



Understanding the Sunday Gospels

CYCLE B

by Father Conley Bertrand

Nihil obstat: Reverend Jason Vidrine, M.A., Theology

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Teresa of Jesus, Virgin and Doctor of the Church

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First Sunday of Advent

Mk 13:33-37

Advent means coming. It is the season in which we prepare for Jesus' coming at Christmas and at the end of the world. In this way we also prepare for our own end and meeting Jesus when he comes for us at death. The Catechism tells us, "The coming of God's Son to earth is an event of such immensity that God willed to prepare for it over centuries... He announces him through the mouths of the prophets..." (CCC 522) "When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present the ancient expectancy of the Messiah; for by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming" (CCC 524). The Gospel for today begins with, "Be watchful! Be alert!" Then we are told why: "You do not know when the time will come." Keep your bags packed; keep yourself in readiness to leave this world and face God; be ready to give an account of how you lived your life. Was it according to your own will and selfish desires? Or was it according to God's will, as expressed by divine revelation and the teaching of the Church? We do not know when the Lord will come. We must live our lives in a way that is pleasing to him so that it does not matter when he comes—we are ready at any given moment. We must live our lives at each moment in preparedness for our meeting with Jesus. All of life must become a preparation to meet him. "Watch", then, means that you do not permit yourself to fall asleep in unpreparedness. You are on the alert in that you are aware of Jesus' coming and will not allow yourself to fall into unpreparedness even for a brief moment, such as a momentary escapade into some sinful pleasure. We must depend on the Lord for the strength and vigilance we need for this. That is why Jesus says, "Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" (Mt 26:41). Therefore, our vigilance must be coupled with prayerful dependence on the Lord

for us to be successful. Human nature is weak and needs God's strength obtained through prayer in order to remain faithful to God. St. Luke speaks of another precaution we must take to remain vigilant and prepared: "Be on guard," he says, "lest your spirits become bloated with indulgence and drunkenness and worldly cares" (Lk 21:34). This inspired word of God is saying to us that unrestrained delight in creature satisfaction such as eating and drinking—however good they are in themselves—dulls our spiritual perception of God's presence. The sense desire that is stirred in us for created goods by the pleasure they provide blurs the keenness of our spiritual perception of God. We must limit our indulgence to the right measure, in accord with God's will, and what is good for us; in this way, we first of all rejoice in God for his gifts as we enjoy them. We must follow the example of St. Paul who says in the second reading, "I give thanks to my God always...for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus..." St. Paul did not get caught up in the grace the Corinthians had received through his ministry and stop there. Rather, these spiritual gifts became an occasion for him to praise and thank God. We, too, must get caught up in the Giver of the gifts rather than in the enjoyment of his gifts. In this way the gifts become an occasion for us to enter into communion with the divine. The sublime spiritual joy of communion with God is so far superior to the passing sensible pleasure we may have in the things he made. We must not allow our senses to captivate our hearts ever to the point of separating us from the joy of communion with God. Restraining our appetite for the limited earthly joys these created goods afford us gives us a spiritual edge and disposes us for higher spiritual joy in God. Habitual temperance enables us to retain spirit dominance so that we can live in the joy of God and his will. Going beyond God's will in self-indulgence indicates that we are departing from God to becoming absorbed in self-centeredness. We no longer enjoy God's presence; we have separated ourselves from him through the pursuit of pleasure or some form of creature enjoyment so far inferior to joy in their creator.

Holiday time is primarily meant to be a time to rejoice in God and the great mysteries he has wrought for us. For example, we express our joy in God and the mystery of Christmas by feasting on the earthly gifts he provides for our human sustenance and enjoyment. We reveal our inner joy in God through our external celebration. We must be careful to contain ourselves so that our celebration will not become an occasion for over-indulgence in these good gifts that were meant to be partaken with temperance and thanksgiving. The Gospel tells us that the time of Jesus' coming is unknown. As Son of God and one with the Father in knowledge, Jesus would know when he would return. But this knowledge is not part of his mission as Messiah to reveal it. We do know, however, that he will come; but we do not know at what moment. The one thing of which we can be sure is that history is going somewhere; there is a consummation to come. To forget God and to become immersed in earth is most foolish. The wise man is he who never forgets that he must be ready when the summons comes. If he lives in that memory, for him the end will not be terror, but eternal joy. In a short parable Jesus illustrates what this constant watchfulness should be. The man traveling abroad represents Jesus who leaves home in the mystery of the Ascension. The servants he places in charge are his apostles who exercise authority over their master's servants and property. The gatekeeper represents the waiting servants who are warned to be ready to open to him whenever he returns. But they do not know exactly when that will be: it could be at midnight or just before dawn (at cockcrow) or after sunrise. The servants are to be on the alert all through the night lest he come suddenly and find them asleep and unprepared to welcome him. Jesus' sudden coming may also refer to the all important moment of death; that precise moment is hidden from us and the only way to make sure of being found worthy is to strive to be worthy always. This holy season of Advent is an opportune time for each one of us to look into his life and see how he stands with God. Jesus' coming at Christmas reminds us of his second coming at the end of time. How would I fare if I were called from this world

today? Our whole existence should be a constant preparing to see God who draws ever nearer. How are you preparing for Christmas when Jesus comes to us in the grace of his first coming? Will you spend more time in prayer, reflecting on the daily readings at Mass? Will you make a thorough examination of conscience and make a good confession? To maintain the state of alertness we need to struggle; for we all have a tendency to live with our eyes fixed on the things of earth. Entertainment is always close at hand to take up our time and to take our attention away from the eternal and the supernatural. Will you have enough courage and discipline to limit your time watching television or the Internet to be able to spend time in prayerful reflection? Especially during this time of advent, you will want to make an effort to retain the supernatural, spiritual dimension of your life. This effort implies self-denial: giving up what you are naturally inclined to do so that you can engage the spiritual powers which enable you to know and experience God who lives in you. Our Gospel text ends with, "May he [the Lord] not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'" "Sleeping", here means being oblivious to God and his will for you; being unaware of his presence and coming judgment; living as if God did not exist; living irresponsibly as if you do not have to give an account of your life to him. "Watch" means being clear-minded and aware of God; keeping a clear conscience so that you regret and repent of the least wrongdoing; thus you can continue to live in the presence of God. The hardened heart spoken of in the first reading refers to one who resists God's will continuously and goes against his conscience. Thus it becomes insensitive to the truth and God's will. Such a hardened heart and conscience is the result of consistently resisting the will of God and the promptings of the Holy Spirit working through your conscience; this occurs because you want to do your own will rather than God's. If you are in such a state, you need to cry out to God for mercy to free you from this hardened state, which makes you inhuman

and insensitive to others. You also need to ask others to pray for your deliverance. In such a state, you have begun to live in the company of the devil, whom you are imitating by resisting God and making yourself a god. The second reading says, "You were called to fellowship with his Son." But the Son was always doing his Father's will (Jn 8:29; 5:34). To be in fellowship with Jesus, the Son, you too must comply with the Father's will. A well-formed conscience is delicately attuned to God's will and finds delight in following it. It is watchful and alert; it is aware of God and lives in his presence, mindful of his words, "Walk in my presence and be blameless" (Gen 17:1).

Second Sunday of Advent

Mk 1:1-8

St. Mark begins his presentation today in these words: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God." "The beginning" reminds us of Genesis, the first book of the bible and its creation account, which begins with, "In the beginning". The solemn arrival of Jesus, the Son of God, is immediately associated with the new creation that is being initiated by his graceful appearance.

The Gospel is the good news of Jesus himself, in Person. He is God's self-gift to us: he reveals the good news of God's love for us in his Gospel; he expresses his infinite love for us through his suffering and death which frees us from sin; he communicates his infinite love for us as glorified Lord through the gift of his Spirit. He makes us children of God to live in divine intimacy and the eternal life of heaven. The Gospel is the presence and saving power of Jesus himself. As St. Paul puts it, the Gospel is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). Through believing, we open our hearts to receive God's self-gift to us in Jesus and enter into intimate communion with him and the Blessed Trinity. This is good news indeed! In this way we begin to live the heavenly life even now.

"Jesus Christ" really means "Jesus, the Christ". He is the long-awaited Messiah and Savior; the anointed one upon whom God has put his Spirit to be lavishly poured out upon those waiting to receive him.

Moreover, St. Mark asserts, this Jesus is "Son of God". He is the divine and eternal Son of God who incarnated himself in our human nature through the Blessed Virgin Mary. St. Mark states this blessed truth at the very beginning of his gospel because it is the height of the good news, although the full realization of the fact of Jesus' divinity will not become clear until after the resurrection. Then it became absolutely clear what the Father had delightfully proclaimed both at Jesus' baptism (Mk 1:11) and Transfiguration (Mk 9:7): "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." St. Mark sees John the Baptist fulfilling Old Testament prophecy as he appears on the Jordan to prepare the people to receive Jesus, the promised Messiah. He combines a phrase from the prophet Malachi, "Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way" (Mk 3:1), with the passage from Isaiah (Mk 40:3) to show that John is that messenger; he is the herald, "a voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"

Originally, the prophet Isaiah announced the return of the exiles from Babylonia and depicts Yahweh (God) as about to lead them through the desert back to Palestine. The voice of a herald proclaims the coming of Yahweh so that a road may be prepared. The imagery is derived from the custom of sending a herald to proclaim the forthcoming visit of a king so that his subjects might put badly kept roads into proper state of repair. The words of Isaiah are here applied to John the Baptist. He is the herald, who announces the coming of the Messiah and urges the Jewish people, and now us, to make due preparation to receive him: the new Deliverer who will free them and us from the captivity and slavery of sin. "John the Baptist appeared in the desert." John's call to repentance is made against the background of a prophetic tradition, which looked to the wilderness for the covenant renewal. For

example, God says, “I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart... On that day, says the Lord, She shall call me ‘My husband’...” and God responds, “I will espouse you to me forever...” (Hos 2:16, 18, 21) Typically, the hidden God is discovered in silence, solitude, and deprivation; then he becomes our all and great Lover.

John is that “voice...crying out in the desert” wilderness of Judea near the Jordan to prepare his fellow Jews and us to be worthy to welcome the Son of God; he is their long-expected Messiah announced by the prophets who is about to come among them and us.

The figure of John points to the continuity between the Old and New Testaments: he is the last of the prophets and the first of the witnesses to Jesus. He is like a bridge that connects the old and the new. Whereas the other prophets announced Jesus from afar, John was given the special privilege of actually pointing him out in person (Jn 1:29).

John was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Repentance is a coming to one’s senses resulting in a change of conduct, a radical conversion; repentance is a change of mind and heart as a result of realizing and admitting that we have sinned and are heading in the wrong direction. Consequently, we make an about face, a one hundred eighty degree turn; we make a thorough revision of our life, our acts, and attitudes to bring them into conformity with the will of God.

By a true change of heart and a total return to God the people could prepare themselves for the arrival of the Messiah. Their sins would be forgiven and their hearts would be ready to live a new life in the kingdom with the Messiah. As a sign of this entry into a new way of life, John baptized his disciples in water. John’s baptism was but an external symbol of interior conversion; it was the manifestation of the desire to win God’s friendship. The one who was coming could and would give that real friendship with God to all who would accept it.

The Jews knew about baptism for gentile converts to Judaism; but the amazing thing about John’s baptism was that he, a Jew, was asking Jews to submit to that which only a gentile convert was supposed to need. John had made the tremendous discovery that to be a Jew in a racial sense was not to be a member of God’s chosen people; a Jew might be in exactly the same position as a gentile; not being of Jewish descent, but being cleansed of sin shows one to belong to God’s people.

It is interesting to observe that because of John’s proximity to the New Testament and because of the continuation of the practice of sacramental baptism in the Church, he has been remembered in Christian tradition as John the Baptist or the Baptizer.

The baptism of John signified the need for inner purity but did not effect this in a sacramental way. John was fully aware that his disciples must also receive the greater baptism of the Messiah, which both signifies and effects spiritual cleansing. Only the Christian sacrament cleanses the soul of sin, infuses the grace of sonship, and regenerates the believer in the Holy Spirit.

The people were going out to John and “were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.”

We should note that the Jordan River is not any old stream. There is a special sacredness about this river. This is the river that stopped flowing to allow the chosen people to pass through it on dry ground as directed by God through Joshua their new leader (Jos 3). It is in this river that Naaman, a gentile, was cleansed from leprosy after washing seven times in it in obedience to Elisha, the prophet (2 Kgs 5). This is the same river that obeyed the prophet Elijah, and later Elisha, when he struck it with his mantle; the water divided and allowed them to cross on its dry bed (2 Kgs 2:8-14). John’s ministry on the site of this holy river Jordan prepares for the salvation of both the Israelites and gentiles as symbolized by the miracles of old. Jesus is going to sanctify these

waters even more by being baptized in them. The people “acknowledged their sins” as they “were being baptized”. The bath did not remove the guilt; rather it symbolized that inner change which took place as a result of grief over their sins and a desire to change their ways without which their guilt would remain. By seeking John’s baptism, a person showed that he realized he was a sinner. The rite, which John performed, announced forgiveness of sins through a change of heart as John urged the people to remove the obstacles to their salvation (Lk 3:10-14).

This confessing of sins was not the same as the Christian sacrament of Penance. But it was pleasing to God because it was a sign of interior repentance; and the people performed genuine penitential acts.

“John was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist;” a garment described as “the hairy mantle” (Zech 13:4) was the distinctive attire of Old Testament prophets. “Camel’s hair” may mean either a skin from a camel or a fabric woven from camel’s hair. The latter was common and cheap and so perhaps more probable. The great prophet Elijah was identified as “wearing a hairy garment with a leather girdle about his loins” (2 Kgs 1:8). John is dressed as the new Elijah who prepares the people for the Messiah and the kingdom of heaven (Mk 9:12-13 and NAB footnote). John’s presence at the Jordan recalls the site where Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kgs 2:6-11).

The Gospel tells us that John “fed on locusts and wild honey.” Locusts were often numerous in the Judean desert and were eaten by many. They are still eaten by people in the Middle East. Locusts are roasted and eaten whole or ground into powder and mixed with other food. The locust is one of the few chosen (kosher) insects that God permitted the Israelites to eat under the Old Covenant (Lev 11:22). This detail portrays John as faithful to the Torah and highlights his renunciation of worldly comforts. His disciplined lifestyle also included fasting (see Mk 2:18). St.

Mark intends his description of John to show that he practiced penance all his life and therefore was capable of preaching penance and repentance to his fellow men. This point holds even if the words for locust and wild honey are capable of two interpretations. The “locust” may be the insect that the Law allowed to be eaten; but it may also be a kind of bean or nut, the carob, which was the food of the poorest of the poor. The “honey” may be that which with wild bees make; or it may be a kind of sweet sap from the bark of certain trees. In any event, John’s diet was very meager.

“And this is what [John] proclaimed: ‘One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.’” John goes on to give the reason why he knows his humble attitude to be correct: “I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John declares that he is only the messenger, the precursor, who is preparing for one who is about to come; he surpasses John in nature and power; for he will confer the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, on those who accept him. John insisted that he was inferior and unworthy to perform even the most menial tasks for the Messiah. The baptism of the Messiah would impart the Holy Spirit and is thus incomparably superior to the baptism of John; his was just a preparatory rite, an external washing symbolic of interior conversion.

This baptism with the Holy Spirit also signifies the copious outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which will be given, not only in the sacrament of baptism, but also in the entire economy of salvation that the Messiah will establish. The prophets had spoken of the superabundant effusion of the Holy Spirit as characteristic of the Messianic age (Is 44:3; Jl 3:1; Zech 12:10).

We rejoice that we have been blessed to live in this fullness of time to receive this generous outpouring of the Holy Spirit into our hearts. We are now enjoying what John could only look toward from a distance and talk about. fold” (*The Sunday Readings*, Kevin O’Sullivan).

Third Sunday of Advent

Jn 1:6-8, 19-28

On this “Gaudete” or “Rejoice” Sunday we focus on the joy that is ours because of the nearness of Christ’s birth. But he also remains invisibly close to us by his indwelling presence. John tells us today, “...there is one among you whom you do not recognize.” Jesus is humbly hidden in the depths of our heart; but we are often too preoccupied with ourselves, or the world around us, to recognize or be attentive to him. His hidden presence can be a source of tremendous joy if we remain aware and live in communion with him.

Our gospel today begins with, “A man named John was sent from God.” You may remember that John the Baptist’s parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were childless; it was only by the miraculous intervention of God that they were able to conceive: for, “Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years” (Lk 1:7). John was definitely “sent from God”, who destined him to be the Precursor, the one who would prepare the way for the coming of Christ among the people. Zechariah prophesied this on the occasion of John’s circumcision when he said, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and brought redemption to his people...and you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins...” (Lk 1:68, 76-77).

It was God himself who chose the name “John” for the baby even before he was conceived, as announced by the angel Gabriel (Lk 1:13). This name means “The LORD has shown favor; The LORD is gracious”. This is a most suitable name for the man who was to introduce the greatest act of graciousness and kindness that God has ever manifested in human history: the favor and gift of the Incarnate Son of God who became our Savior. “He [John] came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” Jesus is the “light of the world” (Jn 8:12); he is “The true light, which enlightens everyone” (Jn 1:9). In the creed

we proclaim Jesus as “Light from Light, true God from true God”; his being proceeds from the Father as glorious Light. He comes to enlighten a world wrapped in the darkness of ignorance, error and sin. John qualifies as a witness because of his personal experience of Jesus and divine inspiration; he tells us what he saw and heard. These are his very words: “I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel... I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him. I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whoever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God’” (Jn 1:31-34).

John’s gospel focuses attention on John the Baptist’s mission or the one who points out the long-expected Messiah to the people. The Messianic identity of Jesus can only be known through explicit revelation from God or Jesus himself and then communicated to others.

John’s testimony helped others to believe; but his own belief and therefore his capacity to bear witness to others came by direct inspiration and revelation from God. This belief is so important because it puts us into contact with God himself; it brings us into communion with the living God. Moreover, St. John’s epistle tells us, “Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself” (1 Jn 5:10). We no longer depend on another’s witness to believe. Faith becomes the fruit of God revealing himself to us in our own hearts. Of course, we need to support each other in living this faith to the highest degree.

“He [John] was not the light, but came to testify to the light.” John was “a burning and shining lamp” (Jn 5:35) to prepare the people for “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (Jn 1:9), Jesus, “the light of the world” (Jn 8:12).

“This is the testimony of John”: John’s whole being pointed toward the Christ. He cherished nothing for himself. He considered himself to be nobody; his whole existence was to reveal “the light of the

world” so that everyone could go to the Christ for enlightenment about how to live and receive his Spirit to be able to live as children of God.

“...the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask him, ‘Who are you?’” In John’s gospel the term “Jews” were those who opposed Jesus. They were the religious leaders of the people at that time. The term is not a derogatory word directed at ethnic Jews in general. After all, Jesus was a Jew, as was his mother, his disciples, and most of the earliest Christians.

In John’s gospel the hostile Jerusalem authorities were in direct attack from the very beginning. The guardians of the national religion wish to know by what authority John baptizes; what right did he have to urge people to repentance.

The people were evidently saying that John the Baptist was the long-awaited Messiah. The delegated Priests and Levites were wondering if this could be so. The Baptist declared without hesitation that he was not the Messiah, the Christ, the one anointed by God to bring salvation to the world.

“What are you then?” they asked, “Are you Elijah?” The Jews interpreted literally the words of the prophet Malachi: “Lo, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes...” (Mal 3:23) They believed the great ninth century prophet would return to earth to prepare the hearts of the people for the day of the Lord. John appeared in the desert in dress (camel’s hair) and character like Elijah. But he answered his questioners with, “I am not” Elijah. John is not Elijah come again in the flesh, but he fulfills his mission in spirit just as the angel Gabriel had told Zechariah, “...he [John] will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people fit for the Lord” (Lk 1:16-17). Jesus himself explained “Elijah has come” in the person of John the Baptist (see Mk 9:9-13 and NAB footnotes).

Again the authorities asked John, “Are you the Prophet?” [John] answered, ‘No!’”

Israel awaited the coming of the Prophet in the likeness Moses. That the authorities question whether John is The Prophet and not simply a prophet suggests that they are thinking of this Mosaic figure foretold in Deuteronomy (18:15-19). John is not the Messianic Prophet; it is Jesus who fulfills this role as the New Moses (compare Jn 6:14; 7:40).

Again John’s questioners pressed him, “Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?” John responded with, “I am the voice of one crying out in the desert; make straight the way of the Lord, as Isaiah the prophet said.”

John identifies himself as “the voice” of Isaiah 40:3. The Isaian passage originally referred to the role of the angels in preparing a way through the desert by which Israel might return from the Babylonian captivity to the land of Palestine. Like a modern bulldozer, the angels were to level hills and fill in valleys, and thus prepare a superhighway. But John the Baptist is to prepare a road, not for God’s people to return to the Promised Land, but for God to come to his people. His baptizing and preaching in the desert were opening up the hearts of the people, leveling their pride, filling their emptiness, and thus preparing them for Jesus’ coming (see Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John*). John simply describes himself as a “voice”: the voice sounds and vanishes; and John realized his role to be just that, to fade before one greater than himself.

“Some Pharisees were also sent. They asked [John], ‘Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?’” It seemed to the Pharisees that washing the repentant with water to signify their interior conversion was a religious function which John had no right to carry out.

John answers, “I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one

who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.” John explains why he baptized. His was a simple baptism of water, with no inherent spiritual efficacy beyond its symbolic power of exciting repentance. But the one who is soon to come is far superior—he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John considered himself to be “a nobody,” preparing the people for the Messiah’s arrival; he is not even worthy to be the Messiah’s servant. John has a premonition of the majesty of Christ whom he recognizes as “Son of God”. In comparison, John experiences his own lowliness and nothingness.

John’s only authority for baptizing is his task to prepare the way for a greater one to follow, who has taken rank above him. To use his own words, “The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me” (Jn 1:15).

And yet the greatness of Jesus is veiled and keeps him hidden; his own humility and self-effacement shields and hides him from the proud and arrogant. The leaders of the people were too self-centered and ambitious to be able to recognize the humble servant of the Lord. Even when John pointed Jesus out they were unable to recognize and accept him. Their egoism and sinful inclinations blind them to the majesty of Jesus; for their whole demeanor and disposition are directly opposed to the ways of God and everything Jesus is and stands for.

Will you be able to recognize the Messiah when he comes to us at Christmas in poverty, weakness, and total helplessness?

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Lk 1:26-38

“The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee call Nazareth.”

The village of Nazareth was situated in northern Palestine, in the region of Galilee. It was so insignificant as never to have been

cited in the entire Old Testament. Nazareth’s sole claim to fame in history is as the residence of Mary and the Holy Family.

In keeping with the marriage customs of the time, Mary was probably a girl of some fourteen or fifteen years at the time of the annunciation. Her home was probably like most in this poor village, a cave dug into the side of a hill with perhaps a small extension to the front. There could have been a single door to the house, with a small opening on the side for ventilation. Light came from the open door or from a lamp consisting of a saucer of oil in which floated a wick. On the floor were perhaps a few mats, perhaps not even that. The floor itself was simply clay beaten hard by the many footsteps of the family.

Mary’s life was definitely a hidden one, leaving her intimate relationship with God undisturbed and free to grow and thrive.

“The angel...was sent...to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.” The word used for Co in Greek usually means a young girl of marriageable age. But St. Luke used the word “parthenos”, meaning virgin in the strict sense. St. Luke uses the word twice in the same sentence. We are reminded of the prophecy of Isaiah, which says, “The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son...” (Is 7:14). The prophet had used the word “alma” to mean a young unmarried woman in this passage. But when St. Matthew quoted it in his infancy narrative, he changed the word to “parthenos” as St. Luke did to indicate that Mary was a virgin in the strict sense. The virgin in Mary’s case implies that she had consecrated all of her love and affective powers to God. Her whole being was directed immediately toward loving God; her whole life was dedicated exclusively to God. It is the heavenly life already begun, as Jesus explained, “At the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven” (Mt 22:30).

The virgin was betrothed, promised in marriage, to Joseph. Espousal was a solemn engagement, a binding contract, among the Jews. It lasts one year.

At the end of the year, the groom took the bride to his own house; then they became husband and wife. “The virgin’s name was Mary.” In Hebrew, Mary’s name is Miriam, which means “the exalted one”.

Joseph, Mary’s fiancé, was of “the house of David”. Mary also is believed to be of the family of David. The book of Numbers says, “This is what the Lord commands with regard to the daughters...: They may marry anyone they please, provided they marry into a clan of their ancestral tribe...” (Num 36:6). Thus both Mary and Joseph were from the family of David. But it was important that Joseph also be “of the house of David”: following Jewish custom, Joseph’s legal fatherhood was equivalent to natural fatherhood in matters of inheritance. Joseph thus confers the privilege of a Davidic descendant upon Jesus. In this way, God’s promise to David of raising up an heir to “make his royal throne firm forever” can be fulfilled (see 2 Sam 7: 12-13).

The angel said to Mary, “Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.” “Hail” is a common greeting, which literally means “Rejoice!” This greeting crowns the theme of joy and gladness that punctuates St. Luke’s Infancy Narrative. The call to rejoice echoes Old Testament passages that address daughter Zion. In the prophets this refers to Mother Jerusalem, whose faithful children will rejoice in the Messianic age because God has chosen to dwell in their midst. Mary, chosen to be the virgin Mother of the Messiah, is greeted with the same summons because she is the embodiment of faithful Israel and the most privileged recipient of God’s Messianic blessings.

The angel’s greeting, “full of grace”, means that Mary is the object of God’s grace and favor. The Greek word means “most favored one”. This title not only preserves all that “full of grace” might imply of personal sanctity, but also points to the reason for that fullness; for the favor that will make of Mary the “Favored One” par excellence is the Messianic motherhood, the divine maternity.

The titles “full of grace” and “most favored one” indicate that Mary is the object of God’s grace and favor from the beginning. She has been chosen for

a long time past, making her a vessel who has been and is now filled with divine life. God endowed Mary with an abundance of grace to prepare her for the vocation of divine motherhood, and to make her a sterling example of Christian holiness. The angel’s addressing Mary as “most favored one” points in the direction of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. St. Luke’s Annunciation Narrative is an important indicator of Mary’s lifelong holiness. God is her “Savior” (1:47) in the most perfect way possible: he sanctified Mary in the first instance of her conception and preserved her entirely from sin and even from the inclination toward sin that we experience.

Mary, more than any other human being in the Bible, is the recipient of the most impressive salutations (see Lk 1:28, 30, 35, 42-49; 2:19 ff, 34). In her, more than in anyone else, God’s Messianic fulfillment is achieved. As such, she has received more, from and through God’s anticipation of Jesus’ redemptive work, than anyone else in the Old or New Testament.

“The Lord is with you,” means God will aid Mary in carrying out the role for which he has chosen her to be, mother of the Messiah. These consoling words are a guarantee that the promise will be efficacious; the divine purpose will be accomplished. Mary is assured of this; she will not be alone; God will be present working through and with her.

“But [Mary] was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” Mary is naturally disturbed and surprised to hear herself called God’s favored one; she had as yet no idea of why she should be called this. There was also that initial fear which a person normally experiences when God gives him or her a special calling. The fact that Mary felt this fear is a perfectly natural reaction in the face of the supernatural and in the presence of an angel.

“Then the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God.’” God’s divine graciousness has endowed Mary with a supernatural quality making her pleasing in his sight. God has

avored Mary to the full, above and before all other creatures. She was the closest of all creatures to God because of the all-important roll given her as Mother of the Messiah. Moreover, her humility, her joy in God, her love for others, her fortitude and plentitude of virtues demonstrate how well she has responded to her graced and favored condition.

The angel goes on to declare to Mary, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.” He is explaining to her why she is so favored by God. God’s plan for her is to become the Mother of the Messiah. She is about to conceive a son whom she is to name Jesus meaning “the LORD saves.” St. Matthew’s gospel explains, “You are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). By this time, Mary would have recalled the text from Isaiah which says, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us!’” (Mt 1:25; Is 7:14). She would have realized her involvement in becoming Mother of the messiah.

Another passage that Mary would have remembered was, “The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst [literally, in your womb]... Fear not, O Zion... The Lord, your God, is in your midst [in your womb], a mighty Savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love...(Zeph 3:15-17).

The angel reveals further that “He [her son] will be great and will be Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary’s son will be great because he is divine, a greatness he will not lose when he takes on the lowliness of human nature. The angel also reveals that Jesus will be king of the Davidic dynasty in keeping with his promise; his kingdom will last forever, for his humanity will remain forever joined to his divinity.

The “Most High” is a title for God commonly used by St. Luke. Mary’s future son is described with

language ordinarily reserved for God’s redeeming presence among his people. He, in fact, will truly be Son of God.

The throne of David his father will be given to Mary’s son. This is a reference to God’s messianic promise to David, which was given through the prophet Nathan. (This was what we read about in the first reading in 2 Sam 7.) Since the monarchy came to an end, Israel had been waiting for its restoration under the Lord’s anointed, the Messiah. He would in a special sense be called “Son of the Most High”. The angel is now explaining to Mary that she is now being involved in this event, the fulfillment of God’s promise to send a Messiah who will occupy his father, David’s, throne.

“He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” The “house of Jacob” is a traditional Old Testament term for the kingdom of Israel. The angel is revealing to Mary that Jesus, her Son, is this anointed Davidic ruler who will re-gather the tribes of Israel with all the nations into his glorious kingdom (compare Acts 15:13-18). Exactly what that all meant in practice, only time would reveal; so much mystery and the darkness of faith would still await Mary to bring her to perfection. How is it that “he will rule...forever”? The paschal mystery was still hidden from Mary; she would have to go through the dark night of Calvary before Jesus would be immortalized through his glorious resurrection. Only then could Mary and we understand how this prophecy could be realized and Jesus would rule forever, “and of his kingdom there will be no end”.

Here Mary would have remembered the words of the prophet Daniel, “One like a son of man... received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:13-14).

“But Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?’” It would be better if this passage read, “How will this be...?” Mary is

not questioning God's ability to give her a son; but she is enquiring as to how such a plan will unfold. Her saying, "I have no relations with a man" refers to her virginal state. Her concern is that she is a virgin at present and that she intends to remain one in the future. The announcement of a miraculous conception thus causes Mary to wonder aloud how God will bless her with a son and yet preserve her virginal purity. Her words are inexplicable otherwise.

Mary believed the angel's words—she did not doubt as Zechariah had done (1:18). Her question, "How will this be?" expresses her readiness to obey the will of God even though at first sight it implied a contradiction: on the one hand she was convinced that God wished her to remain a virgin; on the other, here was God also announcing that she would become a mother. Then the angel Gabriel announced God's mysterious design, and what had been impossible, according to the laws of nature, is explained by a unique intervention on the part of God.

Mary's resolution to remain a virgin was certainly something very unusual. However, in the Old Testament, there were some who, in keeping with God's plan, did remain celibate: for example, Jeremiah, Elijah, Elisha, and John the Baptist. The Blessed Virgin, who received a very special inspiration of the Holy Spirit to practice virginity, is a first fruit of the New Testament, which will establish the excellence of virginity.

"And the angel said to her in reply, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.' The Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High—God himself—will produce this seemingly impossible result. This power is attributed to the Holy Spirit of God. That Spirit hovered over the waters of creation (Gen 1:2) and now hovers over Mary to bring perfection to humanity, which otherwise would remain in a chaotic state.

"The power of the Most High will overshadow you" indicates that the conception of Jesus within the

womb of Mary will be entirely supernatural, the result of God's creative work within her. The shadow is a symbol of the presence of God. When Israel was journeying through the wilderness, the glory of God filled the Tabernacle and a cloud covered the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 40:34-36). The angel mentions the Holy Spirit, the Most High, and the Son of God, offering Mary a glimpse of the Trinity.

"Therefore," the angel continues, "the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God." Mary's virginal conception leaves no doubt that Jesus is God's son—the child who will be born will not be the son of any human father; he will be conceived by the power of God alone and will therefore be the Son of God.

The prophet Daniel tells us that the Messianic times will be marked by the anointing of "a most holy" one (Dan 9:24). Jesus' humanity was anointed by the divinity at his conception. This signals the inauguration of the Messianic age. The Holy One will be Son of God in an entirely new sense because he will be conceived by the power of God alone.

"And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God." Elizabeth is Mary's relative, but we do not know to what degree—it is not stated.

The sign given to Mary in confirmation of the angel's announcement to her is the pregnancy of her aged relative, Elizabeth. If a woman past the childbearing age could become pregnant, why, the angel implies, should there be doubt about Mary becoming pregnant as a virgin? "For nothing will be impossible for God." The angel Gabriel insists that God can surmount every obstacle to motherhood, including the infertility of Elizabeth and the virginity of Mary. Mary, unlike Zachariah, had not asked for a sign or a proof from the angel, but she was given one anyway.

"Mary said," in response to the angel, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me

according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her." Now that Mary knows the divine purpose, she accepts God's will and plan unhesitatingly and with perfect simplicity. Mary freely and actively embraces God's invitation to bear the Messiah. The Greek expression denotes more than mere passive acceptance, indicating that she wishes or desires to fulfill God's will in her life. Unlike Zechariah she welcomes the angel's words uninhibited by doubt. She humbly accepts God's will for her and considers herself as God's handmaid and servant. Gladly will she do whatever God wants of her. And she persevered in doing his will to the very end, even to "standing by the cross of Jesus" as he was being crucified (Jn 19:25). By her obedience, she undid what Eve had done by her disobedience. Thus Mary became the New Eve, "the mother of all the living" (Gen 3:20) in grace, in cooperation with the New Adam, the Messiah (see Rom 5:17-19; 1 Cor 15:20-22, 45-49).

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary & Joseph

Lk 2:22-40

Our Gospel begins with these words: "When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, just as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord,' and to offer the sacrifice of 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,' in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord".

According to the Law of Moses (Lev 12:2-4), a woman who gave birth to a son must go through a ceremony of legal purification forty days after the birth. The law also stated that every first-born male belonged to God (Ex 13:2, 12-15). But he could be redeemed for five silver shekels (Num 18:16). All of this took place at the Temple in Jerusalem. We meditate on this event in the fourth Joyful Mystery of the Rosary. Jesus already belonged totally to God, his Father. But the Holy Family fulfilled the law in obedience to God. This perfect obedience reminds

us of Jesus' desire to be baptized by John, although he was sinless, in order to fulfill all righteousness, i.e. all the details of God's will and plan for him (Mt 3:13-15).

Mary and Joseph presented the offering of the poor instead of a year old lamb: one bird was for a holocaust of adoration; the other as a sin offering (Lev 12:6-8; 5:7-10). They had no sin, but wanted to fulfill the law and give good example.

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the holy Spirit was upon him" (25).

Simeon awaited with longing for the Messianic age, "the consolation of Israel". This was the time when many believed that God would deliver his people from Gentile or Roman rule. God, they hoped, would reestablish the glorious kingdom of David in Jerusalem (Lk 1:71; 2:38). This understanding needed to be corrected and perfected with a more spiritual notion. Whatever the real truth was, Simeon experienced it in this exciting moment. At last it had come! It fulfilled his whole life's waiting. "...the holy Spirit was upon him..."; he did not have to know the details. The consolation he experienced in the Holy Spirit was enough to fill him with supreme joy.

26 "It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord."

Through a deep prayer life, the Holy Spirit revealed in Simeon's heart that he would actually see the Messiah. His dedication to worship the Lord in the temple in solitude and prayer disposed him to receive these divine intuitions.

"He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him into his arms and blessed God..."

Fully possessed and led by the Spirit into the temple (Compare Rom 8:14), Simeon awaited that graced moment. What he had been waiting for all these years was finally arriving. When Mary and Joseph came into the temple with the Child Jesus, the Holy Spirit enlightened the old man's understanding that this child was truly God's anointed one. There was something so very special about this child. The glory of God shined through his human features: the light in his eyes, the glow in his smile, the radiance of his being. And his parents were so filled with holy peace and joy.

Simeon could not resist the impulse to take the child in his arms and press him to his bosom. He received a most powerful grace in this personal encounter with this infant Messiah, God's anointed one. That anointing spilled over and graced the holy man with holy joy. So he broke out in thanksgiving and praise of God, saying, "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel."

Simeon, who had served God in the temple for so long, felt that he could now die in peace. All that holy longing he had experienced was now fulfilled. He was ready to die so that, at last, he could be with God who had fulfilled his promise. We are reminded, here, of St. Bernadette. Once she had seen the Blessed Virgin Mary's smile, that taste of heaven made her want to die so she could experience this heavenly life forever. Earthly life was nothing compared to that one heavenly smile she experienced in Mary. Simeon also felt that way, once he had come face to face with the divinity's radiating light in Jesus, the infant Savior.

Simeon felt like a watchman who had accomplished his task and could now be released from duty. He had actually experienced in his very person the salvation of God that was in the making for all peoples. That blessed meeting with the infant Savior gave him a foretaste of his redeeming presence: what it means to be saved. It means to be plunged into God. And this stupendous grace would be available

to all peoples—not only the Jews—but through them, it would become available for the Gentiles—all the nations of the world. At the same time, this marvelous salvation experienced in person by Simeon, available to everyone else on this planet, would redound to the glory of those first chosen, the people of Israel. For it is from them that God's anointed came and was born.

St. Luke tells us that 33 "The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him." The evangelist has already made it clear that Mary conceived Jesus without a human father, through the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:31-35). Joseph became the child's adopted father. They marveled over Simeon's recognition of this child as Messiah. How did Simeon know? They were in awe at the way God was revealing him. Mary and Joseph already knew from the angel Gabriel that Jesus would be given "the throne of David his father", and that he would "rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there [would] be no end" (Lk 1:32-33). But they could only marvel as the mystery of his Person was gradually revealed.

"...and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.'"

Simeon blessed the holy family by calling God's favor upon them. But then he proceeds to single out and address Mary, his mother. He foresees and points out that Jesus' very Person will be a dividing line. Some will be for and others against him. Those who love and live by the truth will decide in his favor and follow him. These are the humble whose lives are centered on God. Whereas, the proud will choose to go against him. Their decision is based on the desire to keep the self at the center of existence rather than God. These refuse to convert themselves to live according to the truth. The truth is that God, the Creator and Sustainer of all, is the center of the universe. The proud, however, refuse to conform to this reality—they live a lie—they usurp God's place

through a self-centered existence. Jesus exemplified the truth by centering his life around God, the Father, and conforming his will to God's will. Jesus was obedient to this right order of truth even unto death. In this way, he attained eternal glory. The father exalted him in the glorious resurrection. There he can be clearly seen as "the Way and the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6) for all to follow. Now we know with certitude the humble way to live—but the proud refuse to budge from their false, self-centered position. Separated from God in this way will lead to their ruin in this life and in the next.

We can easily see then 35 "that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed" as a result of Jesus' coming. People will respond to his coming by deciding for or against Jesus and his teaching. They are forced to make a decision. They cannot remain neutral. To attempt to remain neutral is to side against Jesus; it is to refuse to live according to the truth and therefore dispose oneself for condemnation.

Simeon prophesies that Jesus' being a sign that will be contradicted is going to cause Mary much suffering. She is told that a sword will pierce her very soul. This image symbolizes the deep anguish and suffering Mary experienced at seeing Jesus attacked by his enemies, their continuously persecuting, and finally crucifying him. The extreme extent of Mary's suffering cannot be fully expressed in words. She stood beneath the cross and suffered in her heart with Jesus the excruciating pains of crucifixion (Jn 19:25). The sequence for the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows celebrated on September 15 expresses Mary's sorrows in poetic form. For example, "Through her heart, his sorrow bearing, now at length the sword had passed... Christ above in torment hangs, She beneath beholds the pangs of her dying, glorious Son... Bruised, derided, cursed, defiled, She beheld her tender child, all with bloody scourges rent..." These were the pains of spiritual childbirth through which Mary became mother of the Church (Rev 12:2; Jn 19: 26-27).

St. Luke tells us that the eighty-four year old widowed prophetess, Anna, who never left the temple but worshipped night and day with fasting

and prayer came forward at that very time when Jesus was being presented in the temple.

38 "...she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem."

Anna, like Simeon, recognized Mary's baby as the Messiah. What an astonishing presence that child presented to these two holy people that made them realize in such a striking way that they had indeed come into the presence of God's anointed one! She could not but tell everyone she met about the arrival of the infant Messiah. Thus, both Anna and Simeon join the shepherds and the Magi in bearing witness to the arrival of the Messiah in Jesus. We, who have experienced his glorious presence within our very persons, must also proclaim him in some way to all we meet.

St. Luke concludes this Sunday's Gospel passage with, "When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

St. Luke does not mention that the Holy Family had to flee to Egypt to escape the jealousy of Herod. St. Matthew explains that an angel warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt because the king was going to search for the child to destroy him (Mt 2:13-15). It was only after Herod died that Joseph was again told by an angel to return to Israel. He was told to go to Galilee.

