

**Homily; Christmas II, Jan. 2/2021;  
Church of the Ascension, Chicago; Rev. Dr. Robert Petite**

*“His mother treasured all these things in her heart.” Luke 2:51*

*Let us pray; Almighty and everlasting God, who stooped to raise fallen humanity through the childbearing of Mary; grant that we who have seen your glory may daily be renewed in your image, by being conformed to the pattern of your love shown forth in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Amen.*

I have recently cultivated a renewed interest in the works of the medieval Italian poet, Dante Alighieri. Dante became a celebrity in 2021, on the 700th anniversary of his death. And so there was a significant celebration of his life and poetry.

Some of you may be familiar with the Divine Comedy, Dante’s epic poem, especially the part entitled *The Inferno*. It has been popularized by the novelist Dan Brown, and in a movie starring Tom Hanks. I don’t recommend either as a way of appreciating Dante’s art.

I make no assumptions about you having read The Comedy. I simply want to introduce you to this extraordinary poem this morning. The poem is essentially a symbolic representation of the movement of human love toward Divine love, presented as a symbolic pilgrimage from hell to heaven.

The first volume of The Comedy, provides us with an extraordinary word picture of life in hell, with all of its gore and evil characters. Some have interpreted these word pictures, as a literal description of hell. Dante meant to describe nothing of the sort, but rather offers an allegorical presentation of the soul’s journey here on earth.

The poem begins with the famous lines, lines that could easily describe our own spiritual journey. – *“I awoke; he says, ” in the middle of life, to find myself in a dark wood, / Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.” (Inferno Canto 1.)*

The poem offers a spiritual path, a way of returning to the “right road”, in which human love progressively moves toward its fulfillment in Divine love. (*Pause*)

The exercise of human love, beset as it is with eros, with its conflicting desires, is often a difficult road, where we lose our way. Without guidance, we can often find ourselves on the wrong road, lost in a dark wood.

St. Augustine of the fifth century, has this experience of lostness in mind when he says, “What is it that moves every person, if it is not love? Show me a love that is idle and doing nothing; Scandals, adulteries, crimes, murders, every kind of excess, are they not the work of love”. . . . “Love, by all means”, says Augustine, “but take care what is you love.” (St. Augustine de nom. Div. 4 11ff; PG3, col. 709Bff).

Augustine is describing love gone wrong, and believes that this is an area of our lives in which we genuinely need to make some choices.

Dante's poem is very much about making the kinds of choices that lead to the healing of our souls and the souls of others, and about making choices that result in our union with God. (*Pause*)

We meet an astonishing group of people in Dante's poem, especially in *the Inferno*, Dante's imaginative description of hell. Here we meet people in whose life love has taken a wrong path.

At one point we meet two lovers, Francesca and Paolo. The lovers are figuratively joined at the hip in a loving embrace, and tossed about by the winds of hell, mirroring the intensity of their love, during their lifetime. As Francesca says in the poem: *Love, that excuses no one loved from loving, / seized me so strongly with delight in him / that, as you see, he never leaves my side. Inferno, (Cento V. The Inferno)*

Francesca's desire for Paolo is presented as a bad thing, but interestingly not for the reasons you might suppose. Dante was no puritan. Their love was primarily disordered, not because of their erotic and illicit union, but because they made of their love, a universe of two. They became one another's obsession. Their love moved only between them, not out from them, their love was not generative, and thus their love constituted a form of idolatry.

In an age like ours, which prizes romantic love above all other loves, it is hard to trust that there is more to loving than falling in love. Can we imagine a way of loving that includes a form of letting go – a movement from being in love to the act of loving?

I think one place where some of us experience this kind of love, although there are also other instances, is the love we feel for our children. Our love for our children is most especially characterized by a love that moves out from us, and eventually, as the child comes of age, a love that is characterized by a letting go, while at the same time being deeply connected. This love is the movement of human love to a love deeply rooted in God's love. But this love takes great courage and spiritual maturity.

It is just such a struggle that Mary's has with her young son in this morning's Gospel. After a three days journey from the Holy City, she and Joseph discover that their twelve-year-old child is not in their company. They frantically retrace their steps and find their child with the doctors in the Temple. When Jesus is scolded by his parents for worrying them, his reply, while different in content and proportion, is as similar in tone as any teenager's reply to their parents– “do you not know that I must be about my Father's business”. The remark could have easily caused offence in Mary, but she simply internally treasures Jesus's reply in her heart.

From one point of view, this story with the doctors is a story about Jesus and his vocation, his quest for knowledge, his journey to the Cross, and his on-going maturation into his divine identity.

But I think St. Luke wants us to notice something else about this story, and that something else is contained within the inner experience of Mary herself, as her love for her child causes her to “treasurer in her heart”. This treasuring comprises a spiritual challenge for her, as it would certainly be for any parent. As in everything dealing with love, there are difficult choices to be made.

A parent's protective love for their child, must eventually give way to a love that involves a letting go. Mary is seeking to sort her way through this spiritual challenge, as she and her son encounter one another.

Luke describes Mary's inner thoughts as *holding or treasuring the events in her memory*, perhaps even to keep her feelings to herself. The challenge before Mary, as she receives Jesus's response is perhaps, in the words of the novelist E.M. Forester, a willingness "to let go of the life we had planned, to have the life that is waiting for us, no matter the difficulty.

I think Mary's treasuring, her inner silence, demonstrates the kind of humility that has nothing to do with self-negation, but is an opening up into self-giving love, unlike the love between Francesca and Paola, in order to begin taking in a life that is presently being presented to her.

Mary's treasuring is, by divine grace, her way of attending, both to the actions of Jesus, and to her own responses. She is being called upon to remain attentive to the unexpected future God has prepared for her. Divine love, not personal anxiety, guides her every internal and external response.

Mary's spiritual journey is also ours. She is the archetypal Christian on the archetypal Christian journey. We too must order our desires and our loves, a pilgrimage often filled with doubt and confusion, a journey where we can often find ourselves in a "dark wood, where the right way is utterly lost", but it can also be a journey informed by a loving will through divine grace, and a trust in God's loving purposes, even when our desires and the choices involved tare at our hearts.

In Dante's magnificent poem, Dante the pilgrim begins and ends his long and arduous journey of learning to order his desires, his loves. He accomplishes this through the support of many friends - the philosopher Virgil his primary guide, St. Lucy, a light on the way, and even his beloved Beatrice, his great romantic and passionate love.

All these friendships in the poem are initiated from beginning to end, by the loving actions of Mary. Mary who knows what true, trusting, and faithful love is, and the enormity of its costs...." that painful wrenching of the heart and soul, that we all feel when we stand helpless in the face of life's challenges. It is this love that enables her, at the end, to stand at the foot of the Cross.

In Dante's wonderful poem, Mary is a sign of the Christian way of loving, of consent and of letting go. But she also keeps faith with Dante, and is behind the scenes at the very beginning of his pilgrimage, and she is there at the end. As the poem finally concludes, Dante has his last words for her:

*"You are a living spring of hope. . ./Your loving-kindness does not only answer / the one who asks, but it is often ready / to answer freely long before the asking. / In you compassion is, in you is pity, / in you is generosity, in you / is every goodness found in any creature."* (Translation by Alan Mandelbaum.) (*Paradiso*. Canto XXXIII, 7-21)

*Note: an excellent resource in appreciating The Divine Comedy is Dante's Divine Comedy: A Guide for the Spiritual Journey; and A 100 Days of Dante; a brief video lecture of each of the 100 Cantos of The Comedy, presented by Baylor College.*