

Friday (Thomas Merton)

He “in whom all things consist” was not only to walk with man in the breeze of the after noon, as he did with Adam, but would also become man and dwell with us as a brother. The Lord would not only love his creation as a Father, but he would enter into his creation, emptying himself, hiding himself, as if he were not God but a creature. Why should he do this? Because he loved his creatures, and he could not bear that his creatures should merely adore him as distant, remote, transcendent and all-powerful. This was not the glory that he sought.

Scripture (Hebrews 2:16-17)

For it was not angels that he took to himself; he took to himself the line of Abraham. It was essential that he should in this way be made completely like his brothers so that he could become a compassionate and trustworthy high priest for their relationship with God, able to expiate the sins of the people.

Ps

“I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security”

Pope Francis

6th Week of Ordinary Time

God: now available any time, any place to anyone

The cure of the leper, (Mark 1:40-45) opens a rather complicated can of worms for readers of Mark’s Gospel, then and now. Worms being decidedly earthy, the can challenges our ideas of the sacredness of God and the boundaries (or barriers) we place around him.

Jesus’ reputation as a healer and powerful preacher is already established in Galilee, so the leper’s question is not ‘Can you cure me?’, but ‘do you want to?’ When the leper approached in his torn clothes and shouting ‘unclean’, as laid down in Leviticus, the onlookers no doubt felt sorry for him but would be scandalised that he would come right up to Jesus and kneel before him. Jesus has already shown he can perform exorcisms by the power of his words, so he could, presumably, have kept back from the leper and cured him from a safe distance. Instead, he touches him. This would confuse and possibly shock the onlookers: Jesus has now made himself unclean. (He cured the man, but until the priest declared him cured he remained unclean in the eyes of other people). We almost take for granted Jesus curing people, but there were significant complications for him as a Jew subject to the Laws of purity detailed in Leviticus 11-16, where the various ways of becoming ‘unclean’ are laid down. To be ‘unclean’ meant that a person was not considered worthy to offer sacrifice to God, or to be part of his chosen people. People were to be warned ‘against a state of uncleanness, rather than incurring death by defiling my Dwelling which is among them’, (in the meeting tent which contained the Ark of the Covenant).

When the leper – an outcast cut off from God and society – fell on his knees, Jesus was so filled with compassion that he couldn’t walk away, as the Law instructed.

Significantly, he did not have a ‘forget the rules, it’s love that counts’ approach: he insisted that the man should go straight to the priest in accordance with Leviticus. However, Jesus knew that his physical contact made him unclean, so it is likely that this is the reason he was unable to go openly into the towns, (although Jesus seeks quiet times for prayer, he doesn’t avoid crowds in the Gospel.). Although Jesus respects the Laws of purity, he does not allow them to be an obstacle to acting compassionately. It is worth reading this from the point of view of Mark’s audience who were living in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, which also destroyed centuries of understanding of the way God was physical presence amongst them, (in the Ark, then in the Holy of Holies), and took away the whole ritual of sacrifice in the Temple, the very core of their religious practice. Imagine Catholicism without the altar and the Eucharist and you will be somewhere near the awful magnitude of events.

I remember the altar rails and the exclusion of all but the priest and the altar boys from the sanctuary. This gave me a good grounding in appreciating the sacredness of God but having clear boundaries between what is holy and what is not, and excluding lay people both carried with it the danger of keeping God at a distance, especially from those who were unworthy. When Jesus touched the leper, he did not lose any of his holiness, nor did he say ‘there is no such thing as unclean’. He did show he would rather be eating with sinners and touching lepers to make them ‘clean’. As a Church we should be clear about what is ‘unclean’, but be equally clear about revealing the presence and holiness of God in its midst, as Jesus did in touching the leper. Martin Bennett.

Monday (John Henry Newman)

When God took flesh and appeared on earth, he showed us the Godhead in a new manifestation. He invested himself with a new set of attributes, those of our flesh, taking into him a human's soul and body, in order that thoughts, feelings, affections, might be his which could respond to ours. When, then, our Saviour weeps with sympathy, let us not say it is love of a man overcome by natural feeling. It is the love of God, the bowels of compassion, of the almighty and eternal, condescending to show us we are capable of receiving it, in the form of human nature.

Scripture (Mk. 1:40-45)

A man suffering from a virulent skin disease came to him and pleaded on his knees saying "If you want to, you can cleanse me." Feeling sorry for him, Jesus reached out his hand, touched him and said to him "I am willing. Be cleansed." And at once the skin disease left him and he was cleansed. The man went away and started talking about it freely, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to stay outside in places where nobody lived. Even so, people from all around would come to him.

Tuesday (Cardinal Basil Hume)

In searching for meaning and purpose in life, we are trying to catch glimpses of the glory of God. It is as if a cloud hovered between us and God. From time to time that cloud of unknowing is pierced by a shaft of light which shows us something about God, though we do not see or touch him directly. In a great Cathedral like Westminster, it is right that we should use all that is fine and magnificent to give honour and glory to God. But I remember a prison chaplain celebrating mass in a shapeless room made clean and tidy for the occasion. It is no place of beauty and the congregation is composed of the wounded ones of our society; their musical talents minimal, their clothing drab and dull. But God is smiling on them as he does on the congregation of the Cathedral. They, too, are pleasing to God.

Scripture (Isaiah 57:14-15)

Then it will be said "Level up, level up, clear the way, remove the obstacle from my people's way," for thus says the High and Exalted One who lives eternally and whose name is holy 'I live in the holy heights but I am with the contrite and humble, to revive the heart of the contrite.'

Wednesday (Henri Nouwen)

The Lord, whose compassion we want to manifest in time and place, is indeed the displaced Lord. A greater displacement cannot be conceived. The mystery of the incarnation is that God did not remain in the place that was proper for him but moved to the condition of a suffering human being. God *gave up* his heavenly place and took a humble place among mortal men and women. God displaced himself so that nothing human would be alien to him and he could experience fully the brokenness of our human condition.

Scripture (Philippians 2:5-8)

Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.

Thursday (Eucharistic Prayer, preface VIII)

Father, all-powerful and ever-living God, we do well,

Always and everywhere, to give you thanks.

When your children sinned and wandered far from your friendship, you reunited them with yourself through the blood of your Son and the power of the Holy Spirit. You gather them into your church to be one as you, Father, are one with your Son and Holy Spirit. You call them to be your people, to praise your wisdom in all your works. You make them the body of Christ and the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture (Romans 3:21-24)

God's saving justice was witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, but now it has been revealed altogether apart from law: God's saving justice given through faith in Christ Jesus to all who believe. No distinction is made: all have sinned and lack God's glory, and all are justified by the free gift of his grace through being set free in Christ Jesus.