So the Holy Family settled there in a town called Nazareth (Mt 2:19-23). Actually that meant that they were back, home again. That was where they lived before they left for Bethlehem to be enrolled (Lk 2:4-5). And there, too Jesus' hidden life began—except for the episode of his being left behind in the temple and found by his parents after three days (Lk 2:41-52).

In that hidden life, Jesus grew up and learned to practice the virtues that built up his strong character

in preparation for his public ministry. Jesus was known as “the carpenter’s Son” (Mt 13:55) and later “the carpenter” (Mk 6:3). The difficult work of carpentry without the convenience of modern tools, contributed to making Jesus into a strong man. That hidden life was also a contemplative one where Jesus could observe nature prayerfully and learn wisdom in the secrecy of his heart. He could draw from that experience of life the wisdom that he learned to preach vivid and impressive, easy-to-understand sermons. That is one of the reasons why the crowds were so astonished at his teaching” (Mt 7:28).

The Epiphany of the Lord Mt 2: 1-12

In the first reading, we see Jerusalem, symbolizing the Church and the people of God, all lit up with a bright light. “Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you...upon you the Lord shines, and over you appears his glory.” This brilliant light expresses the presence of God. God often showed his presence to the Jews as fire and light. Recall the scene of the burning bush through which God appeared to Moses (Ex 3: 1-6); and the pillar of fire (Ex 13: 21) which guided the chosen people through the desert at night.

In the great messianic day, God will transform the holy city from within by his holy and glorious presence. This light in Jerusalem will glow and illumine the gentiles, all the nations of the world. The people in far away countries will be attracted by this light. They will be drawn to the light, which will, in turn, guide them to salvation. This light will fill the foreign nations with joy. These non-Jews will come to Jerusalem, the Church, with their wealth as presents in recognition of her God and King.

When the Babylonian invasion occurred (587 BC), the glorious presence of God left the temple (Ez 10: 18—11: 23); but now it returns; and now it

is beaming light to the entire world. The darkness of despair, ignorance, and evil will now be dispelled. A new temple, the risen body of Jesus, replaces the old. This new temple appears for the first time when Jesus was born. The dark night of the world was illumined by the bright star seen by the magi, wise men who studied the stars.

These wise men came to be pictured as kings (although the Gospel does not say they were). These were even given the names of Kaspar, Balthazar, and Melchior. These legendary figures were brought into existence from meditation on such texts as the responsorial Psalm 72 of today: “The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts: the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute. All kings shall pay him homage...”

St. Matthew’s gospel shows the prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled: “They prostrated themselves and did him homage. They opened their coffers and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” Three gifts may have caused the supposition that there were three wise men. But again the Gospel does not tell us so. This reflects on the passage presented in the first reading, “Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Median and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense and proclaiming the praises of the Lord” (Is 60: 6).

The miraculous star seen by the magi is a fulfillment of the second prophecy by Balaam in the book of Numbers: “A star shall advance from Jacob” (Num 24: 17). According to popular belief of the time, each person is represented by a star, which appears at his birth. This star prophesied by Balaam represents a great leader who is to be David, a figure of the messianic king who was to come after him. Therefore, it would be an unusually bright star.

This star seen by the wise men, then, shows that Jesus is the long expected Messiah. This is the good news. Prophecy is fulfilled. God keeps his promises and comes to save his people.

A third prophecy is fulfilled also as shown by St. Matthew when he quotes Micah who prophesied this eight centuries earlier, saying that from Bethlehem, the place where David was born, a ruler of the people would arise. "From you [Bethlehem] shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel."

We also see a fourth prophesy being fulfilled. In the first reading, Isaiah predicts, "Nations will walk by your light and kings by your shining radiance." A fifth prophesy is made in Psalm 72, which declares that "all kings...all nations will serve him", has come true.

Our faith must be greatly strengthened by the realization of such astounding prophecies. Living that faith will enable us to acquire those luminous qualities that reflect God's increased presence within us.

Epiphany is a word that means manifestation or showing. This feast celebrates God's revelation of himself to all the nations and countries of the world. In Jesus, he shows himself to all of us, all peoples of all races. He comes to make brothers and sisters of all races.

St. Paul puts it this way in the second reading, "In Christ Jesus, the Gentiles are now coheirs with the Jews, members of the same body and sharers of the promise through the preaching of the Gospel."

As children of the same family, whose Father is God; we inherit the same kingdom, which is the fulfillment of God's promises. We even become members of the same body of Christ.

So the feast of the Epiphany is the celebration of the gentile Christmas. On Christmas night, we remember how Jesus is shown to the Jewish shepherds through the message of an angel. Today, Jesus is shown to us gentiles, represented by the magi, through the miraculous star.

Herod missed the chance of a lifetime. Because his heart was hard and evil, he missed the chance to see God in the flesh. Then he tried to kill the

newborn king—but he failed; despite his evil cunning, God's will and truth triumphed. So God continues to prevail in our day. He manifests himself to his believing friends, but hides himself from disbelieving sinners.

People from far away saw the star, but Herod and his court were too blinded by selfish living to see it. The magi experienced great joy at seeing the star; whereas, Herod and all of Jerusalem "became greatly disturbed".

If we live with a clear conscience, the presence of God gives us great joy. But if our conscience is burdened by sin, we are afraid of God and try to hide from his presence.

Because of selfish living, Herod and his people missed the greatest event that ever happened in their midst: the mystery of the Incarnation of God. But they were totally indisposed to enjoy it. The same may be said of us. The manifestation is meant for us, yet our hearts may be ill prepared. We may be so engrossed in self-centeredness or sense gratification that the spiritual light of God is unable to penetrate the darkness of our heart. The star keeps on shining, but our hearts are unable to see it. We remain in darkness as we try to alleviate our miserable lives with superficial, fleeting, unsatisfying pleasure.

Those who see the star are overjoyed like the magi. It leads them to Jesus whose divinity they recognize. They "prostrate themselves and [do] him homage...they open their treasures and offer him gifts..."

Faith is the star that they follow; when they lost it, they sought spiritual counsel. After seeking, the light of the star could be seen again. "[T]he star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother." The star leads them into the presence of the Savior King. He touches the very core of their being with the fulfillment

they have long desired. In him, they discover the divine element lost by our first parents. In him, they recover the complete satisfaction for which they so longed.

Notice, the mother and the child were in a “house”. We can suppose, then, that this event took place sometime after the birth—perhaps several months. This corresponds with the fact that Herod “ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity [who] were two years old and under” (Mt 2:16). He had carefully 7 “ascertained from [the magi] the time of the star’s appearance.”

In Christ, made present for us in the Eucharist, our search for ultimate happiness has come to rest. We have found him for whom our hearts yearned. There, we assimilate the spiritual riches of his divine fullness. We have found ourselves in him whose divinity completes our incomplete, impoverished humanity. His joy-giving presence lights up our whole being with his glory.

The Baptism of the Lord

Mk 1:7-11

Our Gospel begins with, 7“...this is what [John the Baptist] proclaimed: ‘One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.’”.

Large numbers of people were coming from Judea and Jerusalem to be baptized by John the Baptist, which is equivalent to John the baptizer. He was preaching and administering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This baptismal washing for those who submitted to it was a sign that they were sorry for their sins. The washing signified that their sincere repentance cleansed them from their sins. The baptism in itself did not confer grace, as the one Jesus will administer.

John was such a powerful man of God that people wondered whether he might be the Messiah. John,

in his humility, hastens to declare that he is not the Messiah. He was not even worthy to perform for the Messiah the menial task of a slave, which was to untie and carry the sandals of his Master. John’s purity of heart sensitized him to the greatness of the Messiah. His grace as precursor enabled him to realize how far superior the Messiah would be. John knew the Old Testament prophecies. For example, Isaiah had announced that the Messiah would be endowed with an abundance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit empowering him to bring about reconciliation and fill the world with the knowledge and experience of God (Is 11:1-9). (Compare Is 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 61:1-2.)

John was enlightened by the Holy Spirit to understand how great God’s anointed one would be. He would be the source of the Holy Spirit to be poured out upon all peoples (Joel 3:1-2). John continued to explain, 8“I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the holy Spirit.”

John was very much aware of the inferiority of his baptism compared to that of the Messiah. He could understand this from the Isaiah texts to which we just referred. But as forerunner who prepared for his coming, John also knew in his heart that, as the source of the Holy Spirit, the Messiah’s baptism would be far more effective than the one he administered. God revealed this to John so he could excite the people with longing for the stupendous power of the Holy Spirit, whom the Messiah would bring into the world. To be plunged into the Holy Spirit, which is the meaning of baptized, means to be immersed in God. And if the recipient is well disposed, it means to be given an experience of divinity and of heavenly realities. The more we give ourselves over to God, the more the radical grace received at baptism will reveal God to us in the depths of our heart and make the fruits of baptism become a living reality for us.

St. Mark’s gospel tells us, 9“‘It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John.’”

Jesus' home was in Nazareth, so he had to travel some ninety miles south to the Jordan River to meet his cousin, John, who was six months older than he (Lk 1:36). News spread by word of mouth about John's public mission. He was preparing people for the Messiah who was about to appear on the scene.

John hesitated to baptize Jesus. He felt that Jesus should baptize him. He must have known Jesus' holiness before, since they were relatives. But Jesus insisted that John should baptize him because that is what God wanted (See Mt 3:13-15). We can say that Jesus' immersion in the waters of the Jordan identified him with sinners, although he himself was totally free from sin. In this way, he took upon himself the sins of the people so he could forgive and destroy them on Calvary. Through being submerged in these baptismal waters, Jesus sanctified them so that all of us could be purified and graced by them.

St. Mark continues to explain, 10 "On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him." The prophet Isaiah had prayed to God, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down..." (Is 63:19). Now St. Mark sees this moment as an answer to that prayer. The heavens torn apart signify the end of our separation from God; it marks the beginning of communion between heaven and earth. The descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus inaugurates him into his public ministry. He is endowed with an abundance of spiritual gifts to accomplish his mission (Is 11:1-10; 61:1-2).

The Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. This reminds us of the first creation when "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2 RSV). A new creation is now beginning. The dove is also a sign of peace and reconciliation between God and man. In the flood, it was a sign that God's punishment of mankind was ending (Gen 8:10-11). Now the dove—like the descent of the Spirit---announces the peace and reconciliation that Jesus will bring about.

St. Mark records that at that moment, 11 "...a voice came from the heavens, 'you are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'"

These words are very similar to our first reading: "...my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit". This suggests a connection between the Son of God and the Servant of God.

The Father's voice acknowledges Jesus as his own dear Son. The Father was greatly moved to see his Son lower himself to be among sinners and identify himself in his baptism as one of them. The Father was so pleased with his Son's humble disposition that he felt obliged to point out that Jesus was his own dear, sinless Son. Such approval indicates that Jesus is sure to accomplish his mission to bring salvation to his people with whom he has become one.

We see in this gospel scene that at the very beginning of Jesus' public life, the mystery of the Blessed Trinity is revealed. Jesus, the beloved Son is baptized, the Holy Spirit descends in a dove-like manner, and the Father expresses his delight in his beloved Son.

Jesus is God's Son from all eternity. His baptism was the occasion when the Father acknowledged this fact. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit from all eternity, but now, at his baptism, a visible outpouring takes place to equip his humanity with power to fulfill his public Mission as Messiah.

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time Jn 1:35-42

John the Baptist had seen the Holy Spirit "come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon" Jesus (Jn 1:32); this was the sign from God that he was the Messiah who was going to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The next day John was there again, near the Jordan where he was baptizing, with two of his disciples;

“and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God.’” John was carefully watching Jesus as he walked by. He looked upon him at length. What a majestic sight: the God-man; the man who is God, walking right in front of them! What a noble appearance to behold! God incarnate! What an awesome sight!

“How does our lover differ from any other...? My lover is radiant and ruddy; he stands out among thousands. His head is pure gold... His eyes are like doves besides running waters... His teeth would seem bathed in milk, and are set like jewels...His mouth is sweetness itself; he is all delight. Such is my lover and such my friend...” (Sg 5:9-12, 16).

John presented Jesus to his two disciples with “behold, [look at him], the Lamb of God.” This term “Lamb of God” would have reminded the disciples of the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah. “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit...” “Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth; Like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers, he was silent and opened not his mouth” (Is 42:1; 53:7).

The two disciples must have been exceedingly impressed with the sight of Jesus. For they left the great John the Baptist and never returned—they were so taken up with the sight of the majestic God-man.

John was a humble man. He had enjoyed great popularity; many thought that he was the Messiah. But his whole purpose in life was to point the Messiah out. This he now does with his closest disciples. He is happy to see them go to someone “mightier” than he. John truly loved his disciples; there was no trace of jealousy in his person. He was faithful to truth.

When Jesus noticed the two disciples following him he said to them, “What are you looking for?” He is asking us the same question. What are you

looking for in life? Do you limit your aspirations to this life and to earthly things? Your earthly life will end—and then what? Surely you want to look towards the divine and the eternal... The divine Jesus is the only one who can satisfy these aspirations. He is the Son of God; he has overcome death and the grave as he said he would. He is the only one who can offer you eternal life, beginning now and then forever after you die. He is alive and available to you now in his Church. Go to him in faith and receive him; draw divine life from him through continuous, prayerful communion with him; maintain your friendship with him by keeping his word; cleanse yourself from sin by receiving the Sacrament of Penance, which he left in his Church for you; receive him daily or weekly in Holy Communion: remain spiritually healthy and strong to overcome the evil in the world that tempts you to sin.

“What are you looking for?” Beware of leading a self-centered life which is a dead end; the grave provides no turn-around. Only a God-centered life opens up to eternity and everlasting life.

The two disciples responded with, “Rabbi”, “Teacher”: they were looking for more knowledge from the Scriptures regarding God’s anointed one, the source of the Holy Spirit.

So they said, “Where are you staying?” Jesus, of course, was with the Father; he is in the Father and the Father in him (see Jn 14:10). And the only way to get to know Jesus who is one in the divinity of the Father is to be with him. Words cannot fully communicate this reality. It can only be known through experience: we must be in the presence of Jesus to be affected fully by his divinity, which we draw through communion with him. The head through ideas cannot grasp this experiential knowledge of divinity; it can only be attained through the heart united to him in love. Such knowledge is given through infusion. That is why Jesus said to the disciple, “Come, and you will see.” They will see that Jesus is living with the Father and the Father lives in him. They must come to Jesus in faith. That is how they and we

move toward him. God is already drawing them toward Jesus by John the Baptist's words. Now Jesus' very person is drawing them. He is saying to them and us that we must spend some time with him; be with him; observe him, even as John "watched Jesus walk by"; we must listen to him as we visit with him; that is how we absorb his divinity: through love and intimacy. That is why it is so important to spend some time visiting with Jesus in Prayer and in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. That is how the heart assimilates the riches of his divinity.

"So they went and saw where Jesus was staying and they stayed with him that day. It was four in the afternoon." "They went...saw...and...stayed." Once they experienced Jesus, they could not leave. Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: once they visited a while with Jesus, and heard him speak, they urged him to come in and stay with them (see Lk 24:29).

John the evangelist, the unnamed disciple, never forgot that stupendous moment when he first met Jesus, the Son of God who had been anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism. For a Jew to find the long-awaited Messiah would have been the greatest of all discoveries. But to have experienced his hidden divinity was a joy beyond all bounds. He speaks as an eyewitness. "That day" spent with Jesus began at 4PM, but it lasted all evening and the next day until evening—for a day was counted from evening to evening, not from 12:01AM to 12:00PM as we do (compare Gen 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31).

The day was Friday, hence Sabbath eve; thus the disciples had to stay on with Jesus from 4PM on Friday until Saturday evening when the Sabbath was over, for they could not move any distance once Sabbath had begun on Friday evening (see Raymond Brown).

The disciples had gone to visit for a while with Jesus; but once they had experienced fellowship with him, they were interiorly compelled to spend the rest of their lives with him.

Andrew, one of these two disciples, "Found his own brother Simon and told him, 'We have found the Messiah,'" the Christ, who was anointed by God to pour out the Holy Spirit upon the world. We can sense the excitement in Andrew's electrifying discovery shared with his brother. What an awesome find! He could not possibly keep this experience to himself—he would have exploded! But that's because he had spent prime time with Jesus and experienced him personally, first hand. He was imbued with some of his heavenly qualities. He had to communicate such a blissful experience with his dear brother, Simon. We notice the progressive development in the recognition of the disciples: at first they give Jesus the courtesy title, "Rabbi", but after spending a considerable amount of time visiting with him, they are convinced that he is "Messiah"; the Hebrew word for God's anointed one. What a quantum leap! The same would happen to our perception of Jesus if we spent more time visiting, observing, absorbing, and listening to him.

"Then Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus." He wanted Simon to meet Jesus by all means. He too had to experience what Andrew had the privilege of experiencing.

We also need to share our experience of Jesus with others and lead them to him. They too need to spend time with him to get to know him on a deeper level. They will then want to spend the rest of their lives with him. John the Baptist, excited about his discovery, introduced his own disciples to Jesus. They in turn began proclaiming Jesus to their own relatives and companions. Andrew rushed to tell Simon, his brother. Philip found Nathaniel and told him about Jesus. We are called to do the same. But we must first get to know Jesus by spending time with him. Andrew shows what the effect of being together with Jesus has been. "Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon, the son of John; you will be called Cephas'—which is translated Peter." Jesus' penetrating look saw into the very depths of a person. He looked at Simon and saw in him not only a Galilee fisherman, but also one who had it in him to become the rock on

which his church would be built. Jesus sees us not only as we are, but also as we can be; he sees all of the possibilities. Jesus sees and can release the hidden hero and saint in each of us.

Jesus “looks at” Simon and knows all about him; he goes on to reveal what his future name will be. He foretells Simon’s future role in the Church. Jesus already has the vision of the later Church before his eyes as he gathers the first disciples around him.

In the Old Testament God changed people’s name to fit the new role they would play in the history of salvation. For example, he changed Abram’s name to Abraham to indicate he would be the father of many nations (Gen 17:5); he changed Jacob’s name to Israel because he “contended with divine and human beings and...prevailed” (Gen 32:29). Simon’s new name indicates his future role as the rock foundation for the Church Jesus will establish.

Today’s Gospel helps us to understand how Jesus’ first disciples got to meet and know Jesus. The scene in next Sunday’s Gospel depicts Jesus calling the disciple to follow him as if he were a complete stranger and were meeting him for the first time in Galilee. The Gospel of John gives us more detailed knowledge of what actually happened. The first disciples were disciples of John the Baptist; they were called at the Jordan River before Jesus returned to Galilee.

It is because they were acquainted and highly impressed with him that they could abandon all to follow him. It is because they had found something better that they could leave their former life behind...be peaceful and happy rather than a grouch or a tiger. For example: You will have the love to overlook the differences you see between you and your spouse. You will have the strength you need to be patient and long suffering. You will have the presence of God to fill your life. Thus you will not expect or need your spouse to do for you what only God can do. You will be able to accept, in peace, all the imperfections and

things that go wrong in human life and human relationships.

You may find it strange that Jesus calls his own mother “Woman”. We can understand why he gives Mary this title only if we look beyond the immediate context. St. John the Evangelist makes several references to the book of Genesis in his gospel. For example, he begins his gospel with the same words as the book of Genesis, “In the beginning”. He uses the theme of light and darkness, or the spirit hovering over the waters. These are just a few examples whereby he wants to signify a new creation. So too, the word “Woman” refers us to the book of Genesis, especially chapter 3. There we see the old Eve leading Adam into sin.

In the Gospel, we see Mary as the new Eve leading the new Adam to a good act, the miracle of changing water into wine in today’s Gospel, saving a family from embarrassment. In Genesis 3:15, God proclaims a perpetual enmity between the devil and the woman, and his offspring and hers. Although the serpent will strike and wound the heel of the woman’s offspring, he will crush the serpent’s head by his fidelity to God in his suffering, death, and resurrection. That is why we see in the Gospel of John 19:25-27, Jesus addresses his mother once more as “Woman”. She is the new Eve whose Son crushes the head of the serpent on the cross. Now she becomes the mother of all the children of God who are living the divine life. The new Adam and Eve regain by their obedience what the old Adam and Eve lost by their disobedience.

In the Gospel today, we see that Jesus was hesitant to perform his first sign revealing his glory as the heavenly Bridegroom and Messiah at the suggestion of his mother. That was because that full hour of glory, when she would become the mother of all the living as the new Eve, had not arrived. But when the hour came and Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing under the cross, he proclaimed her to be the new Eve, which means “mother of all the living” (see Gen 3:20) in these words, “‘Woman, behold, your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your

mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his home" (Jn 19:26-27). The beloved disciple took Jesus' words seriously and began to live in a very close, loving relationship with Mary as his mother. We are called to do the same.

So the Gospel today sees Mary as the servant woman who sees a need and fulfills it. She is also the mother of Jesus with a special claim of authority over him as our intercessor. The word "woman" makes her our mother in grace as the new Eve, confirmed by Jesus' proclaiming her our mother on the cross. She sends us to Jesus and commands us, "Do whatever he tells you." Moreover, we can also see in the word "Woman" that Mary is the new Eve and helpmate of the new Adam as representative of the Church and people of God. She is also the Bride of the heavenly Bridegroom!

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time **Mk 1:14-20**

Our gospel begins today with a reference to John the Baptist's arrest—which foreshadows Jesus' own fate. John is a type of suffering servant. He had been thrown into prison by Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Peraea. John had denounced him because of his adulterous union with Herodias, his brother Philip's wife (Mk 6:17).

In the plan of God, Jesus was not to proclaim the good news of salvation prior to the end of the Baptist's active mission. But there was continuity between John and Jesus' preaching: they both called the people to prepare for the coming of the kingdom.

"Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God." Last week we learned that Jesus was in Judea, where John was baptizing. But with John's arrest and with the growing enmity of the leaders of the Jews, it was advisable for Jesus to withdraw from Judea and go to Galilee. Galilee was the scene of most of Jesus' ministry and the meeting place of the risen Lord in Mark's gospel.

The Gospel of God is the good news about God and his love; it is about God at work in Jesus and the salvation from suffering, sin, and death that he brings.

"This is the time of fulfillment." What God has looked toward, promised, and had prepared his people for over the centuries is now in the process of unfolding: it is arriving in Jesus. The time and moment toward which all time and history, all human and divine longing have been awaiting, is finally here.

"The kingdom of God is at hand." God's sovereign rule over his people is now being established in Jesus. The long-awaited kingdom is the realm where God reigns. That rule is now beginning in the chosen people who accept it; through them it will spread to all people of all nations.

The kingdom of God is present in Jesus himself and in his ministry. Its power can be seen as he casts out demons and performs miraculous cures to manifest the arrival of God's presence and reign among his people.

The kingdom of God is God's kingly rule and activity in and among his people. God's decisive intervention is happening in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. The kingdom is here and now present: the power of evil spirits is broken, sins are forgiven, and all who are repentant are gathered into God's kingdom. The kingdom is being offered as a gift. God becomes present in his gentle rule of love to all of good will who receive him. The kingdom and rule of God was fully present in Jesus because he was wholly responsive to the will and purpose of his Father. The Father ruled and possessed Jesus' heart completely. That kingdom was offered to all who heard his message. The kingdom also became present to all who accepted the invitation and disposed themselves for it.

The kingdom of God is seen as being established in stages. (1) Its arrival can be seen in Jesus, his miracle and preaching. (2) It is brought into a new stage through Jesus' death, resurrection, and

sending of the Holy Spirit. (3) It has yet to reach its final and complete stage when Jesus returns in glory at the Parousia. Then everyone whose heart is ruled by God will be taken up into the heavenly kingdom in the glory of heaven.

But in order to receive the kingdom in its initial stage, we must “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” In order to receive God and allow him to rule our hearts, we must change our attitude and behavior from being self-centered to being God-centered; from following our own will to doing God’s will. We pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...” In order for God’s kingdom to come in us, we must do his will. We must change from being rebellious to obedient. In this way, God’s reign can be firmly established in us. His grace will begin to rule our hearts in conformity with his gospel, which expresses his will. The love of God will gradually fill our being as yeast permeates dough.

Jesus was passing by the Sea of Galilee. It is a freshwater lake, some thirteen miles north and south and about seven miles east and west in what is easily the most attractive part of Galilee. “He saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen.” They were fishing with the circular throw-nets still used by Arab fishermen of the region. “Jesus said to them, ‘Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ Then they abandoned their nets and followed him.”

To come after Jesus means to become his disciples. St. Mark tells us nothing about Jesus’ previous encounter with these two brothers. They appear to be meeting Jesus for the first time. But St. John taught us in last Sunday’s Gospel how they had come to know Jesus while they were in Judea. Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist who revealed Jesus to him as the “Lamb of God”. Andrew and John followed Jesus and went to visit with him that whole evening and the next day. Andrew discovered Jesus to be the Messiah. Excitedly, he went to tell Simon, his brother, about his discovery. He brought him to Jesus so he could

see for himself. It was during that encounter that Jesus looked into the depths of Simon’s soul and revealed to him that he would be named Cephas, which means rock or Peter in Latin.

At first these men thought that John the Baptist might be the Messiah. That is why they had gone to Judea to be his disciples. But John pointed out that someone mightier than he was coming. The Holy Spirit came to rest on Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove. That is how the Baptist knew Jesus to be the Messiah and could point him out to his disciples.

We see, therefore, that these disciples were extremely impressed with Jesus. They already realized that there was something extraordinary about him. They had experienced the majesty of God in him. They knew that Jesus was no ordinary man.

No wonder, then, that on this occasion, when he met them again in Galilee, they abandoned their nets and followed him. Their experience of God in him introduced them to a whole new world; in him they had come upon the kingdom of God. This is what they had been waiting for all their lives. In him they had found the treasure they had been looking for and now he is inviting them to be his followers, his disciples. They realized how privileged they were. So, excitedly, they left everything behind to be able to follow him. They would not allow anything to come between him and them. They could not bear to stay away from the promised one. They had found him and would not let him go! They jumped at the opportunity.

The same experience befell James and John. “They too were in a boat mending their nets. Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.” John also was a former disciple of John the Baptist. He too had been with Jesus and could not wait to be with him to stay. He too would have introduced his brother James to Jesus.

The only reason these men could leave family

and occupation to be with Jesus is because they had gotten to know Jesus personally; they know from experience how precious an opportunity they were being given. Now they would have the special privilege of being with him all of the time. In this scene we are also given a view of Jesus' messianic power to create disciples. The power of Jesus' personality and the majestic tone of his voice rendered his call to follow him irresistible. These disciples could leave all because in Jesus they had found something, someone better than anything or anyone they had ever experienced before.

It is by coming to know Jesus on a personal and intimate basis that we too will be led to love him and devote our lives to him. Jesus would reveal himself to us the way he revealed himself to these disciples, if only we would befriend him and remain in his presence long enough. We befriend him by keeping his word and conforming our wills to his. But we must also spend a significant amount of time with him in prayer. That is the only way our hearts can absorb the radiance of his divinity and enable us to become inebriated with his love. Thus, we become one with him, share his life, and come to know him personally as Son of God.

Those who belong to the world and are ruled by its lusts cannot know Jesus as the divine Son of God. They are blinded by their worldly desires. But we who remain in Jesus' company as faithful disciples can know him, even as his original disciples. Listen carefully to what Jesus said, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me. And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him" (Jn 14:19-21).

Jesus explains that his disciples will see him with the eyes of their heart because they will share his glorious life of the Spirit. They will know him

personally because they live by his life. They will know his mutual indwelling in the Father and in them, and all because they observe his gospel commandments. They are in conformity with God's will. Like Jesus they "always do what is pleasing to him" (Jn 8:29). They live in communion and companionship with him. Therefore, they live in his presence; they know and "see" him. They realize the sixth beatitude, "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God" (Mt 5:8).

But who can escape the blinding allurements of this world and falling for its false promises of happiness? For the "ruler of this world" (Jn 16:11) is "a liar and the father of lies" (Jn 8:44). He is "a murderer" (Jn 8:44) of souls, and loves to destroy lives by separating them from the life and love of God. He is the ultimate seducer who blinds the children of God from seeing the glory of God shining on the face of Christ (see 2 Cor 4:3-6).

We who desire to love God must be exceedingly careful to heed the solemn warning of Jesus' beloved disciple: "Do not love the world or the things of the world... For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world" (1 Jn 2:15-16), whose ruler is Satan (Jn 12:31).

He has had great success in seducing the children of God through the media. Through various alluring images, he awakens concupiscence and stirs blinding sense desire. Thus the children of God are unable to see God as promised the "pure of heart".

May God protect us from being swept into the current of the deceiving enticements of Satan and this world.

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 1:21-28

“Then they came to Capernaum...”

Capernaum is located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is the site of Jesus’ new home and headquarters in Galilee, the center of Jesus’ Galilean activity. This area is described as what is easily the most attractive part of Galilee.

“...and on the Sabbath [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught.” We are now being given a typical day in Jesus’ Galilean ministry. That particular day was a Sabbath, the seventh day of the Jewish week, set aside for worship and rest. It began on Friday evening until sundown on Saturday.

“The third commandment...recalls the holiness of the Sabbath: ‘The seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord’” (CCC 2168; Ex 31:15).

Since Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week, Sunday has become the Lord’s Day for us Christians. “This practice...dates from the beginnings of the apostolic age” (CCC 2178; Acts 20:7). “On Sundays...the faithful are bound...to abstain from those labors and business concerns which impede the worship to be rendered to God, the joy which is proper to the Lord’s Day, or the proper relaxation of mind and body” (CCC 2193). “Every Christian should avoid making unnecessary demands on others that would hinder them from observing the Lord’s Day” (CCC 2195). The question I would put before you is, is shopping on Sunday really necessary?

“Jesus entered the synagogue...” The synagogue was a meeting place where the Jews met on the Sabbath. It consisted mainly of a rectangular room built in such a way that those attending were facing Jerusalem when seated. There was a rostrum or pulpit from which the Sacred Scripture was read. The homilist sat to speak (Lk 4:20). The synagogue service consisted of prayers

and readings with commentary from the Law and the Prophets. Our liturgy of the word comes from that service. We simply added the Lord’s Supper to it, the celebration of the paschal mystery.

The synagogue is distinguished from the temple. The temple was the place of worship and sacrifice; the synagogue was the place of teaching and instruction; sometimes it served as a school and seems to have been generally a meeting center.

The synagogue was by far the more influential, for there was only one temple. But the law laid it down that wherever there were ten Jewish families there must be a synagogue.

There was no permanent preacher or teacher. When the people met at the synagogue service, it was open to the ruler of the synagogue to call on any competent person to give the address and the exposition. That is why Jesus was able to open his campaign in the synagogues. He was known to be a man with a message; and for that very reason, the synagogue of every community provided him with a pulpit from which to instruct and appeal to people.

St. Mark’s gospel mentions Jesus teaching on seventeen different occasions. As the Incarnate Word of God, his mission was to reveal the love of the Father and the mystery of the kingdom of God.

“The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.” The people were amazed at Jesus’ self-assurance and the authority with which he taught. He speaks with prophetic certitude, in a manner very different from the scribes and doctors of the Law.

Jesus taught with personal authority; he speaks of what he knows and testifies to what he has seen (Jn 3:11). He is directly connected to the Father and is truth itself (Jn 14:6). On the other hand, no scribe ever gave a decision of his own; he would always quote all of his authorities. If he made a

statement, he would buttress it with quotations from the great legal masters of the past. He would not give any independent judgment. He did not possess the truth like Jesus.

Jesus spoke very differently. He spoke with certitude—he needed no authority beyond himself. He spoke with utter independence. He cited no authorities and quoted no experts. He spoke with the finality of the voice of God. The positive, forceful certitude of Jesus was the very opposite expressed in the human opinions quoted by the scribes. The note of his personal authority rang out—and this held his audience captive. Jesus’ humanity was bathed in the light of the divinity. His whole being radiated the power and authority of truth. The mind of every sincere listener was absolutely convinced and nourished with the substance of the divine truth that flowed from Jesus’ heart.

“In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit.” The devil is described as “unclean” because of his impiety and withdrawal from God. He is polluted with pride and hopelessly separated from the purity of God. “He is a liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8:44). His whole spiritual being is poisoned with evil, and is totally perverted. He is as unclean and evil-minded as any creature can be. And if we separate ourselves from God through serious sin, we too become unclean, contaminated with evil; we join him in rebelling against God. We become his companions, and even worse, his slaves. And that’s the beginning of hell on earth: disquietude, misery, anxiety, enslavement to sin and evil, supreme unhappiness, and ultimately despair. Without God we are incomplete and supremely miserable and unclean. A demon is by nature unclean, so St. Mark used the word “demon” and “unclean spirit” synonymously.

In our day, a case of possession is very rare: the devil, with the permission of God, enters into a body and its sense faculties, and acts as its master. The will of the soul remains free; but the body is withdrawn from its empire, at least at times. Most

of the “supposed” possessions are weakened by illness, or in temperaments given to melancholy. (I want to See God, p. 104 by Fr. Marie Eugene) The demon cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” It is interesting to note that the demon speaks as if there are many, using the word “us”; then he shifts to “I”; perhaps at one time it is the devil speaking and at another the demoniac or possessed man. But then, as Jesus said, the devil is a perverted liar (see Jn 8:44). So we can’t really be sure.

The demoniac shouts brazenly at Jesus, a defiant accusation: “You have come to destroy us.” The cry or shout describes the gravity of the demoniac’s affliction. The demon acknowledges that Jesus’ mission is bent on destroying the demonic power structure. Ironically, it is an “unclean spirit” who draws attention to who Jesus is and to the ultimate purpose of his coming. Jesus is in effect recognized as the Messiah, anointed with God’s Spirit and possessing power over evil spirits.

The power of Jesus, very happily, is available to us in the confessional and sacrament of Penance. There we can dump our sins and meet Jesus in this sacrament of his saving and cleansing mercy. He renews us by the power of his Holy Spirit and gives us power to resist the temptations of evil spirits.

“I know who you are” is an attempt to gain magic power over Jesus by uttering his secret name: “the Holy One of God”. This is the demon’s second attempt. He first began by calling him “Jesus of Nazareth”. But the devil is not able to find any weakness in Jesus—he is no match for the Son of God.

“Jesus rebuked him and said, ‘Quiet! Come out of him!’ The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him.” The demon had cried out with hatred and alarm. Jesus, with absolute confidence and mastery, asserts the will of God—and the opposition of the demon caves in.

Jesus rebuked the demon with a formal command which must be obeyed. The demon had no choice. He is forced by the power of God in Jesus to go out of the man he possessed.

Jesus' stern command, "Quiet!" literally means, "Be muzzled!" The arrogant demon flees and produces convulsions and shouting. True to his violent nature he expresses his spiteful anger. He cannot endure the holiness and presence of Jesus. Jesus imposes silence, in part, to preserve his messianic secret. He is a spiritual messiah and does not want his mission to be thwarted by popular misconceptions of a political messiah.

Jesus' victory over the unclean spirit is a clear sign that God's salvation has come: by overcoming the Evil One, Jesus shows that he is the Messiah, more powerful than the demons: "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out" (Jn 12:31).

"All were amazed and asked one another, 'What is this? ... a new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.'" The ordinary Jewish and pagan exorcist used elaborate incantations and spells and magical rites to expel demons. Whereas, Jesus simply commands the spirits and they leave. Divine power is displayed through his word. No one had ever seen anything like this before. The power was not in the spell, the formula, the incantation, the elaborate rite; the power was in Jesus, and people were astonished.

St. Mark sees the exorcism as a testimony to the authority of Jesus to announce God's reign; he is asserting the power of the kingdom as he destroys the kingdom of the devil. Listeners were impressed by the fact that Jesus spoke as one having power, as a teacher qualified to speak and decide questions on his own authority; whereas the scribes were accustomed to repeat the traditional views and constantly cited the opinions of the great rabbinical teachers of the past.

The authority of Jesus was evident not merely in the manner of his teaching, but in the fact that the demons obeyed his command.

Expressions of astonishment are St. Mark's way of drawing our attention to a manifestation of Jesus' true nature. The crowds are astonished because they do not understand what is really taking place and who it is that stands before them. But we understand: Jesus is the Son of God establishing the reign of God among us, vanquishing evil.

"His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee." The people of Capernaum told their fellow Jews in the other towns of Galilee what had happened in their synagogue.

This same Jesus is present in our Church today making himself available through the sacraments to overcome evil in our lives.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 1:29-39

"On leaving the synagogue Jesus entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John."

The synagogue service ended and Jesus went with his disciples to Simon's house. Simon's house in Capernaum seems to become Jesus' headquarters for his Galilean ministry. According to Jewish custom the main Sabbath meal came immediately after the synagogue service at 12 o'clock noontime. Jesus must have been hungry and tired. But a new need came up. "Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her." They are a good example for us. They immediately interceded to Jesus for her. We also need to commend our dear ones to him without delay. For here we see the power of intercessory prayer. Jesus immediately came to the assistance of the afflicted one. "He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them."

Jesus might well have claimed the right to rest after the exciting and exhausting experience of the synagogue service. If power came out of him when the woman with the hemorrhage touched his cloak (Mk 5:30), how much more draining it must have been when he cast out the demons in the synagogue. But once again his power was appealed to and once again he spent himself for others. Jesus was never too tired to help; the need of others took precedence over his own desire for rest.

Jesus does not rely on magical formulas that bring some outside supernatural force into the situation; he himself is the source of that power to heal.

Peter's mother-in-law was so completely healed that she immediately proceeded to serve Jesus and his companions. She began to prepare a meal for them right away and serve them. This shows us that those who are healed by Jesus must serve his Church. This indicates that their charity is alive and well. They serve out of gratitude to God for being called into the joy of his life-giving kingdom. St. Paul demonstrates this in the second reading when he says, "I have made myself a slave to all." But to serve out of love is to reign with Christ.

Jesus reveals his power over the fever, which flees as he grasped the woman's hand and raised her up. This miracle shows that the kingdom is present among us in the person of Jesus.

This event is a symbolic portrayal of the believer: one who had been prostrate beneath the power of sin, but now raised up by the Lord, is called to serve him and the community. It is also a sign of our resurrection.

Although Peter was married, there is no mention of his wife by name in any of the Gospels. Some believe, therefore, that she had already died by this time; this would explain why her mother was living in Peter's house to care for him and Andrew. Yet others wonder if the "sister" who accompanies Peter (Cephas) in his apostolate in 1

Corinthians 9:5 is his wife. "Sister" and "brother" are the earliest names the Christians had for themselves.

"When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. The whole town was gathered at the door." Since it was the Sabbath, cures took place in the evening after sunset; journeys could then be taken and burdens carried without violation of the law of rest. Then they brought their sick and possessed ones on stretchers or pallets to the door of Peter's house, where Jesus was staying. According to the teaching of the scribes, even the carrying of the sick was a violation of the law of Sabbath rest.

"He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him." Once again we see that the kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus. He showed its power for the good of humankind as he restored people to health and expelled demons. Nowadays the power of the kingdom among us is not so ostentatious and spectacular. The power of sin and the devil are squelched in the quiet of the confessional as we unburden ourselves and are loosed from our sins by the power of absolution Jesus left his priests on Easter Sunday night (Jn 20:19-23).

Jesus would not permit the demons to speak because they knew he was the Messiah. The main reason for imposing this silence was because of the prevalent misconceptions of the nature of the Messianic kingdom and of the role of the Messiah. The messianic hope at that time had taken a strongly nationalistic and materialistic coloring. The Messiah of popular expectation was a great national leader who would break the yoke of foreign domination. In these circumstances an open declaration of Jesus' claims to crowds who were raised to a high pitch of enthusiasm by his teaching and miracles, would almost inevitably have led to a clash with the Roman authorities. It was necessary for Jesus to proceed with caution, winning the attention of the people by his marvelous doctrine and striking miracles, gradually instilling into their minds by means of

parables and other instructions the true spiritual concept of the Messianic kingdom and bringing them to understand that the Messiah foretold by the prophets was a suffering Messiah. The reluctance of the Jews to abandon their erroneous notions of the kingdom is strikingly exemplified in the case of the disciples. They just could not get the idea of an earthly kingdom out of their minds (see Catholic Commentary).

“Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed.” Before dawn, while everyone in Simon Peter’s house is asleep, Jesus leaves Capernaum. Coming to a solitary place, he can now enter into deep prayer. It was Jesus’ custom to retire to secluded places and become absorbed in prayer.

Jesus found time to be alone with his Father. Sometimes he was even too busy to eat (Mk 6:31), but he took time out to pray (Mk 6:46). He knew that he could not keep on giving in ministry without first replenishing himself through communion with his Father in prolonged prayer. In silence and solitude he could avoid distractions and devote his whole attention to God.

It was the morning after the Sabbath, the first day of the week. Later he would sanctify another first day of the week by another early rising—on Easter Sunday.

If Jesus needed to pray, how much more should we! Prayer is our way of connecting to God and drawing divine life from him. We need to be with him and remain for some time to be spiritually enriched by his presence. Referring to God’s word is of great assistance in looking upon and listening to the Lord as we visit with him in prayer.

