Falling Down

Becoming whole again

Perhaps one of the best known nursery rhymes in the English-speaking world is with little doubt Humpty Dumpty. While there are numerous versions and an equal number of conjectures as to its origin and meaning, its four lines continue to be enjoyed by children everywhere, despite his rather unfortunate demise. The fact that all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again has never seemed to dampen the youthful delight in its recital.

There is a moral to this tragic tale, applicable to everyone. Like Humpty, each of us has fallen down at some point in our lives and have been broken. It is in our nature, it is that thing we call concupiscence, the inclination to sin. No one is immune, no one is unbroken. We are all sinners, the best and the worst of us.

Like Humpty Dumpty, all the king’s horses and all the king’s men can’t put us back together again, no matter how many horses and men there are or how hard they may try. Nope! It simply cannot be done.

Except...God can. “For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” ¹ Of course there does remain one thing necessary in order for the broken to become unbroken, for us to become whole again and that is to repent. We must ask for God’s mercy and forgiveness and promise to avoid climbing up on that wall anymore.

Of course God knows we will almost certainly forget what we promise for it is in our nature to do so. He knows we are fallible yet no matter how often we climb that wall he will never stop loving us and forgiving us when we fall down, over and over again. Neither will he ever prevent us from climbing that wall.

¹. Mt 19:26.
Contemplating Truth

The spirit rising

Pope Saint John Paul II began his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* by stating, “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.”

John Paul was primarily concerned with how certain fundamental truths of Catholic Doctrine which he had spoken of in his Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* were at risk of being distorted and denied, especially by the younger generation and so hoped to offer further reflection upon the relationship between truth and faith.

“In the present Letter, I wish to pursue that reflection by concentrating on the theme of truth itself and on its foundation in relation to faith. For it is undeniable that this time of rapid and complex change can leave especially the younger generation, to whom the future belongs and on whom it depends, with a sense that they have no valid points of reference. The need for a foundation for personal and communal life becomes all the more pressing at a time when we are faced with the patent inadequacy of perspectives in which the ephemeral is affirmed as a value and the possibility of discovering the real meaning of life is cast into doubt. This is why many people stumble through life to the very edge of the abyss without knowing where they are going. At times, this happens because those whose vocation it is to give cultural expression to their thinking no longer look to truth, preferring quick success to the toil of patient enquiry into what makes life worth living.”

Increasingly we encounter those who care little or nothing for truth and reason; it goes beyond simple annoyance, it chills the soul. For when we look into the eyes what reflects is dark and empty, void of beauty, love, and hope.

R. R. Reno wrote recently that “When reality impinges on our self-image, our conceits, and our cherished assumptions, we tend to falsify things so that we’re not challenged, contradicted, or inconvenienced. We want reality to suit us.”

We see this literally everyday, this empty satisfaction with knowing a bit of this and a taste of that, absent any desire or drive to know more, to understand little more beyond the barest of facts. The sad fact is that we are satisfied with the little that we believe we know and thus find no need to look further, to seek a coherent, overall picture of reality, to recognize and know what is real and true.

This is nothing new of course, this self-inflicted blindness nearly two centuries past with his short tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes” a tale of two disreputable weavers who promise an emperor a new suit of clothes so constructed as to be invisible to those who are unfit for their positions, stupid, or incompetent. The emperor’s vanity forbids him from admitting the truth and so he vaingloriously parades before his subjects in his new clothes. No one dares to admit to being unfit, stupid, or incompetent by stating the obvious, that is until a small child shouts “But he isn’t wearing anything at all!”

Cardinal Ratzinger said “We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires….An ‘adult’ faith is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth. We must develop this adult faith; we must guide the flock of Christ to this faith. And it is this faith—only faith—that creates unity and is fulfilled in love.”

As adults, we have lost a thing so precious, something essential: the innocence and faith of a child. A child sees the world as once it were, a garden full of delightful things, just waiting to be explored, touched and tasted, filled with the presence of God. What they see and touch and taste is real and true and good.

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uch faith in the goodness of God fades all too quickly. What was once seen as fresh and new and filled with incredible beauty becomes cloaked and covered by the sober weight of adulthood. Where once there was no fear, no hesitation, no reluctance to explore, to learn, to discover all that there is and what might be has now been constrained and subdued by new realities, realities which can only lead us away from the beauty and love that is God.

The desire to know more than we know, to learn beyond our expertise, to see the whole of things has been drummed out of us by the exigencies of the daily grind. Our world offers a cornucopia of alluring enticements and simple pleasures guaranteed to provide us with immediate gratification. Slowly we succumb to that easy chair, unwilling to advance another step, irresistibly drawn to the false realities and titillating imagery projected before our eyes.

