

LIFE AND WELL-BEING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Overnight transformation

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Isaiah 63:10b-17, 19b; 64:2-7; Psalm 50:2-3, 15-16, 18-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

In 1915, Franz Kafka published *The Metamorphosis*, a novel about Gregor Samsa, a hard-working salesman and only breadwinner for his family, who one day, upon waking up from sleep, finds himself transformed into an *ungeziefer*, a monstrous vermin.

The German term *ungeziefer* alludes to both a filthy and repulsive insect as to lowly individuals of spineless and dismal disposition. The term also had religious undertones in medieval German, referring to an unclean animal that was unfit for sacrificial offerings.

Although Gregor is changed overnight into a vermin, rather than becoming like one, Kafka insisted that there be no depiction of him as an insect in the book. As he himself confides to his fiancée, the metamorphosis emerged "in bed in my misery, and now troubles, oppresses me with inmost intensity".

There are many different ways to interpret this eerie book, including religious, psychological, and sociological viewpoints. Some read it as Kafka's way of expressing his father

complex, portrayed in Gregor's paying off the paternal bankruptcy bills, in the father's aggressive handling of him by dragging him to his room, to seriously injuring him by throwing apples at him in a fit of rage. Using insights from his *Letter to His Father*, several critics highlight how Kafka's novels are framed by the dysfunctional mechanisms that created his relationship with a very strict father who lacked empathy and affectivity, coming to reject even his son's call to literature.

Whatever the interpretative perspective, Gregor is a victim of his own collapse. Indeed, Kafka's early works feature characters who are not vigilant, and who are perpetually distracted to such an extent as to bring about terrible repercussions for themselves. In Kafka, institutional social structures enforce also this misery and oppression making people feel helpless, by keeping them alienated.

In *The Trial*, written alongside *The Metamorphosis*, the novelist explores existential uneasiness in the story of Joseph K., a banker who is arrested for an unspecified crime he must have committed. Arrested, but not imprisoned, he is left dealing with issues of guilt, justice, identity, and freedom, by an intransigent and corrupt legal system until he becomes convinced he must be guilty. Finally, he doesn't even resist being executed like a dog.

It has been said of Kafka that he is the poet of guilt and shame, and in whose world there is no hope of redemption. Born in Prague in 1883 to a Jewish family, Kafka passed away of tuberculosis in Kierling, Austria, on June 3,

1924. Most of his novels were published posthumously against his will, making him one of the most significant writers of the 20th century. Various initiatives are being taken in 2024 to mark the centenary of Kafka's death.

Vigilance, sleep, guilt, fatherhood, redemption, spiritual and moral uncleanliness, all feature in today's liturgy. In the gospel, as in Kafka's world, alienation is the source of ill.

Jesus presses us: "Be watchful! Be alert!" not to be struck by ultimate "sudden" transformation while "sleeping". The eschatological underpinnings of Jesus's discourse in chapter 13 of the Gospel point to final judgement and transformation, the outcome of both depending on our capacity or failure to live watchful lives. As the apostle points out in the First Letter to the Corinthians, through our watchful awaiting we "are not lacking in any spiritual gift" to arrive at full transformation in fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Watchfulness includes being aware of having "hardened hearts" that lead to sinful attitudes; transforming us into an "unclean people", having "deeds like polluted rags". The Prophet Isaiah encourages us to be "mindful" of our condition before God, who is an empowering father full of compassion, calls us out of self-imposed wretchedness and isolation. God does not look at us with Kafkaesque horror and contempt, but with unconditional positive regard inviting us to flourish and come to fulfilment.

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In search of wisdom

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In Holy Scripture (Proverbs 3:13-18) we find that "Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."

We are in an age of indifference and self-absorption, an age that urges us to focus on ourselves and our own interests. We often speak of intelligence, but while intelligence is the ability to acquire and apply knowledge, wisdom is the ability to use knowledge and experience to make good decisions and judgments. As Albert Einstein put it

"wisdom is not a product of schooling but a lifelong attempt to acquire it".

To shed some light on the thirst for wisdom, Pope Francis draws on one of his favourite saints, St Therese of Lisieux. On the 150th anniversary of her birth, Pope Francis issued an apostolic exhortation on "Confidence in the merciful love of God."

Therese teaches us "the little way of love, self-giving, concern for others and complete trust in the mercy of God," the pope said in this new document. "At a time when human beings are obsessed with grandeur and new forms of power, Therese points out to us the little way."

Therese inspires us to be missionary disciples, captivated by the attractiveness of Jesus and the Gospel. Therese shows us the beauty of making our lives a gift.

At a time when the most superficial needs and desires are glorified, she testifies to the radicalism of the Gospel.

In an age of individualism, she makes us discover the value of a love that becomes intercession for others.



St Therese of Lisieux can help us rediscover the importance of simplicity, the absolute primacy of love, trust and abandonment. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

In an age that casts aside so many of our brothers and sisters, she teaches us the beauty of concern and responsibility for one another.

At a time of great complexity, she can help us rediscover the importance of simplicity, the absolute primacy of love, trust and abandonment, and thus move beyond a legalistic or moralistic mindset that would fill the Christian life with rules and regulations and cause the joy of the Gospel to grow cold.

It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to love. Her boundless confidence encourages all who feel frail, limited and sinful to let themselves

be elevated and transformed in order to reach greater heights.

As the pope says in his exhortation, "if all weak and imperfect souls felt what the least of souls feels, that is, the soul of your little Therese, no one would despair of reaching the summit of the mount of love. Jesus does not demand great actions from us, but simply surrender and gratitude".

As John Udrys writes in *Holy Daring*, it is confidence that chooses to come out of hiding, to give oneself up to mercy, trusting wildly in the promise of salvation rather than letting oneself be terrorised by the heart of condemnation.

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QUOTES & NEWS

Loving the poor

The pope's address during the Sunday Angelus on the feast of Christ the King was read by an official of the Secretariat of State. He reflected on Matthew 25:31-46.

"The gospel today tells us that the 'blessed' are those who respond to these forms of poverty with love, with service: not by turning away, but by giving food and drink, clothing, sheltering, visiting, in a word, by being close to those in need.

So, brothers and sisters, let us ask ourselves: do we believe that true kingship consists in mercy? Do we believe in the power of love? Do we believe that charity is the most kingly manifestation of man, and is an indispensable requirement for the Christian?"

'Unbrotherly love'

Bishop Georg Bätzing of Limburg, president of the German bishops' conference, lambasted comments by Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki of Poznan, Poland, who recently told *Catholic World Report* that "the Church in Germany is in the greatest crisis since the Reformation". The latter also wrote to the pope to criticise the German bishops.

Bishop Bätzing accused Gadecki of "unbrotherly behaviour" when he wrote to Pope Francis to say that the German initiative endangered the unity of the Church. The German bishops' leader said that Archbishop Gadecki was "enormously overstepping his authority" by making "false claims" about the Synodal Path.

Bishops praise law

The bishops of Peru praised a new "Law that Recognises Rights of the Conceived". This law, which was approved by a strong majority, establishes that "human life begins with conception. The human person is a subject of law from his conception. The Peruvian state recognises and guarantees respect for the dignity of the conceived child, as well as its right to life, individual identity, mental and physical integrity, as well as to freely develop in the womb [i.e., without external interference]."

The bishops said that this new law "constitutes an important step towards the construction of a society that respects and defends human life and overcomes a culture of death".

(Compiled by Fr Joe Borg)