“Simon and those who were with him pursued him and on finding him said, ‘Everyone is looking for you.’ He told them, ‘Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come.’” The disciples have hunted Jesus out because they felt that he, the wonderworker, was missing a great opportunity. This is not the attitude of true disciples; this is

not the following of Jesus to which they had been called. They are no more than representatives of the curious crowd who are “searching” for him. They are attempting to turn him from his true mission. But Jesus is not going to be turned from his purpose of proclaiming the kingdom. Jesus explains to his disciples that he must not linger to satisfy the curiosity of the people of Capernaum. He was sent by the Father to proclaim the mystery of the kingdom. The miracles and exorcisms were confirming signs of the kingdom’s arrival. Conveying knowledge of the kingdom is far more important. That knowledge will enable the people to understand the transforming value of accepted suffering, for example, so that they can bear it patiently and be prepared for the eternal life.

Simon represents expectations that are contrary to the intentions of Jesus. The incident foreshadows stronger clashes between Peter and Jesus to come (8:31-33). Peter just could not understand the notion of a spiritual kingdom and suffering servant Messiah. He thought that Jesus was out of his mind when he predicted his suffering and death. He could not grasp that the spiritual transformation of the resurrection could come through suffering and death. It is such a great mystery. But this stupendous mystery helps us to understand what we ourselves are going through when we must suffer. Like Jesus, we are being spiritualized and immortalized.

When they came for Jesus, it is important to note, he arose and went to meet the challenge the Father called him to do. Prayer will not do our work for us. What it will do is strengthen us for the work that we must do.

“So he went into their synagogues preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.” It was exceedingly important that he accomplish the purpose for which the Father had sent him: to announce and establish the kingdom of heaven on earth.

A good example of the importance of understanding the teaching of the kingdom can be seen in explaining the spiritual benefits of the trials of life mentioned in the first reading. Job

describes how miserable life is without the Gospel perspective; the drudgery of life on earth; man is a slave; he is miserable, filled with restlessness, and without hope; he loses sight of happiness.

Jesus shows us that by accepting the Father's will and enduring patiently the trials of earth we are being spiritually transformed into God-likeness. That is what happened to him. By embracing the Father's will through suffering and death, he entered into the glory of the resurrection. The Gospel of the kingdom teaches us to look beyond the mere physical world to the real, lasting, eternal world of God. As St. Paul expressed it, "We are not discouraged...although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor 4:16-18).

Now we understand why Jesus felt such an urgent need to preach and explain about the good news of the kingdom of God.

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 1:40-45

"A leper came to Jesus..."

A leper is one who has leprosy. Leprosy is a term in the Bible that covers a variety of diseases. It does not seem to be Hansen's disease of modern times, but a whole complex of fungi and other inflammations of the skin.

These dermal inflammations made victims unclean, that is, unfit to participate in the liturgical life of Israel (Lev 13:1-8). Because ritual uncleanness was considered contagious under the Old Covenant—infecting everyone who came in contact with it—lepers were isolated from society to keep those who were clean separated from those who were unclean (Lev 13: 45-46).

In the New Testament there is no disease regarded with more terror and pity than leprosy (compare

Cancer). The fate of the leper was truly hard. Any kind of skin disease rendered the sufferer unclean. He was banished from the fellowship of men.

The first reading declares, "The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent, and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out, 'Unclean, unclean!'...He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp." The leper had not only to bear the physical pain of his disease; he had to bear the mental anguish and the heartbreak of being completely banished from human society and totally shunned.

The law was helpless in regard to leprosy; it could only defend the community against the leper. But what the law could not achieve, Jesus accomplishes with ease. The passage throws strong light on the salvation now accessible to all people—in Jesus.

Leprosy is an image of sin; sin, even venial sin, is far more ugly and far more loathsome than leprosy; and it has more tragic consequences in this life and in the world to come. Consider the harm that comes from the sins of gossip, over-indulgence of food, alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, etc. We are all sinners in some way or another. That is a reality we must never forget; and Jesus is the only one who can cure us; He alone.

The leper represents all people before God, defiled and stained by sin. God is righteous and holy and no unclean person can dwell in his presence. All are separated from God due to sin. Even so, God did not want his children to remain separated from him and made every provision for us to return to him through his Son, whose death and resurrection conquered sin.

We tend to think of God as far off and aloof, yet the incident of the leper testifies to God's compassion in his Son. While seeing our sin completely, he still loves us, heals us, and forgives us. His compassion comes from a oneness with humanity because his Son became a human being and was tried and tempted like us in every way, yet remained sinless (Heb 4:15).

On the cross, Jesus so identified himself with sinful humanity that he became sin (2 Cor 5:21) in the sense that he took our sins upon himself. When he rose from the dead, he demonstrated his power over sin and its fruit, which is death.

No matter how terrible our sin, or how distant we feel from God, Jesus loves us, forgives us, and wants to heal us completely. Let us seek him out with confidence, as did the leper because we believe he loves us. Let us approach him with true sorrow for our sins, yet without fear. If we approach him, he will stretch out his hand, touch and heal us (see Mark, a devotional commentary).

The leper “kneeling down, begged him and said, ‘If you wish, you can make me clean.’” The leper had violated the law by entering the town, a sign of faith that drove him on and which is implicit in his request to be cleansed.

The passage shows us the faithful and confident prayer of a man needing Jesus’ help and begging him for it, confident that, if our Lord wishes, he can free him from the disease. This man prostrated or knelt before Jesus as a sign of humility and reverence; he teaches us how to approach Jesus in prayer and when we meet him in the Holy Eucharist. The leper has enough faith in Jesus to know that by an act of will, the Master can accomplish a cure.

“Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him...” Jesus reaches across the dividing line that separated the leper from socializing with other people when he touched him; and though others would be defiled by such contact, he conquers the uncleanness by the greater power of his holiness.

We continue to have free access to Jesus through faith as we reach out to him in prayer or touch him in the sacraments. We too, are healed and cleansed. Observe Jesus’ attitude: he did not drive away a man who had broken the law. The leper had no right to have spoken to him at all, but Jesus met his desperate human need with an understanding compassion. Jesus stretched out his hand and

touched him. He touched the man who was ritually unclean. But to Jesus, he was not unclean: he was simply a human being in desperate need.

Here we see the power of touch: it brings about communion and solidarity; it makes us one with the other; it unites us to each other; it communicates love; it transmits divine power issuing from a heart united to the indwelling Trinity; it brings about healing; it affirms the other, that he or she is loved and cherished.

Jesus said to him, “I do will it. Be made clean.” The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean.” Instantaneous cleansing and healing follows the spoken word of cure. It was the simple word of the Lord which healed the man; the touch was sign of sheer compassion. But that touch also communicated healing love on an emotional level. Here we see the power of Jesus’ word. When we receive it with faith, it enters way down deep into our hearts with its healing power to cleanse us from sin, to strengthen our weakness, and to heal the wounds of sin, making us whole again. We read in the epistle to the Hebrews, “Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Heb 4:12). It is able to convict us in our thoughts—even before we express them in sinful actions.

St. Paul sees the power of God’s word to save us from the leprosy of sin when he says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes... For in it (the word of God) is revealed the righteousness of God...” (Rom 1:16-17). That is why daily reading and meditation on Holy Scripture is so important for spiritual growth.

Jesus also exerts the power of that word in the sacrament of Penance to cleanse us from the leprosy of sin. He said to the apostles on Easter Sunday night, “Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them” (Jn 20:22-23). The priest “acts in the person of Christ the Head”

(CCC 1548) when he says, “I absolve you from your sins,” in the sacrament of Penance. Jesus uses the priest as his instrument to speak the words of forgiveness; he has been empowered through the sacrament of Holy Orders or priesthood.

“Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. He said to him, ‘See that you tell no one anything...’”

Why did Jesus command the leper not to spread the story of his cleansing? Jesus’ main purpose was to preach about the arrival of the kingdom of God. His miracles show that it was arriving in Jesus. He did not want people to misinterpret his actions to mean that he was an earthly kind of Messiah who was coming to overpower the Roman rule. Jesus wants to be about his Galilean preaching without occasioning thoughts of Messiahship. Jesus wanted to avoid a sensationalist reputation of being no more than a wonderworker. Publicizing his deeds by word of mouth comes with the danger that rumors will begin to disconnect his miracles from his saving message. Moreover, he did not wish to ignite the wrath of his enemies before the time of his Passion. He wanted to finish laying the foundation for the kingdom of God. Jesus frequently enjoins silence on demons and men to conceal his identity as the Messiah. This “Messianic secret” is a leading theme in St. Mark’s Gospel.

Proclaiming the miracle would greatly increase the crowd that followed Jesus; he thought it was already too great. The spread of the Gospel would be better served with less wild enthusiasm and more deep reflection.

Jesus told the cleansed leper to “go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them.” This command shows that Jesus respected the Law: he commanded the healed leper to carry out the requirements of the Law. The Mosaic Law required Levitical priests to inspect lepers and determine their status as clean or unclean (Lev 14:1-32). With approval, an individual pronounced clean would offer sacrifices at the temple to be reinstated in the community of Israel.

The people who had known a man as a leper would now have the priests’ guarantee that he was free of the disease and was no longer a danger to their health.

This command to “go, show yourself to the priest” reminds us that the Catholic priest, through the sacrament of Holy Orders, is endowed with the priesthood of Jesus Christ; he has the power to forgive your sins or change bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus. Go to him for forgiveness and divine nourishment.

“The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter.” The man was not able to keep a secret; can you abstain from divulging information which of its own nature requires secrecy? “Everyone should observe an appropriate reserve concerning persons’ private lives” (CCC 2492). “Private information prejudicial to another is not to be divulged without a grave and proportionate reason” (CCC 2491). To act otherwise is sinful.

Perhaps it was because the man was beside himself with sheer joy and gratitude, he could not refrain from telling about Jesus curing him. He failed to carry out Jesus’ command, making his ministry much more difficult: crowds came from all over as a result of the cure.

“He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.”

Do you keep “coming to Jesus from everywhere”? Is he a referral point for everything in your life? Do you keep coming to him for healing, for advice, for love—for everything?

First Sunday of Lent

Mk 1:12-15

...the spirit drove [Jesus] out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan.” It was the Holy Spirit who thrust Jesus out into the wilderness for testing. The very Spirit

who came upon him at his baptism now drove him out to test him.

In this life, it is impossible to escape the assault of temptation; but one thing is sure: temptations are not sent to us to make us fail; they are sent to strengthen the nerve and the sinew of our minds and hearts and souls. They are not meant for our ruin, but for our good. They are meant to be tests from which we emerge better warriors and athletes of God. Temptation is meant to prove our strength and to emerge the stronger from the battles of life.

By submitting to temptation, Jesus tries to show us that we should not be afraid of temptations. On the contrary, they give us an opportunity to progress in the interior life. In this way, we can better understand our weaknesses and our need for God's grace to prevent us from falling; this makes us have recourse to God in prayer; it prompts us to avoid the near occasions of sin; we learn to be more dependent on God for his strength. Thus, we become more closely united to God.

The Messiah is God's anointed one whose mission it was to overthrow Satan and all his powers. A tremendous battle or trial of strength between him and Satan was expected in the last days. In this passage, the great battle of the end times is taking place. The details are meant to suggest that Jesus was victorious, but this stage of the battle, though decisive, was not the final one; the struggle would continue in the various activities of Jesus during his ministry and indeed the lives and sufferings of the early Christians and ours as well.

At least one reason for telling the story of Jesus' temptations was to help the reader to see the true character of Jesus' subsequent ministry and of the life of the early Church: it was the carrying on and completing of a decisive battle with the powers of evil successfully begun before the ministry ever began.

The wilderness is traditionally the haunt of evil spirits, and Satan is the chief of the evil powers opposed to the will of God and the establishment of his kingdom.

It should be noted that the trial is represented as lasting for the whole forty days. Forty days is a phrase which is not to be taken literally. It is a regular Hebrew phrase for a considerable length of time. Moses was said to be on the mountain with God for forty days (Ex 24:18); it was for forty days that Elijah went in the strength of the meal the angel gave him (1 Kgs 19:8). The Hebrews used the phrase forty days not literally as we would count each day, but simply to mean a fairly long period of time.

St. Mark, unlike Sts. Matthew and Luke, makes no reference to fasting and hunger. But the fact that Jesus "remained in the desert" for an extended period of time implies fasting and stringent living. St. Mark simply tells us that Jesus "was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him." The ministry of the angels probably consisted in keeping Jesus supplied with food just as angels fed Elijah in 1 Kings 19. The presence of ministering angels also recalls the angel who guided the Israelites in the desert in the first exodus (Ex 14:19; 23:20). St. Matthew, however, tells us that it was after Jesus had fasted forty days and forty nights that he was hungry and was tempted by the devil; then, after the temptations were over, "angels came and ministered to him" (Mt 4:11). The ministering angels are a sign of Jesus' victory and faithfulness.

The wild beasts may be mentioned to emphasize the loneliness and awfulness of the desert; their presence suggests the desolate character of the region where Jesus stayed; they also indicate the horror and danger of the desert, which was regarded as the abode of demons; thus the evils with which Jesus contended are symbolized.

In the desert, there roamed the leopard, the bear, the wild boar, and the jackal. This is usually taken to be a vivid detail that adds to the grim terror of the scene.

But another way to look at Jesus among the wild beasts is that they were subject to him. This may perhaps symbolize the beginning of the Messianic age as paradise regained: the enmity between man and the beasts would no longer exist. God said, “I will make a covenant for them on that day, with the beasts of the field, with the birds of the air, and with the things that crawl on the ground” (Hos 2:20). “Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid... The baby shall play by the cobra’s den, and the child lay his hand on the adder’s lair. There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain” (Is 11:6, 8-9). Perhaps St. Mark means that by his victory over Satan, Jesus has reversed Adam’s defeat and begun the process of restoring paradise.

The combined forces of good and evil were present to Jesus in the desert. His sustained obedience brings forth the new Israel of God there, where Israel’s rebellion had brought death and alienation.

Jesus retraces the steps of Israel by being led in the wilderness by the Spirit and tested for forty days as the Israelites marched in the desert for 40 years of testing. In the end, Jesus succeeds where Adam and Israel failed by resisting the devil and proving his filial love for the Father.

This initiates an extended campaign against demons, death, and disease throughout the Gospel. Jesus endured temptations to train his disciples how to overcome the devil. No one should be surprised, then, that after our own baptism, the tempter assails us more aggressively than before. Victory is assured if, like Jesus, we commit ourselves to fasting, wait upon the Lord with patience, and have no desire for things beyond our need.

“After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God.” Herod Antipas’ arrest of John the Baptist was a pivotal event turning the focus of Jesus’ ministry to Galilee. Prior to this, Jesus had an earlier ministry in Judea that overlapped with John’s (Jn 3:23).

In St. Mark’s Gospel, Galilee is the scene of the major parts of Jesus’ public ministry before his arrest and condemnation; it is also the meeting place of the risen Lord.

The Gospel of God is not only the good news from God; it is about God at work in Jesus Christ. The proclamation of the good news that Jesus announces in Galilee is that the time of salvation is arriving; it is that moment toward which all time and history, all human and divine longing have been directed. The good news is that the Messianic kingdom foretold by the prophets is at hand: the time appointed for the establishment of the kingdom was arriving. The time when God planned to end the present age and begin a new one was being fulfilled. The waiting is now ended and the kingdom is at hand.

“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.” The kingdom is present in Jesus himself and in his ministry. The proper response to its arrival is a change of heart and a trustful acceptance of the message proclaimed.

The kingdom of God is his sovereign rule over all nations through Jesus. The kingdom of Christ is closely linked with the ancient kingdom of Israel that flourished under David and Solomon. Although David’s empire soon collapsed, for a brief time it foreshadowed the glory of Christ’s reign over the tribes of Israel (2 Sam 5:1-5) and other Gentile nations (Mt 28: 18-20). The international kingdom of old is now resurrected and transfigured in the Church; there, Jesus rules as David’s rightful heir (Mt 1:1; Lk 1:32-33) enthroned in heaven (Mk 16:19; Heb 8:1-2).

The kingdom of God is the effective rule of God over his people. In its fullness it includes not only human obedience to God’s word, but the triumph of God over physical evils, supremely over death. The kingdom was seen being established in stages, culminating with the Parousia or second coming of Jesus.

The imminence of the kingdom requires a

genuine conversion of man to God. John the Baptist and Jesus and his Apostles insist on a need for conversion: the need to change one's attitude and conduct as a prerequisite for receiving the kingdom of God. There must be a transition from rebellion to obedience to God for the kingdom to be received into one's person.

Sometimes people are sorry because of the trouble their sin has gotten them into; but if they could be reasonably sure that they could escape the consequences, they would do the same thing again. It is not the sin that they hate, but its consequences. Real repentance means that the person is sorry not only for the consequences of his sin, but because he hates the sin itself. Repentance means that the person who was in love with sin comes to hate it because it is evil; it is a defiant turning against God who, in his goodness, is trying to prevent us from hurting ourselves.

If you want to see a picture of the horrible, devastating effects of sin, look at Jesus on the cross; look at the crucified Son of God; contemplate pure love rejected; contemplate pure goodness scorned, ridiculed, and repudiated. Perhaps then you will come to see how vile and despicable sin can make the sinner become. Perhaps then you will come to see how distasteful sin is and begin to hate it, and hate it with a passion.

Perhaps we can best grasp the evil of sin when we see its destructive effects on love, both divine and human. Sin attacks and destroys the greatest and most precious reality of all, which is love; and lovelessness is the beginning of hell.

Pope John Paul II wrote in *Dives in Misericordia*, n. 13: "Conversion to God always consists in discovering his mercy, that is, in discovering that love which is patient and kind (1 Cor 13:4) as only the creator and Father can be; the love to which God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:3) is faithful to the uttermost consequences in the history of his covenant with man: even to the cross and to the death and resurrection of the Son. Conversion to God is always the fruit of the

rediscovery of this Father who is rich in mercy. Authentic knowledge of the God of Mercy, the God of tender love, is a constant and inexhaustible source of conversion, not only as a momentary interior act, but also as a permanent attitude; as a state of mind. Those who come to know God in this way, who 'see' him in this way, can live only in a state of being constantly converted to him. They live, therefore, in a state of conversion and it is this state of conversion which marks out the most profound element of the pilgrimage of every man and woman on earth in *statu viatoris*." Our earthly journey, in other words, consists of an ever deepening turning toward God in loving intimacy and gratitude.

Second Sunday of Lent

Mk 9:2-10

"Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves."

Among the Apostles, Jesus had his special friends. When he left the support of his family to fulfill his mission, he formed a new community with the Apostles; and among them, he was particularly close to Peter, James, and John. Besides receiving support from them in the apostolate, he had more opportunity to form these leaders. Among these three, Jesus was particularly close to John (Jn 13:25). We, too, need to form close spiritual friendships to support, enhance, and intensify our spiritual lives. If "Bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor 15:33), good company nurtures good morals.

The mountaintop was traditionally the setting for theophanies, when God would manifest himself, and give supernatural revelations. Going apart by themselves emphasizes the revelatory character of the event; it is closely connected with the strict imposition of silence regarding such a revelation. The scene atop a high mountain alludes to the Moses motif showing Jesus to be the new Moses, radiant in God's presence on the new Mount Sinai. We are given a portrayal of the spiritual realities which were hidden by the Incarnation and perceptible only to the eyes of faith.

“And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.” This event happened six days after Peter was given the insight and proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah. But Jesus explained that he would not be the kind of worldly Messiah they thought him to be. Rather, he was the suffering servant of God who would be put to death; then he would be glorified and rise to become the spiritual Messiah who would save people from sin and give them eternal life.

It is in this context that the transfiguration takes place. For a fleeting moment, the disciples recognized the truth of the revelation of Jesus’ messiahship proclaimed by Peter. Although it would involve suffering and death, he was truly the glorious Son of Man.

The transfiguration balances out the shock of Jesus’ first passion prediction (Mk 8:31-33), strengthening the faith of the three Apostles destined for special leadership positions in the early Church. Beholding the glory of Jesus assures them of his divine sonship and foreshadows their own glorification at the resurrection.

We contemplate in awe this manifestation of the glory of the Son of God to his three favorite Apostles. Ever since the Incarnation, the divinity of our Lord has usually been hidden behind his humanity. But Jesus wishes to show these privileged disciples, who will later be pillars of the Church, the splendor of his divine glory. He wants to encourage them to follow the difficult way that lies ahead; they can now fix their gaze on the happy goal which is awaiting them at the end.

The fact that the transfiguration comes immediately after the first announcement of his passion and his prophetic words about how his followers would also have to carry his cross, shows that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

In the transfiguration, Jesus willed that the glory which was his as God and which his soul had

from the moment of the Incarnation, should miraculously become present in his body. Jesus shows his glory in the transfiguration in order to move us to desire the divine glory which will be given us so that, having this hope, we too can understand “that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). The transfiguration was in some way an anticipation not only of Jesus’ glorification, but also of ours.

The garments of Jesus are described as glistening with heavenly light. “As no fuller on earth could bleach them” underlines the fact that the brightness is of heavenly origin.

St. Luke tells us that it was as Jesus was praying that he was transfigured. The event may have been the consequence of ecstatic prayer. It also helps us to see the transforming effects of prayer; we are encouraged to live in communion with our indwelling Lord.

The transfiguration consisted in a change of Jesus’ bodily appearance. Jesus’ face shone with heavenly light; this was a glory welling up from within; it was accompanied by resplendence in his clothing. St. Paul explains that a similar transformation is taking place in us through grace (2 Cor 3:18).

The transfiguration was a visible anticipation of heavenly glory of the Son of Man even as the life of grace is an invisible anticipation of the heavenly glory of the children of God.

“Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus.” The disciples saw Jesus associated with two of the very greatest men of Israel’s past history: Moses, the supreme lawgiver, and Elijah, the most commanding of prophets. The fact that both figures were, in the Old Testament, described as having ended their lives on earth in a mysterious way (Deut 34:6; 2 Kgs 2:11) adds to the appropriateness of their mysterious reappearance in this preview of the glorious climax of Jesus’ ministry. Both are connected with Sinai (Ex 19:33-34; 1 Kgs 10:9-

13); and by their presence on the New Sinai, they witness to the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Jesus.

By their presence in friendly conversation with Jesus, they testify to the continuity and harmony between the Old Dispensation and the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus; he had come, “not to destroy the Law and the prophets...but to fulfill them” (Mt 5:17). They now appear with Jesus as witnesses to the fulfillment of the law and the prophets taking place in the person of Jesus as he appears in glory.

When these two great figures met with Jesus, it meant that they saw in him the consummation of all they had dreamed of in the past; they saw in Jesus all that history had longed for and hoped for and looked forward to. Their disappearance indicates that the Old Testament, which they represent, must cede to the New; so now only Jesus remains. He will bring all of revelation to completion in himself and in his teaching. He replaces them in the new order. St. Mark does not tell us what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were talking about. But St. Luke says that they “spoke of his exodus” (Lk 9:31), that is, Jesus’ suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension that will take place in Jerusalem. The mention of exodus also calls to mind the Israelite exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land.

“Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, ‘Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified.” Peter expresses the joy of such an ecstatic experience. He may have thought that this experience was the beginning of the glorious reign of the Messiah. In his confusion and eagerness he offered to provide three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

The Jewish Feast of Tabernacles looked back to the tent dwelling of the wilderness days (Lev 23:42 ff), but also forward to the new age when God would again tabernacle with his people; and

members of all nations would gather in Jerusalem to tabernacle there and worship God together (Zech 14:16-19).

St. Mark may well have understood Peter’s words as an offer to build the sort of dwellings God and the Messiah were expected to share with men in the age to come. In that case, what Peter was overlooking was that this scene was not yet the end times, but only its foreshadowing.

The disciples were terrified because they knew that they were in the presence of something supernatural, unfamiliar, and overwhelming.

“Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; from the cloud came a voice, ‘This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.’” The cloud was an Old Testament image of God’s presence. The glory of God appeared to Moses in the form of a cloud through which God spoke to him (Ex 16:10). When Moses climbed Sinai to receive the tables of the Law, the cloud covered the mountain as a sign of God’s presence (Ex 24:15). Whenever Moses entered the Tabernacle, the pillar of cloud descended and stayed at the entrance and God spoke to Moses (Ex 33:9). The cloud of God’s presence filled the temple when it was dedicated after Solomon had built it (1 Kgs 8:10).

The overshadowing of the cloud is an Old Testament image to describe God’s dwelling among his people (Ex 40:35). The fact that the disciples are also overshadowed by the cloud shows that, far from being mere spectators, they are deeply involved in the mystery of Jesus’ glorification as representatives of the new people of God. They, too, are in the process of being transformed into God’s image (2 Cor 3:18).

The Father’s voice was heard from the cloud saying, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him,” as at Jesus’ baptism (Mk 1:11), the heavenly voice alludes to Is 42:1 and designates Jesus as the suffering servant of God. This time, however, the words are addressed to the three disciples; within

the context of the first three predictions of the passion, they constitute the divine approval of Jesus' Messianic role as the suffering servant.

Originally, Peter wanted to build three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, putting them on an equal footing. He totally misunderstood what was happening. But the voice from heaven set the matter straight. Jesus is not the mere equal of Elijah and Moses. He is supremely greater than they. His transfiguration signifies his victory over death; and the voice of the Father designates him Son of God in power.

The words, "Listen to him" allude to Deuteronomy 18:15. God promised to raise up another prophet like Moses; just as Israel received instructions for worship and life issued through Moses, so they must obey the words of his prophetic successor. The Father uses the passage to identify Jesus as this Mosaic prophet (compare Jn 6:14; Acts 3:22). His teaching must be heeded. The voice strengthens the disciples in their adherence to Jesus' teaching. The voice from heaven solemnly ratified the mystery of Jesus' suffering and glorification. Henceforth, the disciples owe obedience to Jesus as the Christ—not to the Law and the Prophets who rendered testimony to him through Moses and Elijah. And the declaration of the Father was a confirmation of all that Jesus had taught them concerning his own Person and his relation to the Old Law. It was undoubtedly to strengthen the faith of the Apostles and to prepare them for the trials of the Passion.

"Suddenly, looking around they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them." The Law and the Prophets—the Old Covenant—gives way to the New. It is completed and surpassed in Jesus, God's Son. He takes over the center of attention.

"As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant." The experience of the

transfiguration must be kept a secret until the mystery of the resurrection is revealed. The disciples will not understand the mystery of Jesus' suffering and glory until the crucified Jesus will have risen from the dead. Not until then can he be proclaimed with understanding. And the Christian is reminded that the risen Christ is to be understood in the light of the cross and suffering. The Son of Man had to suffer in order to enter into glory. Typically, the disciples had not grasped the teaching, not even what resurrection meant. They will come to understand only after the whole paschal mystery has completely unfolded. Revealing Jesus transfigured in glory would only raise false hopes in Jesus being a worldly Messiah overcoming his enemies with power rather than with love and forgiveness.

Third Sunday of Lent **Jn 2:13-25**

"Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem."

The Passover was the greatest and most important religious feast for the people of the Old Testament. It was celebrated every spring to commemorate Israel's rescue from Egyptian slavery. This feast was fulfilled when Jesus passed over from death to life on Easter Sunday; Jesus saved us from sin and death. The Passover was replaced by our celebration of Jesus' glorious Resurrection. The festivals of Judaism are emphasized by John as part of his way of showing how Jesus has fulfilled the hopes of which they were the sign.

John mentions that Jesus attended three Passovers, indicating that his ministry extended over two years. Nearly 80 percent of John's narrative places Jesus in Jerusalem. The synoptic Gospels give greater attention to the ministry of Jesus in Galilee.

It was obligatory for every male Jew who lived within fifteen miles of Jerusalem to attend the feast of Passover. It was the dream and aim of

every Jew, no matter in what land he lived or how far away to celebrate at least one Passover in Jerusalem. Astonishing as it may sound, it is likely that as many as two and a quarter million Jews sometimes assembled in the Holy City to keep Passover.

Jesus traveled south from Galilee to Jerusalem in Judah and yet it is said that he “went up to Jerusalem”. That is because the Holy City dominated one of the highest points of the mountain chain of Palestine at about 2540 feet.

“He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as money-changers seated there.” The temple was divided into several courts. The outermost court, open to Gentile pilgrims, was used for selling sacrificial animals and exchanging foreign currency. The yearly tax of a half-shekel, which every adult male Jew owed to the temple treasury, could only be paid in a special coin called “sanctuary money”. The pilgrims gave in exchange for the coin the Roman denarius and the Attic drachma, which were regarded as “unclean” because of the emperor’s image and certain pagan symbols which were stamped on them.

The merchants were selling oxen, sheep, and doves in the Court of the Gentiles; these were the three kinds of animals which the Jews ordinarily offered in sacrifice. These were for sale at the temple so that the pilgrims would not have the added expense of bringing them from afar.

Every Israelite had to offer as a Passover sacrifice an ox or sheep if he was wealthy, or two turtledoves or two pigeons if he was not (Lev 5:7). In addition, he had to pay a half-shekel every year if he was twenty or over.

But there were flagrant abuses: pilgrims who could ill afford it were being fleeced at an exorbitant rate by moneychangers. It was a rampant and shameless social injustice; and what was worse, it was being done in the name of religion. The poor and humble pilgrims were practically blackmailed

into buying their victims from the temple booths if they wished to sacrifice at all.

The temple authorities and the Jewish traders were making the Court of the Gentile into an uproar and rabble where no man could pray. The lowing of the oxen, the bleating of the sheep, the cooing of the doves, the shouts of the hagglers, the rattle of the coins, the voices raised in bargaining disputes, all of the noise, bellowing, and manure combined to make the court of the Gentiles a place where no one could worship. The conduct of the temple court shut out the Gentile from the presence of God. Jesus was moved from the depths of his heart because seeking men were being shut out from the presence of God. Prophets had already fulminated against these abuses, which grew up with the tacit (silent) permission of the temple authorities who made money by permitting trading.

It was that which moved Jesus to flaring anger; it was impossible for him to stand by passively while the worshippers of Jerusalem were treated in this way. It was the exploitation of the pilgrims by conscienceless men which moved Jesus to immediate wrath. Jesus proceeded to act as he did because God’s house was being desecrated.

“He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, and to those who sold doves he said, ‘Take these out of here, and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.’” Jesus is described as taking action only against the sellers, not against the buyers. His reprimand is directed to the sellers of doves, who refuse to be dislodged by the whip. For John, the words of Jesus come from his consciousness of being the Son. The implication is that he is the unique Son of the Father; he testified to his special filial relationship to God.

The aggressive actions of Jesus are a prophetic sign of the temple’s imminent destruction (Mk 13:1-2). The expulsion of oxen, sheep, and doves

14 from the precincts likewise signifies the termination of animal sacrifice in the temple 21-24.

In applying this to ourselves, we realize that our hearts may also be congested with foreign, worldly elements which desecrate God's indwelling presence. Our hearts may become so cluttered with things and filled with noise that it is no longer a sanctuary where God lives. His sacred dwelling place is so profaned that he is forced to leave us. We displace and insult him by preferring finite, created things to him, our creator. He cries out to us also, "Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace."

"His disciples recalled the words of scripture, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'" This is a quotation from Psalm 69:10; the psalm depicts the suffering of the righteous who are pained by the insults that sinners heap upon God. It was taken to refer to the Messiah. When the Messiah came he would be burned up with a zeal for the house of God. Jesus, burning with righteous indignation, is outraged that business dealings have taken the place of prayer in the temple courts.

The conviction that Jesus was the Messiah seized the minds of the disciples even more deeply and more definitely. This action befitted none but the Messiah, and they were surer than ever that Jesus was in fact the anointed one of God. But this burning intensity of zeal for the temple will destroy Jesus; the action of his cleansing the temple led to his death.

"At this the Jews answered and said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?'" The prophets had protested against the secularization of the temple; they promised that in the days of the Messiah "All will be holy in Jerusalem and no merchant will be found in the temple" (Zech 14:21; see also Jer 7:11-15; Mal 3:1-3). That is why the temple authorities demand a proof, a sign that he was the Messiah, authorized by God to act with such forcefulness.

Jesus refused to give the kind of spectacular sign the authorities asked for. Signs are for the well disposed to evoke or to confirm faith. He proceeded to give them a subtler sign, but one which was truly adequate for all believers.

"Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.'" Jesus, therefore, promises a sign which is that of his risen body; for his body will be destroyed and in three days Jesus will raise himself. His statement is ambiguous since "destroy" and "raise up" can refer to a building as well as to the body of Jesus. It could, therefore, have been understood by the audience as a messianic claim to be the one who replaces the temple in three days, that is, in a short time (Hos 6:2). Besides, the Old Testament had foretold a rebuilding of the temple (Ez 40-46; Tob 13:10-12).

"The Jews said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?'" The Jews understand Jesus' claim only on the natural level: how can he so quickly rebuild their beautiful buildings that had taken forty-six years to construct (from 20-19 B.C. to the current 28 A.D.)? Their misunderstanding will continue until his death trial when they will misrepresent him as having said, "I am able to destroy the temple"... The temple of which he spoke is not made by hands, for it is the Church made of believers, says St. Paul (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22; Confer Rev 21:22).

"But he was speaking about the temple of his body. Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken." Throughout the whole scene John directs our attention from the Jerusalem temple to the new temple, which is the person of the glorified Jesus. He will become a new temple after his resurrection, when he draws disciples into a life of communion with himself and his Father (Jn 14:2-3).

After the resurrection, with the help of the Spirit

who “brings to remembrance” the teaching of Jesus (Jn 14:26), disciples will interpret the words of Jesus with reference to his death and resurrection. Jesus, through his power as Son, will raise himself in three days from the dead and become a new temple insofar as through him believers enter into a living communion with the Father. Thus Jesus is the “place” of a new worship, and through faith in him, believers enter into a new relationship with God their Father (Jn 4:23-24; 14:2-3). Consequently, the Incarnate Jesus, who clears out the temple, is a sign of a new temple who is the glorified Jesus: in other words, he is both the sign and the signified. However, only later will disciples come to understand the meaning of Jesus’ words and to see that his death and resurrection were confirmed by Scripture (Ps 16:10).

“While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing.” Belief in the name is equivalent to belief in the person. Faith is not simply the acceptance of a truth; it also consists of a commitment to a person. The Jewish practice of calling “Yahweh”, “the name” appears to have been imitated in primitive Christian references to Jesus (Mk 9:38).

But this initial faith is weak and incomplete. A faith based merely on miracles without a proper recognition of the divine nature of him who performed them would prove to be unstable and inconstant. Some, seeing Jesus’ miracles accept him, but only to a certain degree; they see only the marvel of the sign, not the meaning behind it.

“But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well.” The supernatural knowledge of Jesus is often highlighted in the Gospels (Jn 4:39; 16:30; Mt 9:4; 17:27; Mk 11:2-4; Lk 22:9-13). Here he detects deficient faith in those who marvel at his miracles but fail to grasp the significance of his person and his mission.

Jesus’ miracles moved many to recognize that he had extraordinary, divine powers. But that falls short of perfect theological faith. Jesus knew their faith was limited, and that they were not very deeply attached to him: they were interested in him as a miracle worker. This explains why he did not trust them (Jn 6:15, 26).

Fourth Sunday of Lent Jn 3:14-21

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

The people complained against God and Moses in the desert. They were disgusted with the manna. In punishment, the Lord sent among the people serpents, which bit the people so that many of them died. They then admitted their sin and asked Moses to take away the serpents. At God’s command, Moses made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole; and whenever anyone who had been bitten looked at the bronze serpent, he recovered (Num 21:4-9).

Jesus sees the bronze serpent as an image of his own crucifixion and the healing it will bring to a rebellious world. It shows the value of his being raised up on the cross: those who look on him with faith can obtain salvation.

Implied here, is the deadly and destructive nature of sin. The guilt of sin is like the pain of the biting of a fiery serpent; its infectious power is like the diffused venom of the serpent. The devil is the old serpent whose temptations are like fiery darts, which wound the sinner with fiery and deadly bites.

The word “lift up” refers both to being lifted up on the cross and being lifted up into heaven. In Jesus’ return to his Father in heaven, the cross is the first step on the ladder of the ascension. Only when Jesus is raised up can the Spirit of which he has

spoken to Nicodemus be given. Moses' serpent is an example of salvation coming through being raised up on a cross.

Looking at this in greater detail: In John, being lifted up refers to one continuous action of ascent: Jesus begins his return to his Father as he approaches death (Jn 13:1) and completes it only with his ascension (Jn 20:17). It is the upward swing of the great pendulum of the Incarnation corresponding to the descent of the Word which became flesh. The first step in the ascent is when Jesus is lifted upon the cross; the second step is when he is raised up from death; the final step is when he is lifted up to heaven. His being lifted up will lead to the gift of eternal life to all who believe in Jesus. The eternal life is the life of the sons of God, the life begotten from above, the life begotten of the Spirit. When Jesus will be lifted up in crucifixion and ascension, his communication of the Spirit will constitute a flowing source of life for those who believe in him (Jn 7:37-39); (see Fr. Raymond Brown, *The Anchor Bible*, Doubleday & Co. Inc., Garden City, New York, 1966).

We see the importance of faith in today's Gospel. The word "believe" is mentioned five times. It is first mentioned in this very first verse, "Everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Faith connects us to Jesus enabling us to draw divine life from him. Through faith, we attach ourselves to Jesus' person and become involved with him; we enter into communion with him; through faith, we begin to participate in the eternal life of God, which is in Jesus. Faith also accepts as true what God has revealed. Faith is a movement towards the person of Jesus; it is giving oneself to him and accepting him as he has revealed himself, that is, as the only, beloved Son, generated from the Father.

The eternal life given to those who believe is the supreme life of God; it refers to the quality of life we receive in communion with the divine; it is much more than endless human life; it is the divine life of the Trinity personally known and experienced through grace perfected by the gifts

of wisdom and understanding. We will enjoy its fullness in heaven, but the clean of heart already have a foretaste of it on earth (Jn 17:3; Mt 5:8).

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." It is God's infinite love that prompted him to give and deliver to death his only begotten Son (infinitely loved, coequal with himself) for the salvation of the world. The Greek word used for this kind of love which comes from God is *agape*: it is the perfect, constant, unconditional love of a Perfect Being who is Love; it is love given even when undeserved; this is the love of God.

The magnitude of God's love is matched by the magnitude of his gift. He gave us his Son in the Incarnation and he gave him over to death in crucifixion. Jesus is the manifestation of God's love for the world. Thus the breadth of God's love is the world of mankind for whom Christ died; and the depth of his love is his most precious gift, his only beloved Son, whose life, especially his death, reveals how much God wants to share his own eternal life with mankind. It was an act infinitely costly to God. He did not spare his own Son, but surrendered him for us all (Rom 8:32), echoing the story of Abraham and his son. John stresses the gratuity of God's love, extending even to this extreme.

The prevenient, merciful love of God takes the form of sending his only-begotten Son into the world and of delivering him up to death in expiation for sin. The Son is the most cherished and precious gift that God can bestow upon the world. Sending his Son into the world and giving him over to crucifixion is the profoundest mystery of God's love; his expiatory death is the supreme manifestation of the Father's love.

The world is sinful mankind which has turned away from God. It is the world far from God and yet profoundly longing for him and sensing its need for redemption, that world is the object of God's infinite love and mercy. God has manifested that love in an historical act, the mission of the

Son and his delivery to death. The only-begotten is also the uniquely loved. It is this Son, most intimately united to him and supremely loved, his own and only Son, that God has given to the world to snatch it from destruction.

The purpose of God's loving act is the giving of "eternal life", which is supremely important and indeed indispensable since it saves men from "perishing". Destruction already hangs over man, and he can only escape from his catastrophic situation by believing in the Son of God.

"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him." Though alienated from God, the world is not evil in itself; it remains the object of divine compassion. The only purpose of the sending of the Son of God into the world was to save it. God wills the salvation and not the destruction of the world, the well being of all men, and not just that of a privileged few.

"Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Believing in Jesus or in his name, that is, in his divine Person, unites us to him; thus united to him, we share his divine, eternal life; we, then, are saved from perishing; for he has OVERCOME DEATH. Moreover, his life empowers us to live according to God's will, according to the truth enunciated by God's word; thus living as God's children in loving intimacy and obedience to our Father, we are cherished by God—not condemned.

Willful unbelief is its own condemnation because it rejects the only source of salvation. Jesus is the one mediator between human beings and God. We must be connected to him through faith by which we draw divine life from him. He is the only one who can unite us to God, the Father, and the eternal life. If we refuse to accept Jesus' Person and his words of revelation through faith, we condemn ourselves to perish.

The person who does not believe is not condemned to death by God subsequent to his unbelief; for God has indeed offered him eternal life; he is condemned already in his unbelief. The perishing of the unbeliever is not a punishment for unbelief inflicted by a ruthless God; it is the self-determined end of a person who does not believe.

Jesus was sent into the world to bring it eternal life; willful unbelief makes him the occasion of condemnation; the unbeliever passes judgment on himself. Just as eternal life already begins in this world for the person who has decided for Christ, so does the unbeliever already stand separated from God and condemned.

