

From the Sermons of Patristicus

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(The following is the author's attempt to speak with the voice of tradition.)

Biographical notes:

Born somewhere in the empire some time after the legalization of Christianity, Patristicus, originally named Rufus, was born to pagan parents. They were somewhat wealthy, had slaves, and lived very comfortably according to the standards of the times. Rufus was taught to worship a variety of Roman gods; and he perceived that this was a safe thing to do, and there wasn't much he had to do. His "manhood" involved a little of the expected empire-style debauchery but, all by himself, he sensed that something was wrong since he knew he didn't want his sisters to be anyone else's playthings, and he kept most things from his mother. He went to the circuses and was not repulsed by the blood though he hated hearing cries for mercy.

He might have lived out his life as expected until something happened that he never expected. He found himself overhearing the conversation of some of his casual acquaintances; they had gotten his attention by repeatedly using that favorite of Roman words, *pax*, i.e., peace. What confused Rufus as he listened more carefully was that he was not hearing about the kind of peace that was gained by Roman arms. Rather, it was something inside a person, something that gave a happiness that was somehow "deeper?" than one would get from a festival. When he inquired of these acquaintances as to what, exactly, they were talking about, they responded in terms of questions, "where do we come from?" "why are we here?" "where are we going when we die?"

Rufus knew that some of his friends would have had an easy time mocking what he was hearing but he did not dare to do the same. There was, indeed, something "peaceful" about these people. They seemed secure of themselves and unconcerned about appearances. This was something rarely seen. Rufus inquired further. He heard about faith in *one* God, a God who seemed more like a god because He was one. He heard about love, love for others, even strangers. It seemed to Rufus that he was experiencing this love in the very attention he was getting from these relative strangers. It seemed

they had something he did not have and had never seen before. It seemed to be something deeper, better. And then one of them said it, “the alternative is killing time until time kills you.”

Rufus was stung by this statement, and he found that he couldn't get it out of his mind. He went back to these peaceful acquaintances and asked them what it was that made them happy. They told him about Jesus. They said that the one God had a Son whom He sent to speak to His people and call them to righteousness. They said that this Jesus allowed himself to be crucified by evil so that he could show how he conquered it, for himself and for us. Our job now is to follow him into glory.

The idea that a god could have a son was not entirely foreign to Rufus, and it somehow made sense that the one God of all people would let His Son come as one of the poorest. This way everyone might know that He was their God, too.

Rufus read the story of Jesus' life. He found that in his heart he wanted this wise and kind Jesus to be victorious in the end. Then, in the midst of his meditations in the direction of this Jesus who—could it be true?—might be seated at the right hand of his loving Father, Rufus heard the voice of his call.

Rufus' wife was happy enough about this development. The influence of this Jesus had made her husband more patient, and she understood that she had a better place in his religion than SPQR offered her. She put no obstacles in the way of Rufus being baptized; though she did not follow him until years later, by which time he was also a presbyter in the community of their neighborhood. He chose the name Patristicus because he had become thrilled by the expositions of the faith he had read in those church fathers who were already well-known. In time, he himself became a popular preacher, and soon thereafter he started to write.

He served faithfully and died faithfully, not a martyr except in the sense that he did not cling to life when finally it was time to go.

The following are excerpts from some of his sermons.

From the sermon “On the Divine Infancy”:

Can't you see him now? He knows that he knows more than some the elders around him but he also sees their faces when they are asked a good question. He knows that in some cases they have not been asked a good question, nor been asked about anything, for a very long time.

With his friends neither is he afraid to show interest. He can, but he has no need to surpass their little stories, and instead he asks even them a question.

This is how it is with the Son of God. He knows who he is, he knows he is loved, he knows that no one around him is greater than he. He could prove anything but he needs to prove nothing.

He is the centerpiece of creation but he does not need to be the center of attention.

He is overawed by no one and so he can see the goodness in everyone.

He gives us this example so that we, who also have nothing to prove to mere human eyes, will look outward toward others and imitate the interest and love of our Father for His children in OUR lives.

And if this is how we live, what wonderful lesson are we proving to ourselves?

From the sermon “On the Death of Joseph”:

Of course he knew about death and had known some people who had died. But this was his father; this could not be happening. What a great desire there was to just stop it.

But we are not here to just stop it. He knew that. He knew that no one of the past had been spared it. He knew that the Lord of life must have a very great purpose for it.

Still, this was his father, who showed him love every day with his daily toil.

This was his father, who believed in him and taught him to believe in himself.

This was his father, the man who was teaching him to be a man. Had he had enough time? Had he done enough to prepare his son for this?

