

Lent, Love Provides a Last Chance.

Hans Urs Von Balthasar.

In the Song of Songs we read: “Love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave” (Song 8:6). Jesus sometimes says things reminiscent of this, things that do not fit in at all with the sweet and sickly picture many people draw of the Man from Nazareth. We must be prepared for this kind of ruthlessness as we listen to today’s Sunday Gospel. Here it is:

“There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’

“And he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, “Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?”’ And he answered him, “Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down”’ (Lk 13:1-9).”

Two truths confront each other in these words of Jesus. The first concerns the political atrocity of the Roman governor, but also the disaster at the Pool of Siloam, the collapse of a tower that buried eighteen people alive. Should such catastrophes be interpreted as retribution for the guilt of those who perished, as the Pharisees were inclined to believe? Jesus says a categorical “No”. The second truth concerns the same episodes and then is made clearer by the parable of the fig tree. Are those struck by misfortune innocent then? No, says Jesus, they were just as sinful as you who are asking the question, and you are just as open to punishment, just as much in danger of punishment, as those who have already been overtaken by it. The only profitable lesson you can take from these reports, from these newspaper columns headed “crimes and accidents”, is this: be converted, change your life, turn around 180 degrees. Not sometime in the future, either, when it suits you, when the recession gets worse and food gets scarcer, but now, because this is God’s time and, as John the Baptist says, the axe is already laid at the root of your tree. It is high time for the fig tree to bear the fruit for which people have been waiting impatiently; even the vinedresser, requesting a postponement of drastic measures, has to agree that next year may be too late, indeed, surely will be too late, if the tree remains without fruit any longer, a parasite using up the soil.

There can be no question of saying that God’s love is not to be seen in this Gospel. In fact, it appears in many forms, but as a love that is so stretched by man, as it were, that it seems to have reached the end of its patience and is obliged to assume the form of a warning.

First of all, Jesus says that God does not simply treat sinners according to their deeds, and that the suffering that overtakes them is in no way an indication of the magnitude of their guilt. Others may have more against them and yet be spared.

Second, he offers his questioners an opportunity. The very misfortune of their fellowmen should be a warning to them: they should take it as a sign from God that they should change the course of their lives. Notice how urgently Jesus speaks of “all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem”, those who, if they do not turn about, will all perish in the same manner: he can foresee the imminent, terrible ruin of the stiff-necked city.

Third, according to Jesus, it is in the nature of the fig tree that it should bring forth fruit. God has given it an inbuilt capacity for good, for being useful. In the same way man only needs to follow a natural instinct, and he will respond to God’s requirement of fruitfulness.

Fourth, there is the goodwill of the vinedresser who asks for a final postponement and who is prepared to do his utmost, by digging and manuring, to elicit fruit from the recalcitrant tree.

And fifth, there is the Lord who yields and grants this last postponement.

Love is quite definitely present, therefore; it shines out from all the cracks, but, in the face of men's tepidity and lack of love and their habit of accusing others of sin and excusing themselves, it has to assume the features of a ruthless and resolute power. "Love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave." Eventually there comes a point at which God's long animity is all used up, when man will not take advantage of the time remaining to him. Then God's love has to resort to other methods. But please understand that I am talking of God's love. I am not saying that God's love is inwardly limited, by his justice, for instance. This is how many people think of it. But none of God's qualities is limited, least of all his love. Nor is his justice, either, or his mercy. All these qualities totally interpenetrate. We cannot say that God is unjust when, in the parable of the laborers hired to work in the vineyard, he pays the latest-hired man the same as those who have worked from morning. The fact that justice and love coincide in God was one of the most felicitous discoveries of little Therese. It is true, however, that after a certain point has been reached God's love must use severe measures in order to achieve its goals. The judgment that all sinners must undergo, and from which they will not emerge without being purified, after a shorter or longer time, this judgment must be unyielding. It must be completely irrevocable, precisely because what is at stake is access to ultimate pardon.

It is worthwhile dwelling for a moment on this idea of judgment. Catholics believe in the existence of purgatory, a period of purification. Paul explicitly speaks of it in the First Letter to the Corinthians:

"Each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor 3:13-15)."

There we have it exactly, this ruthlessness on the part of love. But now, instead of being in the form of a warning in the dimension of time, it actually begins to take measures on the threshold of eternity. Purgatory is nothing other than a dimension of judgment; it is the undergoing of judgment, in which we are measured against the unyielding norm and conformed to it, as we must if we are to be allowed into the kingdom of eternal love. For that is our destination. So the fire of the divine love must burn up everything in us that does not correspond to it. And, depending on how we have lived here on earth, this can be more or less painful; indeed, it may involve appalling pain. Then it may come about that all our earthly superstructure, all we thought we had to identify ourselves with here on earth, will go up in flames, and the burning ruins will fall on us like the tower of Siloam. "He will suffer loss", says Paul, he will grieve over the futility and perversity of his life, and in shame and disgrace he will have to sit down among the dunces to learn the ABCs of real love. Up to now all he knew (and that by heart) was the ABCs of egoism. What can divine mercy do with such a person? He would not even understand it; he would not even know how to accept it.