Judgment takes place here and now; it is determined by faith or unbelief in Jesus. God for his part has no desire to judge, but only to save. Judgment is only due to the refusal of people to believe in the Son of God. Judgment is only the dark, reverse side of God's act of love and redemption when unbelief draws down judgment upon itself: unbelief becomes self-condemnation. Judgment has taken place by the very act of non-belief. Whether and how long a person remains in the sphere of death and condemnation depends on him. Perhaps intercessory prayer will give him the light to see and the strength to repent and accept salvation through faith.

The decision taken by the unbeliever will be formally ratified before the eyes of the world, at the last judgment by the Son of Man; or, as Jesus put it, "The word that I spoke...will condemn him on the last day" (Jn 12:48). The present judgment does not deprive a person's further capacity to make a decision—but it can lead to the "hardening" of his heart.

The last judgment is nothing but the divine acknowledgment of the condition brought about by human decision; it will be the disclosure of an existence long vowed to destruction, already a victim of death. The unbeliever pronounces the final verdict on himself by his present decision.

“And this is the verdict (judgment), that light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil.” St. John, then, goes on to explain why people prefer darkness to light: “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light, so that his works might not be exposed.” Evil is symbolized by darkness. Jesus, the light, has come into the world. But the darkness will not receive it. This very refusal constitutes judgment.

Jesus’ presence in the world provokes men to judge themselves by deciding either for Jesus or against him. Evildoers are disbelievers. Doers who do good works believe: they are drawn to Christ, while evildoers are repelled. They do not want their malice to be exposed, nor will they cease their sinning.

Jesus brings out what a man really is and the real nature of his life. Jesus is a penetrating light that provokes judgment by making it apparent what a man is. The one who turns away is not an occasional sinner, but one who “practices wickedness”; it is not that he cannot see the light, but that he hates the light... it is a question of radical evil.

The judgment takes place wherever people prefer darkness to light and do not believe in the Son of God. They have placed themselves on the side of the “prince of this world” on whom judgment has been passed by the death and victory of Jesus on the cross. The purpose of this passage is to display the personal responsibility of unbelievers and the horror of their act in its true colors.

The passage explains why Jesus who brings salvation is confronted with so much unbelief; it also calls for the holiness of life without which no one comes to the light. It also explains how in spite of all God’s efforts to save, especially through the love of his Son, people could still close their hearts to the light. God, for his part, has done everything to save people from darkness through Jesus’ words and works. Their inexplicable “hatred” rises up from the abyss of

a heart darkened by sin. It is the consequence of a total perversion and moral corruption. When Jesus and the light of his revelation fall upon unbelievers, they themselves are unmasked for what they are, and not just their works. Thus their “hatred” has a psychological explanation and is also rooted in a profounder level of their being; it comes from a general attitude for which they are themselves responsible and which is totally corrupted. This is why they do not come to the light, which is John’s synonym for “believing”.

“But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.” Those who perform morally good acts according to God’s will are drawn to believe in Jesus. Such living according to the truth is totally opposed to the lie, falsehood and wretchedness, which come from the devil. Those who are loyal to God and strive to do his will have the disposition which also enables them to hear and accept the words of God’s envoy. His words are the truth which comes from God. The truth is present in Jesus, but only those are open to it who are “of the truth” and act accordingly.

Their works are done in God in that they are in accordance with God and his will. These works are true and in conformity with God’s nature. There is a kinship between the children of God and the Son of God sent as revealer and redeemer; there is also an intrinsic relationship between moral behavior and faith (see Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*, Herder and Herder, 1965).

Jesus is God’s light sent to the world to show human beings how they may walk in him, “the way, the truth, and the life” in order to reach God. Those who reject him choose to remain in darkness rather than face the challenge of changing their evil ways. By so doing, they pronounce their own judgment and condemnation. Conversely, those who accept Jesus and walk with him or come into the light are not judged. They show by their deeds that they are indeed born of God.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Jn 12:20-33

“Some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover Feast came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, ‘Sir, we would like to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.”

These Greeks by birth have adopted Judaism as full or semi-proselytes. Their plan to worship God at the feast implies that they belonged to the class known as God-fearers; they were attracted to Judaism, but were not circumcised; they were not allowed to share in the eating of the Passover lamb. Their request for an audience with Jesus anticipates his prophecy that “all men will be drawn to him” (Jn 12:32). Their desire to see Jesus places them in contrast to the Jewish leaders who have voiced their despair over his success.

This is a very important moment because it means people of a non-Jewish culture came in search of Jesus. This would make them the first fruits of the spread of the Christian faith in the Hellenic world. This would make it easier to understand Jesus’ exclamation 23 about his own glorification: it has to do not only with his being raised up to the right hand of the Father, but also with his attracting all men to himself.

The Gentiles’ request is presented to Jesus through Philip, who consults with Andrew since there was no precedent for dealing with Gentiles. These were the only two of the twelve who bear Greek names. They may have been personal acquaintances from the same region.

To see Jesus means to seek an interview with him. Perhaps one of the things Jesus is saying through this narrative is that until Jesus has died and risen again, the Gentiles will not be able to see him. But once he has risen and they are joined to him through baptism and share his divine life, they will see him, that is, know him personally (see Jn 14:19-20).

“Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.’”

Our Gospel situates the scene immediately after Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, in the temple precincts, where Jesus usually taught. Chapter eleven began by announcing that the purpose of the Lazarus miracle was “that the Son [of God] may be glorified through it”. 23 Now the hour for this glorification has come. The Lazarus miracle began a chain of actions pointing toward Jesus’ death; now the hour has come for Jesus to be lifted up in crucifixion (Jn 11:32-33). Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead pointed to Jesus as the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25); now begins that hour in which Jesus will be lifted up in resurrection and draw all to himself to give them life (Jn 12:32).

Jesus had said that he would lay down his life and that other sheep not belonging to the fold would join his flock. The appearance of Gentiles wishing to see Jesus indicates that it is time for him to lay down his life. He whose life could not be taken away from him involuntarily (Jn 10:17-18) is ready for the hour of laying down his life and taking it up again.

The bright side of the hour, which previously was presented as the hour of his death (Jn 7:30; 8:20), is now emphasized, and Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man because he is ascending to the heavenly world (Jn 6:62) and so attaining glorification. By glorification here he envisages the fullness of saving power which will be given him to draw all people to himself.

The parable of the seed that dies 24 is a magnificent commentary on the theme of death and life. Jesus begins his statement with a double amen, meaning, “I solemnly assure you”. Jesus is speaking of death as the means of gaining life. In its present sequence after the coming of the Greeks it is meant to refer to Jesus’ death as the means of bringing life to all people (Jn 12:32).

The contrast to dying and bearing fruit is one of not dying and thus remaining unproductive. The peculiar feature of this parable is the insistence that only through death is the fruit borne.

In this parable, Jesus elucidates the mystery of his atoning death. If it be thought strange that he must die in order to bring life, let it be remembered that this paradox already exists in nature. The grain of wheat left to itself produces nothing; only when it appears to have died and has been buried does it bring forth fruit—in far greater abundance than itself. Mysteriously, life is released from the germ enclosed in its shell and it produces thousands of other grains containing its same nature. Through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, many sons and daughters are born of God, inheriting eternal life and participating in the divine nature.

Jesus was killed and buried at Passover, and fifty days later at Pentecost, as the Jews were celebrating the feast of the Harvest, a great harvest was reaped by the Holy Spirit: 3000 were added to the faithful as a result of Peter's Pentecost homily. The first fruits of the harvest were reaped on Pentecost as the feast of the Harvest was celebrated in Jerusalem. Jesus died as a grain of wheat, and then, fifty days later, the great harvest began.

“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.” The interests of spiritual supernatural life must take priority over everything. To love the lower life more is to lose the higher; to hate (which means to love less and subordinately) what is life in this world is the means of self-preservation unto life everlasting. This is the law of self-denial so often proclaimed by the Savior, of which the highest act is martyrdom.

One saves his life—the only life that truly matters—not egoistically clinging to his separate identity as a good to be preserved at all costs, but by being willing to relinquish it. This is the way of renunciation, of sacrifice, and of service, which Jesus revealed as the genuine meaning of life, and this way of Jesus must also be that of the Christian.

The man who loves himself inordinately destroys himself. It is another observable paradox that the meaning of life so eludes him who thinks he is living it to the hilt. Selfishness, man's false love for himself that will not permit him to sacrifice himself ends in destroying him. While the person who hates himself in this world, preserves himself for eternal life. It is only by treating one's life as worthless from a this-worldly view does a person gain the only life that really counts. The principle of sacrifice—the explanation of Jesus' life—also holds for anyone who will count himself a true follower of Jesus.

“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.” Jesus invites all true disciples, that is, those who follow and learn from him step by step, to walk with him to victory through the cross. Readiness to suffer for the cause of Jesus is an essential part of Christian discipleship.

Following Jesus includes a willingness to imitate him in suffering and death. Jesus shows his servants what they will receive for following him: they will be with him and the Father will honor them. This is another way of saying what was said in Jn 12:25 about preserving life to live eternally: eternal life is related to being with Jesus in the Father's love.

The disciple must follow his Lord, and that will eventually take him to the place where his Lord finally dwells. So to serve Jesus is to receive the honor of the Father; what that means is made manifest in the glorification of the Son. “Where I am” is the goal that the disciples will reach through their deaths—the heavenly world. It is Jesus' sphere, his home, to which he is going; even on earth he sees it so close to him that he can talk about it in the present. To reach there, to be united with the heavenly Lord and see his glory, is the highest reward for the disciple who has followed him to death.

The word “honor” refers to the gift of heavenly glory, the full revelation of the love of God. The

Father loves the disciples because they have loved Jesus; he will complete his love by taking them into perfect communion with himself and his Son.

Jesus said, “I am troubled now, yet what should I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Jesus’ obedience to death is not a matter of easy compliance with the Father’s will but the testing, trying obedience of a loving and faithful son. Obedience demands a soul-shaking sacrifice of Jesus. Supreme demands are being made upon the beloved Son.

This scene is parallel to the other three Gospels’ account of the agony in the garden. We see here the true humanity of Jesus. He is fearful in the face of the awful struggle with a resisting human nature and with Satan that the hour of his passion and death entails. In face of an imminent and cruel death, Jesus can and does feel anguish. The value of his sacrifice consists in the readiness with which he submitted to it. The thought of death that awaits Jesus troubles him; he turns to the Father in a prayer very similar to that of Gethsemane. Jesus, as man, seeks support in the love and power of his Father, God, to be strengthened to fulfill his mission. In this way, he is able to resist the temptation to ask the Father to save him from the hour; rather, he rejoices at the opportunity for glorifying his Father that the hour will offer. We find this very consoling, for we often feel weak in moments of trial; like Jesus, we must seek support in God’s strength: he is our rock and our fortress (Ps 31:4).

Jesus’ prayer, “Father, glorify you name” is really a plea that God’s plan be carried out; for the name that the Father has entrusted to Jesus (Jn 17:11, 12) can only be glorified when its bearer is glorified through death, resurrection, and ascension. Only then will men come to realize what the divine name “I Am” means when applied to Jesus (Jn 8:28). Jesus’ plea, “Father, glorify your name,” gives us St. John’s form of the petition in the Lord’s prayer, “Hallowed be your name.” This petition, properly translated as, “May your name

be sanctified,” is not a request for people to praise God’s name, but a request for God to sanctify his own name. The first three petitions in the Lord’s Prayer are synonymous, and the first petition has the same general import as the third: “Your will be done”; the parallel in the agony for John’s “glorify your name” is in the “your will be done” of Mt 26:42. “Father, glorify you name” is Jesus’ final answer from his crisis of spirit, and it is a whole-hearted acceptance of the Father’s will. The glorification of the Son is also that of the Father.

“Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it and will glorify it again.’” The words “I have glorified it” refers to no single event, but to the entire lifework and teaching of Jesus, all of which have been signs of the ultimate glorification that is to come. God will glorify his name by reinstating the Son in heavenly glory and making his death fruitful for the people of the world. This glorification refers to the whole of Jesus’ earthly activity up to his hour. Jesus has glorified the Father in this and the Father has constantly given the Son signs of closeness and involvement. In his reply the Father gives the Son, who now submits to him without reserve, even unto death, the assurance that, as in the past, so too in this hour he will exalt and vindicate the holiness of his name. He will justify the Son, raise him above the power of evil, and give him glory and saving power. This glorification is a solemn ratification that the fullness of divinity dwells in Jesus and that through his passion, death, and resurrection, it will be made present in his human nature itself, showing Jesus to be the Son of God.

“The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’” Now, before the passion, the voice of God tells that the name of his Father has been glorified in the life of Jesus and shall be glorified in his death. Like the voice addressed to Saul on the road to Damascus, this voice was not understood by all the bystanders. The Father’s voice is mistaken for thunder or for that of an angel. Yet in John the purpose of the voice is clearly for the people that they may see the closeness of the Father and the Son.

“Jesus answered and said, ‘This voice did not come for my sake but for yours.’” Jesus comments on the incomprehension of the crowd. He wants to urge his listeners to believe: they ought to recognize that God himself has borne witness to him, and that he is the true messenger of God.

Jesus did not need the reassurance of the voice, but for one who has ears to hear, the voice could tell of the close relation of the Son to the Father. That the voice had been wasted on the crowd standing by merely confirms that they are not attuned to the Word of God.

Jesus said, “Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of the world will be driven out.” The ruler of the world is Satan, whose dominion over the world began with Adam’s rebellion in the garden. Jesus will defeat the devil when he mounts the cross (Heb 2:14-15) and will destroy him when he comes again in glory (Rev 20:10).

The judgment which is to fall on the world is a judgment of condemnation. The world is the hostile mass of men and its prince, Satan, who is now about to be cast out of his dominion.

Such will be the paradox of Christ’s exaltation; it will appear that he has been defeated by this world, but in reality, the power of Satan will be broken; he will no longer be the ruler of the world except to the extent that man’s evil dispositions will permit.

Judgment means the dispossession of the ruler of the world, the enemy of God; the judgment taking place now in the cross had the effect that the ruler of this world is more and more driven out of his sphere of influence; he becomes powerless over those who look up in faith to the crucified Jesus and let themselves be drawn to him.

The victorious hour of Jesus constitutes a victory over Satan in principle; yet in the working out of this victory in the Christian life, there is a tension between victory already won (1 Jn 2:13) and a victory still to be won (1 Jn 5:4-5).

Jesus said, “And when I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to myself.” He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.” Jesus defeats the ruler of the world by drawing so many believers to himself from the cross, which is his throne. Therefore, he is the victor, since, lifted up and enthroned like a king on the cross from where he reveals God’s love, he invites and draws those who are receptive to this supreme expression of a loving Father and a loving Son. It is through and on the cross that Jesus draws all peoples to himself—his sacred wounds and outstretched arms express that supreme love that attracts and wins our hearts, drawing us to him.

Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion **Mk 14:1—15:47**

The first reading captures Jesus’ determination, “I have set my face like flint,” to suffer and die for us. He prayerfully listens to God about the sufferings awaiting him as the servant of the Lord: “Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear.” And Jesus is faithful to accomplish his Father’s will: “I have not rebelled, have not turned back. I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting.” Jesus perfectly went through and fulfilled the role of suffering servant.

The twenty-second psalm used as a response today helps us to understand that Jesus is reciting this psalm while hanging on the cross. It is a prayer to God expressing his feeling of utter desolation as he is abandoned by his disciples, and seemingly even by God himself, to die on the cross. He cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But this psalm is not one of despair—it is one of total trust in God as he fervently prays for divine assistance: “But you, O Lord, be not far from me, O my help, hasten to aid me.” And when God does deliver him, he confidently says, “I will proclaim your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise you...”

And that is what Jesus did when he returned in glory on Easter Sunday morning to tell us about his triumph over death and all evil.

The second reading speaks of Jesus' attitude. Unlike Adam who grasped at becoming equal to God, Jesus emptied himself of his rightful glory as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity; he humbled himself by becoming human; he became the suffering servant, even to the point of death, even the most horrible death by crucifixion. He wanted us to understand what a terrible thing sin is, that it caused the Son of God to suffer so much and die; and at the same time, he wanted us to see how much he loves us.

His redemptive sufferings brought salvation to the whole world. This teaches us the value of accepted suffering when it comes our way. Suffering will purify and sanctify us if we lovingly accept it as God's will for us.

NOTES

The Passion of Jesus shows us the devastating effects of sin—the suffering and death it causes. Through sin, we hurt the one who loves us most. Jesus' great love for his Father and for us moved him to voluntarily embrace the cross. It is through the cross that he saved us from sin. It is through the sufferings of the cross, willingly accepted, that we are purified from sin and made fit for the kingdom of heaven.

NAB footnotes:

14:1 The Passover commemorated the redemption from slavery and departure of the Israelites from Egypt by night. It began at sundown after the Passover lamb was sacrificed in the temple in the afternoon of the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan. With the Passover supper on the same evening was associated the eating of unleavened bread. The latter was continued through Nisan 21, a reminder of the affliction of the Israelites and of the haste surrounding their departure. Praise and thanks to God for his goodness in the

past were combined at this dual festival with the hope of future salvation. The intent to put Jesus to death was plotted for a long time but delayed for fear of the crowd.

14:3-9 At Bethany on the Mount of Olives, a few miles from Jerusalem, Jesus defends a woman's loving action of anointing his head with perfumed oil in view of his impending death and burial as a criminal, in which case his body would not be anointed. He assures the woman of the remembrance of her deed in the worldwide preaching of the good news.

14:13 The man carrying a jar of water was perhaps a prearranged signal, for only women ordinarily carried water in jars.

14:18 The betrayal contrasts the intimacy of table fellowship at the Passover meal with the treachery of the traitor.

14:21 As it is written of him is a reference to Ps 41:10: "Even the friend who had my trust, who shared my table, has scorned me;" Jesus cites this psalm verse concerning Judas at the Last Supper.

14:22-24 The actions and words of Jesus express within the framework of the Passover meal and the transition to a new covenant the sacrifice of himself through the offering of his body and blood in anticipation of his passion and death. His blood of the covenant both alludes to the ancient rite of Ex 24:4-8 and indicates the new community that the sacrifice of Jesus will bring into being.

14:24 Many is used here in the sense of all.

14:26 The hymn sung refers to Psalms 114-118, thanksgiving songs concluding the Passover meal.

14:27-31 Jesus predicted that the Twelve would waver in their faith, even abandon him, despite their protestations to the contrary. Yet he reassured them that after his resurrection he

would re-gather them in Galilee, where he first summoned them to be his followers as he began to preach the good news.

14:32-34 The disciples who had witnessed the raising to life of the daughter of Jairus and the transfiguration of their Master were now invited to witness his degradation and agony and to watch and pray with him.

14:36 Abba, Father is an Aramaic term and its English translation; it is Jesus' special way of addressing God with filial intimacy. The word 'Abba' seems not to have been used in earlier or contemporaneous Jewish sources to address God without some qualifier. We note the complete obedient surrender of the human will of Jesus to the divine will of the Father in the words, "not what I will but what you will."

14:38 "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak"; the spirit is drawn to what is good yet found in conflict with the flesh, inclined to sin. Everyone is faced with this struggle, the full force of which Jesus accepted on our behalf and, through his bitter passion and death, achieved the victory.

14:53 Mark presents a formal assembly of the whole Sanhedrin at night, leading to the condemnation of Jesus.

14:61-62 "The Blessed One" is a substitute for the divine name, which Jews did not pronounce. "I am" indicates Jesus' acknowledgment that he is the Messiah and Son of God. "Son of Man" refers to Dan 7:13, which presents Jesus as judge in the transcendent glory of God's kingdom. "The Power" is another substitute name for God.

15:1 "Handed him over to Pilate": since the Sanhedrin lacked authority to execute their sentence of condemnation, they had recourse to Pilate to have Jesus tried and put to death.

15:6-15 The choice that Pilate offers the crowd between Barabbas and Jesus is said to be in accordance with a custom of releasing, at the

Passover feast, one prisoner chosen by the crowd. 15:7 The Aramaic name, Barabbas, means "Son of the father"; there is an irony in the choice offered between him and Jesus who is the true Son of the Father.

15:13 Crucify him – incited by the chief priests and elders, the crowd demands that Jesus be executed by crucifixion, a peculiarly horrible form of Roman capital punishment.

15:15 "He had Jesus scourged" which was the usual preliminary to crucifixion.

15:16 The praetorium was the residence of the Roman governor. His usual place of residence was at Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast, but he went to Jerusalem during the great feasts, when the influx of pilgrims posed the danger of a nationalistic riot. "The whole cohort" normally consisted of six hundred soldiers.

15:21 They pressed Simon, a Cyrenian, to carry his cross. A condemned person was constrained to bear his own instrument of torture, at least the crossbeam. Roman garrisons in Palestine had the right to requisition the services of the native population.

15:24 The clothing of an executed criminal went to his executioners, but the description of that procedure in the case of Jesus found in all the Gospels is plainly inspired by Ps 22:19.

15:25 "It was nine o'clock in the morning": literally, "the third hour", this is between 9 a.m. and 12 noon. John tells us that Jesus was sentenced to death at noon; that was the hour at which priests began to slaughter Passover lambs in the temple—and Jesus is the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29).

15:26 "The inscription...King of the Jews" was the political reason for the death penalty falsely charged by the enemies of Jesus. The offense of a person condemned to death by crucifixion was written on a tablet that was displayed on his cross.

The charge against Jesus was that he had claimed to be King of the Jews, that is, the Messiah.

15:34 “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” is an Aramaic rendering of Ps 22:2: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This psalm forecasts both the Messiah’s suffering and his eventual deliverance. The full context of Ps 22, in light of its hopeful outcome, rules out the possibility that Jesus succumbed to despair.

15:35 Elijah is a verbal link with Eloi. The prophet Malachi had said, “I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes” (Mal 3:23). But he had already come in spirit in the person of John the Baptist (see Mk 9:13 and note).

15:38 There were two veils in the Mosaic tabernacle, the outer one before the entrance of the Holy Place and the inner one before the Holy of Holies (Ex 26:31-36). Probably the torn veil of the Gospels is the inner one. The meaning of the scene may be that now, because of Jesus’ death, all people have access to the presence of God, or that the temple, its holiest part standing exposed, is now profaned and will soon be destroyed.

15:39 The Gentile centurion’s climactic declaration of belief that Jesus was the Son of God indicates the fulfillment of the good news announced in the prologue (Mk 1:1), and may be regarded as the first fruit of the passion and death of Jesus.

15:40-41 These two women, who watched Joseph roll a huge stone across the entrance to the tomb (Mt 28:59-61,) are important witnesses of the reality of the empty tomb (Mt 28:1-6).

Easter Vigil – The Resurrection of the Lord

Mk 16:1-7

“The Sabbath was over”—the solemn day of rest and worship for the Jews was Saturday. It began Friday at sunset and lasted till Saturday at sunset. Three women are mentioned: “Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome.”

After sundown on Saturday they “bought spices so that they might go and anoint him.” Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph had watched the placing of Jesus’ body in the tomb (Mk 15:47). They must, therefore, have known that a mixture of myrrh and aloes brought by Nicodemus had been used in the burial (Jn 19:39-40). But apparently they felt that, because of the haste on that occasion, the burial rites had been performed only in a summary, even provisional fashion. They proposed to complete the rites by anointing the body.

In Palestine the relatives and friends of a dead person were in the habit of visiting the grave for three days after the burial.

“Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb.” The first day of the week was Sunday, which Christians commemorate as the Lord’s Day (Rev 1:10). Since Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, and entered into his heavenly rest in the bosom of the Father after he had finished his great work of redemption, Christians began to take Sunday as their day of rest and worship. They would then celebrate the paschal mystery of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection through the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, which Jesus instituted for that purpose.

“They were saying to one another, ‘Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’” Their question was prompted by the heavy weight of the circular flat stones rolled on their edge in a stone track and used in Palestine to cover the entrance to burial crypts.

We all have a mental block, which is equivalent to the stone, blocking our entrance to the tomb. We are afraid to go into the tomb. Until now, no one had ever come out of the tomb. Some had momentarily been raised up like Lazarus, only to die again later. So, who will roll back that fear-boulder for us to enter the tomb unafraid?

“When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large.”

“They looked up” to see that help to remove the stone comes from on high. God provided it for them and for us. The stone had already been rolled back by an angel (Mt 28:2). In other words, the tomb is no longer a dead-end, a point of no return. God has opened the tomb for us to see that death’s hold on us has lost its grip. God has given us a way out of the tomb—through Christ. Jesus has vanquished death forever.

The stone was already rolled away, not to suggest the manner in which the Lord left the tomb, but to show that he had indeed left it. What actually happened is that Jesus had stealthily entered into death through his mortal human nature by which he became one of us. And once he had been swallowed up by death, he exploded it to smithereens by his divinity, thus freeing us also from death, that is, all who are united to him by grace. Through union with him, we already possess eternal life. Death then becomes a passageway to glory, even as it did for Jesus. So the stone that blocked the entrance and exit from the tomb “has been rolled back”; our mental block to dying is now removed. We are free to go in and out of the tomb with Jesus.

“On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed.” This young man, according to St. Matthew is an angel (Mt 28:2, 5-7), the one who had removed the stone.

Perhaps St. Mark does not identify this young man as an angel because he wants us to think of another young man—the one who was in the garden when Jesus was arrested; he was wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body. “When he was seized, he left the cloth behind and ran off naked.” Like the cowardly disciples, he fled in fear, naked of his dignity as a follower of Jesus. He ran in the opposite direction. But now that Jesus has faced the enemies threatening us and took our place to suffer humiliation and ridicule, Jesus redeemed us and restored our lost dignity. Like the prodigal son who had lost his dignity but had it restored by his Father when he was clothed with “the finest

robe” (Lk 15:22), we see ourselves in the “young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe,” with our human dignity fully restored.

White clothing is a frequent image of otherworldly glory (Dn 7:9; Mt 17:2; 28:3).

The women had gone to see a corpse, instead they find an empty tomb and an angel, whose “appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow,” (Mt 28:3) reflecting heavenly glory—no wonder they were so shocked and amazed! “He said, ‘Do not be amazed!’” How can they not be amazed?! The resurrection of Jesus comes as a total surprise, wholly unexpected. The angel continued, “You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him.” Like these faithful women, we must “seek Jesus”: he is the divine Son and the source of true joy and the highest life attainable on earth.

The angel identifies Jesus as the one who had been crucified but is now risen. This is not a mere restoration of human life as in the case of Lazarus. Jesus’ humanity has been glorified, clothed with the divinity of the Father through the Holy Spirit. He possesses the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col 2:9). Jesus has passed from this earthly sphere and entered into the heavenly realm. He has become the source of eternal life for the whole world.

As if to give the holy women a material proof of what he is telling them, the angel shows them the slab on which Jesus had been placed. “Behold the place where they laid him.”

“But go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you in Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.’” Peter is invited by name to the reunion in Galilee. This personal invitation is the certain sign that he has been forgiven and is still the chief of the Apostles. Although Peter is singled out, we cannot fail to note that the Easter message is first announced to the faithful, devoted women. These chosen ones were the first to announce the good news. Those with such strong, faithful

love deserved to be the first to know about the resurrection. They became God's instruments to evangelize the weak, cowardly Apostles. Tradition tells us that Mary, who was the most faithful and loving disciple, would have been the first to receive a visit from Jesus after his resurrection.

"He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him." Galilee is a three-day journey from Jerusalem. Like the disciples, we must make the effort to go there if we want to see Jesus. This effort requires virtue; it requires faith, and putting aside everything; we must take time away from our daily activities to seek Jesus. Such expenditure of energies and detachment are transforming and dispose us spiritually to see Jesus, to know him personally; once we meet him we will want to stay with him. We will never want to leave him again. Like the Apostles, we will even die for him so as to never lose sight of him again.

ALTERNATIVE HOMILY MESSAGE:

On the morning of the Resurrection, Easter Sunday, we would expect to see a stark, shocking revelation of the glorious, risen Jesus. Instead, we find an empty tomb and an angel announcing that Jesus has been raised. We are told, "go and tell his disciples...He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him..." We are told to seek Jesus. We must exercise our faith and make the effort to meet Christ who awaits us.

Jesus usually reveals himself to us gradually, by degrees in response to our seeking him. That is how faith usually works. We are called to seek Jesus in prayer, in Scripture, the sacraments, and works of love. Our faith response causes Jesus to reveal himself further. Such seeking spiritualizes us and disposes us to see God.

Seeking is our first movement toward God and away from apathy and self-centeredness. Seeking supposes love, interest, and effort—this is a necessary preparation to be able to see Jesus. Discipline and assertion of spirit dispose us for God who is spirit.

"On entering the tomb" the women "saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe." We met this "young man" before. Remember when we were reading the Passion account in the Gospel of Mark (14:51-52)? This young man was covered by a linen cloth. When they seized him, he left the cloth behind and ran off naked."

He fled because he would not die with Christ. He took the cowardly way out. He lost his dignity when he fled naked. But now he is clothed with the glorious baptismal robe, because he joined Christ in the tomb by dying to self and living according to the spirit. He has become an angel, the Greek word meaning messenger of the good news.

This young man is believed to be St. Mark, whose parents owned the upper room where the Last Supper took place and the adjacent Garden of Gethsemane where this event of Jesus' arrest took place.

Through the Gospel we read today, St. Mark is the angel, the messenger, who is telling the good news of Jesus' resurrection. If we seek him in this way, we too go to Galilee, where the Risen Jesus will reveal himself to us.

Easter Sunday— The Resurrection of the Lord Gospel: Jn 20:1-9

On the first day of the week, on Easter Sunday, "Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning while it was still dark". This darkness symbolizes that the disciples were still sad and unenlightened about the joyful reality of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene "saw the stone removed from the tomb." We learn from St. Matthew's gospel that an angel of the Lord had done this. Jesus' spiritualized body had passed through the walls of the tomb in his resurrected body. The stone was removed, not to let Jesus out, but to show that he had risen.

"So [Mary] ran" in her excitement and awakening hope "and went to Simon Peter" as the leader of

the Apostles, “and the other disciple whom Jesus loved” representing each of us.

Mary told them, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb and we don’t know where they put him.” The resurrection, still unknown to the disciples, comes as a complete surprise, even if Jesus had forewarned them about his suffering, death, and resurrection on three consecutive occasions (see Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Mary and the other women (expressed in the “We don’t know”) thought that someone had removed Jesus’ body from the tomb.

“So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first.” Here we have a vivid eyewitness account of what happened by someone who was a participant, namely the beloved disciple, John. Perhaps he outran Peter because he was younger and more agile. But John is also quicker because he loves more. The disciple closest to Jesus in love was the quickest to look for him and the first to believe in him. John is also the contemplative who is quicker to see because of his intuitive knowledge.

“He bent down and saw the burial cloths there but did not go in. When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place.” Perhaps it was out of deference to Peter as older leader of the Apostles that John waited for him to enter first. At any rate, the description of the event enables us to be present by this eyewitness account as if we ourselves were present to the unfolding of the drama.

The burial cloths assure us that the body was not stolen. Surely, thieves would have taken these along with the body. Perhaps the cloths were left behind as a sign that Jesus would not use them again. The fact that the cloth that had covered Jesus’ head was not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place leaves us without

a clue as to any further meaning. Otherwise we would have believed that the shape of the cloths might have preserved the contours of the body that would have passed through them in the process of resurrection.

“Then the other disciple went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed.” John, the contemplative and the disciple of love, immediately believed. The burial cloths left behind by Jesus triggered total faith in the resurrection of Jesus. Love united the disciple of love to Jesus. The communion of the two gave John an interior knowledge of the reality that Jesus had passed from death to life, the supreme life of the divinity. As John would later write, “Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself” (1 Jn 5:10). John’s love for Jesus gave him the insight to detect his presence through perfected faith, that is, faith perfected by the gifts of wisdom and understanding.

In this episode of the empty tomb, we have come to see that God reveals himself little by little to those who seek him. The effort of seeking spiritualizes us and disposes us to experience God. The spiritual life is a progressive discovery of the risen Lord dwelling in us.

God had said through the prophet Jeremiah, “When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you” (Jer 29:13-14). Seeking is a way of leaving the impediment of self for God. Our personal effort is essential. The discipline of self-mastery and assertion of spirit opens us up for God who is spirit. God responds to our efforts by further self-revelation.

Mary Magdalene and the Apostles responded to God’s initiative in the opened tomb. Jesus in turn revealed himself more completely to them. God makes the first move in self-revelation. If we do not respond, nothing further will happen. We are spiritually indisposed to see him through our inertia. Human apathy and sloth are major obstacles to spiritual progress. We lazily say to God, “Show me and I’ll believe.” God responds,

“Believe and I will show.” Act upon your faith and you will be disposed for God to reveal himself to you.

Second Sunday of Easter (Sunday of Divine Mercy) Gospel Jn 20:19-31

Sometimes people say that no one ever came back from the dead to tell us about it. Today’s Gospel corrects this statement.

“On the first day of the week [Easter Sunday], when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews....”

The news of the empty tomb and calumny that the body had been stolen by disciples of Jesus (Mt 28:13) was, no doubt, circulating in Jerusalem. The disciples were afraid of being arrested and falsely accused, so they hid behind closed doors.

“Jesus came and stood in their midst.” His risen body was so spiritualized that it took on the qualities of spirit. Thus, he could pass through the closed doors. St. Paul tells us that the risen body has the following qualities: incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual (1 Cor 15:42-44). These supernatural qualities of the risen body will also be ours. St. Paul explains, “Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one [Adam], we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one [Christ]” (1 Cor 15:49). Our human nature will be divinized, also, through a like resurrection when Jesus returns at his second coming.

Now that the disciples have been mentally disposed through the experience of the empty tomb with the burial cloths left behind, and Mary of Magdala had announced that she had seen the Lord (Jn 20:1-18), they are sufficiently prepared for Jesus to appear to them. How amazed they were to see Jesus standing in front of them! Three days before, they had seen him crucified, die, and buried. What a sight to behold: an entirely new being! St. Mark tells us that Jesus “appeared in

another form” (Mk 16:12). Mary of Magdala did not recognize him until he called her by name (Jn 20:16); the two disciples with whom Jesus walked on the road to Emmaus did not recognize him even when they were face-to-face with him at table—until “he took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him...” (Lk 24:30-31).

Jesus greeted his disciples with “Peace be with you.” With this familiar friendly greeting, he assured them that they had nothing to fear. He had forgiven all. He knew they were sorry for their abandoning him. He understood their frailty. They gained self-knowledge from the experience. There was no need to say more.

Now that they had been made one with God again, he conferred his own divine peace upon them. They experienced the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Micah, “he shall be peace” (Mic 5:4), “the peace of God that surpasses all understanding” (Phil 4:7). From this experience of peace, they knew something of the nature of God; they got a glimpse, or rather, a foretaste of heavenly life.

Jesus then “showed them his hands and his side.” He needed to identify himself as their beloved Master whom they had seen crucified. Although the risen body is spiritual, it is nonetheless tangible and viewable. What a marvel to behold: the risen body is both corporeal and spiritual at the same time!

Pope John Paul II gives another reason why Jesus kept his wounds. He says, “Christ retains in his risen body the marks of the wounds of the cross in his hands, feet, and side. Through the resurrection, he manifests the victorious power of suffering, and he wishes to imbue with the conviction of this power the hearts of those whom he chose as Apostles and those whom he continually chooses and sends forth.” (On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering)

“The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” The disciples were in anguish when Jesus told them of his departure. He proceeded, however, to console them saying, “But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you” (Jn 16:42). Now they are being inebriated with Jesus’ own heavenly joy, coming right from the Father and communicated by the Holy Spirit. Joy is one of the first fruits of the Holy Spirit (see Gal 5:22). The Acts of the Apostles tells us, “The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52). As a result of Philip’s ministry in Samaria, we read, “There was great joy in that city” (Acts 8:8).

Even after being flogged for speaking in the name of Jesus, the Apostles continued to be filled with joy; “they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name” (Acts 5:41). Clearly, this heavenly joy did not depend on sensible pleasures—it came straight from the risen Christ in whose presence they lived. They were firmly attached to the vine as Jesus had told them, “Remain in me, as I remain in you” (Jn 15:4). As a result, the disciples continued to be filled with joy even after Jesus’ physical presence was no longer visible. Whereas previously, the Apostles were saddened at Jesus’ departure, “they returned to Jerusalem with great joy” when he was taken up to heaven (see Lk 24:51-52).

Jesus proceeds to bestow his peace upon the Apostles again, reassuring them once more that they have nothing to fear from the divine manifestation that they are witnessing. Now that they have been forgiven, they are re-integrated and disposed to receive a new gift.

Jesus said to the disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” You may remember that the angel told Joseph to name the child “Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). His very name means “Yahweh saves”. Jesus’ primary mission, then, is to save people from sin—that is why the Father sent Jesus. Now, he is sending the Apostles to continue his mission.

“And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” Just as in the first creation God breathed a living spirit into man, so now in the new creation, Jesus breathes his own Holy Spirit into the disciples.

Pentecost is the official and public descent of the Spirit for directing the Church’s mission in the world. For John, the gift of the Spirit flows from the glorification of Jesus, his return to the Father. A real gift of the Spirit to the Apostles is involved here. Through the resurrection, Jesus has become a life-giving spirit (1 Cor 15:45). He shares this sanctifying, creative Spirit with the Apostles so that they, in turn, may communicate it to others. In fact, each of us has received the Holy Spirit through baptism. The other sacraments, especially confirmation, strengthen and increase the gift so that we, in turn, can sanctify others by our very presence, words, and example. In this way, we affect others with that Spirit of holiness.

Jesus goes on to specify for the Apostles the special power he is giving them. There may have been other disciples present as St. Luke tells us when he says, “the eleven gathered together and those with them” (Lk 24:33). But the focus is on the Eleven, and the words that Jesus spoke were addressed to them.

Having breathed the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, Jesus goes on to explain its significance: “whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

Jesus is passing on to the Apostles, as they will pass it on to their successors, the power to forgive sins (compare 1 Tim 4:14; 1 Tim 1:6). This power was administered in various ways in the Church. For example, Peter exhorts those who listened to his Pentecost sermon with: “Repent and be baptized...for the forgiveness of sins...” (Acts 2:38). St. James writes that the sick should summon the presbyters of the Church to pray over and anoint them; “If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another...” (Jms 5:14-16). The Council

of Trent defined that this power to forgive sins is exercised also in the sacrament of penance (compare Mt 16:19; 18:18).

What a wonderful gift to the Church! It has the mission to continue Jesus' ministry of forgiving, of taking away the guilt and burden of sin. We have the psychological need to confess our sins, to get it out of our system (compare Ps 32:1-5). We have sinned against God and his Church represented by the priest. We need to admit our sins and our sorrow for them.

But we also need to hear from God's official representative that we are forgiven and absolved from our sin. This Easter Sunday sacrament of Penance is such a consoling boon for the people of God! The merciful Christ is still present in his Church, personally conferring forgiveness in the sacrament. There, we encounter our risen Lord so he can take all our sins away. Jesus administers his power over sin through his Apostles and their successors. Just as he can use bread and wine to communicate himself to us, so too, he can use men to communicate grace and forgiveness.

The Apostle, Thomas, was not with the others when Jesus appeared to them. "So the other disciples said to him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'"

Thomas shows us how absenting ourselves from the worshipping community is a dangerous act. Jesus reveals himself to us when we go to meet him in the "breaking of the bread". Thomas lost faith when he isolated and separated himself from the faith community. The world is in darkness about spiritual realities. Association with a faithless world soon blinds us to the supreme truth of God and the resurrection of his Christ. We cannot survive very long without the faith community gathered around Jesus who promised to meet with us when we come together in his name (Mt 18:20).

The Holy Spirit taught the early Church how to keep the faith alive and growing as we see in the first reading. "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers." Some even met daily in the temple area and in their homes (Acts 2:46). The epistle to the Hebrews calls us to the assembly saying, "We must consider how to arouse one another to love and good works. We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another..." (Heb 10:24-25).

"Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them."

Every Sunday is a little Easter; we must celebrate Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection in the manner Jesus directed us at the last supper when he anticipated this mystery. He wanted to make it present for us for all times—so he could be with us. The habit of meeting together on the first day of the week had already begun. This time, Thomas joined the others.

"Jesus came...and stood in their midst and said, 'Peace be with you.'" Jesus reassures the group, each time, that they have nothing to fear about his majestic presence.

He then invited Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe."

Where was Jesus when Thomas had expressed his serious doubt about Jesus' resurrection? How is it that Jesus heard him? Jesus was with the Father invisibly present with Thomas. He was not far away. He was personally present to Thomas, but Thomas was not with him.

"Thomas answered [Jesus] and said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'"

Thomas was so shocked at the appearance of our glorious risen Lord; he did not need to investigate his wounds as Jesus invited him. At least nothing hints to that effect. Jesus refers to Thomas' believing because he saw him—he said nothing about his touching him.