We have been seduced to the dark side, bit by bit, unwitting and unknowing of our ever increasing addiction even as looming shadows cast a veil upon our memories of the one transcendent God. “In abandoning God, man loses his reason and becomes blind.” We turn inward to a place where god is ‘I’, where only ‘I’ adores and is adored by ‘I’.

“A Godless society, which considers any spiritual questions a dead letter, masks the emptiness of its materialism by killing time so as better to forget eternity. The farther material things extend their influence, the more man takes pleasure in so-phisticated, narcissistic, and perverse amusements; the more man forgets God, the more he observes himself. In looking at himself, he sees the deformations and the ugliness that his debauchery has encrusted on his face. Then, to delude himself that he still shines with the original splendor of a creature of God, he puts on his make-up. But the hidden evil is like the glowing coal beneath the ashes.”

In his Pensées Blaise Pascal observed that since man could not remedy death, misery, and ignorance man therefore had decided that what was necessary in order to be happy was to not think of such things at all.

Elsewhere in this issue mention is made of material destitution (See Richer For Poorer beginning on page 6) but as Pope Francis observed in his Lenten message in 2014:

“No less a concern is moral destitution, which consists in slavery to vice and sin. How much pain is caused in families because one of their members—often a young person—is in thrall to alcohol, drugs, gambling, or pornography! How many people no longer see meaning in life or prospects for the future, how many have lost hope! And how many are plunged into this destitution by unjust social conditions, by unemployment, which takes away their dignity as breadwinners, and by lack of equal access to education and health care. In such cases, moral destitution can be considered impending suicide. This type of destitution, which also causes financial ruin, is invariably linked to the spiritual destitution which we experience when we turn away from God and reject his love. If we think we don’t need God who reaches out to us through Christ, because we believe we can make do on our own, we are headed for a fall.”

What worries is the deafening silence from far too many Christians, often promoted by self-imposed ignorance of faith and a lack of will to form a closer more intimate relationship with God. Silence in the face of evil lends tacit consent and acceptance of it. To live and to act as if God does not exist is perhaps the greatest tragedy of our time.

Cardinal Sarah calls those who remain silent guilty of silent apostasy. It would certainly appear a valid argument, one far too close for comfort.

“The circumstances and developments in the world surely do not help us to give God his proper place. Western societies are organized and live as though God did not exist. Christians themselves, on many occasions, have settled down to a silent apostasy. If the concerns of contemporary man are centered almost exclusively on the economy, technology, and the immediacy of material happiness that has been wrongly sentimentalized, God becomes distant;…”

What is needed is a wake up call. We need to be shaken from our complacency and satisfaction with the status quo, to learn more about our faith, to contemplate the truth, and refocus our hearts, minds, and souls on God.

2. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger a few hours before his election to the throne of Peter, April 18, 2005.
Innocence Renewed
Forgiveness always comes first

There is that unanswerable question, an enigma if you will, that comes to mind as we reflect upon the readings for the 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time: “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” A similar question can be raised from the Gospel: “Which came first, the woman’s love of Jesus or his forgiveness?”

There is a certain ambiguity in the translation of the passage “So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven because she has shown great love.” The 1986 English translation differed by a single word: “her many sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.” Either translation could be interpreted to sound as if her great love caused or resulted in her sins being forgiven although the older translation could and should be correctly understood to mean that because her sins were forgiven she showed great love.

Take notice of what occurs here. It wasn’t because the woman loved Jesus that he forgave her but the complete opposite. Because Jesus forgave her she loved him in return. God’s love for us is forever and unchangeable no matter how broken we may be.

What is crucially important here is to understand the right order of God’s love, our love of God, and God’s mercy and forgiveness for our sins.

God doesn’t love us unless we love him first nor does he withhold his mercy and forgiveness until he receives our love. God loves us first, last, and always, no matter how broken we may be. His love is unconditional; we can never lose his love. Never.

Even if we choose to deny him, hate him, or ignore him, his love will remain. As difficult as it is to understand, God loves Lucifer, the angel who would be god, evil incarnate. So if Lucifer remains in God’s love, how could you ever lose his love. God’s love knows no bounds. You simply cannot sin enough, hate enough, become evil enough to lose his love.

O f course, our love for God is not the same as God’s love for us. Our love for him is conditional, it depends on how disposed we are toward God at any given moment, whether we believe he has answered our prayers or ignored them, whether we are having a good day or a bad day, and so forth. Some believe they hate God, others hold little or no faith in his existence. So while God loves us always, our love for him wavers hot and cold; it blows like the wind.

