness that dwells deep within has such a hold on us that we do not know it. We only sometimes catch a glimpse of the effects of our sinfulness, but we are skillful at avoiding the place where pride dwells. St. Anselm understood this when he said that we have not yet understood the gravity of sin.

One sure evidence that we have not understood and that we walk in darkness is the fact that we are not in church during Lent. We offer Prayer and Holy Communion each day, Sunday through Friday. Of the approximately twelve hundred members of St. John's which are communicants in good standing, only about fifty to sixty come to church during the week. One might infer from this that we do so well with repentance and obedience that we need to attend Holy Communion during Lent only on Sundays. That attitude is also darkness. If we have any sense that our heart is not completely full of the love of Christ, the love both of him in particular and of others for his sake, if we fall short of this love in any way, how can we allow such complacency of pride to dwell where only charity should abide? Too busy for one service a week? All of our time taken up with unselfish duties and responsibilities? During the season when we come face to face with the darkness of our hearts, how can we spurn the grace of God? "Take, eat. This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." It is the darkness of human pride, still active in the old man of the Christian, which will not submit to our Lord's command to "Do this in remembrance" of him, and to receive the gift of his grace and the comfort of his presence in the Holy Communion.

No doubt, it is not all willfulness that holds us away. It is also ignorance of God's "favor and goodness towards us," and the weakness which precludes discipline, and the passion for other things that hold us from the table of the Lord. Such is the actuality of pride.

We walk through a dark valley in Lent. It is the valley of death. Ezekiel described it as a valley full of dead men's bones. It reminds one of Eliot's "hollow men" and of all the pitiable characters that populate Dante's Inferno. Why are we here in this darkness? Because it is we who are these. Only by coming to this awareness, shall we be able to turn from the inordinate desire for excellence that seeks to put ourselves above all others, and step onto the path of humility. With that first step, we enter into another world, where not pride but charity is the queen that rules.

(to be continued)

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