The astonished Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" The greatest doubter, faced with the sheer evidence of truth, asserted more strongly than anyone had ever before that Jesus is Yahweh God. Thomas makes clear that one may address Jesus in the same language in which Israel addressed Yahweh. Nothing more profound could be said about Jesus.

Thomas asserts definitive certitude in the divinity of Jesus. Many use his expression, "My Lord and my God!" to express their faith in the divinity of Jesus during the Elevation of the Host and chalice at the consecration of the Mass.

Thomas had remained in his stubborn disbelief for a full week. His reluctance to believe and the way it ended, with all of his doubts completely shattered and annihilated, are of greater advantage to strengthen the faith than the more ready faith of all the believing Apostles. Besides, his perception of the divinity in the risen Jesus is the fullest and most explicit of all recorded in the Gospels. Thomas had demanded physical proof of the resurrection. And he received it. Thus, he rendered the service of forever refuting any explanation of the resurrection appearances as auto-suggestion or hallucination. In this context, we might also remember how Jesus ate with the Apostles after he had risen from the dead (Lk 24:38-43).

"Jesus said to [Thomas], 'Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.'"

How can Jesus say that we are even more blessed than those who saw him? Their faith is based on passing, external appearance. Our faith is

based on the indwelling presence of the risen Jesus revealing himself to us. St. John tells us that "whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself" (1 Jn 5:10). We believe because of the certitude coming from the experiential knowledge of God revealing himself in our hearts. Faith is the testimony of God revealing himself.

The written and unwritten signs of Jesus were meant to bring us to faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. "Through this belief [we] may have life in his name." Faith connects us to God through his Christ and Son. In this connectedness, we have an unending flow of divine life permeating and sanctifying our whole persons. Faith is perfected through the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding; these supernatural powers enable us to know God by spiritual intuition. We can savor our union with him and enjoy his presence. Jesus says that we are particularly "blessed" to believe without seeing him with our bodily eyes. The supernatural powers that give us spiritual sight make it possible for us to have a more elevated, superior knowledge of our glorified Lord from whom we continually draw divine life.

Third Sunday of Easter Lk 24:35-48

"The two disciples recounted what had taken place on the way..." One of these disciples was Cleopas, the husband of Mary's sister; they were the parents of James and Joses (Jn 19:25; Mk 15:47; 16:1); these two are mentioned as the so-called brothers of Jesus (Mk 6:3).

These two disciples were on their way to Emmaus when the risen Jesus joined them on their walk. But they did not recognize him. Jesus went on to explain from the Scriptures that the Messiah had to suffer to enter into his glory. They were greatly consoled as they heard him speak. It was not until he broke bread with them that they recognized him. Then he vanished.

This passage helps us to understand that the Risen Jesus is encountered in the liturgy of the Mass when the word of God is explained to us, to open our hearts to Jesus who comes to us in the Eucharist, in the breaking of the bread. It is then that we, too, recognize him.

Jesus would appear and disappear like this to take us to the Father: he wants us to follow him in faith into the invisible world where we can be with him and the Father.

The early Christians insisted on Jesus as the one who fulfilled the Scriptures; they did this because Jesus had first done so himself.

The two disciples' experience of Jesus and his explanation of the Scriptures regarding himself is the source of the Gospel proclamation. The good news they had received must be shared with the community; they think that it is still struggling with the same discouragement which had been theirs. They consequently return immediately to Jerusalem, only to be greeted by the apostolic proclamation of Jesus' resurrection. The Lord had already appeared to Simon 34. Peter, the first one to be called (Lk 5:1-11) and the one who had denied Jesus (22:54-62) had returned to strengthen his brothers (Lk 22:32).

But was the community's experience of the risen Lord in the breaking of the bread an illusion or some spirit? Was this really the same person who had called them (Lk 5:1-6, 11)?

"While they were still speaking about this, he stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" As in John's Gospel, Jesus has no angry words to level at the Apostles. Rather, he communicates his peace and tranquility of order by forgiving their abandoning him. This gift of interior peace is not lost by external trials or persecution. It comes from the indwelling presence of God deep within them.

"But they were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost." The Apostles are naturally fearful because of this supernatural

manifestation. But Jesus reassures them saying, "Why are you troubled? And why do questions arise in your hearts?" The transformation that took place through the resurrection caused Jesus' appearance to undergo a change. Mary Magdalene recognized him only when he mentioned her name. The two disciples recognized him only when he gave them the familiar sign of the breaking of the bread. It should not surprise us, then, if the Apostles thought they were seeing a ghost.

So Jesus proceeded to identify himself by the wounds he retained of his crucifixion. He said, "Look at my hands and feet, that it is I myself."

The nail marks demonstrate that Jesus' risen body is the same body that was crucified only days earlier. The evidence for his rising becomes incontrovertible as it mounts from his disappearance seen in the empty tomb to his various appearances, and now to a direct examination of his wounds.

Our Lord retained the imprint of the five wounds in his glorified body as proof of his identity and a sign of his triumph over death. These wounds also manifest the victorious power and value of suffering.

Jesus continues to give evidence that his body is real, "'Touch me,' he says, 'and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.' And as he said this, 'he showed them his hands and his feet.'"

Jesus' risen body is truly physical but no longer earthly, since his humanity is now incorruptible and endowed with spiritual qualities. He forever reigns in a human body, but one that can pass through locked doors, vanish at will, and is no longer subject to the limitations of time, space, and the laws of nature.

The stranger whom the two disciples had met was now seen as truly a physical human being with all the tangible characteristics of a human being. Jesus was not with them as a spirit, but in the person of those who journeyed with them through life. For

the disciples, this seemed too good to be true, but they joyfully knew that it was true.

This passage stresses the reality of the resurrection. The risen Lord was no phantom or hallucination. He was real. The Jesus who died was in truth the Christ who rose again. Christianity is not founded on the dreams of men's disordered minds or the visions of their fevered eyes, but on one who in actual historical fact faced and fought and conquered death and rose again.

"While they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed, he asked them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of baked fish; he took it and ate it in front of them." The disciples are not only invited to touch, but to watch the risen Lord eating a meal of fish. The glorified body of Jesus was no longer in need of food, but he was still able and willing to partake of it for the sake of the brethren.

There is no doubt that both Luke and John agree that the resurrected body of Jesus was no longer subject to physical limitations, but they try to emphasize its solid corporeal nature (compare Acts 10:41). For the Jews, reality is always particular and concrete. Therefore, for the resurrection to be real the risen Jesus must walk, talk, and eat as he had done in earthly life. For the Jews a disembodied spirit could be nothing but a ghost or apparition. Materialistic imagery therefore had to be used in order to demonstrate the reality of the resurrection. Jesus' own resurrection assures us of the physical nature of our own resurrection on the last day.

Jesus said to his disciples, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures." The past tense of the verb shows that Jesus' presence is now different from that before the resurrection.

Luke here summarizes the source and extent of apostolic power as well as the basic truths of their preaching. Salvation in the Lord Jesus fulfills and

crowns the Old Testament preparation; one must continually return to the Jewish Scriptures to appreciate what Jesus said and accomplished. Jesus, however, must first open their minds, for it is not so much a matter of historical knowledge but of faith-penetration. The Church, furthermore, must always understand the Scriptures as interpreted by the Apostles or their disciples.

After convincing his disciples of the reality of his presence, Jesus enlightens them upon the meaning of Scripture. He shows them that the events of which they are witnesses are not chance happenings, but they are providentially ordained. The prophecies are fulfilled. All that inspired Scripture, which Israel guards as a deposit, must be fulfilled.

Luke insists upon the importance of Scriptural interpretation either by Jesus or by one of the Apostles. For example, the Ethiopian eunuch seated in his chariot reading the prophet Isaiah did not understand the passage about the suffering servant until Philip explained it to him (Acts 8:31-35).

Jesus' reference to Moses, the prophets and the psalms reflects a classical division of the Old Testament into three parts. The third division is sometimes called the "writings" or the "other books".

Jesus said to them, "Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day..." That the Christ should suffer is a mystery foretold in the Old Testament and reported in the New. For example, Acts 3:18 and 17:3. Jesus' mockery and rejection as a new David recall Psalms 31 and 69. The suffering servant of Isaiah also depicts his passion: Is 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53, 12. Jesus' agony and crucifixion are vividly described in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53.

Jesus himself reiterated on three occasions that he was going to be rejected and suffer as we see in Luke 9:22, 44, and 18:33. Jesus reminds the two disciples of his need to suffer in order to be glorified (Lk 24:6-7).

The fact that Jesus should rise on the third day is also

an Old Testament theme. Here are some examples: Isaac was under a death sentence for three days until God intervened to give him back alive to Abraham on the third day (Gen 22:4, 13). This was an historical preview of Jesus rising to new life after obeying his Father unto death (Heb 11:17-19).

The experience of Jonah coming forth from the whale after three days in its stomach foreshadows Jesus emerging from the grave after three days in the earth (Jon 2:1, 11; Mt 12:40).

Hosea depicts Israel's restoration from exile as a third day resurrection (Hos 6:2). Since the Messiah represents Israel in the fullest sense, embodying both its vocation and destiny, Jesus' own resurrection initiates the resurrection of Israel from a state of spiritual death (Rom 11:15, 25-27).

Jesus continued to instruct his Apostles "that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem." The Gospel will be preached to all the nations so that they may be converted, in order to obtain forgiveness of their sins. This starting point of this expansion will be Jerusalem. This preaching is the theme of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:8). Luke never pictures Jesus at work among Gentiles; that was to be undertaken by the Church. The risen Lord now commissions the Church to proclaim that through the cross and resurrection, God is extending the forgiveness of sins and salvation to all nations; but the disciples must remain in Jerusalem for the descent of the Holy Spirit before the proclamation of the Gospel message is destined to commence in Jerusalem rather than Galilee.

The disciples had to wait in Jerusalem until power from on high came upon them. There are occasions when the Christian may seem to be wasting time as he waits in a wise passivity. Action without preparation must often fail. There is a time to wait on God and a time to work for God.

The quiet time in which we wait on God are never wasted. For it is these times when we lay aside life's tasks that we are strengthened for the very tasks we

lay aside. But the Church was not left to live forever in the upper room; it was sent out into the entire world. After the upper room, came the worldwide mission of the Church. The days of sorrow were past and the tidings of joy must be taken to all peoples.

The preaching must be done "in his name". This phrase expresses faith in the divinity of Jesus. What was formerly said only of Yahweh is now used of Jesus. Salvation in the name of Jesus confesses a faith in his equality with Yahweh. His name, in its dignity and power, is now invoked where the Jewish people called upon God who revealed himself to Moses at Sinai.

The Gospel ends today with Jesus saying, "You are witnesses of these things." As witnesses, they must speak about what they have seen and heard. We, too, are to be his witnesses. "Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself" (1 Jn 5:10). Faith is the testimony of God revealing himself in our hearts. With St. Peter we are urged to speak out and say, "It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

4th Sunday of Easter

Jn 10:11-18

This Good Shepherd Sunday is vocation Sunday. We pray that God will send us more priest-shepherds to guide his flock to heaven. If a young man enjoys good morals, a good mind, and good health, God may call him to the priesthood. He will experience this call within his own heart. His conscience will tell him that he ought to test out that vocation by going to the seminary. A desire to do God's will should lead him there. Jesus promised those who leave all for him one hundred times more in this life and eternal life as well (Mk 10:30). My own experience of life testifies to the truth of this promise. I urge any of you who believes he has this call to the priesthood to test it out and say, "Yes!" My experience is that it will lead you to the highest and happiest life attainable on this earth. Today's Gospel makes a transition from Jesus' visible

appearances the last three Sundays. Jesus is still present among and within us, but he is no longer visible. We can only see or know him personally with spiritual powers.

Recall Jesus' words, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me" (Jn 14:19). He promised to reveal himself to those who love him (v.21); this self-disclosure will take place through his indwelling presence (v.23).

The Gospel today begins with Jesus saying, "I am the good shepherd." This good shepherd goes ahead of us to guide and lead us. He is worthy of being followed. He proved his goodness by laying down his life for us. In obedience to his Father, he suffered and passed through death for love of us; he overcame and destroyed death to pave the way to glory for us. He removed the sting of death so that it is no longer harmful to us. Now death becomes the passageway to glory. Jesus, our good shepherd, went through suffering for us, patiently enduring its pain, to show us its transforming value. He shows us that we too are being transformed into the very image of God by suffering if we patiently accept and endure it. Jesus accepted the Father's will for him, no matter how difficult the cross was, to show us the way to the highest life of the spirit. The Father is all-knowing and knows what is best for us. Suffering is temporary, whereas the glory we attain through it is eternal; suffering, however painful it is, will end; glory will never end.

Jesus our good shepherd is worthy of being followed. He is the only one who was able to overcome death and returned to tell us about it. His formula for living is proven effective and authentic. Those of us who believe in him are already beginning to live the eternal life now (Jn 6:47) and are enjoying the company of the good shepherd (Jn 15:4); the heavenly food he gives us will enable us to make the transition from earthly to heavenly life without experiencing death (Jn 6:50). We will retain our self-consciousness as we pass through physical death to the glorious new life of heaven.

In saying, "I am," the good shepherd Jesus uses the

divine name. He is God in human form. And God is love; he is utterly self-giving; he loves to the extreme.

Jesus explains what he means in saying that he is the good shepherd: "A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep."

The Jews were a pastoral people who make their living by shepherding sheep. It was only natural that their literature, the Old Testament books, should have many references to pastoral life. Jesus and his Apostles continued the tradition and used pastoral images familiar to the people to illustrate for their hearers the spiritual truths of Christianity.

In today's reading, St. John gives us Jesus' description of himself under the well-known image of the good shepherd; he not only cares for his flock, but also is willing to die to protect the life of that flock. He was the owner of the flock; they belonged to him, and he would prove himself a worthy leader and defender of the flock.

In those days, wolves, lions, and robbers often raided the sheepfolds. The true shepherd should and would defend them with his life. Jesus laid down his life for his flock.

The hired hand, who does not own the sheep, will flee when danger threatens. He thinks only of his own safety; he leaves his helpless flock to its fate.

The scribes and Pharisees were the legal shepherds of the Jews; but actually they were far more interested in their own gain and glory than in the spiritual welfare of their flock. The mass of people were being attracted to Jesus; there was a danger that those leaders would lose their position and the substantial profit it entailed, hence one of the reasons for their fierce opposition to Jesus. In this sermon, quoted by St. John, Jesus contrasts himself, the true good shepherd, with these hirelings who were working only for personal gain.

Although Yahweh was the divine shepherd of Israel (Ps 23:1; Is 40:11), he exercised his rule through earthly shepherds like Joshua and David (Num 27:16-18; 2 Sam 5:2). A similar arrangement was expected for the last days when the Lord would shepherd the flock of his people through the Davidic Messiah. God said, "I myself will look after and tend my sheep" (Ez 34:11). Jesus, who is God incarnate, is the fulfillment of this prophecy.

In Jesus, the good shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep, we have a model to imitate. Every good father, mother, priest, and servant of the public is challenged to labor indefatigably for those they serve. We use our positions to spend ourselves to the end of our strength for them. Such selfless labor in love transforms us into the very image of God. Jesus gives another reason why he is the good shepherd. He says, "I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep."

Jesus can also be called the good shepherd because he relates to us, his sheep, very intimately. He raises us up to a new, higher level of being so that we can relate interpersonally with him in mutual knowledge and love. Our intellects and wills have been elevated by grace so that we can know and love Jesus on a divine level. Sanctifying grace enables us to participate in his own divine nature. We can then live in communion with Jesus and the Father through the Holy Spirit who can operate in us by the powers and gifts of grace given to us. Our intimate knowledge and love of Jesus is on a parallel with the knowledge and love between Jesus and the Father. We are more than animals to the good shepherd; as the second reading explains, we are children of God: "We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is"; our experiential knowledge of him comes from sharing his nature and life. Grace gives us an initial experience of what our glorification in heaven will be like.

By dying for us and rising to new life, Jesus elevates us to his own level of being and life, so we can live in a loving relationship with him.

Jesus goes on to look to the future when he said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd." Jesus looks beyond the fold of Judaism to the wider world and sees other sheep of his who are waiting to be gathered in. He is thinking of his mission to the Gentiles after he is glorified. When the vision is fully realized, there will then be one flock, one shepherd.

If personally, Jesus came first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, his church will go beyond those limits. His glorification and sending his Spirit will make this possible. Most of the Jews had the erroneous idea that they alone would be God's flock always, that the messianic kingdom would be for them only. But the universality of the messianic kingdom was frequently foretold in the Old Testament. Abraham was called to bring blessings not only on his descendants, but on all nations (Gen 12:3). The Gentiles, therefore, were also to be part of the good shepherd's flock.

Jesus' prophecy that "other sheep...will hear his voice" began to be fulfilled within a short time after his resurrection. St. Peter received the first Gentile, Cornelius of Caesarea, into the Church within a year of the resurrection. Before the last of the Apostles died, the Church had been firmly established in the principal cities and towns of the Roman Empire. "There will be one flock, one shepherd," means that Jesus is the supreme shepherd over the one universal Church. The spiritual authority of the shepherds like Peter and his successors is derived entirely from Jesus.

The unity of the church is to be found under one visible head; for it was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant; he did this in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God. (Vatican II)

Jesus went on to say, "This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it

up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father.”

It is not to be supposed that the Father only began to love the Son when he had offered himself upon the cross; rather the evangelist is saying that the Father’s eternal love for the Son rests upon the Son’s eternal sharing of the Father’s love for people; this love finds expression in the Incarnation; and in the Incarnation, this love expresses itself in the self-offering of the cross. The Father’s love is poured out upon the Son, because in obedient love, he lays down his life for humankind in fulfillment of the Father’s design.

Jesus chose death freely; his enemies did not take his life from him, as they thought they were doing, against his will. His voluntary death, followed by his glorification in his resurrection, was the Father’s purpose in sending him on earth. He freely and willingly accomplishes the mission.

The Son’s obedience and authority are not mutually exclusive, but are bound up with each other through the Son’s fellowship with the Father. Jesus’ death and resurrection belong together inseparably and form one single event over which the Son disposes.

We must not conclude from the phrase, “to lay down life and take it up again”, that Jesus is raised from the dead to return to the identical earthly life that he had before. Rather, this phrase brings out the transition of the entire person into the transcendent sphere of divine life and divine glory. The glorification he underwent completely changed him into a new being as can be seen in his marvelous new body after the resurrection. Jesus passes through locked doors because he is so spiritualized; yet he became visible; his body can be touched; he is seen eating a piece of baked fish in front of his disciples. His presence communicates great joy to them. Jesus’ glorified presence has become a life-giving spirit, immortal and incorruptible (compare 1 Cor 15:42-49).

5th Sunday of Easter Jn 15:1-8

“Jesus said to his disciples: ‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.’”

Israel is pictured in Old Testament passages as the vine of God. In Psalm 80, God’s people are compared to a vine God brought out of Egypt. But Israel, for all God’s tending, had not been the vine he meant it to be. It had become degenerated. Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard (Jn 5:1-7) stresses that Yahweh spaded, cleared, planted, and took care of the vineyard only to be rewarded with sour grapes. In return, Yahweh says he will make a ruin of the vineyard. And so in presenting Jesus as the real vine, John may well have been thinking that God had finally rejected the unproductive vine of Judaism still surviving in the synagogue.

Now Jesus says that he and his followers will form the new chosen people. He is the true vine, the vine that will bear fruit. The vine of the Old Testament, Israel, was only as shadow, a type of what was to come.

In saying, “I am the true vine,” Jesus is identifying himself as divine. Those who are connected to him receive divine life. Jesus enjoys the highest quality of a vine; he produces choice, divine wine.

This metaphor of the vine is placed in the context of the Last Supper, at a time when the disciples have just drunk the Eucharistic wine-made-blood, the fruit of the vine. Jesus’ blood under the form of consecrated wine will be one of the chief channels of transmitting life from the vine to the branches.

The mention of the Father as the vine grower helps to qualify the kind of vine that Jesus is—a vine belonging to the heavenly order. The Father is mentioned as the one who tends the vine with its branches; he sees that the branches are cleared away of anything that might prevent them from producing fruit.

“He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.”

The figure of the vine and the branches presupposes that the Christian life is essentially one of activity, of bearing fruit: union with Jesus is not only the condition of bearing fruit, it also demands this. The branches of the vine are Jesus’ disciples; if they remain fruitless, the Father will remove them. The first action that the vinedresser engages in is to cut off the branches that do not bear fruit. Later, when the vine has put forth leaves, comes the second stage of pruning: the vinedresser pinches off the little shoots so that the main fruit-bearing branches get all the nourishment—so even the fruit-bearing branches need pruning.

The Father must trim away our selfishness to increase our growth in love. Pruning probably refers to the trial and fatherly discipline we experience in this life. For example, a person afflicted with cancer or heart ailment may be moved to give up certain bad habits they were unwilling or unable to break with previously. As a result, they are more devoted to God and can channel all of their love toward him, thus fulfilling the great commandment (Mt 22:36-38).

Then Jesus adds, “You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you.” St. Paul speaks of “the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thes 2:13).

In explaining the parable of the sower, Jesus explained that “the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirty fold” (Mt 13:23). So the word of God causes us to grow spiritually.

The epistle to the Hebrews tells us that “the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit...and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Heb 4:12). The truth contained in the word affects our consciences and causes us to

change for the good. That is how the teachings of Jesus helped his disciples to become virtuous.

Then Jesus said, “Remain in me, as I remain in you.” The second reading today states, “Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he gave us.” We remain united to Jesus by keeping his commandments; our will and his are one. Thus, we remain intimately united to him. The Holy Spirit, through the gift of wisdom, gives us an experience of his presence in the form of love, joy, peace... (Gal 5:22-23). This union of love prompts us to reciprocate God’s love with continuous acts of affective love; it draws us to live in an interpersonal communion of love. God is not far away to receive our love. He dwells in our hearts (Jn 14:23) to pour out his love upon us and to receive ours.

Jesus continues, “Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me.” The community of life shared with Jesus is the condition of his bearing fruit, of living a virtuous life. The one who breaks this unity is like a dead branch, fit only to be cast into the fire.

The relationship which Jesus offers is described as a mutual abiding, which implies a permanent presence of one person to another, intimate indwelling and familiarity. Like two friends present to one another in listening, understanding, and loving response, the disciple is present to Jesus and Jesus is present to him. This close union and communion is the condition and disposition necessary for the disciple to bear the fruit of love and good works. Thus, Christian disciples either remain in communion with Jesus and produce fruit or they separate themselves from him. The branches do not give but take the sap of life from the vine; therefore, there is no fruit without immanent adhesion.

Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.”

Baptism connects us immediately to Jesus so that we form one body with him. To put it in the words of St. Paul, “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it” (1 Cor 12:27). Through union with him we draw divine life and begin to live on a human-divine level. We can then produce supernatural works. Sanctifying grace makes us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4); actual grace activates this shared divine life into virtuous works of love and service. We are totally dependent on God’s sanctifying and actual grace to live on this supernatural level. That is why it is absolutely necessary to cling to God through prayer issuing into a good moral life. Virtuous living is a fruit of our close union with God. The impulse towards practicing the moral virtues comes from our close adherence to God through our exercising the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love expressed in prayer and adoration. We have no power of our own to live on a supernatural level. Without our connectedness to Jesus and drawing divine life from him, we would experience spiritual bankruptcy; we would become withering and then dead branches, fruitless and waiting to be lopped off the Divine Vine.

Jesus explains further, “Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned.” A separated vine-branch is proverbially good for nothing—useless, destined only to be cast out and burned in the fire. This fire symbolizes the pains of separation from God, which is the beginning of hell. Damnation awaits every branch that is separated from the true vine and its life-giving divine sap (see Mt 3:10; Heb 6:4-8).

Jesus goes on to explain one of the good effects of living in conformity with his will. He says, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.”

The second reading tells us why the prayers of those who remain closely united to Jesus are favorably answered. “We...receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.” Moreover, the first epistle of John goes

on to say, “he hears us whenever we ask for anything according to his will” (1 Jn 5:14). In other words, petitions in prayer that are prompted by a life lived in union with Jesus will be echoes of his own desires and they will be in harmony with the Father’s will and therefore granted. Conformity of wills supposes that we keep in mind Jesus’ words that enlighten us regarding what is God’s will. We desire and ask for only what he wills, what is good for us. Therefore, he gives it to us. If we do not receive what we ask for, it is because our Father wants to give us something better. Jesus’ cry to the Father to be spared from drinking the cup of crucifixion was given something better than escaping temporary suffering, namely, eternal glory. So it is for us.

Jesus concludes the Gospel today with, “By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” The Father was glorified in the mission of the Son; but now that the Son has completed his mission of bringing life to people, the Father is glorified in the continuation of that mission by his Son’s disciples. The glorification of the Father in the disciple is not merely a question of praise by others; it is rooted in the life of the disciples as a sharing in Jesus’ life.

“Bear much fruit” is symbolic of possessing divine life and secondarily it involves communicating that life to others.

“Become my disciples” involves love of Jesus (Jn 15:9-10) and love of one another (Jn 12-17). The love of the disciple for his fellow Christian must be so great that he is willing to lay down his life (13). Thus, verses 9-17 with their theme of love are really an interpretation of the idea of bearing fruit.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Jn 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples: “As the Father loves me, so I also love you.” Jesus loves his disciples with the same divine love he has received from his Father. We have been brought into the current of God’s own eternal love-life. This love unites us to God and brings us into the community of the Trinity. That love between the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit. We are the object of God’s special creative love; it lifts us to a new level of being; that love transforms us into God-likeness. It is up to us to dispose ourselves by removing the resistance to it given by our fallen human nature. We can then become totally receptive to God’s outpoured love.

Jesus’ request to us is, “Remain in my love.” Jesus’ ardent desire is that we respond to his love; that we remain in that ocean of love that baptism plunged us into, that we return love for love. Here we are talking about that divine, eternal love that God freely lavished upon us. Surely we will give our utmost attention and effort to preserve, cherish, and increase that love. We will strive, then, through prayer, silence, and solitude never to forget the benevolent source of that love that surrounds and penetrates our whole being with his love-presence.

Jesus goes on to tell us how to remain in his love: “If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love.” Jesus himself shows us how to remain in his love through his example of obedience to his Father’s will. “I love the Father and do exactly as the Father has commanded me” (Jn 14:31). It was common in ancient society for younger siblings to look up to the eldest brother for guidance on how to honor and obey one’s parents. Jesus gives us that example. Jesus’ obedience of his Father’s will that he suffer and die for us goes far beyond the Ten Commandments. So, too, must our keeping Jesus’ commandments go beyond the Old Testament Ten Commandments. These are contained in the Gospels and in all of the New Testament.

Jesus goes on to reveal his purpose in wanting us

to remain in his love by conforming our lives to his will: “I have told you this,” he says, “so that my joy may be in you and your joy might be complete.” Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). The highest joy comes from God and possesses a divine quality. It participates in the very bliss and joy that is in God. God himself is the only source of this heavenly happiness; no earthly suffering can destroy it because it flows from our union with God. That is why Jesus is concerned that we remain closely united to him and remain continuously in his love. That is how we attain the highest kind of happiness in this world.

Nothing causes so much joy as to be loved, and Jesus desires to enlarge our hearts by the fullness of joy; the delightful divine joy that is ours originates in Jesus’ love for us that is in our hearts; it is matured and perfected by our love for one another, as we sacrifice ourselves to love one another.

The commandment that summarizes and informs all the others (Rom 13:8-10; Col 3:14), and which Jesus is most concerned about is love. “This is my commandment,” he says, “love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Love is the basic commandment through which we will remain in Jesus’ love; and love can subsist only if it remains alive and produces more love. Three subjects of divine love form a chain: the Father loves Jesus; Jesus loves the disciples; the disciples love one another.

The model of the disciples’ love is Jesus’ supreme act of love, his laying down his life for others even when they were his enemies crucifying him.

The disciples must be receptive to the divine love; they must, first of all, allow themselves to be loved. This receptive posture is prayerful attentiveness to the Beloved whose loving gaze meets ours for a communion of love. Once we have received and been filled with the divine love, it will incline and prompt us to reach out and extend it to others.

We will not allow its flow through us to others to stop. This divine love is the greatest of all loves; it is a love that can bring a person to lay down his life for family and friends. This love makes us like Jesus who sacrificed himself for us.

Jesus tells us, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Living in the friendship of Jesus implies that we are living in the truth of his words. Our lives are in conformity with his will expressed by the truth of his words. That is how we preserve the divine life in us which flows with our being in a communion of love with Jesus; for he is the source of the divine life that comes from the Father and given to us through the Holy Spirit.

The promise of intimacy with Jesus is conditional because it can be fulfilled only if we commit ourselves to his teaching. But if we keep his word, we are like Abraham, our father in faith, who was the first to be called a friend of God in the Bible (Is 41:8; 2 Chron 20:7). Just as he, the Old Testament ideal was the friend of God, so for us to be the Friends of Jesus, is the New Testament ideal.

We must realize what a privilege ours is: we are like the friends of the king who had the closest and most intimate communion with him. They had free access to him. So do we. Jesus calls us to be his friends and the friends of God. That is a tremendous offer. It means that we no longer need to gaze with longing at God from afar. We are not slaves who have no right whatever to enter into the presence of the Master; we are not like a crowd whose only glimpse of the king is in the passing on some state occasion. Jesus gave us this intimacy with God, so that he is no longer a distant stranger, but our close friend.

Jesus continues, “You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.”

We can continue to be Jesus’ friends only if we live in his love by keeping his commandments. Otherwise, we would no longer be living in the truth. We

would lose God’s grace and cease to be partakers of the divine nature. We would necessarily lose Jesus’ friendship. It is true that in the past Jesus called his disciples servants (Jn 12:26). But at the Last Supper he made himself their servant when he washed their feet. In reversing roles, he put himself at their level or even as their servant. The foot washing was a symbol of his sacrificial death, which he would undergo for them. In this way he would elevate them to the level of children of God. He would then even begin to call them brothers (Jn 20:17).

Just as God revealed to Abraham the secrets of his heart because they were friends (Gen 18:17 ff), Jesus shares his intimate thoughts with his disciples because of their friendship. Similarly, the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend (Ex 33:11). What individual men of God were granted in the Old Testament, was extended by Jesus to all disciples who are truly his friends. In the case of his immediate disciples, Jesus disclosed and entrusted to his friends everything that he had heard from the Father; he revealed to them the “name”, the very being of his Father (Jn 17:26). Moreover, Jesus promised that he would reveal his very self to whoever keeps his word (Jn 14: 21, 23). And in this knowledge, they would begin to experience eternal life (Jn 17:3).

Jesus continued to speak to his disciples in the Gospel today saying, “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another.”

It was not the Apostles who chose Jesus in the way disciples would go about choosing a Rabbi; it was Jesus who chose them. The Twelve were chosen to become the most intimate disciples of Jesus as models for all of us; we too were chosen freely by Jesus and, like the Apostles, are sent to bring the word to others. The notion of “go” and “bear fruit” have connotations of a mission to others. We have been “appointed” to go on a mission to transmit the divine life and love to others. The superabundant life and love of Jesus’ friendship urges us to channel

the overflow into apostolic activity; the sacrificial love of Jesus in us prompts us to place ourselves at the service of all for whom Jesus died. We are called to use the divine gifts as instruments to help others discover the spiritual riches that are in Christ. In order to bear fruit, we must remain united to Jesus as branches to the vine. The first and prevailing fruit that we must bear is that special love that comes only from God. But that love is really an expression of the divine life which we share through friendship with Jesus. We must give that divine love-life to others through brotherly love and concern as we associate in daily life with them. This love is expressed through virtuous living. St. Paul explains it this way: "Love is patient...kind...bears all things...endures all things; it is not jealous...pompous...inflated...rude, it does not seek its own interests; it is not quick tempered, it does not brood over injury" (1 Cor 13:4-7). This love overflows from our being unto others, creating a divine atmosphere.

Prayer in Jesus' name, that is, made in union and communion with him will give the fruit lasting value. If the disciples enter upon this love-life and remain closely connected to the vine, they will bear fruit and the fruit will abide: those who join the community of believers will remain loyal and steadfast. In other words, the disciples will bring forth enduring fruit and their prayers for the spread of the faith will be answered to the extent that they are filled with divine sacrificial love, which freely flows from them unto those they encounter.

Our Gospel ends with Jesus' repeated words, "This I command you: love one another." Jesus wants to be sure that we get the message of the supreme importance of love in our lives. The divine love we have described must be our prevailing attitude. It must inform all of our actions, all of our virtues. This manifested love shows that we are connected to Christ, the vine, and are bearing fruit. That is what the Lord's Supper and the fruit of the vine are all about: the Eucharist we receive must produce that prevailing attitude of divine, sacrificial love in our lives. A loveless life indicates that one is a dead branch.

The Ascension of the Lord

Mk 16:15-20

The scene of this Gospel for the Ascension takes place at the end of the forty days Jesus spent with his disciples after the resurrection. The first reading tells us, "He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." According to St. Luke this last appearance of Jesus to his disciples took place at Bethany (Lk 24:50) near Jerusalem. That is why the first reading states Jesus telling them "not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for 'the promise of the Father'...in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem...and to the ends of the earth."

That is how St. Mark exhorts us at the beginning of his Gospel today: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature."

The exhortation is directed to us as well as the original disciples who were present in this Ascension Day scene. Even if we were not present with Jesus then, the risen Christ reveals himself to us within our own hearts (Jn 14:20-23). St. John tells us, "Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself" (1 Jn 5:10). Our very faith is the testimony of God revealing himself in our own hearts. We are in the same situation as the Ephesians whom St. Paul addresses in the second reading. He prays, "May...the Father of Glory give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him. May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe..." In view of this interior knowledge within our very hearts, we are truly qualified witnesses to the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, and all that implies. We, as members of the Church, are the receptacles of his glory, as the second reading puts

it, “The Church [is] the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.” With St. Peter we can say, “It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

We may not have the freedom to travel to the ends of the earth, but we have many opportunities to proclaim Jesus and his Gospel to the family and business world we live in. As Jesus told the man he had freed from the legion of evil spirits, “Go home to your family and make it clear to them how much the Lord in his mercy has done for you” (Mk 5:19).

Meanwhile, we await Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit to give us a new experience of Jesus’ presence within us through the outpouring of the Spirit next Sunday, the feast of Pentecost. We prepare ourselves by prayer and “fasting” from all those things and desires that clutter and obstruct our hearts from receiving and experiencing God’s self-gift to us.

We are being called to “proclaim the Gospel to every creature,” that is, to the whole human race, to the whole world. Until now, the disciples had been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and were forbidden to go to the Gentiles, or into any city of the Samaritans; but now they are authorized to go into all the world, and to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to every creature, to the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, to every human creature that is capable of receiving it.

But the influence of the Gospel extends even beyond human beings. St. Paul tells us that “creation itself will be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). If original sin and its effects caused humankind to abuse and distort and destroy creation, the Gospel enlightens and graces us to “cultivate and care for it” (Gen 2:15) according to God’s original plan. This grace calls us to respect God’s creation and develop it according to our God-given wisdom. The science of ecology encourages and instructs us to preserve and foster a healthy environment.

The Second Vatican council teaches that at “the

time of the restoration of all things (Acts 3:41) ... the human race as well as the entire world which is intimately related to man and achieves its purpose through him, will be perfectly re-established in Christ... Christ, having been lifted up from the earth, is drawing all men to himself... He is continually active in the world... Therefore, the promised restoration which we are awaiting has already begun in Christ, is carried forward in the mission of the Holy Spirit and through him continues in the Church... The final age of the world has already come upon us (1 Cor 10:11). The renovation of the world has been irrevocably decreed and in this age is already anticipated in some real way” (Lumen Gentium 7:48). God’s grace working in us to handle God’s creation with care helps us to see and carry out our part in this renovation. It is in this sense that we can more fully understand how it is that we can “proclaim the Gospel to every creature.”

The Gospel goes on to say, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned.” To believe the Gospel means to accept and receive it, along with opening our hearts to receive Jesus himself and the kingdom of God, which he brings and communicates to us through the Holy Spirit. This begins to take place through baptism to which faith leads us. This sacrament connects us to Jesus into whom we are plunged and immersed. Thus we are able to live continuously in him and he in us. We share in his divine life with the Father and begin to live the eternal life even now. That is how we are “saved”. But we must “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12) and “take care not to fall” (1 Cor 10:12). “Be sober and vigilant,” St. Peter warns, “your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour” (1 Pt 5:8). “Whoever endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

But Jesus asserts, “Whoever does not believe will be condemned.” That seems to leave us with no alternative. There is no middle way between the blessing and the curse (Deut 30:15-20). Our acceptance and union with Jesus is urgent and absolutely necessary. For he is the only one who can and has overcome the world (Jn 16:33) with its

various lusts and enticements (1Jn 2:15-17) that lure us away from the salvation that is in Christ.

Why do people not believe in Jesus and why is their failure to believe so blameworthy and condemnable? St. John explains it this way: "...light [Christ] came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light [by believing in Christ], so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God" (Jn 3:19-21).

These "wicked things" may not be evident to us; they may not be seen in external deeds. But a life of self-centeredness, instead of being God-centered, is sufficient to cut a person off from following Jesus and the truth that he proclaims. The self leads to death and corruption in the tomb. Only Jesus has overcome death and can free us from sin, and lead us to eternal life; without him, there is no salvation; he alone is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6).

But only God knows a person through and through and can judge whether one is condemnable or not; he alone knows whether a person is culpable or not in his unbelief. "[M]an sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). There is such a thing as invincible ignorance. Only God can know and deal with that.

The Gospel continues, "These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

These miraculous powers were given to the disciples and those who believe. The power of the Gospel is displayed through the miracles of those who preach and live it. In the early church the Apostles drove out demons (Acts 16:16-18), spoke in new tongues (Act 2:4-11), sustained the sting of serpents unharmed (Acts 28:1-6) and healed infirmities by laying their hands on the sick (Acts 3:6-8; 28:8). And God

continued to work miracles throughout the history of the Church. This can be seen especially in the lives of the saints or certain holy places especially blessed by God through the intercession of Mary, such as at Lourdes. God converts worldly people ruled by their senses by making use of miraculous signs that strike them with astonishment; he abruptly places the supernatural before them in the language of sensible signs.

The mention of various evils such as serpents, poison, and disease remind us of Psalm 91. The psalmist is confident that God's presence will protect the people in every dangerous situation: the snare, the plague, the terror of the night, the arrow, the asp and the viper, the lion and the dragon. With the coming of Jesus and the establishment of his kingdom; in other words, Jesus is saying that evil in all its forms is being defeated. St. Luke reports Jesus' words (upon the disciples return from their mission) in this way, "I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky. Behold, I have given you the power to tread upon serpents and scorpions and upon the full force of the enemy and nothing will harm you" (Lk 10:18-19). Thus, although some of these were literally fulfilled in a few specific incidents, the examples of certain evils, such as serpents and scorpions, are more symbolical of the evils of the world in general. It is concerning these that Jesus said, "In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world" (Jn 16:33). Our union with him through faith and baptism enables us to draw divine power to brave the dangers and overcome the enemies of our spiritual life.

The Gospel continues, "So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God."

According to Jewish ideas of the time, heaven, the abode of God, was above the skies. Jesus disappeared in the direction of the sky to convince his Apostles of his return to the Father. The Father, it was, who took him up in his glorified human nature.

Jesus ascended to heaven forty days after his resurrection (Acts 1:3). He is now enthroned as

king and judge at the Father's right hand (Co 3:1; Heb 12:2). The right hand is the place of honor. This expression is the fulfillment of Psalm 110:1 where David says that Yahweh-God welcomes the Messiah and seats him at his right hand; he remains in this place of favor while God subdues his enemies. The glorified Christ lives the very life of God, equal to the Father in dignity and power. The limitations which he had imposed upon himself during his earthly life have disappeared, and the glory of the God-Man shines in the fullness of the divine radiance.

In seeing Jesus endowed with such honor in his glorified human body, we also see ourselves there, anticipating our own glorification. We see the dignity of our own human bodies signified in this mystery of the Ascension. Our body is God's temple. It will be glorified and enjoy the heavenly life with Jesus in the presence of the Father.

The Gospel of today concludes, "but they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs."

At his word, the Apostles set out from Jerusalem and carried forth the "word", the Gospel, to the known world. By the great highways of the Roman Empire, they traveled to carry the Good Tidings to pagan cities.

The Lord continued to work with them. The Risen Jesus was present to inspire and inform their efforts to spread the kingdom. Faithful to his promise, he aids them with his strength and wisdom.

The Apostles had neither the prestige of learning, nor the power of eloquence to convert Greece and Rome. But these poor unlettered fishermen changed the world by the power of the Spirit of God and miracles (Rom 15:19). And the risen Jesus continues to be with us even to our day as he promised, "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

Pentecost Sunday

Jn 15:26-27; 16:12-15

"Jesus said to his disciples: 'When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father...'"

