

Lectio Divina

DAILY SCRIPTURE READING + MEDITATION + PRAYER + CONTEMPLATION

"First, have habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his. You must then study Christ's life in order to know how to imitate Him and conduct yourself in events as He would." ~SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS

**Monday, March 25 ~ Third Week in the Season of Lent
Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord**

Holy Gospel: Luke 1:26-38 The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end." But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God." Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Meditation: In this particular passage of sacred scripture we see the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy and the unfolding of God's plan of redemption in the events leading up to the Incarnation, the birth of the Messiah. The new era of salvation begins with the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary. This child to be born is conceived by the action of the Holy Spirit upon Mary, who finds favor with God. As Eve was the mother of all humanity doomed to sin, now Mary becomes the mother of the new Adam who will father a new humanity by his grace (ref. Romans 5:12-21).

Prayer: O God, who willed that your Word should take on the reality of human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, grant, we pray, that we, who confess our Redeemer to be God and man, may merit to become partakers even in his divine nature. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: How does Mary respond to the word of God delivered by the angel Gabriel? She knows she is hearing something beyond human capability. It will surely take a miracle which surpasses all that God has done previously. Her question, "how shall this be, since I have no husband" is not prompted by doubt or skepticism, but by wonderment! She is a true hearer of the Word and she immediately responds with faith, trust, and without hesitation. Mary's prompt response of "yes" to the divine message is a model of faith for all believers. Mary believed God's promises even when they seemed impossible. She was full of grace because she trusted that what God said was true and would be fulfilled. She was willing and eager to do God's will, even if it seemed difficult or costly. Mary is the "mother of God" because God becomes incarnate when he takes on flesh in her womb. When we pray the Nicene Creed we state our confession of faith in this great mystery: "For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man." God gives us grace and he expects us to respond with the same willingness, obedience, and heartfelt trust as Mary did. When God commands he also gives the help, strength, and means to respond. We can either yield to his grace or resist and go our own way. Going our own way leads to nowhere; following Christ leads to eternal life.

Tuesday, March 26 ~ Third Week in the Season of Lent

Holy Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35 Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. That is why the Kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who

decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan. When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, 'Pay back what you owe.' Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt. Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?' Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

Meditation: Who wouldn't be grateful to have someone release them from their debts? But can we really expect mercy and pardon when we owe someone a great deal? The prophet Amos speaks of God forgiving transgression three times, but warns that God may not revoke punishment for the fourth (see Amos 1:3-13; 2:1-6). When Peter posed the question of forgiveness, he characteristically offered an answer he thought Jesus would be pleased with. Why not forgive seven times! How unthinkable for Jesus to counter with the proposition that one must forgive seventy times that. Jesus made it clear that there is no reckonable limit to forgiveness. And he drove the lesson home with a parable about two very different kinds of debts. The first man owed an enormous sum of money – millions in our currency. In Jesus' time this amount was greater than the total revenue of a province – more than it would cost to ransom a king! The man who was forgiven such an incredible debt could not, however bring himself to forgive his neighbor a very small debt which was about one- hundred-thousandth of his own debt. The contrast could not have been greater!

Prayer: May your grace not forsake us, O Lord, we pray, but make us dedicated to your holy service and at all times obtain for us your help. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: There is no way we could repay God the debt we owed him because of our sins and offenses. Only his mercy and pardon could free us from such a debt. Despite how we may feel at times toward people in our lives, there is no offense our neighbor can do to us that can compare with our debt to God! If God has forgiven each of us our debt, we, too must forgive others the debt they owe us. Through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross – which atoned for our sins – each one of us have been forgiven a debt beyond all reckoning. It cost God his very own Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to ransom us with the price of his blood. Jesus paid the price for us and won for us pardon for our sins and freedom from slavery to our unruly desires and sinful habits. God in his mercy offers us the grace and help of his Holy Spirit so we can love as he loves, pardon as he pardons, and treat others with the same mercy and kindness which he has shown to us. God has made his peace with us. Have you made your peace with God? Have you reconciled yourself with God? Especially during Lent we are called to reconcile ourselves with God and with one another. A healthy trip to the confessional to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a first and important start. Have you been to confession lately? If not, why not?

Wednesday, March 27 ~ Third Week in the Season of Lent

Holy Gospel: Matthew 5:17-19 Jesus said to his disciples: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the Kingdom of heaven."

Meditation: Notice how Jesus consistently taught reverence for God's law – reverence for God himself, for the Lord's Day, reverence or respect for parents, respect for life, for property, for another person's good name, respect for oneself and for one's neighbor lest wrong or hurtful desires master us. Reverence and respect for God's commandments teach us the way of love – love of God and love of neighbor. What is impossible to men and women is possible to God and those who put their faith and trust in God. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit the Lord transforms us and makes us like himself. We are a new creation in Christ (ref. 2 Cor. 5:17) because "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy

Spirit which has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). God gives us the grace to love as he loves, to forgive as he forgives, to think as he thinks, and to act as he acts. The Lord loves justice and goodness and he hates every form of wickedness and sin. He wants to set us free from our unruly desires and sinful habits, so that we can choose to live each day in the peace, joy, and righteousness of his Holy Spirit (ref. Romans 14: 17). To renounce sin is to turn away from what is harmful and destructive for our minds and hearts, and our very lives. As his followers we must love and respect his commandments and hate every form of sin. Do you love and revere the commands of the Lord?

