

Christmas Sermon 2011 - Rev. Paul Check

“More tortuous than anything is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9) You may recognize these words from the prophet Jeremiah, who was, according to Blessed John Henry Newman, “the most eminent of all the persecuted prophets,” and therefore, in Newman’s description, “an especial type of our Lord and Savior.” Indeed, Cardinal Newman called Jeremiah “the most exact type of Christ” among the prophets, “in typifying Him who came and wept over Jerusalem.” So Jeremiah’s words can almost be taken as Christ’s words.

Like the Master, Jeremiah locates the malady that most afflicts man in the heart. Man was wounded in his capacity to receive love and to return it. Sin has made the heart “tortuous,” tangled, to the point that it cannot heal itself. We hear frustration and sadness in the prophet’s voice: “...beyond remedy; who can understand it...” Later, the King of the Prophets expresses His own dismay when He weeps over Jerusalem, over the Chosen People, who have failed to respond to His love: “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!” Jesus said. (Lk 19:42)

Man is at cross-purposes with himself. He desires love, but he seeks satisfaction in ways that will not fulfill his hope. His desires are often misdirected...this is a patristic definition of sin, “missing the mark,”...and that leads to the condition with which we all have lived experience: broken hearts, hard hearts, ungiven hearts. Such is the true tragedy of fallen human nature.

Yet the Good God would not leave us in this way. I cite Blessed Newman once again:

[the Word of God] when man fell, might have remained in the glory which He had with the Father before the world was. But that unsearchable Love, which showed itself in our original creation, rested not content with a frustrated work, but brought Him down again from His Father's bosom to do His will, and repair the evil which sin had caused. And with a wonderful condescension He came, not as before in power, but in weakness...

The stable at Bethlehem, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, is a school of divine and human love, “unsearchable Love,” Cardinal Newman called it. That is who God is—infinite Love—and that is why He will not leave us at cross-purposes with ourselves. A boundless love cannot do such a thing. He will show us a way forward, a way out of the tangle of our own hearts. He will gently draw us to Himself once more. We know and trust what the Beloved Apostle St. John wrote: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son into the world to be the expiation for our sins.” (1 Jn 4:10) Expiation: the amends Christ makes on our behalf both *atone* and *repair*...it is possible for man to love again, because the love of God has healed man’s heart from the effects of selfishness. We are not beyond remedy, after all.

St Augustine, a man who understood the perils of the human heart as few have, wrote, “The whole business of this life is to restore the health of the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen.” To make it easier for us to see Him, to grasp Him in terms understandable to us, God chose the most simple, most winning way to enter His creation and our world...in a way appealing to even the most aggrieved, cold or self-centered hearts...as a child innocent and vulnerable. Why does the “Mighty God” (Is 9:6) choose such an entrance? Very simply: because love does not force its way, but rather surrenders itself to the beloved in the earnest hope of finding welcome.

The two great questions of the spiritual life are, “Who am I?” and “Who is God?” It takes humility to know that I cannot find a complete answer to the first question without sincerely trying to answer the second. Jesus came to tell us of His Father’s goodness, His generosity and mercy, how the Father looks upon us with a “serene and kindly countenance,” in the words of the Roman Canon. There is one thing we certainly know about ourselves: that we want to be loved for who we are and not for what we can do. And so it is with God

Himself: He wants us to love Him, not for His gifts, but for who He is: a loving, personal God, who is both the origin and the reason for our existence, whose joy is that we are His children.

In one sense, God's entry to the world did not seem to change anything: the legacy of Original Sin remains. There is still so much disorder, so much that we can see that is wrong. The innocent still suffer. Freedom is abused. From what then, one might ask, did the Savior deliver us?

To attempt an answer to that reasonable question, we go back to the prophet Jeremiah: "Who can understand [the human heart]?" The one who understands it best is the One who was not satisfied only to create the heart and to redeem it, but who also loved us with a human heart Himself...a heart that was the gift of His mother, whose own Immaculate Heart was unlike any other.

While it is true that Christ is the Divine Physician, we would do Him and ourselves a grave disservice if we treat Him as a means to an end, to love Him more for what He does than for who He is. In other words: "I will love you, God, if you do what I ask." We might not think explicitly in those terms, but we do well to examine our intentions when events are not as we would have them...

The Savior did not deliver us from all discomfort and disappointment, or from very acute suffering...but He did deliver us from the burden of sin, and from the shame and guilt that follow in its wake. He showed us how to love by His own compassion...by not only suffering for us, but also with us...by not emancipating Himself from the dangers of a fallen world. He knew that we are vulnerable to confusing means and ends, to preferring the gift to the benefactor...and so He made necessary both the wood of the crib *and* the wood of the Cross for our salvation...so that we would have to seek Him, to depend upon Him, to trust Him with undivided hearts.

True, God did not refashion the world entirely by becoming man, but He did prove by His own life that, "It is when I am weak that I am strong," as St Paul said. (II Cor 12:10) The Good God knows what is best for hearts that still can be drawn easily off course. He wants us to remember that His "power is made perfect in [our] weakness." (II Cor 12:9) Self-reliance, on the other hand, though very subtle and attractive, is the road to misery in this life and eternal loss in the next.

Weakness is the condition of children, and so God chose to come to us as a child, to remind us of His power and of our need for Him...and to reassure us that no one understands the human heart as well as He...in both its frailty and its nobility. Yes, we may endure some fatigue as we strive to love generously and faithfully after the pattern of the Son of God. But our hearts are fortified for life's adventure by the presence of the Infant Jesus in the manger.

If Our Blessed Lord can be said to have given a Christmas sermon, He did so when He explained why He came into the world as He did: "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children," Jesus said, "you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven." (Mt 18:3) Our Lord always taught us two ways, by precept and by His example. Jesus is the perfect child of God, and He instructs us how to begin again today, at the start of a new year of grace, to learn more deeply how to love as God's precious children and so enter into His joy.