

EXPOSITION ON THE SIXTH PENITENTIAL PSALM

PSALM 129

Saint John Fisher

1 *A gradual canticle.*

Out of the depths I have cried to thee, O Lord:

2 Lord, hear my voice.

Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.

3 If thou, O Lord, wilt mark iniquities: Lord, who shall stand it.

4 For with thee there is merciful forgiveness: and by reason of thy law, I have waited for thee, O Lord.

My soul hath relied on his word:

5 my soul hath hoped in the Lord.

6 From the morning watch even until night, let Israel hope in the Lord.

7 Because with the Lord there is mercy: and with him plentiful redemption.

8 And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

Every sinner who breaks the commandment of God goes away from him and draws backward into many great, perilously deep dangers, falling more and more toward the horrible pit of hell. Holy Scripture has shown this figuratively in the story of the prophet Jonah, describing the certain degrees and orders of his descent when he broke the commandment of God. We shall here mark and note seven points in that order, as they are shown: first Jonah, by breaking God's commandment, turned himself away and fled from the face of God; secondly, he went to a town named Joppa near the sea, where he hired a ship convenient to pass over on his journey; thirdly, he entered the ship, or, as scripture says, came down into it and, in spite of being warned by the sudden rising of a great, violent storm, would not return to land; fourthly, he went down into the hollow, lowest places of the ship and there slept soundly; fifthly, he was cast out from this place into the surging sea; sixthly, he was devoured and swallowed down into the lowest part of a great whale's belly; and lastly, if he had not remembered almighty God shortly in these tribulations and been saved by his help, he could not have escaped being digested in the great fish's belly and voided out from it like dung, and so slipping down to the bottom of the great sea. These seven degrees of Jonah's fall from God by the breaking of his commandment signify to us the diverse falls of the sinner, who goes lower and lower from one degree to another into the diverse perils of the depths. It does not matter for our purpose at this time that Jonah in Holy Scripture signifies Christ, for one and the same thing by a different consideration may be taken figuratively for two contraries. Sometimes in Holy Scripture the lion signifies Christ, as in the Apocalypse, *vicit leo de tribu Iuda*, and sometimes it signifies the devil, as in the epistle of Saint Peter, *tanquam leo rugiens circuit* (Rev 5:5, 1 Pet 5:8). What can be more contrary than God and the devil? Seeing that one thing may betoken Christ and the devil, why may not Jonah sometimes signify Christ and sometimes the sinner?

But let us proceed in what we have begun. We shall mark and consider how the degrees of Jonah's fall from God correspond to and signify the degrees of the sinner's descent from God by sin. The first degree of going into sin is the consent of the mind, with prior deliberation about something forbidden by God's law. For a plainer declaration, this will be an example: here is a young man still chaste in his body, to whom the remembrance of a fair woman comes to mind; he does not withstand it but eagerly thinks on her beauty and sets his mind to have his fleshly lust of her; at last he consents to have to do with her if he can find opportunity and leisure. This consent of the mind is deadly sin, even if he should never have his purpose indeed. Jesus Christ our Savior says in the Gospel, *qui viderit mulierem ad concupiscendum eam, iam moechatus est eam in corde suo*, he who beholds a woman and consents in his mind to have his lust of her if he can, the sin is committed in his heart, and by that consent alone he commits a deadly sin (Mt 5:28). If he died then without any penance, he would be damned forever. But those cogitations that come suddenly into the mind, no matter how unclean, provided we do not consent to them but oppose them as much as we can, are no deadly sins and oftentimes no venial sins, and we shall have great profit by striving against them, not consenting at any time. 'Whoever sets his mind on a worldly creature or pleasure more than on God turns himself away from his maker. He follows after and obeys that worldly thing contrary to God's law, which is called the unlawful consent of the mind. He

flees from God as Jonah did when he fled, disobeyed, and would not go as commanded to the great city of Nineveh. It is written of him thus: Almighty God said to Jonah, rise and go to the great city of Nineveh, preach and tell them that their malice and sinful living have come to my knowledge. Then Jonah rose, disobeyed that commandment, and fled from the face of our Lord. Thus, you perceive how manifestly the first fall into sin, which is consent, corresponds to the first fall of Jonah.

The second degree of the sinner's fall is his being occupied and actively searching for time and opportunity to fulfill his purpose in deed. For at such time as the sinner busies himself with how and by what means he can accomplish the sin to which he consented before, he falls down one degree deeper, and his sin is more grievous than it was by consenting alone. In so doing he heaps sin upon sin and makes the first spot of it blacker, fouler than it was in the sight of God. Truly, it is a general rule that when a deadly sin is once purposed by consent of our mind, whatever we do to accomplish it is also deadly sin. An example: perhaps you have decreed with yourself to use your body (if you conveniently can) in sensual lust and pleasure with a certain woman, and you go about and labor by many means to fulfill it in deed—by wanton words, wanton looks, gallant apparel of your body, frequent gifts, or any other means. Whatever you do in full purpose of it, no matter how little, even if it is but the lifting of a straw, is always deadly sin. This second degree of the sinner's fall is shown figuratively by the second act of Jonah, his going to Joppa, a town near the sea, and there hiring a ship so that he might flee Judas-like from the face of our Lord God. Of his so doing Scripture speaks in these words: *et descendit in Ioppen; et invenit navem euntem in Tharsis, et dedit naulum eius*, Jonah went down to Joppa, there found a ship going toward the country of Tarshish, and hired it (Jonah i:3).