The word Advocate or Paraclete comes from a legal term for a defense attorney: a spokesman, defender, mediator, and intercessor. He is a person called to the side of one in need—a helper—one who speaks on behalf of another. In John, the Advocate or Paraclete is a witness to Jesus, a prosecutor of the world who represents the continued presence on earth of the Jesus who has returned to the Father. While it has been customary to use masculine personal pronouns in English for the Advocate, the Greek word for "spirit" is neuter.

The Advocate will be sent by the Father at the request of Jesus. The Spirit comes from both Jesus and the Father in mission. The mission of the Spirit in history is a reflection of the procession of the Spirit in eternity.

The Holy Spirit is spoken of as a distinct, divine Person that proceeds from the Father and the Son; he is the emanation of divine light, and the energy of divine power.

Jesus describes the Advocate as "the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father". But Jesus said of himself, "I am the truth" (Jn 14:6); he is the reflection and revelation of divine reality; "the Spirit of truth", the Holy Spirit, will reveal the divinity in Jesus by making that divinity present in us through his indwelling (Jn 14:15-17).

"He will testify to me": the Holy Spirit makes Jesus present in us and makes us aware of his presence: "Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself" (1Jn 5:10). Faith is the testimony of God revealing himself in our hearts through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The power of our ministry is derived from the Spirit, for it is he who gives us experiential knowledge through faith of the risen Jesus.

“And you also testify, because you have been with me from the beginning.” The apostles have been witnesses to Jesus’ public ministry. They were qualified to bear witness to him because they were living in close communion with him throughout his public life. They heard all of his sermons, they questioned him about the things they did not understand, they experienced his miracles and his virtuous life. They saw him crucified and mingled with him during forty days after his resurrection. They saw him ascend to heaven. They were all together when he sent the Holy Spirit upon them as he promised.

The Advocate gives witness to the risen Jesus in the heart of the disciples and they in turn witness him to the world. The witness borne by the Paraclete and that borne by the disciples come together to form a single witness.

Being with Jesus from the beginning emphasizes the origin to which all later proclamation can be traced back. It is because the disciples are in communion with Jesus, the historical revealer who brought God’s ultimate word to mankind that their witness has a lasting and unsurpassable value in proclaiming the word of God. The disciples are the unique witnesses because they have been with Jesus. And the Spirit will give them the right word to speak of what they have seen and heard.

The Spirit will bear witness to Jesus first by enabling the disciples themselves to understand and personally accept his meaning and mission, and then he will fortify them to bear witness to the outside world to what they have understood. It is the Holy Spirit who makes fully understood the truth revealed by Jesus.

The apostles and we were appointed to be witnesses for Jesus in the world. The Spirit gives us the incentive and zeal to carry out our mission. We must express in word and deed what the Spirit testifies in our hearts. We must speak the truth in love. The Advocate accuses and exposes the world and proves it guilty only by means of the Christian community. And the community also requires faith

in the Paraclete and the support of the Paraclete in order to fulfill that task.

Jesus continues, “I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming.” Only after the resurrection will there be full understanding of what happened and was said during the ministry.

Acting in and through the Paraclete, Jesus will communicate that understanding. There was no further revelation after the ministry of Jesus; for Jesus is the revelation of the Father, the Word of God.

The Paraclete’s guidance along the way of truth involves more than a deeper intellectual understanding of what Jesus has said—it involves a way of life in conformity with Jesus’ teaching. Guidance along the way of truth is guidance to the mystery of Jesus, who is the truth. The Spirit continues the teaching mission of Jesus to bear witness to the truth. The guidance of the Spirit is Jesus’ guarantee that the Gospel would not be corrupted, distorted or misunderstood by the ordained shepherds of the Church during her earthly pilgrimage. The Pope alone or the Pope and the bishops united with him are divinely protected from teaching error when they define matters pertaining to faith and morals (compare Mt 16:18-19). The Paraclete is not only Jesus’ interpreter, but also his successor who will continue his revelation by unveiling the meaning of Jesus’ words.

What the apostles cannot bear to be told concerns the later situation of the community, which is still beyond their grasp. In their present situation they would not be able to understand the future. The present revelation will need to be interpreted and applied to the new historical situation.

The Spirit’s elucidation will give a more profound penetration into the content of Jesus’ teaching with the application of that revelation to the behavior of

the community within the world. The Paraclete will guide the community into the future and make clear to it what is coming. The Paraclete will not proclaim anything with a new content. All that he will do is to expound anew to the community Jesus' message in the situation in which that community finds itself and set forth before it what is coming.

His guiding the community into all the truth, then, can be seen as an instruction by means of which Jesus' revelation can be understood more and more perfectly in each historical context; and the community can be increasingly nourished by it.

To render his teaching explicit and clear in detail, Jesus still needed to speak many words, too many for his hearers to take in that evening. He will therefore complete their instruction through the other Paraclete. For the fourth time the advent of the Spirit is promised to them; and for the third time he is called the Spirit of truth (14:17; 15:26; 16:13). The Spirit is an internal illuminator. We would seem to have the full final revelation in the explicit understanding of which the Church shall ever grow through the illuminating action of the Paraclete. Thus the Spirit of God would be the principle to secure the Church's living penetration of the deposit given by Jesus, the Image of the invisible God (Col 1:15).

In Jesus, "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden" (Col 2:3). The Spirit is not an independent speaker. "Whatsoever he shall hear he shall speak." By particular prophecies and still more by full confidence in "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim 3:15), he will show them the things that are to come.

The declaration of the things to come consists in interpreting in relation to each coming generation the contemporary significance of what Jesus had said and done; it consists of a deeper understanding of what Jesus means for one's own time. The Paraclete brings no new revelation, because he receives from Jesus what he is to declare to the disciples.

Jesus continues to address the apostles at the last supper, "He will glorify me," he says, "because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. Everything that the Father has is mine; for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you."

Jesus glorified the Father by revealing the Father to men; the Paraclete glorifies Jesus by revealing him to men. The Spirit also glorifies Jesus by begetting children who thus reflect God's glory in a way similar to that in which Jesus reflects God's glory.

In declaring or interpreting what belongs to Jesus, the Paraclete is really interpreting the Father to men, for the Father and Jesus possess all things in common.

The Paraclete participates in the continuation of Jesus' saving work and therefore contributes to Jesus' glorification. The Father has placed everything at the Son's disposal for his revelation and the Paraclete draws on this fullness. Jesus is therefore confirmed by the Paraclete as the one to whom everything is entrusted. This text points to the fullness and absolute nature of revelation in Jesus Christ.

Through the help of the Advocate, the truth of the Gospel is increasingly disclosed and its message becomes a source of new strength to the Church, which can, in and from the Spirit, thus know what Jesus told, gave, and promised.

Jesus reveals here some aspects of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. He teaches that the three divine Persons have the same nature when he says that everything that the Father has belongs to the Son, and everything the Son has belongs to the Father (17:10); and the Spirit also has what is common to the Father and the Son, that is, the divine essence. The activity specific to the Holy Spirit is that of glorifying Jesus, reminding and clarifying for the disciples everything the Master taught them (Jn 16:13). On being inspired by the Holy Spirit to recognize the Father through the Son, men render glory to Jesus; and glorifying Jesus is the same as giving glory to God.

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Mt 28:16-20

“The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.”

The number eleven recalls the tragic defection of Judas Iscariot. The eleven disciples are the twelve minus Judas. Only the eleven are mentioned as coming to meet Jesus, because they have been chosen as the representatives of Israel, and so the commission is to be addressed to them. This restriction does not rule out the presence of others. The eleven remained in Jerusalem until the end of the paschal week (Jn 20:26), when naturally they went back to their homes in Galilee. Recall the incident when Jesus appeared to the Apostles after an unsuccessful night of fishing on the Sea of Galilee (Jn 21). Matthew is aware of the fact that Jesus had indicated a particular mountain in Galilee where they were to meet him. Perhaps the mountain is the high ground above the lake, the mount of beatitudes where Jesus inaugurated the kingdom. It is only appropriate that the disciples should return to the place where Jesus began his ministry, to Galilee of the Gentiles (nations). The mountain (Mt 5:1, 17:1) and Galilee (Mt 4:12-16) are preeminent places of revelation.

“When they all saw him, they worshipped, but they doubted.”

Matthew tends to make general statements and summarize events that other evangelists as Luke and John explain in particular detail. St. Luke tells us that the disciples were “startled and terrified” at first “and thought that they were seeing a ghost” (Mt 24:37). But Jesus calmed their fears by inviting the disciples to “touch” him as “he showed them his hands and his feet” (Mt 39-40). Since “they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed” (Mt 41), he asked for something to eat to demonstrate the reality of his physical presence. “They gave him a piece of baked fish; he took it and ate it in front of them” (Mt 42-43).

Jesus was very patient in demonstrating the reality of his risen body. His horrible death by crucifixion had shattered their faith; after all, this was the first time someone had overcome his own death and returned to appear to his friends in his glorified body. But we see how successful Jesus was in overcoming Thomas’ doubts. He, the greatest doubter ever, made the strongest statement asserting the truth about the risen Jesus when he saw him: “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28), he exclaimed. Thomas was convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus was Yahweh God standing right before him.

Thus reviewing the evangelists who were more detailed in narrating Jesus’ appearances after the resurrection shows us that the original doubts of the disciples were overcome and they then could freely worship Jesus as the God-man who had conquered death and returned to share the joyful news with them.

“Then Jesus approached and said to them, ‘All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’”

On a mountain the Son had refused to receive all kingdoms and their glory from the devil at the cheap price of idolatry (Mt 4:8-9); now the Son of Man has received all power in heaven and on earth from the Father because of his fidelity and obedience unto the death of the cross.

Jesus’ obedience unto death has resulted in the resurrection which constitutes his formal investiture as king of the kingdom of heaven and earth. Sovereign powers were his before, a necessary consequence of the Incarnation: the eternal Son of God became human; but now the Son of Man has formally taken possession of his throne. The resurrection inaugurates the new and worldwide epoch of the kingdom. The kingdom has come in power.

This authority has been given by God. Jesus’ saying that “the Son of Man [will be] seated at the right hand of the Power” (Mt 26:64) has now been fulfilled. While Jesus had given evidence of his authority before, now all authority has been given

to him. The power and authority of Jesus as the Son of God have been revealed in his resurrection. Jesus' authority has been a topic masterfully developed throughout the Gospel of Matthew. His ministry in Galilee manifested authority, as did his teaching (Mt 7:29), healing (Mt 8:9), acts of forgiving (Mt 9:6, 8), expulsion of demons (Mt 10:1). In the temple, his prophetic action provoked a dispute about his authority (Mt 21:23, 24, 27). Now he claims authority on a universal scale.

This is what enables him to initiate a universal mission. This is why he can tell his disciples, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..." This conferral of cosmic authority constitutes Jesus as that all-powerful Son of Man of whom Daniel spoke: "I saw One like a son of man coming, on the clouds of heaven; when he reached the Ancient One...he received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be...destroyed" (Dan 7:13-14).

Omnipotence, an attribute belonging exclusively to God, belongs to Jesus: he is confirming the faith of his disciples who are worshipping him; and he is also telling them that the authority which he is giving them equips them to carry out their mission to the whole world; this authority comes from his own divine authority. Since universal power belongs to the risen Jesus, he gives the eleven a mission that is universal. They are to make disciples of all nations.

Since the death-resurrection has smashed the barriers of the old age, and since it was a sign of the last days that the Gentiles would stream to Zion in pilgrimage, the eschatological (end times) mission is to all nations. There is a new element here: the inclusion of the disciples' mission to all nations. The severe restrictions of the missionary mandate of Mt 10:5-6 (not to Gentiles and Samaritans, but only to Israel) are explicitly rescinded by Jesus. He died "for the many" (Mt 26:28), that is, for the whole mass of humankind and therefore, it is to all mankind that the fruits of his death are now offered. The Jews are not excluded from this offer, although they no longer enjoy a privileged status as the only chosen

people, Israel. All people are invited to submit themselves freely in faith to the Son of Man's rule now. A positive response is warranted lest they fall under his punitive power on the last day. Matthew's Gospel began by recalling that Jesus was the Son of Abraham in whose descendants "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 22:18). We can now see its fulfillment unfolding.

On hearing Jesus conferring his authority upon the eleven to make disciples, we should bear in mind that the authority of the Church, which is given to it for the salvation of mankind, comes directly from Jesus, and that this authority in the sphere of faith and morals is above any other authority on earth.

The Apostles receive the charge of teaching all nations what Jesus taught by word and deed: he is the way, the truth, and the life that leads to the Father. The Church, and in it all Christian faithful, have the duty to proclaim until the end of time, by word and example, the faith that they received. He gave them the Spirit to fulfill their mission. Therefore, the teachings of the pope and the bishops united to him should always be accepted by everyone with assent and obedience.

Conferring upon the eleven and their successors the authority to make disciples of all nations, Jesus continues, "...baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit..."

Baptism is the means of entrance into the community of the risen One, the Church. This sacrament of initiation consecrates the person to the Blessed Trinity. By Baptism, the neophyte (newly converted) becomes the property, and therefore the protégé, of the persons named. It seems probable that the Trinitarian formula was necessary for the efficacy of the rite, and it is attested early in the second century. (See the Teaching of the Apostles, Didache 7:1, and St. Justin, Apologia 1:61.)

This passage regarding baptizing in the name of the three Persons is perhaps the clearest expression in the New Testament of Trinitarian belief. It may have been the baptismal formula of Matthew's church,

but primarily it designates the effect of Baptism, the union of the one baptized with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While it had been sufficient to baptize “in the name of the Lord Jesus” in the earliest day of the Church (Acts 10:48; 19:5, etc.), very soon it became necessary to employ a Trinitarian formula to distinguish Christian baptism from the many alien rites of the Hellenistic world.

Jesus continued speaking, saying, “...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

Those who were brought into the company and fellowship of the Blessed Trinity were dedicated, given to the service and honor of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They will carry out this commitment by keeping Jesus’ commands, especially that of love. They must obey all that Jesus taught and exemplified during his public life. Keeping his commands is also a sign that we love God and want to remain united to him and live in his company. The commands of Jesus are the standard of Christian conduct—not the Mosaic law, even though some of the Mosaic commandments have now been invested with the authority of Jesus (Mt 19:17-19; 22:36-40).

Jesus concluded his address in these consoling words, “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” The promise of Jesus’ real though invisible presence echoes the name Emmanuel, given to him in the infancy narrative. Matthew begins with, “...they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us,’” (Mt 1:23), and ends with, “I am with you always” (Mt 28:20). These words express the experience of Christians through the ages.

The universal mission poses a staggering task, before which the original eleven disciples, and later Church leaders, might easily shrink. The Son of Man, therefore, ends his address with a consoling and strengthening promise. Jesus is not an absentee landlord. Just as Yahweh, appearing to the commissioning the patriarchs and prophets of old, would issue his bracing, “Fear not! I am with you!” (Is 43:5), the Son of Man promises to his nascent Church his abiding presence to strengthen her in

her worldwide mission. He who was from birth God-with-us (Mt 1:23) now promises his continued presence to his Church on the move. This is not a static presence. In Mt 28:20, the all powerful Son of Man promises his dynamic, energizing, enabling presence to his pilgrim Church as it moves ever farther into time and space.

This mission will endure until the end of time; and to enable it to do this work, the risen Christ promises to stay with the Church and never leave it. When Sacred Scripture says that God is with someone, this means that that person will be successful in everything he undertakes. Therefore, the Church, helped in this way by the presence of its divine founder, can be confident of never failing to fulfill its mission down the centuries until the end of time.

Unlike Luke and Acts, there is no departure and Ascension in Matthew. Jesus does not ascend from his Church; he comes to it to remain with it always.

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ-Corpus Christi **Mk 14:12-16, 22-26**

“On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb...”

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was originally an agrarian feast and celebrated at the beginning of the harvesting (Deut 16:9); it was a religious celebration for the new harvest. It lasted seven days during which bread made from new corn was consumed. This new corn was unmixed with anything from the previous year, and so it was unleavened (Ex 23:15; 34:18).

The paschal (Passover) feast had originally been a feast of shepherds (pastoral feast), also linked to the memory of the Exodus. The fusion between the two must have taken place during the period of centralization of worship in Jerusalem (Deut 12). Then the Pasch was made a pilgrimage feast to be celebrated at the time of the full moon of the month,

Nisan-Abib. The convergence of the two feasts was motivated by the fact that they coincided in time; they commemorated the Exodus, and during both of them, unleavened bread was taken. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was celebrated for one week beginning with the day after the Pasch (Lev 23:5-8).

The first day of the Unleavened Bread, a Thursday, was the fourteenth day of the month Nisan, that is, the Preparation Day for the Passover; it began at sunset.

The synoptic Gospels (Mt, Mk, and Lk) quite definitely treat the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples as a Passover meal.

On the Preparation Day, all leavened bread was removed from the house, for only unleavened bread was to be eaten during the entire week of the Passover. It was on this day, too, that the lambs were sacrificed. In the time of Jesus, the lamb of the Passover meal was considered to be a sacrifice that could only be immolated in the Jerusalem temple, and for the same reason the Passover could be eaten only in Jerusalem (Deut 16:1-8). Certain designated parts were given to the priests. In the evening, the slain lambs were brought home from the temple and, the other preparations made, the Passover was celebrated as of old, as a family feast of joy and freedom on the beginning of the fifteenth Nisan (also called Abib).

“Jesus’ disciples said to him, ‘Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?’ He sent two of his disciples and said to them, ‘Go into the city and a man will meet you, carrying a jar of water. Follow him. Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, “The Teacher says, “Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?”’”

St. Luke tells us that it was Peter and John who were sent to prepare the Passover meal (Lk 22:8). Jesus had probably made arrangements with the householder to whom they were directed. In this way, he avoided mentioning the householder’s name or the exact place to keep it from Judas lest he should reveal it to

the Sanhedrin beforehand. In this way, Jesus could celebrate the Last Supper undisturbed.

The man carrying the water jar would have been a peculiar sight and easily identifiable, because men customarily transported water in skins slung over their shoulders; the women carried it in jars balanced on their heads.

Jesus continued, “Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make the preparations there.’ The disciples then went off, entered the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover.”

The upper room of a Palestinian house was not usually connected with the rest of the rooms of the building, but was reached by an outside stairway only. (There is an ancient Christian tradition that this house was owned by Mary, the mother of St. Mark, to whom the Garden of Olives also belonged.) This large upstairs room would have been spread with couches and furnished. There had to be a group large enough, such as Jesus and his disciples, to consume an unblemished one-year-old male lamb. In contrast to the first Passover and early Israelite custom when the lamb was eaten in haste while standing (Ex 12:11), the Passover meal had become in first century Palestine a festive dinner at which even the poorest reclined at table: this was a sign of the liberation of Israel from bondage.

For the paschal meal, in addition to the lamb which was to be slaughtered in the temple, it was necessary to provide unleavened bread, bitter herbs, wine, and a sauce called haroset, made from fruits, nuts, spices, and vinegar. These reminded the people of the hard times they experienced while subject to the Egyptians and the bitterness of the forced labor as they were driven and beaten to make bricks (Ex 5:12-14).

Four cups of wine were prescribed. The third cup, taken after the eating of the lamb, was called the “cup of blessing”. During the meal, the Hallel Psalms (113-118) were sung and the head of the family explained the significance of the ceremony, which

commemorated the Exodus. This is what Jesus did—but in the new way.

Our Gospel text says, “While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, ‘Take it; this is my body.’”

Jesus took bread, blessed, broke, and gave it to the disciples: these are the same actions and the very same words as in the feeding of the multitudes with the multiplication of the loaves (6:41; 8:6). There is no doubt that the correspondence is intentional; the vocabulary there was prompted by the Eucharistic language here. The feeding of the crowds prefigured the multitudes that Jesus would feed by means of the consecrated bread at Mass. The bread that feeds the people of God is Jesus himself.

The words, “while they were eating,” indicate that the meal began with a preliminary course, which is presupposed here. At the beginning of the main course, Jesus, as head of the group, pronounced a blessing, that is, he gave thanks to God over some of the unleavened bread before the lamb would have been eaten.

Just as the head of the family at the Passover explained the meaning of “the bread of affliction” (Deut 16:3), so Jesus interpreted the bread he was about to distribute. It is his body. Jesus identifies the unleavened bread of the Passover feast with his own flesh (Jn 6:51). This gift of himself in the sacrament is inseparable from his self-offering on the cross (Heb 10:10), since together they constitute a single sacrifice in which Jesus is both the priest and sacrificial victim of the New Covenant. Jesus’ actions signify the mystery of his Passion: In breaking the bread, Jesus pre-enacts the breaking of his body on the cross. Likewise, as Jesus gives himself voluntarily in the Last Supper, so his crucifixion will be a death he freely accepts, not the end result of hostile forces beyond his control.

In the Last Supper, Jesus already offered himself as a victim to be sacrificed. The Supper and the Holy Mass constitute, with the cross, one and the same unique and perfect sacrifice, for in all these cases,

the victim offered is the same—Christ; and the priest is the same—Christ. The only difference is that the Supper, which takes place prior to the cross, anticipates the Lord’s death in an unbloody way and offers a victim soon to be immolated; whereas, the Holy Mass offers, also in an unbloody manner, the victim already immolated on the cross, a victim who exists forever in heaven.

“At the Last Supper,” Vatican II teaches, “on the night he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust to his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection.” (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 47)

Today’s Gospel continues, “Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many.’”

Again, this occurred at the third cup of the Passover meal, “the cup of benediction” (1 Cor 10:16), which followed the main course and preceded the singing of the Hallel.

Jesus interprets the cup of wine in terms of “covenant blood”, an allusion to the sacrifice that concluded the Sinai Covenant (Ex 24:8) mentioned in the first reading. The book of Leviticus explains, “Since the life of a living body is in its blood, I have made you put it on the altar, so that atonement may thereby be made for your own lives, because it is the blood, as the seat of life, that makes atonement” (Lev 17:11). The blessings for Israel implied in the poured-out blood of the Sinai Covenant are now seen as a type of the blessings to come to all people in the poured-out life of Jesus.

Jesus’ intention is clearly sacrificial in his words over the wine. The sealing of a covenant once done in Moses’ time, he now means to achieve in his own blood. It is to atone vicariously for the sins of “many”, meaning all or a great number without restriction; Christ’s blood poured out will admit the mass of

humankind into a new covenant with God. This is in accord with the meaning of the fourth Suffering Servant poem (Is 53:11). God and man are bound in a new life-giving love relationship (covenant) of which his shed blood is the sign.

All the Gospels say of Jesus' blood that it is poured out for the forgiveness of sins. This was the traditional function of the spilling of blood (Lev 17:11; Heb 9:22). Thus we find the first significance of this new Christian Passover. The Passover of the Jews commemorated the saving act by which God freed his people from the bondage of Egypt. The Christian Passover (Pasch) commemorates and signifies the sacrificial and saving act by which the servant of the Lord has freed humans from the bondage of sin. The broken bread and separated cup of wine, therefore, portray the broken body and shed blood of Christ's death (1 Cor 11:26).

Jesus further specifies that his blood (his death) is the inaugural rite of a new covenant between God and man. The allusion here is to Ex 24:8; the story of the ratification of the covenant of Sinai by Moses (first reading), who sprinkled the people and the altar of God with the blood of bulls to signify the blood bond established by Yahweh's saving act and Israel's acceptance of his law (Heb 9:18:22). Just as the Jewish Passover rejoiced in a covenant enacted in blood, so the Christian Passover is the joyful covenant meal (Ex 24:9-11) of a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34), again enacted in blood, this time the blood of the atoning Servant of God (Is 53:11). Under this aspect of covenant meal the Eucharist is sacrificial, not in virtue of the Old Testament type, but in virtue of the sacrifice of Christ, which it represents.

To sum up, the words of consecration of the chalice clearly show that the Eucharist is a sacrifice: the blood of Christ is poured out, sealing the new and definitive covenant of God with his people. This covenant remains sealed forever by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross in which he is both priest and victim. The death of Jesus founds the new community. The Last Supper helps us to understand the meaning of Jesus' death on Calvary.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's body and blood. But the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice is wholly directed toward the intimate union of the faithful with Christ through communion. To receive communion is to receive Christ himself who has offered himself for us" (1382).

Here, it is helpful to recall Jesus' words, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you...For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me" (Jn 6:51, 53, 55-57).

Jesus concluded his Last Supper discourse saying, "Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

Jesus' use of the word "Amen" at the beginning of a statement indicates its solemnity and underscores its importance. He looks beyond his death to the resumption of the table fellowship in his risen life, when the kingdom shall have been inaugurated.

Jesus reminds the Apostles that this is a farewell banquet, for his death is imminent. But he will triumph over death, and they will be with him again in the happiness of the eternal kingdom. Jesus looks forward, beyond death, to the kingdom. As in the predictions of the passion, death is not the last word. Here Jesus looks, with sure hope, to the eschatological banquet.

His words also mark a break: the close association, supremely marked by table fellowship with his disciples is at an end. But by expressing to them

his own serene expectation, he is assuring them of renewed communion in the kingdom. In Peter's speech to Cornelius, he explains that he was one among other witnesses who saw Jesus after God raised him; they "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10:40-41). And isn't that our happy lot also, who share the Eucharistic banquet with Jesus in these end times?

But there is also another sense in which the kingdom of the end times is compared to a banquet. The wine at that banquet will be new; it will belong to a new order of things. "I confer a kingdom on you..." says Jesus, "That you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (Lk 22:29-30). The prophet Isaiah spoke of the rich fare available at this banquet in the Messianic kingdom: "On this mountain (Mt. Zion, symbol of the heavenly Jerusalem) the Lord of hosts will provide for all people a feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines" (Is 25:6). The spiritual nourishment signified by this banquet is available to everyone who responds to Jesus' invitation. He says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him and he with me" (Rev 3:20). Such a one will feast and enjoy intimate, interpersonal communion with the glorified Jesus. Those who hunger for him will be happily satisfied (Mt 5:6) as he gives them that "hidden manna" (Rev 2:17), the divine substance we receive by living in prayerful communion with him.

Our Gospel today closes with the words, "Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives".

The fact that Jesus and the Apostles sang should encourage all men to use their own voices to praise God in song. It is an outstanding way to witness our faith verbally.

What hymn did Jesus and the Apostles sing to conclude the paschal meal? It was a special group of Psalms they sang during the course of the Passover liturgy. The word, Hallel (Hebrew for "to praise"), was the designation given to Psalms 113-118. A

couple of these were sung earlier in the course of the meal, the rest (115-118) at the end of the supper, which brought it to a close.

The Mount of Olives was east of Jerusalem, beyond the Kedron ravine, only about half a mile from the wall of the city. It was easily near enough Jerusalem to count as Jerusalem for purposes of keeping the Passover.

11th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Mk 4:26-34

Jesus continues to explain what the Kingdom of God is like. Here he compares its innate power for growth. A man broadcasts the seed on the ground and leaves it to itself. He goes to sleep and rises day after day. The seed on its own sprouts and grows. How this happens he really doesn't understand—it is a mysterious reality. First the blade is formed, and then the ear of grain begins to be formed. Finally the full grain in the ear is realized. Once it has ripened, it is then harvested with the sickle.

We do not see all of this taking place. It's part of the mystery of the growth of an organism. Much of it is invisible. So too, on a supernatural level grace works unobserved within people. We gradually reach spiritual maturity as we cooperate with the divine influence affecting us in the form of grace. Through it we have become partakers in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4).

We hope that each of us will have reached spiritual maturity at the end of our lives, ready to be harvested for eternal life. So too it will be for the whole world. It too, is in the process of growing to full maturity. The harvest will take place when Jesus returns in glory to judge the living and the dead. Those who had died before will be awakened to life for the final judgment when the resurrection of the dead will occur: "those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation" (Jn 5:29).

Jesus also compares the Kingdom of God to a small grain of mustard seed which grows into a very large shrub. The birds of the sky come to perch in its shade. This is to bring out how Jesus and his small band of followers will eventually grow to be world-wide. All the peoples of the nations will come to dwell in this kingdom, the Church.

“Now the Father’s will is ‘to raise up men to share in his own divine life’. He does this by gathering men around his Son Jesus Christ. This gathering is the church, ‘on earth the seed and beginning of that kingdom’” (CCC 541).

The first part of Chapter four of St. Mark’s Gospel is about someone who sowed seed that fell on different kinds of soil. Jesus explained that the seed that was sowed represents the word of God. This helps us to understand that the seed in the present parable is also about the word of God through which the Kingdom grows. It contains an innate power for spiritual growth. It tends toward full spiritual maturity. If we are that good earth spoken of by the other parable, the seed will produce thirty, sixty or a hundredfold. Different degrees of receptivity of God’s word will result in various degrees of holiness. On the other hand, obstacles such as, “worldly anxiety, the lure of riches, and the craving for other things, intrude and choke the word, and it bears no fruit” (Mk 4:19).

But if we cooperate with God’s word and meditate on it, we will receive the power to overcome all of the serious obstacles that tend to impede holiness of life. St. Paul explains that “...faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). Meditating on God’s word empowers us to overcome those obstacles impeding spiritual growth.

Again, the word of God proclaims that “the gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes....For in it is revealed the righteousness of God from faith to faith” (Rom 1: 16-17).

The faith that is nurtured by meditating on the word has remarkable power. Jesus states that, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘move from here to there’, and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (Mt 17:20).

Jesus is saying that no matter how grave an obstacle is blocking your spiritual growth, your faith can overcome it if you continue to nurture it through the word of God.

The word of the Lord expressed the power of God’s word to destroy the obstacles that stand in our way to holiness in these words to the prophet Jeremiah, “Then the Lord extended his hand and touched my mouth, saying, ‘See, I place my words in your mouth! This day I set you over nations and over kingdoms, to root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant’” (Jer 1:9-10).

The word of God destroys obstacles and builds and plants new structures for spiritual growth.

St. Paul had serious obstacles to holiness in his life. He writes, “For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want....Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 7:19, 24-25). And again, “I have strength for everything through him who empowers me” (Phil 4:13).

Thus we can conclude that faith, nourished by meditating on God’s word, connects us to our glorified Lord Jesus, who strengthens us to triumph over all of the difficulties that impede our spiritual progress.

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 4:35-41

“On that day, as evening drew on, Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Let us cross to the other side.’”

Jesus had been teaching the crowds in parables. “A very large crowd gathered around him so that he got into a boat on the sea and sat down. The whole crowd was beside the sea on land. And he taught them at length...” (Mk 4:1-2) After Jesus had finished teaching, he asked the disciples to take him across the lake or Sea of Galilee. The boat probably belonged to Peter. The journey across the lake was probably from Capernaum to the eastern shore near Gerasa, approximately 5 or 6 miles.

“Leaving the crowd, they took Jesus with them in the boat just as he was.” The Apostles took Jesus to the other side of the lake “just as he was” without any further preparation.

“And the other boats were with him.” No further mention is made of these boats and of what became of them during the storm. Perhaps they were able to turn back. Could they be meant to emphasize how the story fulfills Psalm 107:23 and following? This is the passage our Psalm response is taken from. This Psalm expresses an identical situation with today’s Gospel.

Let us re-read it in view of the Gospel. “They who sailed the sea in ships, trading the deep waters, these saw the works of the Lord and his wonders in the abyss.

“His command raised up a storm wind which tossed its waves on high. They mounted up to heaven; they sank to the depths; their hearts melted away in their plight.

“They cried to the Lord in their distress; from their straits he rescued them, he hushed the storm to a gentle breeze, and the billows of the sea were stilled. They rejoiced that they were calmed, and he brought them to their desired haven...”

In this passage it was those who went down to the sea in ships who saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. That is what happened in today’s Gospel.

We can understand that after being with Jesus all day and listening to his spiritually nourishing words, the people would want to follow him wherever he went. They could not bear to be separated from his exhilarating presence. So they got in their boats and followed him.

“A violent storm came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up.”

St. Mark has the most vivid and lifelike account of what happened. He gives evidence of dependence on an eyewitness; actually St. Mark is the fortunate recorder of St. Peter’s sermons. And it was probably in St. Peter’s boat that this event took place (compare Lk 5:1-3).

The Sea of Galilee is 685 feet below sea level and is surrounded by mountains almost on all sides. Particularly at night “as evening drew on” a storm can quickly develop: as warm air from around the sea rises, cool air rushes down from the mountains to take its place, often causing a violent wind. At the northern end of the sea there are valleys to the east and west, which help to funnel the wind over the water. Within the matter of a half-hour the normally glassy surface can be transformed into a choppy sea whose waves develop to seven or eight feet, more than enough to be a danger to light fishing crafts.

The Fathers of the Church see in the boat tossed upon the waters a symbol of the Church subjected to persecutions and trials.

“Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion.” The cushion was the helmsman’s seat on the high afterdeck, where Jesus would have been protected from the splash of the waves.

This simple remark of Jesus being asleep brings out the true humanity of Jesus. He was so tired

after the hard day that neither the noise of the storm nor the waves breaking over the boat awakened him. A few minutes later, the same Jesus who was human, tired, and sleepy, proved himself Lord of the elements—proved himself to be God. The two natures in Jesus, the human and divine, were so perfectly united in the one person that the divinity took nothing away from the humanity. His human nature was like unto ours in all things save sin (Heb 4:15)—nor did his humanity impede his divinity in any way.

The ability of Jesus to sleep peacefully and untroubled is a sign of perfect trust in the sustaining and protective power of God. Jesus' sound sleep is a manifestation of his complete trust and abandonment to his Father's loving care and protection. This attitude, which we are called to have, is known as self-abandonment to divine providence.

But the Apostles had reached the point of desperation. They were losing the battle against the storm and the sea—the boat was dangerously filling up with water. So “they woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’”

The disciples mistake Jesus' untroubled faith and trust in his Father for careless indifference and woke him with a rebuke. The danger gets too much even for these professional fishermen who know the lake in all its moods. They cry out in terror and indignation to the teacher at his apparent indifference to their plight. The tones of men in mortal danger are unmistakable.

“He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ The wind ceased and there was a great calm.” Jesus is here depicted as exercising power over wind and sea. In the Christian community this event was seen as a sign of Jesus' saving presence amid persecutions that threatened its existence.

Jesus' calming the sea may be meant to recall the Old Testament theme of God's control over the

chaotic water: Ps 65:8; 89:10; 93:3-4; 107:28-29. This is expressed in today's first reading when God tells Job that it is he who “shut within doors the sea...set limits for it and fastened the bar of its door and said: Thus far shall you come but no further, and here shall your proud waves be still!”

The image of a storm or of the great waters was frequently used as a metaphor for the evil forces active in the world, and particularly for the tribulations of the righteous; only the power of God could save them from these. The ability to control the sea and subdue tempests was regarded as one of the characteristic signs of divine power.

The religious implication of the miracle of Jesus calming the storm is seen in its Old Testament background, where God's work in creation is described as a conquest of the sea or sea dragon and paralleled by his deliverance of Israel. Here Jesus shows the same divine mastery over the sea in his own redemptive ministry.

But there were sometimes moments of national or personal disaster in the Old Testament when it almost seemed as if God had lost interest in his people and had ceased to watch over them. At such times they would speak of God as being “asleep”, and they did not hesitate to call upon him to “wake up” and busy himself to help them: Ps 44:23-27; 35:23-24; Is 51:9-10.

At times it might almost seem as if Jesus was asleep while the ark of his Church was being buffeted by waves of persecution and suffering. But from the event of today's Gospel, his disciples could learn that he was in fact by no means indifferent in response to their prayer—even if it was not accompanied by perfect faith; he would arise and deal with the forces arrayed against them, no matter how powerful those forces might seem to be; for was he not armed with the power of God himself?

Here we see the power of God's word operating through Jesus. If we take this word in and absorb it through daily meditation we will receive its

power to overcome the evil forces that arise within us as violent storms.

Jesus asked his disciples, “Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?” Jesus is surprised at their lack of trust in his power after all the miracles they have already seen him perform. He cleansed a leper, cured the paralyzed servant and Peter’s mother-in-law, exorcized demons—he cured all the sick (Mt 8:1-17). He could save others, could he not save himself and them whom he had chosen to be his helpers only a short time ago?

“They were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?’”

Once awake, Jesus performed the characteristically divine act (stilling the waves with a word of rebuke), and the disciples were now filled with a different kind of fear and awe—they realized that they were in the presence of one who disposed of power nothing less than divine.

Their dawning realization is expressed in the form of a question and the early Christian congregations would have had a ready answer. They will have seen in the story evidence that Jesus was, in fact, God—for they would have viewed this event in light of the resurrection when Jesus demonstrated his definitive, divine power even over death itself.

In biblical thought, God alone can control the waters of the sea and the storm. Furthermore, these elements can be the image and the home of evil powers; here Jesus “exorcises” these infernal forces. The disciples have seen a work that only God can accomplish. In the light of their monotheistic faith they must ask, in awe and perplexity, who this man is who can do a work of God. During the storm the disciples had failed in that confidence in God of which the tranquil sleep of the Master was a visible sign. However, Jesus reprimands them for their lack of confidence in his person (see Jn 14:1). By his tranquil sleep,

his gentle reproach and his stilling of the storm, Jesus exhorts his disciples to have trust in him at all times and in all circumstances.

We have an important lesson to learn as we journey across the sea of time to the shore of eternity. During that crossing all who come to the use of reason encounter some storms. There is no smooth, calm crossing for anyone. This is the will of God. Jesus knew that a storm was going to blow that night in the Sea of Galilee. He allowed his disciples to face that terrifying ordeal, because he wanted his future church to have confidence in his divine power and assistance when tribulations and persecutions would seem to be on the point of ending her forever.

Down through the centuries, the Church of God has had to face storms and trials which would have swamped her if she had not a divine Founder and Protector. Jesus, however, kept his promise: the gates of hell cannot prevail against her. She survived the storms and as a consequence of them, gained new vigor and strength. That same divine guarantee which Jesus gave his Church will be with her until the last human being on earth has entered heaven.

St. Augustine tells us that the episode at sea signifies the drama of the Christian life. All of God’s children embark with Christ on a life that is full of dangerous storms, especially attacks from evil spirits and temptations of the flesh. We must learn to trust in Jesus daily, since he alone can restrain these forces and bring us to the safe harbor of salvation. God allows these storms to benefit us. They test us: they help us see how strong or weak we are. As we struggle and resist these various temptations, we become stronger in fortitude and in our commitment to Jesus. We are like athletes, who increase their strength through new exercises in endurance and increasing degrees of needed force. When we fail, we can grow in humility and dependence on God. By relying on him, we draw divine power to overcome our weaknesses.

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 5:21-43

“When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered around him, and he stayed close to the sea.” “The other side” refers to the western shore of the Sea of Galilee; this occurred during the first months of Jesus’ public ministry. Yet he was already attracting large crowds of people.

“One of the synagogue officials, named Jairus, came forward.” At the head of each synagogue was the archisynagoge, whose function it was to organize the meetings of the synagogue on Sabbaths and holy days, to lead the prayers and hymns and to indicate who should explain the Sacred Scripture. He was assisted in his task by a council and also had an aide who looked after the material side of things. So we see that in a case of dire need, even high-ranking Jews would humbly acknowledge Jesus.

“Seeing him he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him...” The majesty of Jesus must have been impressive for the leader of the synagogue to fall at Jesus’ feet in this way. But he was in a desperate situation and did his utmost to bring his daughter’s plight to Jesus’ attention. He must have loved his daughter greatly to forget his own prestige and humble himself to such an extreme in order to obtain Jesus’ help.

He said, “My daughter is at the point of death. Please, come lay your hand on her that she may get well and live.” [Jesus] went off with him, and a large crowd followed him and pressed upon him.” Jairus was convinced that power for good emanated from the Person of Jesus. This power would be transmitted through Jesus’ hands as he lay them on his dying daughter. Meanwhile, however, the story of this event is interrupted.

“There was a woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years. She had suffered greatly at the hands of many doctors and had spent all that she

had. Yet she was not helped but only grew worse. She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. She said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I shall be cured.’ Immediately her flow of blood dried up. She felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction.”

The issue of blood made the woman legally unclean (Lev 15:25-27). It would have been embarrassing for her to tell her affliction to Jesus in the presence of the crowd. The people might have driven her away and ill treated one who exposed them to the danger of contracting legal defilement. Consequently, she had recourse to this means whereby she hoped to secure the benefit of Christ’s miraculous power without being observed.

In addition to her physical suffering—which had gone on for twelve years—she suffered the shame of feeling unclean according to the Law. Everything she touched became unclean as well. Therefore, in order not to be noticed by the people, the woman came up to Jesus from behind and, out of delicacy, touched only his garment. Her faith is enriched by her expression of humility: she is conscious of being unworthy to touch Jesus.

The woman believes that the mere touching of Jesus’ garments will achieve her cure. Her faith is evident, but it is still imperfect. She believes that Jesus possessed a supernatural power of healing which somehow resided in him and could flow from him without his being aware of it. The rest of the story will show that he is conscious of and in control of the power he wields. But her strong belief enabled her to take the risk involved in reaching out towards Jesus and ultimately establishing a bond with him.