The boy Jesus wanted to look away from what was happening, to be anywhere else, to think about anything else. But he needed to be there for his father, and for his mother who could not be left alone.

He said wise and wonderful things to his father. He smiled and tried to project peace. He held his calloused, workman's hand. And because he could not look away he looked into the face of death. At first there was fear to fight off, fear of seeing something terrible. Then, indeed, there was terror, terror in thought that this is destiny of life. It was easy to remain quiet with this because it was far too terrible to put into words.

And then he saw through it. This is too terrible to be our destiny. My father's soul is too beautiful to pass away. The Lord of life will surely hold on to this precious thing that He has made. Through death He must be taking my father to Himself. And, one day, we are going to be together once again. It cannot be that we were made to love so that our love would come to this. No, no, we were made for love and life and we are going to have it. If anything is forever it cannot be death; it has to be life.

Already Jesus saw his own life in glory.

From the sermon "Hail Mary, Full of Grace":

Her grace was more than her willingness to say "let it be done to me as you say."

Her grace was more than her peace in the face of hard things whose divine purpose was not revealed to her.

Her grace, the greatest we might imagine, gave her more than peace but even joy in face of God's attention to her, which she knew was even greater in difficult moments when she needed Him to know what she was bearing and thereby bear it with her.

Even in the most difficult moments, or ESPECIALLY in the most difficult moments she was most joyful because she knew that she and God were building something especially wonderful with what He was asking from her.

Her peace and joy were so real that they inspired in her even greater love, greater compassion for the needs of others, greater efforts to help them feel their worth and beauty.

This was her beauty, part of it....

From the sermon "The Scourge of Indifference":

Perhaps they thought that the worst thing that Jesus the preacher had to bear were the taunts. Perhaps it was the pointless opposition of the envious, or the opposition based on bad or old ideas.

But no, the worst thing that Jesus the preacher had to bear was indifference.

Some people had fallen into the hole of finding meaning in survival, and in their minds they were far too busy to ask themselves, What are we surviving for?

Some people had no time except for nonsense. They were killing time until time killed them.

Others listened but did not hear.

Their minds were small and they were too lazy to reach for something more.

They had already decided that everyone's words were just words and did not notice that here there was something different.

Some thought they knew it all already.

In any case they walked away.

This was the worst thing that Jesus the preacher had to bear. To have so much to give is to want so much to give it, and to suffer much if people do not want it.

Even opposition is better. At least it means that people are thinking, and that they care about ideas. Maybe, later, minds that had gotten that far would go a little farther.

Envy means that people know you're doing good.

Indifference was the scourge. They had no reaction to what him was so important and beautiful. There was no reason to think that, later, they would get it. Time and chance were wasted.

Indifference created the temptation to think that I am not even involved in the war against evil.

But Jesus must have discovered that this IS the war against evil; it is getting people to know and grow.

From the sermon "The Surprise of Envy":

Surely the first time it came as a surprise. Why are you envious? Didn't you hear? Isn't what we are talking about more important than getting attention for talking?

Doesn't the truth have a greater hold on you, if you, too, would be its voice?

Don't you feel better for the Father's love than anything you might get from the attention of a crowd?

Don't the gifts of faith heal you from any need to might have had to get attention here and now, and then again tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that?

For one who embodied the gifts he wanted to give, and knew like no one else how wonderful they are, it must have come as a surprise that someone would find that something else was somehow more important.

What do you find?

From the sermon "The Unheard Passion":

We are told his last words, but these reveal only a few of his last thoughts.

But sharing with us our humanity, he surely thought and felt many of the things that we might feel if we, too, had been subjected to slow execution and had entered into the agony that was soon to end in death.

Surely he had to resist anger; and we know that he did, and that instead he spoke words of forgiveness and of love. Thus, he must have struggled within himself to align the truths he taught, and to do what other men could never have done: to look past the jeering to the hidden beauty of those who knew not what they were doing, and who would have done better if they had known better.

Surely he had to resist fear, because fear before death is the most human of emotions, and though he was so very strong spiritually he was now very weak physically.

Of course there was pain, and with pain the temptation to cry out.

But this was not the mission. The mission was to proclaim the power of faith before anything. The mission was to lead his brothers and sisters through their own crosses into the darkness and unto the light.

We might imagine there were moments he felt utterly alone, but we can be sure that these pointed him quickly to the Father who had never left his side.

We might imagine there were moments he was tempted by the great human “why,” but we can be sure that these pointed him quickly to His Father’s promise that there is nothing that is not redeemed in glory.