The third degree of the sinner's fall is the fulfilling of his purpose that he has been intending so long to accomplish. Consent is evil; the active means to fulfill his purpose is worse; and the accomplishment of the sin in deed is worst of all. This is for three reasons: first, for the long continuance; secondly, for the greater lust and pleasure had in the offense; and thirdly, for the great harm that comes to both soul and body. A man who does a trespass against almighty God and lies long in it offends more grievously than if, as soon as he is fallen by sin, he will rise again. For a person is less blameworthy if he refrains shortly after consenting than if he continues a long time and at last fulfills his purpose. The immoderate lust and pleasure of the body is made more grievous by fulfilling it in deed than by thought or consent alone. For when the mind is set on bodily pleasure, the soul is thereby sorely vexed; when both body and soul consent, the sin is great; but when at last the accomplishment of the sin is exercised in deed, then this is much more grievous. For only the soul was made foul by thought and consent, but both body and soul become corrupt by the deed, and many times two bodies, as by the sin of fornication. This third degree is shown figuratively by the third act of Jonah, for as the sinner first finds means and then does the deed, so Jonah first found the way and means to hire the ship and after entered into it; or as Scripture says, *et descendit in eam*, he came down into the ship (1:3). And just as many times a person who has grievously offended is struck quickly with the abomination of his sin, yet will not refrain despite that divine warning, even so, as soon as Jonah had entered into the ship, a great tempest arose on the sea, yet he would not return to land.

The fourth degree in the fall of the sinner is the custom of it: the more a sinner accustoms himself to sin, the more grievous, the deeper is his descent toward the pit of hell.

Although he does not perceive it, he sinks little by little into the filthy pleasure of it, just as a horse, the softer the mire or clay he wallows in, the more easily he lies and the more deeply he imprints his form in it, but when he tries to rise again, the softness of the clay will not allow him to take a hold by which he might be assisted. The custom of nature is much like this, for naturally we must use meat and drink for hunger and thirst and use other things in the same way we have been well accustomed to. This fourth degree is more grievous in the sight of God than one deed or the doing of a sin once. Perhaps one offense, trespass, or fall may be excused because a man in himself is so frail. For it is said, *humanum est cadere*, the property of man is to fall; *sed pergere in lapsum et perseverare diabolicum est*, but to lie long and continue in sin is appropriate to the devil.* When the devil has enticed any person to this point of continuance, he has then brought him into a sad, sound sleep, from which he can scarcely awake for any calling or noise. This degree of the sinner's fall is represented by the fourth act of Jonah: instead of returning to land when he perceived a great tempest coming, he went down into the lowest parts of the ship and there slept heavily. Scripture

*A variation on the proverb "to err is human", *errare humanum est: perseverare diabolicum*.

declares it, saying, *descendit in interiora navis et dormiebat soporegravi*, Jonah descended into the low parts of the ship and there slept soundly (1:5). Likewise, when the sinner comes into the custom of sin, he goes down and in manner sleeps in it.

The fifth degree in the fall of the sinner is when he rejoices and boasts of the sin he committed, where rightly he should be ashamed and fear the penalty of the law ordained for open sinners. Such persons are beyond both fear and shame. Many times in common taverns they speak openly to others of the like disposition about their ignominious and shameful offenses, making great boast, about how wickedly they have done with that woman and that one, perhaps slandering someone they never touched. Thus they make open vaunt of themselves so that others will honor and praise their wickedness. To these may be applied the saying of the prophet Hosea, *profunde peccaverunt*, they sin deeply (Hos 9: 9). So deeply our Savior compares these slanderous declarations of their wickedness to the fall of one who slips down to the bottom of the sea, *utilius est illi si lapis molaris imponatur circa collum eius et proiciatur in mare*, it would be better and more profitable for this sinner if a millstone were hung about his neck and he were so cast into the sea than for him to show his sin openly by boasting and bragging (Lk 17:2). The fifth act of Jonah corresponds to this degree when he was cast into the sea and drowned in the waters. Likewise, these great abominable sinners who boast of their ungraciousness are utterly drowned in sin, overwhelmed with the manifold floods of it.

The sixth degree is when the sinner will defend his error and find fault with virtue. Such sinners have used, accustomed themselves to, and made their boast of vicious living for so long that it seems to them no sin, and by all the means that can be found, they labor and scheme to cause all others to think as they do. O great and deadly profundity of sin! When a man is fallen to this degree, he despises and utterly forsakes all wholesome warnings by which he could be brought again into the right way of good life. *Sapiens says, impius, cum in profundum malorum venerit, contempnit*, when the sinner is fallen into the depth of sin, then he despises all wholesome remedies and correction for the amendment of his sinful living (Prov 18:3). He would have every person live as he does and will not allow the life of wicked folks to be reprov'd and spoken against or the grievous wounds of his soul to be touched in any way. The sinner of this sort is entirely in the possession and power of the devil. Saint John shows that our adversary the devil goes about searching whom he may devour, but now I fear he does not need to do so, for his purpose is in a way already fulfilled. He has devoured and swallowed many into the lowest part of his belly. This sixth degree is well shown by the sixth act of Jonah, when the great, mighty whale devoured and swallowed him down into the vile, lowest part of his carcass. Likewise, these obstinate and abominable sinners are utterly devoured and swallowed down by our great enemy the devil.

The seventh degree is to despair of the great mercy of God, which is the deepest, most perilous of all others, just next to the horrible pit of hell. If any creature has fallen so deep that he despairs, it will be very hard for him to rise again. Saint Chrysostom says, *desperatio non finit peccatorem post lapsum exurgere*, despair will not let a man, when he is fallen down, rise again. It is like a deep pit whose mouth is stopped up with a great stone, so that nothing can get out unless the stone is removed. The covering of this deep pit of desperation cannot be taken away without strong, steadfast hope in the great mercy of almighty God. We have spoken so much in the previous psalms about this superabundant mercy that if there were not a great plenty of Scriptures one after another in every place, praising and exalting this great mercy, I would be afraid no more could be spoken of it.
