

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Fr. Joseph Levine; August 16, 2020

Readings: Is 56:1, 6-7; Ps 67:2-3,5-8; Rm 11:13-15,29-32; Mt 15:21-28

Last Sunday I affirmed that the Lord himself will come to save “his faithful ones who strive to do his will, even when they labor against adverse winds, even when they feel abandoned.”

Today, we heard the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah declaring: *Observe what is right, do what is just; for my salvation is about to come, my justice about to be revealed.*

The greatness of the salvation will be proportioned to the greatness of the crisis we are presently experiencing. That is to say that the good that will come about, through the work of the Lord, will be incomparably greater than the evil suffered.

We learn today also that the Lord’s salvation is for all who love the name of the Lord, who become his servants, who keep the Sabbath free, and hold to his covenant.

Notice the centrality of Sabbath and covenant. So let me say something today about the meaning of the Sabbath, which since the Resurrection of Jesus Christ has been transferred to Sunday, the Lord’s Day.

In 1846 in the parish of La Salette in the French Alps Mass attendance was dwindling, cursing was becoming common, together with impurity, greed, and self-indulgence. Two poor children, with little or no schooling, Melanie Calvat, who was 14, and Maximin Giraud, who was 11, were tending their sheep when they came upon a beautiful lady, it was the Virgin Mary, sitting upon a rock and crying. She warned the children that the violation of the Sabbath and the cursing, invoking the holy name of Jesus, would oblige Jesus to bring a severe punishment on the region and that her own intercession would be of no avail, unless the people converted. The people of La Salette actually did convert.

Today, in general, people think even less of the holiness of the Lord’s day and the holiness of his name than the people of La Salette at the time the Virgin appeared. Even worse, we don’t even think the Lord takes either the holiness of his name or the holiness of his day seriously; we don’t think he would actually punish anyone. So we fail to recognize divine punishment, even when it is taking place.

What is the Sabbath all about? Why is it so important? Why can’t people just go about the practical business of their lives and get things done?

On Mount Sinai, in a voice heard by all the people, God gave the Ten Commandments. In the third place he said, *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work.* (Ex 20:8-10)

The contrast is between 'your work', human work, and setting aside the day specifically for God. The work to which God refers is all work that provides for the needs of human life in this world. God created this world, but he is not limited by and does not belong to the world he created.

Nevertheless, when God enters into a covenant with his people, something remarkable happens: He declares, *You shall be my people, and I will be your God.* (Jer 30:22; cf. Jer 31:33)

The covenant establishes a type of marriage between God, the Bridegroom, and his people, the Bride. The new and eternal covenant in the Blood of Christ establishes a marriage between Christ, the Son of God made man, and his Church, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, built on the Rock of Peter and his successors.

Now usually, in human life, we think of a wife complaining that her husband is never home because he is always working. In the marriage between God and his people, it is the Divine Bridegroom who complains that his people are never 'at home', because they are always working. They are consumed by the needs of this life and give no thought for the life they share with God, which lasts into eternity.

Now, in the Catholic Tradition, the life we share with God, the supernatural life, the life of the children of God, goes by a special name: it is called *sanctifying grace*. Sanctifying grace is a reality that is interior to our souls, given to us first in baptism, capable of being lost through mortal sin, capable of being restored through a complete, humble, and sincere confession to a priest. Sanctifying grace is a real participation in the life and nature of God, that elevates and transforms our soul from within and makes us truly to become children of God. It is the beginning of eternal life in us.

St. Paul writes: *You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.* (Col 3:3-4) The glory of the life of grace is presently hidden from our eyes and known only to faith; in heaven what is now hidden will be made manifest.

On August 6 the Church celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, when his appearance was changed and he allowed the glory of his divinity to shine through his humanity, then his human face shone like the sun. (cf. Mt 17:2) If the glory of the soul in a state of grace were to appear through the human body, it would be like the light of the Transfiguration, except in a lesser degree.

Returning to the meaning of keeping the Sabbath, we can speak of the interior fulfillment of the commandment and of the exterior fulfillment of the commandment.

Interiorly we must actually keep the Sabbath at all times by refraining from sin, living in fidelity to the life of grace, and so ordering all of our actions, even those meant to meet basic human needs in this life, to the goal of eternal life. Interiorly we keep the Sabbath when we love the Lord our God with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole strength, and our whole mind.

Since, however, we are bodily creatures, and through our body social creatures as well, we cannot live on a purely interior level; we need bodily and social observances both to express and to foster the interior life.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. By the Lord's command, as it has been handed on to us by the Church, we are to set aside one day of the week, Sunday, the Lord's Day, in which we are refrain as much as possible from any activity that merely serves our life in this world (one important exception being those works of charity that serve the material needs of others), so as to dedicate our time to being with God, to the cultivation of the life of grace, both individually and socially.

The life of grace is the great gift of the new and eternal covenant in the Blood of Christ. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is always the solemn renewal of that covenant. Therefore, the Mass is the most essential activity of the Lord's Day. The Body of Christ in holy communion is the essential nourishment for the life of grace. Therefore, communion in the Body of Christ, is likewise an essential activity of the Lord's Day.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, born of the Virgin Mary, is at once the High Priest, mediator between God and men, God's Holy Mountain, his Temple, his altar, and the sacrifice offered on the altar. The whole of the prophecy is brought to fulfillment in him. Through fidelity to the life of grace, we come to dwell upon this Holy Mountain and receive the fulfillment of the promise of God.

This reality comes to us through the Church, the Bride of Christ, and through the Sacraments of the Church.

Nevertheless, perhaps we feel that the Church treats us a bit like Jesus treated the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel. We must not, however, turn away from the Church any more than the Canaanite woman turned away from Jesus. Rather, we must persevere in humility as did the Canaanite woman. Then we will receive the true answer to our prayers and the fulfillment of God's promise.

The reality of grace, from its inception to its perfect fulfillment is seen in the Blessed Virgin Mary, full of grace. Yesterday, we celebrated that perfect fulfillment in her glorious Assumption, body and soul, into heaven. She is the perfect creature of grace. Her humanity was completely transformed by the fulness of grace from her Immaculate Conception. She gave the perfect grace-filled response to the message of the angel when she said, *Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word.* (Lk 1:38) She persevered in fidelity to her consecration to the Son of God, her own Son, to the foot of the Cross, giving through grace her assent to the sacrifice of our redemption. From the time of Pentecost, she was the great witness of grace in the heart of the Church. Finally, after completing the course of her earthly life, she was taken up to heaven, body and soul, her body now a resplendent lamp through which the glory of her grace shines forth. There in heaven she intercedes with her Son for us as the Mediatrix of all grace.