Quinquagesima Sunday – The Ascent to Jerusalem

In the name of the Father...

The Parable of the Good Samaritan tells of a man ... going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.¹ Last summer, I spoke of the parable’s topography being instructive:² Jerusalem is an elevated place, twenty-five hundred feet above sea level symbolizing obedience to God’s law. By contrast, Jericho is the lowest dry land on earth, eight hundred feet below sea level, symbolizing the pagan perversity for which it rightly was consumed by fire.

In this vein, we can note that Jericho is east of Jerusalem, for the Jews the direction of exile. Eden being an elevated place,³ Adam was cast out to the east,⁴ and down to a place befitting his behavior. This is the true descent of man.⁵

In today’s gospel, Our Lord approached Jericho from the east to begin his final ascent to Jerusalem, to accomplish by his passion the great work of redemption, to bring the children of Adam back from exile and captivity to sin. If the journey from Jerusalem to Jericho tells of descent into depravity, then the ascent from Jericho to Jerusalem speaks of growth in charity.

In today’s epistle, St Paul writes of charity. His discourse is not about some vague ephemeral emotion, nor tolerance, nor being nice, nor even love properly understood on a natural level. He writes of the strictly supernatural love of God infused by God.

The Corinthians were disputing who had the greater charismatic gifts. Paul wrote that charity is immeasurably superior to them all: it is superior to works of mercy; it is superior even to faith which can move mountains.⁶ Paul might have summarized his teaching: caritas sola necessaria est - charity is the one thing necessary. Charity is the life of heaven even now, the one thing which will abide the same in heaven. When those charisms, even faith and hope pass away, charity will remain: caritas numquam excidit.⁷

Charity is properly the image of God in us, making us like God. St John writes: Deus caritas est... God is charity, and whoever abides in charity abides in God, and God abides in him.⁸ Charity disposes us to receive God, ultimately in the Beatific Vision. Thus St Paul writes: For now we see in a mirror dimly, but

¹ Lk 10:25-37
² Sermon for XII Sunday after Pentecost
³ Gen 2:10
⁴ Gen 3:24
⁵ Sermon for Septuagesima Sunday
⁶ Mt 17:20; 21:21
⁷ 1 Cor 13:8
⁸ 1 Jn 4:16
then face to face.\textsuperscript{9} To progress in charity is to draw closer to that elevated place where God dwells in otherwise inaccessible light.\textsuperscript{10}

Of charity’s properties which Paul enumerates, some pertain to that ascent from Jericho to Jerusalem.

First: charity does not rejoice in iniquity. Remaining in Jericho – in the clutches of avarice, gluttony, lust - is not an option, footnotes notwithstanding, the topography of footnotes in this case perhaps being suggestive.

Then, charity endures all things. Our Lord taught: Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy which leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard which leads to life, and those who find it are few.\textsuperscript{11} Like the way from Jericho to Jerusalem, the path to eternal life is steep and narrow: to traverse it requires patience and perseverance, enduring hardship. There are many who, if they do not rejoice in iniquity, are saddened by the truth and the demands which it makes of us, the slothful for whom remaining in Jericho seems preferable, until it is consumed by fire.

Finally, purified by trial and the one thing abiding at the peak of the ascent, the antithesis of rejoicing in iniquity, charity rejoices exceedingly in the truth, in the truth of God’s law and especially in Him who is the First Truth.

Our Lord encountered a blind man in Jericho. The Psalmist writes: For evils have encompassed me beyond number; my iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see.\textsuperscript{12} Sin blinds. The blind man pleaded with the Lord: Domine, ut videam… Lord that I may see…, that I may see my sins and be free of them, that I may see not with corporeal eyes, but with the eyes of faith, as if in a mirror dimly. Granted his desire, the blind man saw first the First Truth Incarnate, whereupon - leaving Jericho - he followed Him, rejoicing.

What does it mean to follow Our Lord? He taught: If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.\textsuperscript{13} To Peter’s question about the fate of the Beloved Apostle John, Our Lord replied: … what is that to you? You follow me!, John explaining that Our Lord foretold … by what kind of death he [Peter] was to glorify God. Peter was to follow in his master’s footsteps.

\textsuperscript{9} 1 Cor 13:12
\textsuperscript{10} 1 Tim 6:16
\textsuperscript{11} Mt 7:13-14
\textsuperscript{12} Ps 39(40):12
\textsuperscript{13} Mt 16:24
And so must we. On this last Sunday before Lent, the Church brings us to Jericho with the ascent to Jerusalem before us. For forty days, we will follow Our Lord liturgically, culminating in the great events of Holy Week and the Passion, the redemption of the children of Adam.

There is also, however, a moral ascent before us, both the lifelong pursuit of perfection in *charity* and the immediate Lenten discipline. Each must leave that personal Jericho and set out away from exile and sin on that steep and narrow path which leads to life, i.e., obedience to God’s law. At the threshold of Lent, our prayer should be that of the blind man: *Domine, ut videam...* that I may see my sins, my faults and failings and reject them, no longer to *rejoice in iniquity*. Our prayer should be for *patience* and *perseverance*, to not be saddened at the truth and its demands, to *endure all things* as we deny ourselves, do penance for our sins, take up the cross and follow the Lord, that we may glorify God by death to self.14 And hopeful of finally attaining that elevated place where God dwells in otherwise inaccessible light, where the blessed *rejoice exceedingly in the truth, face to face* in the very sight of Him who is the First Truth, our prayer always should be that we may follow the Lord rejoicing.

*In the name of the Father...*