No one is perfect, no one that is but God. We are fallible, God infallible. We are broken, God unbroken and unbreakable, one in perfect being.

Through the inheritance of our first parents we acknowledge our weaknesses and our brokenness; we recognize that through our broken nature we will fail repeatedly, failing over and over again.

I t is quite common for us to believe that in order to be loved by God we must rid ourselves of our imperfections and become sinless in his eyes. That is backward thinking. God loves us no matter what. When we sin it is because we have deliberately shut our self off from his love, denied him sanctuary within our soul, and hardened our heart to his love.

To compound our backward thinking we often conclude that we have exceeded the limits of brokenness and can never be made whole again. It is as if we have been branded on the forehead with the letters PBS (Permanently Broken Sinner,) forever marked for our sins.

More and more we find ourselves in what we believe to be an irresolvable and therefore unforgiveable state of brokenness. Divorce, abortion, pregnancy outside of marriage, homosexuality, extramarital affairs, lost virginity, the list goes on and on. We find ourselves with feelings of hopelessness and a sense that what has happened is irrevocable, beyond repair, beyond the redemptive power of God’s grace.

We have lost our innocence and have come to believe that what we have lost, like virginity, can never be restored or renewed. We come to believe that we are well and truly hung and that there are no second chances, that we have no hope of heaven.

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hat is old school or old church thinking. There was indeed a time when there was simply no room for error, no first or second chances, when the attitude followed along the line of “you made your bed now lie in it,” forever. That kind of attitude has left permanent scars on far too many: divorcees, ex-priests and religious, those who have had an abortion, those who have committed adultery or infidelity, children born out of wedlock, loss of faith, and others who have made grave, seemingly unforgivable mistakes.

What is missing and most needed is a recognition that there is but one truly unforgivable sin, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Pope Saint John Paul II explained this in Dominum et Vivificantem:

“Against the background of what has been said so far, certain other words of Jesus, shocking and disturbing ones, become easier to understand. ... They are reported for us by the Synoptics in connection with a particular sin which is called 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.' ... Why is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit unforgivable? How should this blasphemy be understood? Saint Thomas Aquinas replies that it is a question of a sin that is 'unforgivable by its very nature, insofar as it excludes the elements through which the forgiveness of sin takes place' (ST 2b:14:3). According to such an exegesis, 'blasphemy' does not properly consist in offending against the Holy Spirit in words; it consists rather in the refusal to accept the salvation which God offers to man through the Holy Spirit, working through the power of the Cross. If man rejects the 'convincing concerning sin' which comes from the Holy Spirit and which has the power to save, he also rejects the 'coming' of the Counsellor . . . If Jesus says that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven either in this life or in the next, it is because this 'non-forgiveness' is linked, as to its cause, to 'non-repentance', in other words to the radical refusal to be converted. . . . Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, then, is the sin committed by the person who claims to have a 'right' to persist in evil—in any sin at all . . . The Church constantly implores with the greatest fervor that there will be no increase in the world of the sin that the Gospel calls 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.' Rather, she prays that it will decrease in human souls.”

All too often the Church finds itself at the sharp end of the spear, taking vicious jabs from those who believe her to be too dogmatic, too rigid, too set in her beliefs to change or show mercy toward those who are broken. If that were the case, there would be no one worthy of membership in the Body of Christ, for we are all broken. We are all in need of his grace, his love, and his forgiveness.

As Father Ron Rolheiser writes:

“We need a theology which tells us that even though God cannot unscramble an egg, God’s grace lets us live happily and with renewed innocence far beyond any egg we might have scrambled. We need a theology that teaches us that God does not just give us one chance, but that every time we close a door, God opens another one for us. We need a theology that challenges us not to make mistakes, that takes sin seriously, but which tells us that when we do sin, when we do make mistakes, we are given the chance to take our place among the broken, among those whose lives are not perfect, the loved sinners, those for whom Christ came.

We need a theology which tells us that a second, third, fourth, and fifth chance are just as valid as the first one. We need a theology that tells us that mistakes are not forever, that they are not even for a lifetime, that time and grace wash clean, that nothing is irrevocable. Finally, we need a theology which teaches us that God loves us as sinners and that the task of Christianity is not to teach us how to live, but to teach us how to live again, and again, and again.”

The message from the readings for this Sunday is one of God’s unceasing love for his broken and fallible creatures, a love that forgives long before we can ask. No matter what we do we cannot lose God’s love and no matter how many times we fall, he will always be there to catch us and lift us up again. Our love for him is not a condition for his forgiveness, it never has been and never will be. Amen.
What ought we to think of poverty? The common vision of it fails to lead to understanding for as with so much of what we perceive these days to be true what rolls off the tongue is too often unrelated to reality.

