

Behold, I Make All Things New
Msgr Charles Pope -- 2025-01-16

INTRODUCTION: We welcomed back Msgr. Charles Pope as he explored with us what a “normal” Christian Life might be. There is great power to be found in the words of scripture and in the words of the liturgy, but many times we have gotten so used to hearing them that we don’t really take them in, nor do we ponder deeply what they are telling us about Christ, and the life-changing transformative relationship that awaits us. Many of us have low expectations of our relationship with the Lord, in part because we have not been told to expect much. If we look at the scriptures in the early church in the Acts of the Apostles, people were powerfully aware that the Lord had touched their lives, and that their lives were different, not sin free, but different, more hopeful. Msgr. Pope questions if many Catholics and Christians feel that way today. Do we? We often hear the words at Mass in the scripture readings, or in the liturgy and they go in one ear and out the other. What happens if we truly listen and ponder what we are hearing? Msgr. Pope invited us to explore several passages from scripture and from the liturgy, and let them transform our lives and our relationship with Christ.

THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE: Msgr. Pope gave us two working definitions of the normative Christian life. The first is to be in a life-changing, transformative relationship with the Lord. The second definition is to be in living, conscious contact with God at all times, to have our lives touched by the presence of God, and to see how He is working, even in the difficult things.

Let us think about baptism. This is where we are brought into a relationship with Christ Jesus. Most of us do expect, and have had in our lives, encounters with people that have changed us forever. We need only think of someone who has inspired us or helped us, a teacher, a mentor, an employer – our lives are never the same for having met them. If we can have such life changing experiences with other human beings, why can we not have similar experiences with God? Our Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose for us. How can we live boring tepid spiritual lives knowing that? We are to be women of hope, who understand and see that God is at work, even in troubling times.

A PROPHETIC DECLARATION OF REALITY: “We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). ALL things work together for good, even the difficult, unpleasant and painful things, even our sufferings. Many of us can look through the rear view mirror of our lives, and see that our sufferings have brought us some benefits, we have learned from them. Sometimes God closes one door to open another. Sometimes God permits suffering to help us to grow more humble, or to realize this world is not our final destination, and help us set our eyes on heaven. If we believe this scripture of St. Paul, we have a deep, abiding confidence and hope and inner joy that the world did not give and that the world cannot take away.

“So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17). We are a new creation, all things are made new. Is this just a slogan? Are these just empty words? Scripture is in fact a prophetic declaration of reality. It tells us what is really going on. The early church followers were powerfully aware that their lives were different, that the Holy Spirit was alive and working in them. Many were suffering great persecutions. We can hardly imagine such suffering today. All led difficult lives, but something deeper was going on in them. We are a NEW CREATION! What does this mean? How do we get our minds around it? From the second reading of the Epiphany, we learn that “... the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph 3:6). This is an extraordinary claim, and we should be amazed. We need to first take these words seriously, and then ponder their impact on our lives, how our lives are different. The theological answer is grace, the power, the life, the love of God at work in us, beginning to move our sins out, and bring graces alive. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to anoint us to see what the Lord has done for us, how He has changed our lives. These scripture passages are rock solid statements of reality. We need to let them take hold of us. We need to raise our expectations.

OUTSIDE OF TIME: “We were indeed buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). This beautiful passage is used in the Easter Vigil Mass. We become a member of the body of Christ, and so we die and go into the tomb with Him, and we rise with Him. When Jesus was baptized, we went with Him into the waters of the Jordan. God lives in the fullness of time, there is nothing past or future for God, everything is present and at once. God lives outside time, in Eternity. He is not waiting for us to be born, we were always with Him, He has always known us. When He went up on the cross, we went with Him as a member of His body. We already existed in His heart and in His mind. “Before I ever formed you in the womb, I knew you” (Jer 1:5). “Every one of my days Lord was written in Your book before one of them ever came to be” (Psalm 139:16). God knows everything we have done and what we will do. God has always known what we will freely do, and He has already provided. We who are baptized into Christ Jesus, are members of His body, and His Holy Spirit indwells us as in a temple. God knows us in our perfection even as we are far from it now.

THE POWER IN THE SACRAMENTS: We are changed by each one of the sacraments. For a couple, “they are no longer two, but one” (Matt 19:6). This is not simply a saying, but a reflection of what actually happens when a couple gets married. Something changes. For a priest, there is also a change when he receives the sacrament of Holy Orders. We are all changed by the sacraments.

