

Sunday Afternoon Readings

(By RIGHT REV. MGR. POWER for the N.Z. Tablet.)

IX.—A MODEL PENITENT.

Knowing now the enormity of sin, we must determine to turn from it by heartfelt sorrow; this sorrow must not only remove sin, but also extract its roots and plant in their stead the seeds of virtue. In St. Peter we have a model penitent, one who sinned grievously, but who sorrowed for his sin during all the years of a long life. Let us study this model and imitate him!

Three things contributed to St. Peter's fall: he was self-confident, he was not ardent in the way of the Cross, and he went into the occasion of sin. Since these are the dangers against which Our Lord Himself warns us, He may not be counted upon to help us when we walk into them with open eyes. St. Paul is very clear on this when he says: "Let no temptation take hold on you but such as is human," that is, such as cannot be avoided by human beings. It is only with unavoidable temptations God will make issue, and give us special graces to overcome them. Now, our chief temptation is to pride, and to pride in the form of self-sufficiency and self-confidence. We have done so much for ourselves in the natural order, so much in the way of improvements, discoveries, and triumphs over nature in every branch of science, that we are easily led to think that we can similarly overcome obstacles that are supernatural. But if we only exercise a little thought, we must conclude with St. Paul that here we can do nothing of ourselves. It is through God's strengthening grace we both believe and will; without that grace we cannot formulate a good thought, or utter a good word: we cannot say: The Lord Jesus, except by the Holy Ghost. What else does Our Lord mean by promising His grace to the humble? What else does St. Peter, taught by his own sad experience, mean by the warning: "Be sober and watch, for your adversary the devil like a roaring lion goeth about, seeking whom he may devour, whom resist ye, strong in faith"? It is with the eye of faith, not with that of natural wisdom, we must see our enemy, and it is with the weapons supplied by faith we must meet and conquer him.

The chief of these weapons is a humble distrust of self. The root of constancy is not in our heart, but in the Heart of Jesus, a way to which was opened to us by the soldier's spear. Self-oblation to God is better than self-confidence. The four-and-twenty Ancients are for ever casting their crowns of gold before the throne of the Lamb. If they thus joyfully cast down the symbols of their highest good, we might wisely imitate them by laying our mental self-importance, our mental self-sufficiency at the feet of Him Who will be our safest guide.

We must make a similar oblation of our free will. Peter was over-confident of his own will, and because of this came the three sins against his Lord. He had so often been warned; just a little while ago, Jesus had said to him: "Watch and pray lest you enter

into temptation." Surely, he thought, this warning could not have been meant for him. Was he not always by his Master's side? Was he not able to withstand every temptation? Had he not said from a heart of conviction that he should never be scandalised, that he would die with Christ? What could Jesus have meant by saying that he would deny Him three times that very night? Jesus was wrong; Jesus did not know His disciple. But Jesus is always right, and His warning is always justified. Presuming on his own strength, Peter was careless; he went where no friend of Christ should be found, amongst His enemies; a swift temptation came, and yielding to panic fear, he committed his three sins: he denied his Master, he perjured himself, and he invoked a terrible imprecation, calling God to affirm that the lie he had spoken was the truth.

There are too many like Peter to-day; well-intentioned, well-disposed, but careless about the occasions of sin. They find themselves amongst those who have no great love for Christ; questions arise, principles of worldliness are advocated, and the poor Catholic lets go his opportunity from human respect, or through fear of complications. It is a sorry story. Chapter after chapter will be added to it while men rely upon themselves. The Church will continue to warn them, but they will not listen: They feel themselves so strong, that they blindly rush in where angels fear to tread. They are not afraid of the bustle of the street, of the seductions of fashion, of the indecencies of places of entertainment, of the unrestraints of public morals. They forget that they have the same passions as other men; they ignore St. John's warning that "the whole world is seated in darkness," and so they fall from God. St. Paul was spiritually stronger than we can pretend to be, yet he was ever afraid of the broad road of wickedness, and ever warned his converts against it: "See therefore brethren, how you walk circumspectly; not as unwise, but as wise . . . because the days are evil. . . We have this excellency in earthen vessels, that the excellency may be of the power of God, and not of us." The Psalmist, recognising the self-same danger, cries to God: "Pierce Thou my flesh with Thy fear; for I am afraid of Thy judgments."

But now, though sin is a terrible thing, we are taught by the example of St. Peter that it may be made to serve an excellent purpose; it is included in the "all things," which, according to St. Paul, work together unto the good of those who love God. Peter sinned, but see the sublime use he made of this thought every day of his life! Leaving Pilate's Hall, he came face to face with his Master; Jesus just looked at him, and Peter, going out, wept bitterly. He wept every day, and his tears wore those deep furrows down his cheeks which the Christian painters love to portray. Where sin had abounded, grace did more abound. In one

moment he stepped from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to the Heart of Jesus. When the sun looks down upon the earth in Spring it makes all nature smile, and when Jesus looks with love upon the heart, healing, health, life, and vigor pour into it. "O God of Hosts, convert us and show us Thy face, and we shall be saved."

Jesus knew Peter after all, and Peter knew that He knew him. He remembered that day three years ago, when the Master looked into his heart by the Lake, and he fell at His feet, captivated for evermore by the mighty spell of that glance of love. Oh, if He would only look at us like that! But He does, and no one can ever be happy who resists that look. There will be a third look at Peter. Jesus has ascended into Heaven, the brutal Nero seeks Peter's life, for Peter is now Head of the Church; the people urge him to escape, his life is necessary for the Church's welfare; he reluctantly follows this counsel, and is hastening along the Appian Way from the wicked city; One meets him and looks at him. Peter, astonished, enraptured, cries: "*Domine, quo vadis*—Lord, whither goest Thou?" "To Rome," Jesus replies, "to be crucified afresh." "No, no, Master," cries Peter, "Thy disciple will take Thy place." He retraces his steps, he is crucified in the wicked city. "With head downwards," he whispers to the executioner. "I am not worthy to be crucified like my Master"; and his wish is granted.

Three looks of Jesus have made of Peter an Apostle, a penitent, a martyr. His long life and his glorious death have made a grand atonement for one hour's sin. Glory springs out of wreck and ruin, and it shall be so with us if we only will it. We too may behold that countenance, full of grace and truth, and sinners though we be, may become apostles, penitents, martyrs. Here then is our lesson: we cannot build a worthy house of the soul unless we lay its foundations on the genuine bed-rock of sorrow for sin. This sorrow must not be merely sentimental, but must show itself in works of penance and mortification heartily taken up and bravely endured in the service of God.

"O God, Who rejectest no one, but in Thy tender mercy art propitiated by the repentance of those who have sinned, however grievously, receive with favor the prayers we humbly offer Thee through Christ our Lord."

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