While this may sound reminiscent of a Gershwin tune, there is an important distinction to be made within a specific context when one speaks of poverty and its constituents. What lies at the heart of the matter, as often is the case when considering the depths of human suffering and the plight of those living in unimaginable destitution, is precisely how to corrupt the hearts of those who have abundant means to care for those who are in such desperate need.

To this end, seemingly endless programs have been implemented and literally thousands of organizations have been instituted, all with well-intentioned goals and objectives, with catchy slogans and heart-rending marketing campaigns, to solve an intractable human condition which only becomes more dire with each passing day.

That there are those who are destitute, lacking in nearly every basic necessity for life ought to neither be denied nor ignored, especially by anyone who hopes to be placed on the right side of the king come judgment day. However with the means to do so, anyone who feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, clothes the naked, provides care for the ill, welcomes the stranger, and visits the prisoner, will be abundantly blessed by God.²

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”³ and we fail to comprehend. He tells us “The poor you will always have with you; but you will not always have me”⁴ and we miss his point completely. He says “Toe-may-toe” and we hear “Toe-mah-toe” and our inclination is to just “call the whole thing off.” Likewise, those who would call for the eradication of poverty are guilty of calling Jesus, the Son of God a liar. It is they who are mistaken and lying.

Why do we not get it? As with so much of what bombards and pummels our minds these days it boils down to a poor choice of words, coupled with a desire to avoid as much as possible any unpleasantness which would threaten our personal utopian worldview.

Those who are in most need are not poor, they are destitute, possessing none of the basic necessities of life. The destitute lack in virtually everything upon which to survive. Destitution is a social condition created soberly and deliberatively through the godless actions of some over others; it is the direct result of man’s inhumanity toward man. Destitution rests upon the willful and deliberate actions of those who care only for themselves and who place no value on human life. It will be those who will be placed on the left of the King, to whom he will say, “Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

We most often consider poverty and the poor in economic or financial terms — those who have little financial resources or material possessions are poor, those whose incomes fall below a certain point, the so-called poverty line — and to a limited extent it is accurate to say so, but only to a point. For poverty is much more and encompasses far more than the contents of one’s wallet.

Poverty is both a biblical and a Christian value. We seldom consider it to be so but it is as confirmed by no less than Jesus Christ. As Saint Paul tells us “our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”⁵ CONTINUED ON PAGE 7
Clearly Jesus had little material possessions so how could he be rich if not through nonmaterial means? God was the source and substance of his wealth and as God no one could be richer than the Son of the Father. By becoming man, through his incarnation, he who was rich became poor, reduced to the meanest poverty in order to bring the richness of salvation to all.

“A poor person feels dependent on God; this bond is the foundation of his spirituality. The world has not favored him, but all his hope, his sole light, is in God.

The poor person is someone who knows that, by himself, he cannot live. He needs God and other people in order to be, flourish, and grow. On the contrary, rich people expect nothing of anyone. They can provide for their needs without calling either on their neighbors or on God. In this sense, wealth can lead to great sadness and true human loneliness or to terrible spiritual poverty.”

Most religious take a vow of poverty, a solemn declaration of forbearance to worldly possessions. Saint Francis of Assisi asked those who would follow him to wear poor habits, work to support their community, and to acquire no material goods. Such a penurious vow sits sourly on the stomach; cultural and social norms would prove quite the opposite to be the case for we have been brainwashed to believe that the measure of our success in life rests solely upon all that we may acquire and possess. It is not the sanctity of our souls but the size and quantity of our toys which has become our abiding creed.

So why do some deliberately eschew all the toys for a life of poverty? It is quite simple: they do so in order to be closer to God.

Saint Francis of Assisi wanted to be poor because Jesus chose to be poor, because to Jesus poverty was a virtue not a fault or failure. Jesus became poor to show us the best possible way for us to know God and to find our way back to him.

“The Son of God loves the poor; others intend to eradicate them. What a lying, unrealistic, almost tyrannical utopia! I always marvel when Gaudium et spes declares: “The spirit of poverty and charity is the glory and witness of the Church of Christ” (GS 88).

We must be precise in our choice of words. The language of the UN and of its agencies, who want to suppress poverty, which they confuse with destitution, is not that of the Church of Christ. The Son of God did not come to speak to the poor in ideological slogans! The Church must banish these slogans from her language. For they have stupefied and destroyed peoples who were trying to remain free in conscience.”

3. Mt 5:3.
4. Mt 26:11.
5. 2 Cor 8:9.
7. God or Nothing.
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