Prayer: Grant, we pray, O Lord, that, schooled through Lenten observance and nourished by your word, through holy restraint we may be devoted to you with all our heart and be ever united in prayer. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: How do you look upon the laws of God? Negatively? Positively? Pick-and-choose when it suits you (the old "cafeteria Catholic")? Jesus' attitude towards the law of God can be summed up in the great prayer of Psalm 119: "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day." For the people of Israel the "law" could refer to the Ten Commandments or to the five Books of Moses, called the Pentateuch, which explain the commandments and ordinances of God for his people. The "law" also referred to the whole teaching or way of life which God gave to his people. The Jews in Jesus' time also used it as a description of the oral or scribal law. Needless to say, the scribes added many more things to the law than God intended. That is why Jesus often condemned the scribal law. It placed burdens on people which God had not intended. Jesus, however, made it very clear that the essence of God's law – his commandments and his way of life – must be fulfilled. So, once again, how do you view God's law? How do you put God's law into action and practice in your daily life?

Thursday, March 28 ~ Third Week in the Season of Lent

Holy Gospel: Luke 11:14-23 Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute, and when the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke and the crowds were amazed. Some of them said, "By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons." Others, to test him, asked him for a sign from heaven. But he knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste and house will fall against house. And if Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that it is by Beelzebul that I drive out demons. If I, then, drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people drive them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I drive out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man fully armed guards his palace, his possessions are safe. But when one stronger than he attacks and overcomes him, he takes away the armor on which he relied and distributes the spoils. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."

Meditation: Jesus himself encountered personal opposition and battled with Satan when he was put to the test in the wilderness just before his public ministry. He overcame the evil one through his obedience to the will of his Father. Some of the Jewish leaders reacted vehemently to Jesus' healings and exorcisms and they opposed him with malicious slander. How could he get the power and authority to release individuals from Satan's power? They assumed that he had to be in league with Satan. They attributed his power to Satan rather than to God. Jesus answers their charge with two arguments. There were many exorcists in Palestine in Jesus' time. So Jesus retorted by saying that they also incriminate their own kin who cast out demons. If they condemn Jesus they also condemn themselves. In his second argument he asserts that no kingdom divided against itself cannot survive for long. We have witnessed enough civil wars in our own time to prove the destructive force at work here for the annihilation of whole peoples and their land. If Satan lends his power against his own forces then he is finished. How can a strong person be defeated except by someone who is stronger? Jesus asserted his power and authority to cast out demons as a clear demonstration of the reign of God. Jesus' reference to the finger of God points back to Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh and his magicians who represented Satan and the kingdom of darkness (see Exodus 8:19).

Prayer: We implore your majesty most humbly, O Lord, that, as the feast of our salvation draws ever closer, so we may press forward all the more eagerly towards the worthy celebration of the Paschal Mystery. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: We live in a world of compromise. And yet, there are some aspects of our life that we just cannot afford to compromise on – especially our faith life: the laws of God, the teachings of Christ,

and the teachings of the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Remember, the teachings of the Church have their foundation in the laws of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ, and are applied to contemporary situations. Jesus makes it clear that there are no neutral parties. We are either for Jesus or against him, for the kingdom of God or against it. Once we start going down the road of compromise, we turn against God and Jesus, because we begin to place our will above and before the will of God (sound familiar – Adam and Eve?). There are two kingdoms in opposition to one another – the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness under the rule of Satan. If we disobey God’s word – if we compromise God’s word – then we open the door to the power of sin and Satan in our lives. If you want to live in freedom from sin and Satan, then your house – your life and all you possess – must be occupied by Jesus where he is enthroned as Lord and Savior. Is the Lord Jesus the Master of your home, heart, mind, and will?

Friday, March 29 ~ Third Week in the Season of Lent

Holy Gospel: Mark 12:28-34 One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” Jesus replied, “The first is this: Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.” The scribe said to him, “Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, He is One and there is no other than he. And to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Meditation: The Pharisees prided themselves in the knowledge of the law and their ritual requirements. They made it a life-time practice to study the six hundred and thirteen precepts of the Old Testament along with the numerous rabbinic commentaries. They tested Jesus to see if he correctly understood the law as they did. Jesus startled them with his profound simplicity and mastery of the law of God and its purpose. What does God require of us? Simply that we love as he loves! God is love and everything he does flows from his love for us. God loved us first and our love for him is a response to his exceeding grace and kindness towards us. The love of God comes first and the love of neighbor is firmly grounded in the love of God. The more we know of God's love and truth the more we love what he loves and reject what is hateful and contrary to his will. What, then, makes our love for God and his commands grow in us? Faith in God and hope in his promises strengthens us in the love of God. They are essential for a good relationship with God, for being united with him. The more we know of God the more we love him and the more we love him the greater we believe and hope in his promises. The Lord, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, gives us a new freedom to love as he loves. Do you know the love which conquers all?

Prayer: Pour your grace into our hearts, we pray, O Lord, that we may be constantly drawn away from unruly desires and obey by your own gift the heavenly teaching you give us. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: The following prayer of Saint Anselm is worth contemplating today: "We love you, O our God; and we desire to love you more and more. Grant to us that we may love you as much as we desire, and as much as we ought. O dearest friend, who has so loved and saved us, the thought of whom is so sweet and always growing sweeter, come with Christ and dwell in our hearts; that you keep a watch over our lips, our steps, our deeds, and we shall not need to be anxious either for our souls or our bodies. Give us love, sweetest of all gifts, which knows no enemy. Give us in our hearts pure love, born of your love to us, that we may love others as you love us. O most loving Father of Jesus Christ, from whom flows all love, let our hearts, frozen in sin, cold to you and cold to others, be warmed by this divine fire. So help and bless us in your Son."

Scripture passages (NAB translation) courtesy of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Daily meditations and contemplations adapted from the Irish Jesuits' *Sacred Space* web page and *Biblical Medications for Lent* by Rev. Carroll Stuhlmüller, C.P.; prayers are from *The Roman Missal*, Catholic Book Publishing, 2011; information about saints, solemnities, feasts and memorials courtesy of the Catholic Culture web site.

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