And though he was tempted to close his eyes and NOT experience his last moments, we can be sure that he knew that there was nothing to be gained by doing this, and instead and did the only thing that could lead to something greater and commended his spirit into the hands of its maker.

From the sermon “He Suffered for You”:

If you understand it, how can you be indifferent to it? If you understand that in his moments of greatest agony, his motive to go on was to think about you, how do you not, every single day, think about him?

If such suffering was the price of giving you what you could not give yourself,

the means to a treasure beyond price,

nothing you deserved,

but rather the means to overcome the ugliness of selfishness,

by an agony never far from him in the eternal present in which he lives,

how can you indulge this ugliness again and again, and do so in his face?

From the sermon “Stripes”:

He who did not deserve it, took it. We who deserve much less, resent it much more.

We are talking about stripes, those blows and other injuries and offences that come to us for doing GOOD.

If, even in the smallest way, it happens to us we are outraged.

We want our goodness paid back HERE, not noticing that this is not goodness.

We do not think of the rightful punishments that did not come our way, or the pain our sin has caused others.

It does not occur to us that evil must resist its enemies.

We do not think of him. He suffered for doing good and he was paid in glory.

From the sermon “Not My Will But Yours Be Done”:

Sometimes one wonders how we dare complain to God, or question Him, as much as we do.

Could we have designed the universe and then led it to become the home of man?

Could we have planned the inspirational life the Son of Man Son and then brought glory out of the gore of the cross?

Would we have thought of us, to give ourselves the life we have gotten through the lives and love of many others?

Have we not been surprised many times by what God brought out of problems and pain, and acknowledged that He, indeed, did know best?

Is there any possibility that He has stopped working now, in our time, in my life, for the good of us all?

And if He asks for our life here, or the life of someone whom we love, is it possible that He has taken us too early or too late?

Do we have a better plan than trusting Him?

Is there anything better than what we get from trusting Him?

From the sermon “More Than Eye and Mind Can Bear”:

Often it happens that their pastors, wanting the faithful to grasp enough about the Mass to come to it, try to make it simple. Too often it happens that they make it too simple, and thus they close the door on an open-ended understanding of what God gives us, that itself would give us presently unknown joy and room to grow.

Though He is everywhere, the love embodied by Jesus is, by His design, there.

Like no where else, this is where He wants us to see and touch Him.

Like no where else, He is there, looking back at us if we be willing to look at Him, and to feel our touch as a sign of our love.

By His design, He gives us Himself to hold in our hand.

We, who live in His Hands, are allowed to see this using our own.

To do this He puts Himself in our care, showing us the love that wants to trust, and to inspire more trust.

He gives us Himself so He can tell us that His plan is to hold back from us nothing.

The body of Christ becomes one with our body so He can express to us how deeply He loves us and how deep He wants our relationship to be.

Now we can feel ourselves becoming inseparable so we know that forever we will be.

And, yes, through the wonder of His infinite love, we receive His all every time, and every time we receive something more.

From the sermon “Erased by Love”:

Only God can create from nothing, and only God can uncreate, and turn something into absolutely nothing.

Love, the source of all that is, makes something nothing.

Indeed, the love in God’s forgiveness makes something less than nothing.

If something once existed at least it WAS something. It leaves a trace; it leaves a space. It was there in history and in the minds of those who know.

Not so onus of our sins. God’s forgiveness leaves nothing behind. He, who is the source of all that is, has no room in Him for this. He wills to think of it no more, nor to have a place in His memory.

He sees us now, not as we want to be seen, for our wants are tainted by a memory we do not so well control. He sees us now greater for what we have learned and more innocent than we can imagine.

It is there for the asking. And all He asks is that we receive His forgiveness and strive to see ourselves in the light of His love.

From the sermon “Signs of the End”:

O children, so badly you want to see the bad guys get it. For centuries now you have paid attention to so many predictions, allowed yourself to be swayed by silly arguments, made much too much out of unusual events.

How many times?!

The end is at hand. The judgment is coming. And then it doesn’t. And then we forget. And then the signs appear again.

How many times do think you’ve seen the signs?

You see signs in the sky but not in your scalp.

Why do you not see that the end IS coming, at least for you and me.

It is coming, and sooner than you think.

The signs are plain to be seen, and there are many. History is on their side. And science. And faith.

What might you get from the end of the world for all that you cannot get now from the end of the world for you?

What greater reason do you need not to cling to things here, or to suffer what you do not have, or the judgments of others?

What greater reason do you need to get ready for the end of life as you know it, and the judgment you expect for others?

You see signs in the sky but not in your scalp.