The sinner needs a kind of brainwashing to make him grasp the ideas that lie behind God's love. In the end, however, the ideas God has are the only true ones, and ultimately we simply have to submit to them. In judgment and the fire that goes with it we shall have to walk slowly toward the final, all-embracing idea, the final notion of God's inventiveness, namely, the crucified Son of God. He is the truth, and I must allow myself to accept this truth. The truth of sin: that is your contribution. The truth of grace: that is what God has done for you. Conversion is always a painful and lonely process. No one can do it for me, and I must learn to love things I previously disliked and renounce the very things I previously held dear.

But now let us leave purgatory and return to the world. As Christians we cannot interpret suffering in the world in any other way than as divine love veiling its face when confronted with the world's terrible sinfulness. It may seem to us that those who are less sinful have more to suffer. In that case, no doubt, their suffering is on behalf of the others. The Galileans mentioned in the Gospel

were actually having their sacrificial animals slaughtered in the Temple when they themselves were butchered along with them. Compared with others, they were God-fearing sinners. The least guilty can be imprisoned in concentration camps or banished to the Gulag Archipelago. This arises from the Cross of Christ: the better can suffer on behalf of the worse. Or rather, let us say, “are privileged to suffer” on their behalf. And this suffering can be genuinely harsh and pitiless. This is something for us to remember if, in our suffering, we reach the end of our patience; it will support us and prevent us from becoming bitter.

Above all, however, we ought to hear the urgent note of warning in Jesus’ words: “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” This “unless” implies the possibility of averting disaster. Jerusalem could have repented. All of us could repent, and then our future would look different. The axe is laid to the roots of the trees, but many respond to the Baptist’s words, are converted and baptized. The fig tree could bear fruit next year--its last chance--and so escape destruction.

We can apply all this to our own country. If God had found ten righteous men in Sodom, the town would have been spared as Abraham requested. Who knows how many righteous people, interceding for their fellows, are left among us? One thing is certain: there would be more if we were to be converted; perhaps there would be enough then to save our country. One suspects, however, that today there are probably fewer than in former times, when people prayed more, did more penance and believed with greater hope. In those days less paper and print were produced (by synods, episcopal offices and all manner of committees) to go straight into our wastepaper baskets, but there were a more genuine Christian atmosphere and outlook in our parishes. In those days there was not the destructive dispute between the mindless left and the ossified and embittered right.

Then, in the last war, we were aware of the protecting hand of our interceding Abraham, St. Claus, our country’s patron saint, blessing and preserving our native land. “By grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph 2:8). We should remember this, nor should we assume we will be saved by grace the next time round. “I tell you, No”, says the Lord, in his “I tell you” showing his full power as Judge, “but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Just as millions have perished, to the north, to the south, to the west and east of us. We have a good life; our land is full of gold that people send here for safekeeping, and we look after it for them and for ourselves. But it is doubtful whether this gold is the manure of which the Gospel speaks, helping us to bear fruit. The same could be said of all the prosperity that has formed our life-style and has become the almost unconscious goal of our work and efforts.

For the present we are still free; we have what, for the modern world, is unheard-of freedom, and we must use it responsibly for ourselves and for others. But among us there are those, and their numbers are increasing, who lust for the fleshpots of Egypt, of the slave house, and who would dearly like to wallow along with the multitude, as our own Carl Spitteler puts it. They are not prepared to learn any lesson from those trees of Europe that have already been felled and have lost their freedom to bear fruit. They are no longer parasites on the soil: they themselves are being bled dry. For them the system that bleeds them dry, the system of the Egyptian slave drivers, no longer holds any attraction or fascination. The pears rot from within; you can only see it when you cut them open. Who can do anything to stop the rot among the intelligentsia of our country? Once it has spread far enough, it will hardly be worth stretching out a hand to protect it.

But we have no intention of being fatalists like those still under the spell. We must affirm that the personal attitude, personal conversion, can be the decisive factor in everything. “Let it alone, sir, this year ... if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not”, then--in God’s name and for his greater glory, so that he can make room for other and better things--”you can cut it down.”

Hans Urs von Balthasar,
“You Crown the Year with Your Goodness (Sermons through the Liturgical Year)”