Most people have higher expectations of Tylenol than of the Eucharist. When we take Tylenol we expect something to happen, as in our pain will diminish or go away. Do we expect anything to happen when we receive the Eucharist? We need to confidently participate in the “medicines” and the things God gives us. This is how these sayings begin to come alive in our lives. We are a new creation! We can look back over our lives and say we have been blessed.

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness, from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). We actually reflect the Lord’s glory with ever increasing brightness as we are transformed. Little by little, the process of transformation is going on in our lives.

THE POWER IN LITURGICAL TEXTS: We need to listen more carefully to the words of the liturgy. There can be a danger to ritual – we no longer listen carefully to what is being said, because we have heard it so often. Listen to these words of the Easter Preface: “For with the old order destroyed, a universe cast down is renewed, and integrity of life is restored to us in Christ” (Preface IV of Easter). Something incredible is being said here, and do we even hear it? From the offertory prayer of the 4th week of Easter: “Grant, we pray, O Lord, that we may always find delight in these paschal mysteries, so that the renewal constantly at work within us may be the cause of our unending joy.” Unending joy! If we do not connect with what is being said, it will not register. There is an expectation that God will help us to live better, to be more hopeful, more joyful. God can take so many things in our lives that always don’t seem a cause for joy, and turn them to our benefit. He can make all things new. We need to learn to trust Him.

The Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) shows the power of the word and the sacraments. The whole episode resembles a Mass. It begins with the travelers expressing sorrow and sadness about the events that had happened in Jerusalem, (opening prayers, penitential rite). Then Jesus explains how the Old Testament foreshadowed all that had recently happened (the liturgy of the word). Later they realized that their hearts were burning as they listened to Him. Then “their eyes were opened” at the breaking of the bread (Liturgy of the Eucharist). Are our hearts on fire when we listen to the word and the homily? Are our eyes opened when we receive the Eucharist? These are all transformative experiences if we attune our minds and our hearts to them.

GRATITUDE: Msgr. Pope listed two things that keep us from fully receiving the teachings presented today. The first is that we tend to be discouraged easily, we tend to be negative, tend to remember only the bad stuff. We are wired for negativity. We have to fight to overcome this tendency. The second thing is sloth. Sloth is when we have sorrow, sadness or aversion at the good things that God wants to offer us. We might have to give up some of the things we do, we might have to give up our favorite sin in order to accept what God has to offer us. What do we do about these two things? To increase joy in our lives, Msgr. Pope encouraged us to develop a consistent discipline of gratitude to give us good mental and spiritual health, and a sense of well being and contentment. God has been so good to us. We are all very blessed. Every day so much goes right that we are not even conscious of, or take for granted, while maybe only a few things go wrong. And we need to be grateful even for the difficult things for “ALL things work together for good for those who love and trust the Lord.” Think of the patriarch Joseph, and all that went wrong with his life, including being sold into slavery and imprisoned, and yet so much bad led to so much good, even he recognized it. The sin of his brothers brought them salvation through Joseph. And the very sin we did to Jesus became the source of our salvation. Only God can do things like this. ALL things work together for good. St. Paul tells us “these momentary afflictions are producing for us a weight of glory way out of proportion to the suffering” (2 Cor 4:17).

These are realities that we have to claim and meditate on. We have to discipline our minds to be grateful and to develop an attitude of gratitude. The battleground is in the mind. Sow a thought, reap a deed. Sow a deed, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny. How we think is how we act.

ALL CREATION WILL BE RENEWED: Not only are we renewed, but ALL creation will be renewed. Adam and Eve wanted a better deal than what God offered them in paradise, so we are now all in a paradise lost. All creation suffered the loss – “Cursed be the ground now because of you... thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you...” (Gen 3:17b-18). One day creation will be restored to its original harmony, peace and beauty. St. Paul takes up the story: “For creation is waiting with eager longing for the number of the elect to be complete... For one day creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and disorder to obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God...” (Romans 8:19-21). St. Paul personifies creation in this passage as waiting and groaning and yearning for human beings to finally get their act together, and enough of them be saved so God will come and put back into order what has been in disorder. Creation too will one day be perfected. From the end of the book of Revelation we learn “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev 21:5). Unlike secular environmentalists who see human beings as the problem, we Christians know that we are the solution, not the problem! The real way to restore creation starts with us — to evangelize, to have lots of children for the kingdom of God, and to love the world. By doing so, we can build up the number of the elect to fully staff the kingdom of heaven.