“Jesus, aware at once that power had gone out from him, turned around in the crowd and asked, ‘Who has touched my clothes?’ But his disciples said to [Jesus], ‘You see how the crowd is pressing upon you, and yet you ask, “Who touched me?”’ And he looked around to see who had done it.”

With a huge crowd surging and pushing on him and trying to get near him, this seemed a strange question as the disciples remarked, but Jesus wished to show that he was able to distinguish a touch which brought healing, because of the faith that inspired it from all the other casual touches. One touch on Jesus' clothing effected what many physicians had been unable to do for her over a period of twelve years.

The question, "Who has touched my clothes?" was intended to make it clear to the woman that she had not obtained the cure as an automatic or magical result of contact with Jesus' garment without his knowledge or consent. The miracle was granted in answer to the faith of which she had given such striking proof.

Jesus, of course, knew by supernatural knowledge who had touched him. His action in looking around to see her who had done this, and the question, are to be understood in the light of his experienced knowledge. He had assumed a real human nature at the Incarnation; and by the use of his senses and intelligence, acquired knowledge experientially in the same way as other men.

The woman's faith led her to touch Jesus; through that physical contact and faith, she drew healing power from Jesus to cure her and remove her legal uncleanness. Though others would be defiled by physical contact with a person legally unclean, Jesus conquers the uncleanness by the greater power of his holiness.

"The woman, realizing what had happened to her, approached in fear and trembling. She fell down before Jesus and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction.'"

Jesus' question, "Who touched me?" and his look have the power to make the woman come forward and confess. It is only when, in fear and trembling, she has personally come into the presence of Jesus that her action is approved and her cure confirmed. Her action gains approval

of Jesus because what she had in fact relied on for release from her plague was the one thing that people are meant to rely on for release from all the ailments of society. To rely on Jesus and his works still available in his Church is faith; and through faith, people can have salvation or wholeness from all their sins and the evils which result from them. What happened to the woman is thus an example of salvation by faith.

This interpretation of the woman's faith and the deed it prompted provide the point of return to the main story. The father's original request had shown his faith in Jesus, but it was faith in his power to heal the sick; now the news of his daughter's death poses the question of faith in Jesus' power to raise the dead.

Returning to the Gospel text we read, "While he was still speaking, people from the synagogue official's house arrived and said, 'Your daughter has died; why trouble the teacher any longer?' Disregarding the message that was reported, Jesus said to the synagogue official, 'Do not be afraid; just have faith.'"

The messengers did not think that Jesus could restore the girl to life. Jesus, however, reassured Jairus; all will be well if his faith remains unshaken.

The words of the messengers show that they have no such faith; seeing that the child is actually dead, there can be no point in troubling the Teacher further. Even his power, it is implied, cannot be expected to deal with death.

This reminds us of the attitude of Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus (Jn 11). If Jesus had been there before their brother died, they are convinced that something could have been done, but now that Lazarus is actually dead, they have no hope that even the power of Jesus can be of any avail. Their hopeless attitude finds expression in weeping for the dead; and likewise in our story those who share the faithless attitude of the messengers fall to ritual lamentation for the child.

“[Jesus] did not allow anyone to accompany him inside except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James.” These were the three Apostles who were privileged to be witnesses of the glory of Jesus at the transfiguration and were also his companions at his agony in Gethsemane. These were the leaders among the Apostles; he wants to teach them about the mystery of his Person and the powers within him.

“When they arrived at the house of the synagogue official, he caught sight of a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.”

Even in those days they could tell when a person had definitely died and was not in a comma. They simply had stopped breathing and the signs of life departed. The professional mourners were not sent for until it was certain that a person had died. The scornful laughter of those present reflects their certainty that the child was indeed dead.

“So [Jesus] went in and said to them, ‘Why this commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but asleep and they ridiculed him. Then he put them all out.’”

Sleep is a biblical metaphor for death (see Dan 12:2; 1 Thes 5:10). Jesus’ statement is not a denial of the child’s real death, but an assurance that she will be roused from her sleep of death. The New Testament often refers to death as sleep: Mt 27:52; Jn 11:11; 1 Cor 15:6; 1 Thes 4:13-15. Death is like sleep to God; he can easily awaken us to life. Bodily death is like sleep from which we awake in God. The person lives on: his soul is immortal. When death comes, we shall close our eyes on this life and awake to real life, a supreme life that lasts forever.

The Christian usage of sleeping for death is based on the certain fact of the resurrection. All those who are now in our cemeteries will be awakened one day. Our word cemetery comes from the Greek word for dormitory or sleeping place.

“[Jesus] took along the child’s father and mother

and those who were with him and entered the room where the child was. He took the child by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha Koum,’ which means, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise!’ The girl, a child of twelve, arose immediately and walked around. At that they were utterly astounded.”

The raising of Jairus’ daughter demonstrates Christ’s divinity. Jesus does not refer to any superior power; his authority is sovereign: all he has to do is give the order and the daughter of Jairus is brought back to life; this shows that he is God. Here, we see the power of Jesus’ Person and life-giving word and why we must take that word in through meditation and receive Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

The word used for “arose” is the same word used for the resurrection of Jesus. The miracle of raising the little girl from death to life demonstrates to us our own resurrection from death.

The human heart recoils in anguish from death, but we are comforted by the knowledge that Jesus destroyed death. It is no longer the event that man must fear above all else. For the believer, death is the necessary step from this world to the Father.

We must fear offending God and committing mortal sin that separates us from him. Sin is real death—for it separates us from the source of life; it kills the divine life of the soul.

The eyewitnesses were “utterly astounded”: they have seen a marvel wholly exceptional and unexpected. Such a miracle bolsters our faith in the power of Jesus to raise us up after we have died to eternal life. Jesus raises the dead girl to life because he is the “resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25). For St. Mark, Jesus is the Son of God already mediating the power of his resurrection; he is the Lord, the source of saving power. The passage shows us the salvation that faith produces.

Faith comes to fulfillment through personal encounters with Jesus. The Christian is asked to recognize that faith in Jesus can transform life

and give us victory over death. But this faith is not something vague or impersonal. One must come to him, seek him out; one must kneel at his feet with the intensity of one's pleading with humility.

"[Jesus] gave strict orders that no one should know this..." Jesus imposes silence upon those who were present because he wants to avoid exciting the crowds and being taken as a worldly Messiah. He does not want his spiritual work to be impeded; his purpose on earth is to proclaim the kingdom of God; the miracle signifies that it has at last arrived and is being established.

What Jesus did for the woman and little girl are examples of what he does for us through the Church, the initial budding forth of his kingdom.

"Jesus' words and actions...announced and prepared what he was going to give the Church when all was accomplished. The mysteries of Christ's life are the foundations of what he would henceforth dispense in the sacraments, through the ministries of his Church for 'what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries'" (CCC 1115); "...it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments" (1120); "...in them Christ himself is at work" (1127); "...from the moment that a sacrament is celebrated...the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it" (1128); "The Spirit heals and transforms those who receive him by conforming them to the Son of God" (1129).

Finally, we read in today's Gospel, "[Jesus] said that she should be given something to eat." He shows himself to be sensitive to human need. The young girl is so completely restored to life and perfect health she immediately begins to walk around and needs to eat. See what Jairus' love for his daughter and faith in Jesus has done to save her. With such love and faith in Jesus' power to save we can be confident that our loved ones—those we are concerned about—will be restored to health and the fullness of life.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 6:1-6

"Jesus departed from there and came to his native place, accompanied by his disciples."

Jesus had been preaching and working miracles in Galilee for many months. He had spent most of the time in towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee. He had made Capernaum the headquarters of his Galilean mission, but Nazareth was his hometown. Before leaving Galilee, he paid a visit to Nazareth. In paying this visit to Nazareth, Jesus' purpose was to preach the kingdom of God. He was accompanied by the disciples.

"When the Sabbath came he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished." On the Sabbath, most of the Jews attended a service of bible reading with a sermon and prayers in their local synagogue, very similar to our liturgy of the word in our Mass—which derives from the synagogue service. Synagogue means a gathering place.

The people were astonished at his teaching. Up until he began his public life, he had kept his identity hidden. They did not realize the depth of his wisdom nor the power and authority with which he spoke. We are reminded of the temple guards who could not bring themselves to arrest Jesus because, they explained, "Never before has anyone spoken like this one" (Jn 7:46). Jesus spoke from the depth of his heart and needed no other authority to bolster the truth. The truth that he spoke came directly from his Father to whom he was deeply united. His words, therefore, were full of wisdom. He had been pondering the mysteries of God throughout his hidden life. As a boy, his parents "found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers" (Lk 2:46-47). In silence and solitude, he had been preparing for his mission to reveal the kingdom of God. He must have kept his deep insights into

truth well hidden, for it came as a total surprise to the people of his hometown.

“They said, ‘Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are wrought by his hands!’ The people were surprised to hear such wisdom coming from the mouth of Jesus because they knew that he had not attended a rabbinical school.

But Jesus knew the Scriptures well. We remember how he quoted the Scriptures to counteract the devil’s misinterpretation of them (Mt 4:3-10). Much of Jesus’ wisdom came through infused knowledge when he was in deep prayer. This helps us to understand what was taking place when he would rise “very early before dawn” and go off to “a deserted place, where he prayed” (Mk 1:35); or he would go to the mountain to pray, and “he spent the night in prayer” (Lk 6:12). In this way, he opened himself to “the Father of lights” (Jms 1:17) where he received divine enlightenment for his mission of teaching and preaching.

Jesus’ fellow townsmen had also heard of the extraordinary miracles he had worked around the other towns of Galilee; they had also heard of the huge crowds that listened to his preaching.

But they asked, “Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?” And they took offense at him.” These questions reflect the change from admiration of Jesus to skepticism and ill will. He had returned to Nazareth with the reputation of a prophet and wonderworker, but his townsmen took offense. Their attitude was that they knew his relatives and his own humble way of life too well to accept him as a divinely appointed teacher. There seems to be a widespread discontent that one whose ties are so close—he was a commoner just like them—should be coming to such prominence. Enthusiasm yields first to skepticism, resentment, then to opposition and disbelief.

What could have caused such a change? The

people of Nazareth had heard nothing but marvelous reports of Jesus’ wonderful preaching and outstanding miracles. One would therefore expect that if they were at all reasonable, they would rejoice on having one of the fellow citizens admired by thousands and looked upon by so many as the long-promised Messiah. Instead, they turned against him in bitter hatred. Apparently pride and envy must have proceeded to blind their hearts and minds. Why should a neighbor’s son, and one of a lower status than many of them—a mere carpenter, be given this privilege while their sons were passed over? This could not be, their envy told them, and so they shut their minds against any proof to the contrary.

It was the same later in the case of the Pharisees. The same vices, pride and envy, darkened their intellects and prevented them from seeing the truth. They were the religious leaders of the people, or so they thought themselves to be. If the Messiah had come, they felt that he should have come through them and with their approval. This imposter, Jesus, could not possibly be the Messiah. Not only was he not keeping the Law as strictly as they kept it, but he was friendly with sinners and tax collectors. Furthermore, he was talking of some faraway kingdom in heaven not of the earthly empire, which they decided the real Messiah would establish.

They had not only heard of his extraordinary miracles, but also had seen some of those who were cured. In Bethany, only a few miles from Jerusalem, Lazarus had been raised to life after four days in the grave. They tried very hard to deny these miracles (see Jn 9: the man born blind), and they even thought of killing Lazarus to make people forget the miracle (Jn 12:11). Thus, their pride and envy made them irrational. This helps us to understand what seems to have happened to the people of Nazareth. They were not able to transcend the natural barrier of familiarity or overcome the obstacles of envy and pride to move on to supernatural faith in Jesus.

This episode marks the dramatic and tragic end of Jesus' Galilean ministry foreshadowing the greater rejection of Israel. At the same time, it signals a new phase of the ministry in which the twelve will play a more active role (6:7-13, 30) as an anticipation of the mission of the apostolic Church, especially toward those outside Judaism (see 7:1-23; 24-30; 8:1-10).

Jesus is called "the carpenter". This is the only passage in the Gospels which reveals this fact of the hidden life of Christ. St. Matthew describes Jesus as "the carpenter's son" (Mt 13:55). We can suppose here that Joseph passed on to Jesus his own professional skill as a craftsman. So we see that Jesus made a living for himself and Mary by hard work after Joseph died. He was a common laborer. We learn from this that physical labor is part of God's providential plan to perfect us in virtue and bring us to salvation. Much strength and painstaking effort is needed to complete the work at hand. We co-create with God. In silence, we work in his presence, in his company, in prayerful communion. We overcome selfishness and self-centeredness as we do God's will and work for the good of others.

Jesus is called "the son of Mary". This is the only New Testament text that calls Jesus "the son of Mary". It was Jewish custom to refer to a man as the son of his father (see Lk 3:23; 4:22; Jn 1:45; 6:42).

The form of expression, "the son of Mary", in Greek indicates that Jesus was the only son of Mary. This expression may reflect Mark's own faith that God is the Father of Jesus (Mk 1:1, 11; 8:38; 13:32; 14:36). St. Mark does not deal with Jesus' infancy, but there may be an allusion here to his virginal conception and birth in his being described as "the son of Mary". This is also an indication that Joseph had already died.

Jesus is called "the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon". Mention is also made of "his sisters". What are we to make of this?

The word "brother" does not necessarily mean son of the same parents. It can also indicate other degrees of relationships: cousins, nephews, etc. Thus in Gen 13:8 and 14:14, 16, Lot is called the brother of Abraham, whereas we know that he was Abraham's nephew, the son of Abraham's brother Haran (Gen 11:27). The same is true of Laban, who is called the brother of Jacob (Gen 29:15), although he was his mother's brother (Gen 29:15); there are other instances (1 Chron 23:21-22, etc.). This confusion is due to the poverty of Hebrew and Aramaic language: in the absence of distinct terms, the same word, brother, is used to designate different degrees of relationship.

From other Gospel passages, we know that James and Joses, who are mentioned here, were sons of Mary of Clopas (Jn 19:25). We know less about Judas and Simon: it seems that they are the Apostles, Simon the Cananean (Mt 10:4) and Judas, the son of James (Lk 6:16), the author of the universal epistle, in which he describes himself as "brother" of James. In any event, although James, Simon, and Judas are referred to as brothers of Jesus, it is nowhere said they are "sons of Mary", which would have been the natural thing if they had been Jesus' brothers in the strict sense.

Jesus always appears as an only son: to the people of Nazareth, he is "the son of Mary" (Mt 13:55). When he was dying, Jesus entrusted his mother to St. John (Jn 19:26-27), which shows that Mary had no other children. To this is added the constant belief of the Church, which regards Mary as the ever-virgin. This is the Church's Tradition of the first four centuries. From the beginning, she was always given the name "virgin". St. Jerome, writing in AD 383 states, "It is difficult to understand how the doctrine of the virginity of Mary could have grown up early in the second century if her four acknowledged sons were prominent Christians, and one of them bishop of Jerusalem."

The Gospel of today continues, "Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in

his own house.” Jesus answered the skepticism of the people of Nazareth with a proverb, which is a particular application of the familiar truth that familiarity and envy create a prejudice against one who is well known. His words disclose the real reason for the offense they have taken at him; it also affirms his own claim to be a prophet.

Comparing himself to previous Hebrew prophets, whom the people rejected, Jesus intimates his own eventual rejection by the nation. This is true in view of the dishonor his own relatives had shown him (Mk 3:21) and now his townspeople as well.

It is interesting to note in view of our explanation of Jesus’ brothers and sisters that he says, “A prophet is not without honor except...among his own kin” rather than his own family (see Mk 3:21).

Today’s Gospel passage comes to a conclusion with, “So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.”

Jesus’ power of working miracles was restricted and limited only by their lack of faith and their envy. The majority of them had made themselves unworthy to receive a miracle. Jesus worked miracles only in response to faith in himself; these miracles were signs of the arrival of the kingdom. If this faith were lacking, the miracle would have no significance. He lacked, then, opportunity rather than power at Nazareth. Jesus’ power to work miracles was not limited or lost, but faith, which his townsmen lacked, was normally demanded for the exercise of this power. But there were a few people who had faith in Jesus, and he healed them.

Jesus’ amazement at their lack of faith was real; the attitude of his townsmen was something new in his human experience.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time Mk 6:7-13

“Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits.”

A new phase of Jesus’ ministry begins; rejected by his own townspeople, he devotes himself to his disciples, whose mission is being prepared. In this new period of Jesus’ Galilean ministry, he shared his preaching, exorcisms, and healings with the Twelve.

The disciples’ activities are an extension of Jesus’ ministry of proclaiming God’s kingdom in word and deed. In the days before mass media, religious and philosophical ideas were propagated mainly by traveling missionaries. Thus, in the early church, the instructions given in verses 8-11 have served as a checklist for missionaries and for those whose hospitality they sought. The thrust of these sayings is the subordination of material and physical concerns to the task of preaching God’s kingdom.

Jesus had chosen the Twelve to be with him and that he might send them to preach. They had been in his company for a considerable time; and as a further step in their preparation for the task which lay before them, they are now directly associated with his personal ministry. In order to lend authority to their message of repentance, Jesus gave them power over the unclean spirits. Until now, he had concentrated on instructing them. But he has chosen them to be sent out to preach. The time had come for them to take an active part in the ministry.

This occurred while Jesus was on his third tour of the towns and villages. In the midst of this tour, the Twelve assume their full apostolic identity and thus fulfill what was anticipated in Mk 3:14-15. They are “called” and “sent out” by Jesus; they are “authorized” by Jesus, invested with his own

authority. They are an extension of Jesus himself in their preaching, exorcising of demons, and healing the sick; and they report back to him upon completion of their mission 30. All of this reflects the Old Testament practice (2 Chron 17:7-10).

Jesus' missioning of the Twelve was a practical measure dictated by a present need. The Twelve could be his presence in many places at one time in proclaiming the kingdom here and now. Hence they were empowered to do precisely what he was doing: preach, heal, and exorcise: the signs of the advent of the kingdom of God.

Up until now, the Apostles had sat at Jesus' feet; they had heard his doctrine and seen his miracles. They had received that they might give; they had learned that they might teach; and therefore, now Jesus began to send them forth. They must not always be studying in the academy to get knowledge. Though they were not as yet so well accomplished as they were to be; yet according to their present ability and capacity, they must be set to work and make further improvements afterward. This is proper during their time of formation. Their mission is a training exercise for leadership in the Church.

Jesus sends the Apostles out in pairs according to Jewish custom (see Lk 7:18; Jn 1:37) for mutual assistance and support. In this way, they were the more apt to face dangers and overcome their fears. They will encourage each other. They will edify each other with good example and the word of God. Their very presence together brings Jesus' presence among them. Jesus is in their midst when they gather in his name (Mt 18:20), and when they pray in agreement, the Father will hear them and answer their prayer (Mt 18:19). And each needs the other to express and direct Christian love through service and Christian affection. In this way, they can continue the fellowship of the Holy Trinity: like the Father and the Son, they spirate the Love that is the Holy Spirit (1Jn 4:12).

The Apostles were given authority over unclean

spirits. They were called unclean because of their resistance to the holiness of God (see Mk 1:23 and footnote). We must resist them because they will contaminate us with sin and evil; we then become morally unclean. It is especially through the sacrament of Penance that the authority of the Apostles and their successors exercise their authority over unclean spirits.

"[Jesus] instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick—no food, no sack, no money in their belts. They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic." The lack of concern for material comforts on the journey reflects the urgency of the disciples' task and the trust in God that it demands. They are to take nothing with them for the journey, no food, no bag to carry provisions, no money to buy food, no change of clothes. In their ministry, the Apostles are to be like Jesus. They are to depend wholly on those to whom they are sent for their livelihood, taking no food, no begging bag, no small change, and no extra clothing. They are to be itinerant beggars going from house to house. A bag or pouch would hold a substantial sum of money, whereas the money in a belt would be a relatively small amount. All sources of financial security are forbidden.

The meaning of these instructions is that they are to undertake their task in a spirit of complete detachment from material or personal considerations with entire trust in divine providence. The verbal discrepancy between Mark, which allows a staff and sandals, and Matthew and Luke, which forbid shoes and even a staff, does not affect the sense. Each one of the Evangelists wished to convey that Christ had commanded the Apostles to take nothing more than was needed for immediate use.

Jesus requires the Apostles to be free of any form of attachment if they are to preach the Gospel. A disciple, who has the mission of bringing the kingdom of God to souls through preaching, should not rely on human resources, but on

God's providence. Whatever he does need in order to live with dignity as a herald of the Gospel, he must obtain from those who benefit from his preaching, for the laborer deserves his maintenance (Mt 10:10).

St. Bede says, "The preacher should so trust in God that he is convinced that he will have everything he needs to support life, even if he cannot himself obtain it—for he should not neglect eternal things through worrying about temporal things."

The Apostles are sent on tour in pairs, wearing only what they stand up in, so that they are bound to rely on the hospitality of those to whom they are sent. This became one of the recognized principles in the Church's pastoral work. The saying "the worker earns his keep" (Mt 10:10) and in Luke's account in the mission of the 72 (Lk 10:7) is repeated in 1 Tim 5:18. So, too, in Acts 16:15, Paul and his companions accept an invitation from a woman named Lydia at Philippi to stay in her house while they are evangelizing in the town. In 1 Cor 9 and 2 Cor 12:13 and following, Paul admits that, in special circumstances, he kept himself independent: but he has to defend his action. He did it because he was evidently being accused of making money out of the Gospel, and therefore had to avoid giving any handle for his critics. In general, the Christian principle is not proud independence, but a willingness to accept the risk and obligation of mutual dependence.

Later on, toward the end of his ministry, Jesus asked the Apostles, "When I sent you forth without a money bag or a sack or sandals, were you in need of anything?" "No, nothing," they replied." Now, however, when facing a hostile world, Jesus proceeds to tell them, "But now one who has a money bag should take it, and likewise a sack, and one who does not have a sword should sell his cloak and buy one" (Lk 22:36). In other words, in contrast to the ministry of the Twelve and of the seventy-two during the period of Jesus (Lk 9:3; 10:4), in the future period of the Church, the missionaries must be prepared for

the opposition they will face in a world hostile to their preaching (see NAB footnote to Lk 22:36).

Continuing with Jesus' instructions in the Gospel today, Jesus said to the Apostles, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave." Traveling missionaries depended on local hospitality. This command was intended to prevent "social climbing", that is, spending undue time and energy in search for better accommodations. (Traveling missionaries presented problems for the local communities, as the Didache 11:4-5 indicates with its counsel that an Apostle is to be welcomed for a day or two, but after that further stay suggests that he is a false prophet.)

But generally speaking, remaining in the same house as a guest rather than moving to another offering greater comfort avoided any impression of seeking advantage for oneself and prevented dishonor to one's host. Changing from one house to another would lay them open to the charge of inconstancy and be likely to cause jealousies and contentions.

Jesus further instructed the Apostles, "Whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, leave there and shake the dust off your feet in testimony against them." This is a symbolic act of judgment for those who reject the Apostles' preaching. It is a testimony or proof that they are condemned for rejecting Jesus' envoys and their message of salvation. This action signifies that the place is as good as heathen and unclean. Jews shook off heathen dust on re-entering Palestine. The idea would be that the inhospitable town does not belong to the true Israel.

The disciples are directed to take symbolic action only, not violent reprisal; that action had the vital function of provoking thought among the local people; the gesture is intended to make them think again and lead them to repentance. It conveys the idea that the inhabitants are now responsible for their own fate.

The urgency of their mission is also communicated by this action. The Apostles must not waste their time with those who are unreceptive to their message. There are some who are favorably disposed who are awaiting them.

After Jesus had finished instructing the Apostles, “they went off and preached repentance.” In Jesus, God and the gift of his kingdom is approaching. To be receptive, people must turn away from their sinful, selfish ways. They must reform their lives: they must avoid self-seeking and self-indulgence and begin to seek God in prayer and obedience to his word. They must become God-centered instead of self-centered and so change their sinful ways of behavior and life-styles that cater to the flesh, corruption, and eternal damnation.

The Gospel tells us, “The Twelve drove out many demons.” This was a sign that the kingdom of God and its power for good was arriving in Jesus and the authority he shared with the Apostles and the church he was establishing. This driving out of demons continues to this day, particularly in the sacrament of Penance. All of this is carried on quietly in the confessional where people are freed from the power of the evil one. Their sins are forgiven and they are freed from his horrendous grasp. They may then walk in the joy of God’s presence again.

The Gospel ends with “They anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” Oil was a common medicinal remedy, but it is seen here as a vehicle of divine power for healing. The curative powers of the disciples prolong those of Jesus. In the anointing with oil the Church sees a prefigurement of the sacramental anointing of the sick. Oil was commonly used at the time in dressing wounds (Lk 10:34). Here, however, it is clear that there is question of an anointing, which has results far beyond those customarily associated with ordinary medical treatment. The Apostles were apparently acting in accord with a definite instruction of Jesus. The anointing, which they practiced, foreshadowed the sacrament of

the sick in somewhat the same way as baptism by the Apostles during Christ’s life (Jn 4:2) foreshadowed the sacrament of Baptism.

St. Mark is the only evangelist who speaks of anointing the sick with oil. According to the council of Trent, the sacrament of the anointing of the sick is “suggested” by the text. Whether or not this episode marks the formal institution of the sacrament, it is clear that the disciples’ ministry anticipates its future administration in the life of the Church.

St. James recommends and promulgates its use to the faithful. This is what he says, “Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven” (Jms 5:14-15).

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 6:30-34

“The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught.”

This is the only place in Mark where the Twelve are called “apostles”; Mark’s usual name for them being “disciples”. Here, “apostles” means “those who were sent” out to preach repentance. “The apostles gathered together with Jesus” is a model and ideal for us. “Where two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus said, “there am I in their midst” (Mt 18:20). The Apostles really had nothing over us. In a sense, we have a better Jesus than they had: their Jesus was not yet glorified with the fullness that will bring him to the whole Church. We have the glorified Jesus who said, “I am with you always” (Mt 28:20). “[I]n him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily, and you share in this fullness in him” (Col 2:9-10). We were immersed in him at baptism (Rom 6:3) for a continuous union and “being with” him. We,

“the church”, are “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23 RSV). It is profitable for us to be aware of his presence with and in us. But for that we must live in him by always doing his will. The writings of the New Testament also aim at directing us to live according to the spirit (compare Gal 5:16-25). Then we are disposed and able to know Jesus’ presence in us. The wonder of the resurrection and the glorified Jesus is that he can be present to each of us at all times in every place.

The Apostles “reported all they had done and taught”. We remember that they had been sent on a mission to call people to repentance in order to receive the kingdom of God soon to appear in the Messiah. They were in formation and needed to give an account of themselves; in this way, Jesus could critique their activities. They would learn from his wisdom and improve their technique in the apostolate. This is part of our format in the Come, Lord Jesus! meeting. We are called to give an account of ourselves as we answer the question, “How did you witness your faith this last week?” We take seriously Jesus’ words, “You are to be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). In relating what we “did and taught”, we are only following the example of the Apostles who returned to give an account of themselves. We need such discipline because human nature tends to take the easy way out, shirking our responsibility. The Second Vatican Council tells us, “The apostolate of the Church and of all her members is primarily designed to manifest Christ’s message by words and deeds and to communicate his grace to the world. An apostolate of this kind does not consist only in witness of one’s way of life; a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words.... ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel’ (1 Cor 9:16)” (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Art 6). The Come, Lord Jesus! Program is only trying to help its members carry out Jesus’ command.

Jesus said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” It is not good for one to work all the time! We need a break from the tension and stress of continuously applying ourselves to work. That is why the Lord himself established Sunday as a day

of rest. We need to relax our faculties and refresh ourselves so we can undertake our activities anew on Monday. Work is good for us; it perfects us in virtue and self-discipline. But the body and mind also need to rest in order to restore their energies and powers that have been exhausted by labor.

In this way, we can devote our attention to family and faith life. We need time for prayer and worship. We must foster our spiritual life through sacred reading and meditation. We notice that Jesus took his Apostles to a “deserted place”, away from the luxury and pleasures that would foster the life of the flesh. Jesus carefully led them to a place free from distractions and objects that would stir the senses, so they could focus on spiritual realities. We must do the same on a daily basis as well as special times of retreat and recollection. We must be attentive to the needs of the spirit and give it substantial nourishment by prayer, the word of God, the Holy Eucharist, holy hours, sharing spiritual insights with those of kindred spirits, retreats, examination of conscience, spending time alone with God....

Many find solitude very difficult to endure. Perhaps it is because the ego and the self are too demanding; there are too many noises springing from self-centered desires to be able to enjoy the love and peace that radiate from the divine presence. These multitudinous wants and desires make the wayward self a living hell. It is no wonder, then, that silence and solitude are feared and avoided at all costs. The unredeemed self is a horror to be escaped, hence the need for ceaseless talk and distraction through the images and sounds provided by the media. Anything to drown out the uncomfortable experience of the turbulent self.

The Gospel tells us, “People were coming and going in great numbers, and [Jesus and the apostles] had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place.” The apostolic activity of the Twelve seems to have been very effective. Fresh throngs were coming to Jesus so that he and the Apostles’ time were totally taken up in ministering to them. But Jesus was concerned about his men and himself:

they were exhausted and needed some respite from all this activity. So they retreated by going off in the boat by themselves, attempting to escape the crowd. But that was all in vain: “People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them.”

These people “from all the towns” of Galilee had experienced the presence of Jesus and his comforting words—and they would not be denied him. They stuck to him like glue. There was something of the divine in him which gratified their spirits. So they followed him on foot. They ran with such haste that they outdid the Apostles in their boat. They had never seen or heard anyone like Jesus. The joy of being in his presence turned the desert into a refreshing oasis.

It is the same for us. We must not let anything come between Jesus and us. He provides a joy beyond anything or anyone on this earth. The common people of his day recognized this, so they made great effort to be where he was. Their insistent need touched Jesus.

“When he disembarked and saw the crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

What a disappointment that would have been for us! How resentful we feel when someone frustrates our plans! We usually have no reserved strength of virtue so our resentment can be noticed, at least, if not angrily or dolefully expressed. But Jesus had reserved strength sustained by an infinite love for these, his people. He understood their need. He was able to abstain from his need so he could fulfill theirs. He loved them more than himself. He was like a good parent who cares for the needs of their children before their own.

Instead of manifesting some form of negative behavior, we read that Jesus’ “heart was moved with pity for them”; he had reserved energy to give and love still more. The reason given for his compassion on the crowd is that “they were like

sheep without a shepherd.” So “he began to teach them many things”. His primary concern was to nourish their spirits with the word of God. Knowing the truth nourishes our inner lives. If we are given an understanding of the value of the cross, for example, we are much more capable of endearing patiently the suffering at hand. It’s like the farmer who endures hard work in the hot sun because he knows the reward he will collect at harvest time.

The people were “like sheep without a shepherd”. Sheep without a shepherd cannot find their way; they perish in the wilderness; they get lost; sheep cannot find food and water in the desert; they have no defense against predators such as robbers and wild beasts. So too humans get lost without a divine guide to lead them to God; they need someone to teach them the truth to nourish them and to keep them from erroneous ways; they need someone to protect them from temptations which assail them and the allurements of this world. They need the good shepherd to protect them from the evil one.

The people in Jesus’ day were like those at the time of the prophet Jeremiah mentioned in the first reading. The prophet says, “Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture, says the Lord... you have scattered my sheep and driven them away. You have not cared for them...” Then Jeremiah, speaking for God, makes this marvelous promise, “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock... I will raise up a righteous shoot to David; as king he shall reign and govern wisely, he shall do what is just and right in the land... this is the name they give him: ‘the Lord our justice’”.

God promised, then, to personally shepherd his sheep through the Messiah, Jesus is the shepherd sent by the Father to care for his people. Not only would he now sacrifice his rest to come to their aid, but he would later on, lay down his life for them and for all of us. We, like those people of Galilee, have so much to be grateful for.

The compassionate Christ has had pity on us too, and has brought us into his fold. He knows all our infirmities and all our human weaknesses; and he

is ever ready to have pity on us and pardon us. This should give us great confidence and great encouragement. Jesus has not changed: he is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8). He has the same compassion that he had for those Galileans; we too are often like sheep wandering half-lost through life. He is ever calling us to come to himself so that he will lead us to safe pastures. If only we would listen to his merciful calls.

Psalm 23 in today's response expresses very richly the experience of having Jesus as our shepherd:

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
In verdant pastures he gives me repose,
beside restful waters he leads me;
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me in right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk in the dark valley
I fear no evil; for you are at my side
with your rod and your staff
that give me courage.
You spread the table before me
in the sight of my foes;
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Only goodness and kindness follow me
all the days of my life;
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for years to come."

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jn 6:1-15

"Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee."

This freshwater lake is also known as the Sea of Tiberias or Lake Gennesaret. Jesus and the apostles withdrew near the city of Bethsaida, the area on the northeastern bank of the lake, the birthplace of Peter and Andrew (Jn 1:44). "The Large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick." The crowd of Galileans gathered around him because of Jesus' reputation for miracles. This was not

invariably a good sign. They stopped short of seeing the miracles as "signs" as John calls them, pointing out who Jesus really was: they revealed his divinity, that he was from God and indicated that the kingdom of God had arrived in Jesus. But the people were more concerned about their own needs. They did not think beyond the cures he worked to heal their sick and crippled. The Gospel tells us that "Jesus went up on the mountain and there he sat down with his disciples." The mountain evokes the memory of Sinai where Moses mediated the revelation of the old covenant. This hints at the fact that in Jesus, we have a new Moses who is going to mediate the revelation of the New Covenant. The teachers of Israel sat when they formally taught the people. The synagogues contained the "seat of Moses" from which the scribes and Pharisees expounded the Law (Mt 23:2). This special seat was a sign of the authority of the speaker. Moses taught the Old Law; Jesus came to teach the New Law of grace. The Gospel uses the imagery of Moses to portray Jesus as the new prophet, who, like Moses, was sent from God—to him they must listen (Deut 18:15-19).

"The Jewish feast of Passover was near." The Passover was celebrated annually in Jerusalem to commemorate Israel's deliverance from Egyptian slavery (Ex12). Central to the feast, is the liturgical meal, called a Seder, in which the story of the Exodus is retold, psalms are sung, and a lamb is eaten with unleavened bread and other condiments. The evangelist mentions the upcoming feast to hint that Jesus will give new, greater meaning to the Passover. He is the true "Lamb of God" (Jn 1:29), whose redeeming work will accomplish a new deliverance from the slavery to sin (Jn 8:31-36) in a sacramental and liturgical meal (Jn 6:53-58; 1 Cor 5:7-8). The significance of the Passover, here placed in the background of John 6, will move to the foreground when Jesus transforms this feast into the memorial meal of the New Covenant at the Last Supper (Mt 26:17-29; CCC 1340). Our Gospel continues, "When Jesus raised his eyes and saw a large crowd was coming to him,

he said to Philip, ‘Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?’ He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do.” The allusions to Moses continue in the question that Jesus puts to Philip to test his faith. Moses complained to God, “Where can I get meat to give to all this people?” (Num 11:13) Jesus wishes to offer Philip an opportunity to show whether he will rely on his own natural cleverness or would trust in the power of his master. “Philip answered him, ‘Two hundred day’s wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little.’” Philip’s answer reminds us of Moses’ response to God, “Can enough sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them?” (Num 11:22) But his thinking looks to ordinary means to fulfill this need.

Jesus has compassion on the crowd and wants to care for their physical needs. At the same time, he wishes to perform a sign of the superabundant nourishment God has in store for his people in the bread from heaven he will give them. Philip’s answer betrays no trace of an idea that Jesus literally had resources in his own person to satisfy the deepest needs of people, or to provide food to satisfy their hunger. A denarius was the ordinary working day’s wage (Mt 20:2). So 200 day’s wages was far more than they had or could afford. “One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?’” So the situation, on a natural level, seemed hopeless. Ideally, at such moments, we must look to Jesus for divine assistance. He comes forward to show us what he can do for us in such moments of need. But we ourselves must be as resourceful as we can with our own efforts and ingenuity. He can take what little we have and turn it into sufficiency or even an abundance, which overflows into surplus. Only John mentions the barley, which was used to make bread for the poor and as grain to feed animals. Three of those small flat Palestinian loaves were required to give one person a fairly abundant meal; the supply discovered would have

made a picnic for only two or three, or at most a little for five people. The word translated “fish” was used to describe a dried and pickled fish eaten as a “tit-bit” with bread. But there were five thousand men, not counting women and children, to feed. These barley loaves remind us of the similar miracle of Elisha (see first reading) who multiplies 20 loaves of barley for 100 men with some left over. The miracle of Jesus is comparatively greater: only 5 loaves were multiplied to feed 5000 plus, and much more was left over. Through these conversations with Philip and Andrew, and the miracle he is going to work, Jesus teaches his disciples to trust in him whenever they meet up with difficulties in their apostolic endeavors in the future: they should engage using whatever resources they have—even if they are plainly inadequate, as was the case with the five loaves and two fish. He will supply what is lacking. In the Christian life, we must put what we have at the service of our Lord, even if we do not think it amounts to very much. He can make meager resources productive. “Jesus said, ‘Have the people recline.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in that place. So the men reclined, about five thousand in number.” The abundance of green grass (Mk 6:39) indicates that it was springtime. St. Mark tells us that the apostles got the men to sit in groups of fifty and a hundred (Mk 6:40), evidently to facilitate the distribution of the food. This also made it possible to count the multitude.

“Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining, and also as much of the fish as they wanted.” Giving thanks was the usual Jewish custom before meals. The head of the family, before breaking the bread for the meal, used to “bless” God, that is, he praised him, and gave thanks for having given to the earth the power to produce bread for man’s nourishment. By thanking the Creator he referred the gifts back to their Giver. We may suppose that John purposely wrote the words “gave thanks” in Greek “Eucharistein” to allude to the name of the Eucharist, which name was probably already being used at the end of

the first century to designate the Holy Eucharist. The miracle of the loaves thus foreshadows the institution of this sacrament at the Last Supper. This is made clear in Jesus' discourse on the Holy Eucharist in John 6:26-59: he is the living bread come down from heaven. The account of the miracle begins with almost the very same words as those which Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul use to describe the institution of the Eucharist (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:25). This indicates that the miracle, in addition to Jesus' sensitivity to people's material needs, foreshadows the Bread of Life that he will give us. Jesus himself distributes the loaves even as he will at the Last Supper. It points forward to the discourse on Jesus as the bread of life. The number of the crowd, however, suggests that this is a simplification and that the synoptic Gospels are correct in involving the disciples in the distribution. Jesus worked through his apostles (Jn 4:1-2; CCC 1335) as his delegated agents with the claim that it was done by Christ himself. This helps us understand the priesthood and the sacraments (CCC 1548). This helps us understand the deeper meanings and sacramental content of John's Gospel. In this way, we are given a beautiful picture of the Catholic Church.

"All the people" representing the universal Church, gathered in "small groups" of fifty to one-hundred, representing the local churches, all being fed by Jesus, the great High Priest, who provides the miraculous "Bread" of the Eucharist to all the people through the hands of his priests, the apostles. Each receives not Philip's "little bit", but as much as they wish, and the fish too. "When they had had their fill, [Jesus] said to his disciples, 'Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted.' So they collected them, and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves that had been more than they could eat." The abundance and surplus provided by the sign "on the mountain" recall the messianic banquet on God's mountain expected in Isaiah 25:6. When the Israelites gathered the manna, there was no surplus (Ex 16:16-21); now, more

was left over than there had been originally. John alone mentions Jesus' order to gather the fragments (as Christians did carefully at the Eucharistic synaxis). The same word is used for the gathering of the Eucharistic bread, in turn a symbol of the gathering of the Church. "So that nothing will be wasted," instructs us that every gift of God, not only that which comes through a miracle, is a precious thing and should not be wasted. "The twelve baskets full" surplus is symbolic either of the twelve apostles who will then have all they need of the Eucharistic bread symbolized to give to the whole Church; or it also stands for the twelve tribes of the New Israel, who will never be in want.

"When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, 'This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world.'" The people correctly see in this miracle an indication that Jesus is the prophet like Moses foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15-18. These people draw a connection between the food supplied by Jesus and the manna given by Moses. The description of Jesus as "the prophet who is to come into the world" is of very great importance in understanding John's interpretation of the story of the feeding. It shows that on the basis of this sign, the evangelist regards Jesus as the giver of the bread of life, who surpasses Moses. In him, Moses' promise of the prophet who is to come is realized and the expectations based on the time of Moses, and still alive in the Judaism of his time, receive their highest fulfillment. Even the mountain and Passover fall into place in this picture.

The evangelist has now constructed the base for them immediately following revelatory discourse, which goes a stage further (Jn 6:32-58). Although the crowd realize that this banquet provided in the wilderness is Messianic and apparently identify "the Prophet" who comes (Deut 18:15-18; Ps 118:26) with the Messiah, they do this merely because of the signs Jesus had performed without real depth to their perception as the event will show. What is offered to Jesus here, and what he emphatically rejects, has a correspondence in the temptation scenes of Lk 4:1-13; Mt 4:1-11.

“Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.”

The desire of the crowd to make Jesus king shows that they connected this sign with the promised messianic banquet and so concluded that Jesus must be the expected Messiah or prophet, but, as in John 2:23-25, Jesus is not easily taken in by their enthusiasm, which stops short of true faith in him. Israel hoped for a militant Messiah to overthrow the Romans and re-establish their national independence in Palestine. Jesus backs away from these aspirations, knowing that his kingdom is heavenly and spiritual (CCC 439). Jesus does not deny his royal mission, but he disassociates it from a political form of government. The Gospels clearly show that for Jesus, anything that would alter his mission as the Servant of Yahweh was a temptation (see Mt 4:8; Lk 4-5). He does not accept the position of those who mix the things of God with merely political attitudes. It is interesting to note that just as the Jerusalem ministry had a climax before the sacrifice of the Son in a triumphal entry where he was hailed as king, so the Galilean ministry before its close is thus endowed with an acclamation as eager and as mistaken as that of the Jerusalem crowd.

When Jesus slips away to the mountain, the main point is not to record the fact of his rejection of such political initiatives. The whole emphasis is on “him alone”, which draws attention more to his lonely closeness to God, a closeness into which he deliberately withdraws, because men do not understand him. But Jesus’ aloneness also includes intimacy with his Father (see 8:16, 29; 16:32). It is interesting to note that John’s Gospel records two food miracles: bread (6:1-14) and wine (2:1-11). Together, they anticipate the Eucharistic liturgy where Jesus gives himself as food under the visible signs of bread and wine. CCC 1335 points out, “The miracles of the multiplication of the loaves, when the Lord says the blessing, breaks and distributes the loaves through his disciples to feed the multitude, prefigure the superabundance of this unique

bread of his Eucharist. The sign of water turned into wine at Cana already announces the Hour of Jesus’ glorification. It makes the fulfillment of the wedding feast in the Father’s kingdom, where the faithful will drink the new wine that has become the Blood of Christ.”

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jn 6:24-35

“When the crowds saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus.”

After the miraculous multiplication of the loaves, Jesus sent the Apostles across the lake to Capernaum. He himself disappeared from the crowd, as he knew they were planning to proclaim him king. It was a worldly kingship which he did not want. Later, when the crowd missed him and the Apostles, they set out by boat to cross the lake. They found him in Capernaum.

They were looking for Jesus. They had experienced him as a person and were strongly inclined to be with him. They did not know that he was a divine Person, but they had experienced divine qualities in him and were driven to be near him. So they were “looking for Jesus.” Perhaps we too realize that nothing on earth compares to the divine Jesus. We also, hopefully, are constantly “looking for Jesus”, seeking him above all others in our hearts to enjoy continuous communion with him, careful not to let anything or anyone come between him and us.

“And when they found him across the sea they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you get here?’”

Their search was not in vain. Jesus allowed himself to be found. He desires to reveal himself to us. If we seek him in prayer, sacred reading, and in works of love for others, he will allow us to find him. “On my bed at night I sought him whom my heart loves...” (Sg 3:1)

The people address Jesus as Rabbi. The title reflects a general attitude toward Jesus as a respected teacher. But he does not answer their question based on mere curiosity. It is of no consequence. He promptly goes on to address the heart of the matter.

“Jesus answered them and said, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled.’”

As always their aspirations are on the material level: they see the miraculous element of the sign, but not its meaning. Jesus tries to raise them above their materialistic outlook but is met with a persistent inability to understand. Jesus sees through peoples’ outward positions and exposes them mercilessly. “Seeing signs” here has the deeper sense of seeing in faith, which appreciates the significance of the miracles. A true seeing of signs means realizing the divine meaning of Jesus’ actions. The experience of feeding did not lead these people to a deeper vision. Their eating of the loaves gave them pleasure, but it was enough for them to have their stomachs filled. Their thoughts and searching have no higher object.

They did not understand that the feeding of the loaves was a profound parable of God’s nourishing of the soul. Instead, their seeking Jesus was a direct result of their hope that the supernatural powers Jesus had displayed might be put to their service in providing food and a Jewish empire. Nothing could be done for them or profitably said to them until their grave misconception had at least been exposed. They did not look on the feeding as a sign, but simply as a satisfaction of physical hunger.

A deeper insight into the sign will require the long discourse by Jesus to explain that the multiplication was a sign of his power to give life through the bread of his teaching and of his flesh, a power that he has because he has come down from heaven.

The Gospel continues with Jesus’ address: “Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

Certainly the needs of the body must be cared for; but if all the labor of men, whether manual or skilled, has its end only in sustaining the life of the body, human life is mortal indeed. It perishes with the body. But it is possible to labor for a bread that nourishes something more than the body, something that can endure to eternal life; its effect on the eater will be to bring him eternal life. Later in the discourse Jesus identifies himself with the food that bestows eternal life. The idea is not that the food lasts forever, but that the food is imperishable, because it gives eternal life. Bodily food helps keep us alive in this world; spiritual food sustains and develops supernatural life which will last forever in heaven. So, just as people must labor for their daily bread, so must they labor for the food which “endures for eternal life.”

All earthly food is temporary in itself and in its effects. Today’s bread satisfies today’s hunger; one must eat again the next day. Jesus is trying to raise the people’s thoughts above physical necessities; there is a heavenly bread which will give eternal life. This should be their principal concern.

It is “the Son of Man” who will give them this food that nourishes with eternal life. This was Jesus’ favorite title for himself. It conveyed the humble status he embraced by his Incarnation, as well as his glorious, exalted state as risen Lord. This title refers to Daniel 7:13-14 when this mysterious Person coming on the clouds is glorified by God in the end times. Therefore, the title hints at Jesus’ exaltation on the cross, resurrection, and ascension when he will then nourish his people with himself. The whole process and sequence of events through which this will take place is too complex for Jesus to explain now. But the concept of the glorified Son of Man will give them some intimation of how this mystery of conveying eternal life will take place.

Jesus continued, “For on him the Father, God, has set his seal.”

A deeper understanding of this “seal” is explained by St. Thomas Aquinas: When a seal is impressed on wax, the wax receives the complete form of the seal. So it is that the Son received the entire form of the Father in the mystery of the Incarnation. God the Father impressed his divinity on the human nature of the Word, who is the reflection and the very stamp of God’s nature (Heb 1:3). Thus Jesus acts with the very authority of God; his human nature is the instrument by means of which the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity acts.

This sealing may have been expressed at Jesus’ baptism when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus and the Father testified, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11). Jesus’ miracles proved that he was from God; they were the “seal”, the authorization of the Father approving his words and work.

The people said to Jesus, “What can we do to accomplish the works of God?” Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.”

What is the spiritual equivalent of “earning your bread”? Their question seems to presuppose another misunderstanding: they are taking his meaning to be that there is something they can do which will provide them with a miraculously eternal bread. Jesus’ reply is that the bread of which he speaks, God gives to him who has faith in him whom he sent. The labor of which he has spoken involves the total submission of oneself to Jesus and the word of God revealed by him.

There is but one work that earns the food of which Jesus now speaks, that men believe in him whom God has sent. There is but one work required by God, and it is done not in one action, but in a life of faith and trust, a life that conforms to his word which expresses his will and good pleasure.

The crowd’s response is in terms of works they can do. Jesus, in turn, puts the emphasis on faith. Obtaining eternal life is not a question of works, as if faith did not matter; nor is it a question of faith without works. Rather, having faith is a work; indeed, it is the all important work of God.

The main thing Jesus is trying to do is bring them to make an act of faith in him, so that he can then openly reveal to them the mystery of the Blessed Eucharist—that he is the bread “which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.” Of themselves, they can do nothing toward eternal life, but by believing, by accepting Jesus as God’s intermediary, they will be doing their part.

So the people said to Jesus, “What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do? Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

They ask what sign Jesus has to offer, at the same time minimizing the miracle of the loaves—the sign which yesterday had moved them to want to proclaim him king! Jesus, after all, had but fed them with earthly bread, whereas in the days of Moses, he gave them bread from heaven to eat (Neh 9:15).

They know Jesus is claiming to be the one sent from God, but they are demanding some greater miracle than one multiplication of loaves. They remind him that during the Exodus, God supplied their ancestors with daily bread from heaven (see Ex 16:4), not only once, but also for years. Yesterday’s miracle was very small when compared with that!

But quoting Ex 16:4, “He gave them bread from heaven” lays a foundation on which Jesus can set his own new interpretation, which is his revelation of himself as the bread of life come down from heaven.

So Jesus said to them, “Amen, Amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from

heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

First of all, it was not Moses but God who fed Israel with the manna. Secondly, the manna was heavenly bread only after a fashion (see first reading). It was an earthly food given by a miracle regarding the manner it was given. Actually, it was a thin yellow-white substance lying on the ground, a viscous substance exuded by the tamarisk trees, then very plentiful in that region. The sting of insects causes this substance to drop from the leaves. When it falls on the cool ground, it hardens into a wafer-like substance but will melt again when the sun grows strong. It had to be collected early in the morning. This material is sweet and is still a favorite with Bedouin travelers; but it is much rarer now as the tamarisk trees are rare in these parts.

The manna did not bring the Israelites to their heavenly destiny. Manna is rather a food that perishes, since it melted away every morning (Ex 16:21) and turned foul if it was stored overnight (Ex 16:19-20).

By these clarifications, Jesus indicates that the Old Testament is being fulfilled now in his own work. The manna given by Moses was not the real bread from heaven of which the Old Testament speaks; it is Jesus’ teaching. If we recall that in rabbinical thought, bread was a symbol of the Torah, we may have a contrast here between Moses and Jesus, between the Law and Jesus’ teaching.

In our passage, God himself is identified as the giver of the bread from heaven to emphasize its superiority to the old manna and prove the new manna to be the genuine food, really from heaven. The mention of Moses also implies that Jesus is the prophet promised by Moses, the Messiah. However, he far surpasses Moses and his gift; he himself is the bread of life which comes down from heaven.

The Jews, too, regarded the exodus from Egypt and

the miraculous events of the journey through the wilderness as more than just events of the past. On the contrary, Jews were told to think of themselves in every age “as though we ourselves had come out of Egypt.” However, the gift of the manna was expected only from the future redeemer, as a gift of the messianic age, the end times. Through the present discourse, Jesus proclaims that this time has come to pass, and that God is giving the promised bread from heaven here and now. This reflects the end times understanding of John’s Gospel: in Jesus, the eschatological salvation of the end times is present.

The attribute “real/true” (bread) denotes the fulfillment of what the manna in the wilderness (a type) promised, a filling with divine substance and life (Jn 1:9; I Jn 2:8). The word “true” (bread) is therefore applied in the full sense only to God (Jn 17:3; Jn 5:20) and Jesus Christ (Jn 15:1). Thus we see why only the bread from heaven described by Jesus in this way is the true bread of God. It is the bread which comes down from heaven and gives the world life—the life of God.

Our Gospel concludes with, “So they said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’ Jesus said to them,

‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.’”

The Jews have understood only that Jesus is talking about an unusual bread offered by God, but they misunderstand him to mean a miraculous earthly bread. They ask for some and thereby confirm Jesus’ remark that they are only concerned with food which passes away. Perhaps “always” even contains a reference to the miraculous feeding, which they would like to see regularly repeated. They have as yet no thought for eternal life.

Jesus responds with one of his great “I am” statements saying, “I am the bread of life”. He identifies himself with God himself, using the divine name. The bread he will give is himself.

But the people must “come” to Jesus through faith to receive the Bread. They must accept Jesus, God-become-human in Jesus as gift through faith. They must believe in him and his word, entrusting themselves totally to him and his divine revelation.

Anyone who accepts him, believing and following his teaching will have his hunger and thirst satisfied forever. He will have eternal life, where all earthly cravings will come to an end. The lives of the saints who committed themselves wholly to Jesus demonstrate the reality of this statement.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jn 6:41-51

“The Jews murmured about Jesus because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’”

The people are grumbling against Jesus because of his revelation, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They refuse to accept his statement. They cannot understand how Jesus can say that. They would have to take him at his word and accept what he says out of sheer faith, simply because he has proven himself to be trustworthy: his truthfulness, his goodness, his compassion toward people, his closeness to God as seen from the miracles he performed, his reverence toward God, his virtuous life... But they cannot transcend their natural way of thinking. They think they know him: they believe he is the son of Joseph. “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother?” But they are misinformed. They know nothing of his miraculous conception, that Mary conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, that God is his Father, that he really has come down from heaven. But they adamantly continue to bask in their ignorance saying, “Then how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’”

So often in life we are like the “Jews” in this Gospel to complain against God because we do

not understand his ways of dealing with us. Much of life is mystery. Rather than accept life as it is with all of its difficulties and inconveniences and challenges, we rebel and express our displeasure with God’s will of good pleasure for us by griping. God is trying to sanctify us, for example, through trials, to develop our virtues; but we prefer our own will and our own natural ease and convenience. We are not interested in spiritual growth by trusting God, accepting his will as we experience the different trials of life. And so we murmur like the Jews in the desert who are dissatisfied with what God is providing for them: it does not satisfy their taste (Ex 15:24; 16:2, 7, 12; 17:3; Num 11:1; 14:2, 27, etc.). Underlying this murmuring rebellion against God is a lack of faith in his love for us; he gave us life and providentially cared for us up to this point in life. He is not only concerned with maintaining our natural lives; he is also preparing us for eternal life; he is transforming us into spiritual beings through virtuous living so that we will be able to pass through death to the fullness of life.

Jesus does not take up the Jew’s objection. (John uses the pejorative term “Jew” for those Jews who are in conflict with Jesus and continue to oppose him.) He simply says, “Stop murmuring among yourselves.” He does, indirectly, give a positive answer to their objection—it is the Father who sent him; he is from God (46)—but he makes no attempt to argue it further here, since only a believer will accept this claim of Jesus (6:29). Then he goes on to call upon them to listen to God and let themselves be taught by him.

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day. It is written in the prophets: they shall all be taught by God. Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me.” To come to Jesus is a synonym for belief (Jn 6:35, 37, 44-45).

Coming to Jesus through faith is not only the will of the Father (38), but it is also his work: for the Father draws believers to faith in Jesus (44). Consequently, to believe in Jesus is to be open

to God. Moreover, the prophets had spoken of a new covenant when God would “teach” his people through a new law, which would be more than an external message. It would also affect them interiorly (Jer 31:33); and now this time has arrived in Jesus who is “from heaven”, that is, from God (41). In listening attentively to him, one hears the Father, for he is the source of the teaching of Jesus. God the Father, then, draws believers to faith in Jesus in two ways: through the message of Jesus; and as an interior “teacher” (45) himself, he makes the message of Jesus an interior law of the heart through the power of his Spirit (14:17, 26).

If the Jews will desist from their murmuring, which is indicative of a refusal to believe, and will leave themselves open to God’s movement, he will draw them to Jesus. This is the age spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when they are being taught by God, if only they will listen.

Belief is not something a man achieves by his own unaided effort (see Mt 16:17); the initiative always lies with divine grace, or, as he puts it, only the Father can draw a person to such a momentous step. And he quotes Isaiah 54:13, “They shall all be taught by God,” where the stress falls on God as the ultimate cause of one’s belief.

The Second Vatican Council tells us: “Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he must have the interior help of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and ‘makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth’” (Dei Verbum N. 5).

“Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me.”

Being taught by God means hearing God, becoming aware of his teaching and learning to accept that teaching. It is not outward hearing, but an inward attention, not an experience of God which can be shared, but an immediate awareness of what he says and wants. This hearing only takes

place properly when a person makes what he has heard part of himself and proceeds to follow it; this is the effect of the Father’s drawing.

No one can come to the Son without having received the teaching of the Father; no one can hear the Father and learn from him except through the Son.

The word of Jesus, helped by the inner action of the Father in a person, is for the reader of the Gospel not a word from the past, but one which endures into the present, which indeed is made plain only by the Paraclete and summons every human being to make a choice.

“Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.”

The misunderstanding we are warned against here regarding listening to the Father has to do with the immediacy of access to the Father. There is no approach to him except through the one who was really with God and comes from him. Only he can testify from his immediate experience what he saw and heard with God. Men can know God the Father only through Jesus Christ, because only he has seen the Father, whom he has come to reveal to us. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no one goes to the Father except through him (Jn 14:6).

Today’s Gospel continues with Jesus saying, “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.”

By using the introductory words “Amen, amen” Jesus indicates that he is making a solemn declaration: when we believe in him, we become connected to him; faith unites us to him; in this way we begin to live God’s own eternal life; this union with him brings about a sharing in his own divine life according to our human capacity. We become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pt 1:4) through sanctifying grace. Through such a close union with the divine Jesus, we come to know God personally. As Jesus explained, “Now

this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ” (Jn 17:3). It is not, then, a question of receiving eternal life after we die. Rather, Jesus says, “Whoever believes has eternal life” while still living on earth. This is what is implied in our being called “children of God” (1 Jn 3:1).

The reason why all of the above is true, Jesus explains, is because he is “the bread of life”. Faith unites us to him who is divine nourishment. Jesus asserts, “I Am the bread of life.” His “I am” statement indicates that he speaks as God; union with him through faith nourishes us with the life of God. It elevates us to a new level of being; we live on a supernatural level; the gifts of wisdom and understanding, which perfect the virtue of faith, enable us to experience the beginning of eternal life (Jn 17:3), even now.

Jesus continues to explain in today’s Gospel, “Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die.

The crowd had held up to Jesus the example of their ancestors who ate manna in the desert, but Jesus points out that this did not save their forbearers from death. And then, picking up once more the Scripture citation, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” Jesus says that the bread that truly comes from heaven is a bread that does not permit a person to die.

Up until now, through verse 50, Jesus has been speaking of himself as “the bread of life” and “the bread...from heaven”, which must be received in faith. He is speaking of himself: “I am the bread.” And he has been inviting the people to come to him and to believe in him so that they may receive eternal life.

Manna was interpreted in some Jewish circles as signifying divine word or instruction; thus there was preparation for understanding “the bread of life” or “the bread from heaven” of which Jesus spoke as divine revelation given to people by

and in Jesus. The first part of Jesus’ discourse in this section of John’s Gospel refers primarily to revelation. The bread symbolizes food. The divine word and wisdom are often presented under the symbolism of food or bread in the Old Testament. In this first part of the discourse (verses 35-50), Jesus is like Wisdom, who in Proverbs 9:5 issues an invitation: “Come, eat of my bread; drink of the wine I have mixed.” The description in Sirach 15:3 of what wisdom will do for the one who fears God and practices the Law is also apropos: “She will nourish him with the bread of understanding and give him the water of learning to drink.” In Israelite thought, the joys of the messianic days were often pictured under the imagery of an intimate banquet with Yahweh or with his Messiah (Is 25:6; 65:13).

In John Jesus announces that this banquet is at hand. Jesus is the bread of life for those servants of Yahweh who believe in the one that Yahweh has sent.

But verses 48-50 are leading towards a transition from the theme of Jesus as the bread of wisdom and revelation to verse 51 where he makes the startling statement that he himself must be eaten. He expresses it this way: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

The manna which the Jews called bread from heaven gave physical life only; the bread which is Jesus will give real eternal life. The old manna could not avert physical death; the new manna brings new life over which death has no power. And that new bread is Jesus’ own flesh.

In this momentous statement: “the bread that I will give is my flesh”, we pass from what Jesus is to what he will give. The future tense points to the cross, where Jesus surrenders his life for human sins, and to the Eucharistic liturgy, where Jesus offers himself as living bread to a starving world. His gift implies and involves his death; and it is not only for a nation, but also for a world. The

saying prophetically links Galilee with Golgotha, the Incarnation with redemption and the Lord's Supper.

The Eucharistic theme has been reached. At the climax of this reiteration, "I am the bread," Jesus' statement is more astounding than what he has said thus far: "the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." These words are very similar to the Last Supper account: "This is my body which is given for you" (Lk 22:19). Here "flesh" not only refers to Jesus as the Incarnate Son who gave himself for the life of the world on the cross, but it is also the Person of Jesus who continues to give himself and to communicate his life in the Eucharist. Hence, in the same glance John sees Jesus give himself on the cross and in the Eucharist so that we may have a share in his life.

This is John's version of "This is my body, which is for you" (1Cor 11:24). John changes "body" to "flesh" (see Jn 1:14). In this verse the evangelist anticipates the institution of the Lord's Supper, which is possibly one reason why he does not record it in chapters 13-17. John's use of flesh emphasizes Jesus' humanity as the means of our nourishment. Perhaps the idea of eating Jesus' flesh may not strike us or Jesus' audience as totally strange if we remember that the Exodus traditions spoke of eating flesh (quails) and of returning to the fleshpots of Egypt. By "flesh" John understands "flesh and blood", food and drink (53, 54). The flesh and blood of the Passover lamb played a key role in the Exodus (12:13). They were to eat its roasted flesh (Ex 12:8). The communion sacrifice in Leviticus 7:18-27 speaks of eating "flesh". Hence, the terminology of flesh was not entirely alien to Jesus' Jewish audience.

How exactly Jesus would accomplish the giving of himself – his flesh – to eat was not explained. Blind faith was required to accept his word. Now we understand how he accomplished his promise: he transformed bread and wine into his body or flesh and blood at the Last Supper, and empowered his Apostles to do the same.

He continues to give us himself through the mystery of the Holy Eucharist. We receive divine nourishment to sustain us with God's own eternal life.

Ours is like the mysterious food and drink which Elijah "ate and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb" (see first reading). This mystical food sustains us through our life's journey to eternity; through it we already begin to live the eternal life even now.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time Jn 6:51-58

51 "I am the living bread that came down from heaven..."

In saying, "I am", Jesus is uttering the divine name; he is proclaiming his divinity; he is one with the Father in possessing the divine nature (Jn 10:30). As such, he is divine nourishment for us. When we receive the Holy Eucharist, we receive the divine Jesus in person under the form of bread. It is his way of nourishing us with the divine substance that is his.

The soul is so precious and is endowed with such dignity as the image of God; nothing less than God himself can be its food.

The Eucharistic bread Jesus gives us is alive; it is his glorified flesh, saturated with the Father's divinity, which also belongs to Jesus by nature. For he is the God-man who gives himself to us so we can assimilate the holy virtues of his divinized humanity that comes to us as spiritual food.

The miraculous food Jesus gives us is the consecrated bread in the Mass that was changed through transubstantiation. The substance of the bread became the substance of Jesus' resurrected body to nourish our spiritual nature. The appearance of bread remains, but its inner substance has been changed into the risen Jesus. He is overflowing with the supreme heavenly life of God.

We normally become what we eat. This heavenly Bread communicates to us its own divine qualities so that we can become alive with God's own holiness. He gradually transforms us into himself. He transmits his own love for the Father and for others to us so we too can become love.

“...whoever eats this bread will live forever...” (6:51).

The Eucharist is the food of immortality. Because of sin, it is necessary for us to experience physical death. But Jesus says, “...whoever believes has eternal life” (6:47). Therefore, whoever maintains this life of God by eating “...this...bread that comes down from heaven... [does] not die” (6:50). Such a person will pass through physical death without being harmed by it. The eternal life already possessed by the person will remain intact, untouched by death. The Eucharist preserves us through death into eternity. The person who lives on Christ's glorified Body-Person preserves the eternal life received in baptism. The tomb then becomes an antechamber to entry into the fullness of eternal life already begun on earth. “...and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (6:51).

On the authority of Jesus, expressed and given at the Last Supper, and by the power of the Holy Spirit given to the Apostles and their successors, simple bread is transformed into the Body-Person of Jesus. It is the glorified Body of Jesus that was transformed by the resurrection that we receive.

Those who refuse to believe, along with Judas (6:64), wrongfully think Jesus is referring to his mere human flesh. But he explained, “It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail” (6:63). Through the resurrection, Jesus became “...a life giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45). His spiritualized resurrected Body communicates the very life of God to those who receive him worthily. Unbelievers like Judas are unable to transcend their carnal-mindedness to understand such spiritual matters. They need to trust Jesus and his word. As the God-Man, he could devise a way to remain with us and nourish us with the substance of his divinity, and

it is amazing in what a simple, ingenious way he accomplished this mystery! He takes ordinary food, simple bread, to change it into himself so that he can nourish us supernaturally with his own Spirit-Life. His true followers accept this stupendous mystery in all simplicity—because it is Jesus who promised and accomplishes it.

“The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?’” (6:52)?

Typically, Jesus was speaking on the level of spirit, while his listeners were hearing and thinking on the level of flesh. They were like the Samaritan woman who interpreted Jesus' “living water” as mere flowing water rather than the Holy Spirit who would forever quench her thirst by becoming in her “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:10, 14). This earthly way of understanding Jesus' words and images to convey spiritual realities was a typical occurrence. Only those who knew Jesus on a deeper level understood or believed that he could do what he said. Jesus was talking about his spiritualized, resurrected body—not his flesh in its earthly, untransformed state. If the people had put their trust in Jesus, that he could do what he said, even if they did not understand how, they would have come to discern what he was trying to explain. But they did not trust his genuineness, his trustworthiness. Consequently, they refused to believe Jesus, even as some disbelieved the reality of his statement to this very day. So rather than take back what he had said or explain that they had misinterpreted the meaning of his words, Jesus simply insisted that they accept their truth; he demanded faith in himself even if they could not understand how he would accomplish this mystery. And so, “Jesus said to them, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you’” (6:53).

When Jesus referred to himself as “Son of Man” he was alerting his audience to Daniel's prophecy about the Messiah's glorification (Dan 7:13-14). God will give life to his people through his Messiah whom he will glorify with his Spirit; he himself will become the source of divine life for

all the people after he has been glorified (Jn 7:38-39). Jesus was trying to convey to his people that they must receive him in his glorified state in the way he would determine and require for them to have life. They must have faith in him that he could accomplish it. They must assimilate his glorious self and the divine life in him as their daily food. He wants to be their “daily bread” (Mt 5:11), intimately involved in their everyday lives. He wants to be their food in person as well as their intimate friend. It is only at the Last Supper that he would finally reveal how he would accomplish this mystery. He did it by changing the bread and cup of wine that he held in his hands into his body and blood, anticipating his self-gift to us in his passion, death, and resurrection. But for now, he simply wanted his disciples to believe in his word, and trust in him. For he had proved himself worthy of trust. His miracles and truthfulness proved him trustworthy and credible.

Without receiving the glorified body-person of Jesus, we cannot receive the divine life that his spiritualized flesh attained. We are bereft of this divine life communicated to us as grace in the Eucharist. Jesus continued to stress the need to receive his self-gift in the Eucharist. “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day” (Jn 6:54).

Jesus is determined to convince us of the value of receiving him in the Holy Eucharist. He explains that by taking him into ourselves as food and drink, we already begin to live the eternal life of heaven. That means we are brought into the life of the Trinity: In this mystery, the Father gives himself and his divine life to the Son; and the Son receives and reciprocates his self-gift to the Father in Eucharistic gratitude. The two are eternally joined together in their mutual Love, which is the Holy Spirit. So the Eucharist brings us into this Supreme Life of the Eternal, Personal Knowledge and Love in mutual self-gift within the Godhead. We are called to enter into that sublime life of the Trinity through a reciprocal self-gift to God in purity of heart. The Father gives himself to us through his Beloved Son by means of the Holy

Spirit in the Holy Eucharist. By reciprocating through our own self-gift, we dispose ourselves to accept Jesus’ invitation to begin living the eternal life of the Blessed Trinity (see Jn 17:3).

As a result of our participation in the very life of Jesus, which is the eternal life already begun on earth, we too, like Jesus, defy death. Physical death is necessary to put an end to our earthly exile and our being deprived of face-to-face, person-to-person, intimate knowledge of God. Our untransformed flesh and its evil tendencies must happily come to an end. So often, our unpurified body overwhelms our will and its good desires and leads us to sin. Death will put an end to our unredeemed body and its sinful tendencies for total devotion and worship of God. Just as Jesus’ body was raised on the third day, so too, our body will be raised on the last day to be glorified like Jesus. “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:43).

Then Jesus proceeded to explain the reason for these good effects in receiving him: “For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink” (Jn 6:55). Eternal life and resurrection of the body on the last day is possible because of the true, spiritual, immortal, and eternal life that Jesus gives us in the Holy Eucharist. The divine life of the children of God received at baptism must be nourished. It is sustained by assimilating the glorious life of the risen Jesus. We receive him under the form of the bread and wine that was transformed during the consecration of the Mass by the Holy Spirit. By apostolic succession in the laying on of hands, the priest, acting on the command of Jesus to “Do this in memory of me” (1 Cor 11:24), receives the power to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The appearance remains the same after the utterance of the words, “This is my body...this is my blood,” but the substance of the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus. In this way, Jesus gives himself to us as spiritual food and drink for our spiritual lives. His divine nature provides spiritual nourishment for our soul, which is living the life of God through grace.

Jesus calls his flesh and blood true food and drink because they actually provide spiritual sustenance for our spiritual nature.

Assimilating Jesus as our food under the form of bread and wine reminds us of the scroll that the prophet Ezekiel was commanded to eat. By digesting the contents of the scroll, the prophet was nourished by the word of God so he could speak it to the people (Ez 3:1-3). Taking in Jesus in the form of consecrated bread and wine sustains us and enables us to grow into the likeness of Jesus and become like him. Such sustenance and growth parallels what natural food and drink does for us.

Food also provides us with energy for wellbeing and action. The good effects of receiving the body and blood of Jesus can be compared to the mysterious food and drink given to the discouraged and fearful Elijah fleeing Jezebel. “He got up, ate and drank, then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb” (1 Kgs 19:1-8). Jesus continues to explain the effects of the Eucharist: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (Jn 6:56).

Even after the physical presence of Jesus under the appearance of bread and wine disappears because of the digestion process, the unitive effects of the Eucharist remain. Holy Communion brings about a lasting union between the person and Jesus. A new degree of love-union perdures. Jesus’ visit has a lasting effect on our person; we cannot forget him. A residue of his love and virtuous qualities stays with us. It tends to bring about an enduring interpersonal communion between him and us. Jesus’ desire is that we remain in him as he remains in us (Jn 15:4).

Baptism brought us into a holy union with Jesus. We were baptized into Christ (Rom 6:3). Our union with him through sanctifying grace continues even if we are not aware of it. Receiving the Eucharist increases that union and awakens consciousness of it. Jesus’ love for us, upon receiving him, stirs reciprocal love in us. We are drawn to return love for Love. Even after some

time passes, after our reception of his Body and Blood, the memory of his presence and love lingers in us. This loving memory stirs unitive, loving acts and deeds. Through the Eucharist, Jesus brings about his desire that we remain in loving union with him throughout the day.

“God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). When we receive Holy Communion, we are plunged into the divine Jesus. When an iron rod is thrust into fire, it takes on the qualities of fire; it is so thoroughly permeated with the qualities of fire that it can be said to become fire. That is what happens to us when we are plunged into Jesus in receiving the holy Eucharist. He communicates to us his own divine perfections and virtues with which his sacred humanity is endowed. Moreover, as hard metal softens and melts in the fire and is permanently changed into a new form, so too, Jesus molds us into his likeness; we, too, begin to remain in loving union with him as he remains in us. We become like him. He communicates his own loving disposition and virtuous qualities to us. He changes us into himself as we increasingly surrender to him and his will. We are melted into union with him.

Jesus comes to us in his saving presence to pervade our whole being with his healing, nourishing, soothing, purifying, and strengthening powers (virtues). Our whole being is penetrated by his goodness to imbue us with his own benevolence. He thoroughly saturates us with his divine presence. The species of bread and wine give us the sacred humanity of Jesus united to his divinity. That divinity and Person of Jesus lights up our whole person as a light illuminates a room. Jesus’ presence fills our spirit as perfume fills the air with its fragrance, as cool water fills a lake, as air and its life-giving oxygen fills our lungs to enliven and invigorate us, as melodious music sweetens the surrounding atmosphere with its pleasing sound.

Jesus’ Eucharistic discourse continues: “Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me” (Jn 6:57). Jesus receives his being eternally from the Father

who begets him and gives him divine life. The divine life of the Father is communicated to us through the Son. Through his incarnation, Jesus assumed our human nature. This human nature of Jesus was transformed in the mystery of the resurrection. His human nature was deified. Even his human flesh was divinized. It is his glorified flesh that we receive in communion through which he transmits to us the divine life. We participate in the divine nature through sanctifying grace communicated in the Holy Eucharist. This holy transfusion is accomplished through the Holy Spirit. We receive it through faith, which opens us to his divine outpouring.

What wonders take place in the secrecy of our hearts! The divine life is being poured into our open hearts through the Holy Eucharist, which is nothing less than the divine Jesus himself.

Here we assume that we have placed no barriers between him and us. We are free from sinful attachments that close our hearts to full receptivity of this divine life that is being freely given to us. "This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever" (Jn 6:58).

We must consume Jesus himself to assimilate his divine life. He is our bread in a general sense. But he becomes our bread of nourishment more specifically in the Eucharist. He who comes from the Father in heaven transforms common bread into himself to nourish us with divine life. This life becomes our own, the very life of God, which enables us to live forever.

The ancestors of the Jewish audience that Jesus was addressing ate manna in the desert (Jn 6:49). But that was a natural phenomenon that God used to nourish his people in the desert until they reached the Promised Land. However, it only provided subsistence for their natural lives while on their journey to the Promised Land. It did not give them divine life like the Eucharistic bread Jesus promised to give them. This heavenly bread gives eternal life to those who receive it with faith. Through faith, we draw divine

life from Jesus' glorified body. As he passed through death to enter into the glory of God the Father, so do we who receive the eternal life, which Jesus gives us in the Eucharistic bread.

Death is mere sloughing off of the body that has become too feeble or damaged to maintain natural life. It's like a reptile that sheds its old skin because it has outgrown it. It passes on to a new and better form more suitable for its new existence. The body is like a booster rocket that is dropped off and left behind. It has served its purpose in life. It is no longer needed. The spirit is set free and made lighter so that it can enter into a new sphere of being in the heavenly realms. Death does not destroy our identity as persons. We retain our self-consciousness as disembodied spirits. The eternal life given us by the Eucharist remains intact as we pass through death of the body to enter into the fullness of life with God. The corruptible body is useless in heaven. We need a new set of senses to perceive and enjoy the spiritual delights that await us. We have fruition of these through the spirit, just as when we enjoy spirit-to-spirit communion with God during prayer. At the end of the world in its present form, God will give us new spiritualized bodies endowed with spiritual powers capable of savoring the supernatural joys God has prepared for us.

St. Paul tells us that these resurrected bodies will take on the qualities of spirit: incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual (see 1 Cor 15:42-44). We will undergo a kind of metamorphosis kindred to that of a caterpillar when it becomes a butterfly, with all kinds of new unprecedented powers.

Today's Gospel begins with, "Many of Jesus' disciples who were listening said, 'This saying is hard; who can accept it?'" The "disciples" were the outer band of Jesus' followers who had been continually with him for some time. They were a group distinct from the Apostles.

The "Jews" represent unbelievers in general, while the "disciples" are the still uncommitted followers of Jesus. The mass of disciples take offense at his words and his claims just like the

Jews in 6:41 and 52. They find Jesus' words "hard", because to them they seem difficult, intolerable, and unacceptable to faith. They cannot and will not "hear" or inwardly accept them.

Jesus requires his disciples to accept his words, because it is he who has spoken them. That is what the supernatural act of faith involves: that act whereby, inspired and assisted by the grace of God, we believe that the things which he has revealed are true—not because we understand them—but because of the authority of God himself who reveals them and who can neither deceive nor be deceived.

Our Gospel text continues with, "Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, 'Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?'"

Jesus knows the scandal caused by his words, but he neither revokes nor dilutes anything of what he has said. "The Son of Man ascending to where he was before" is intended to rectify what was simply a cannibalistic interpretation. The Ascension will perhaps surprise the protestors more, but it may eliminate their chief difficulty about eating the flesh of one who in celestial glory takes his place where he was from eternity. The Ascension, making a heavenly reality of Jesus' presence, is essential for the Christian understanding of the Eucharist, which contains the three great mysteries of the Son of Man: Incarnation, Redemption, and Ascension.

"Where he was before" is a plain reference not only to the continuing existence of Jesus after his death, but also to his pre-existence. Jesus is going back to the Father who sent him. There is an implication that the Son of Man has descended.

"Ascending to where he was before" will be the culmination of the mystery of who the Son of Man is; it will be the crowning act of the Incarnation, death, and resurrection and his return to heaven, "where he was before", the final proof of his divinity.

"Son of Man" denotes Jesus' heavenly origin and the necessity of his exaltation. Only when the Son of Man is exalted and glorified can his true identity be recognized. Only then will the Son of Man give the food of eternal life and offer people his flesh and blood, which they must eat and drink to have eternal life. Those who believe in the Son of Man overcome the blindness of hearts; those who do not believe become even blinder (9:35-39). Jesus wants to arouse faith—that is his intention in his reply to the murmuring disciples; the question, together with the following sentence is meant to be an aid to understanding, and that is its real purpose. But to the degree that it meets unbelief, it can have the effect of leading to greater offense. Only in faith can the ascent of the Son of Man be "seen", but from the world it remains hidden (14:19). If the ascent includes the whole cycle of the exaltation and glorification of Jesus, his return to the Father (20:17), the unbelieving world sees only the outward exaltation on the cross, and the unbelief becomes a judgment on them (3:18, 12:3, 16:11). Jesus' intention is to appeal to the "disciples" for a faith in which they can really "see", that is, spiritually experience, the ascent of the Son of Man.

Jesus continues in this Gospel to help his audience believe in him and his words. "It is the spirit that gives life, he said, "while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe."

The statement has been taken as referring to the Person of Jesus, to his words, and to men's capacity for understanding. The most natural sense, after the mention of the Son of Man, is to refer it to Jesus himself. The ascending glorified Son of Man is empowered to bestow the life-giving Spirit (7:39; 17:2), the promised gifts of life and the Holy Eucharist. In his earthly mode of existence, he cannot fulfill the promises he has previously made. It is his spiritualized flesh and blood that will give life.

Another explanation regarding "It is the spirit that gives life" is that it is only when man, who is called to faith, allows himself to be guided by

the divine Spirit will he surmount the offense of Jesus' words; in his earthly human condition (his fleshly existence), he is incapable of this.

The life of which Jesus has been speaking is entirely within the sphere of the Spirit, and only the Spirit can give an understanding of it. We cannot accept the mystery exposed by Jesus' words if we think of it in too human a way. The murmuring disciples have only human judgment; they are not enlightened by divine revelation; they have not faith which alone gives life.

What is the flesh no use for? The previous sentence tells us: for giving life. The dominant idea is what enables the Son of Man to transmit life; and it is the Spirit who does this; Jesus will possess and give that Spirit when he is glorified. It is not the flesh and blood of the earthly Jesus, but that of the heavenly Son of Man, who, filled with the Spirit, possesses a new mode of existence. It is he who must be consumed through faith.

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Our Gospel continues: "Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him."

Jesus knew who the believers were from the very first day that they began to follow him, as he also knew his betrayer among the Apostles; but he gave them every chance to open their hearts to God's grace and change their minds.

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Jesus explained unbelief as a lack of cooperation with grace: "Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me" (Jn 6:45). That is how the Father draws people to Jesus, by the prompting of grace. That is what he means by "no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father" (Jn 6:65). Faith in Jesus is a gift of God which requires the cooperation of man. This cooperation consists of following the inspirations given by grace and obeying God's will. Thus, unbelief indicates refusal to comply with the promptings of grace given by the Father. We must pray for the grace to respond lovingly to God's grace. It is a gift beckoning us to come to Jesus in faith.

The Gospel continues, "As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him."

The promise of the Eucharist which caused arguments among Jesus' hearers at Capernaum and scandalized some of them (61) led many people to give up following him. These disciples were not ready to accept anything which went beyond their very limited horizons. The mystery of the Eucharist does call for a special act of faith.

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The Apostles' formation by Jesus in a close-knit community formed and enlightened them so that they were able to pass the test of faith. They believed in the person of Jesus because they knew him intimately and could accept whatever he said. They had the advantage that those who belong to a small faith community like Come, Lord Jesus!—unlike the multitude who tend to be spectators whose faith is less enlightened and developed.

The title, “Holy One of God”, is one of the expressions which designates the Messiah (Mk 1:24; Lk 1:35; 4:34; Acts 2:27).

But in the circumstances, it seems very likely that “the Holy One of God” is used by John to convey a deeper meaning which Jesus had for the Apostles after the resurrection. Because of their “faith” they are on the way to seeing in him the real Son of God. They know he has the words of eternal life, the Truth which will lead them to eternity. They therefore accept his statement concerning his Body and Blood as food which produces eternal life, even though as yet, they know not how this may be.

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time Jn 6:60-69

Today's Gospel begins with, “Many of Jesus' disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’”

The “disciples” were the outer band of Jesus' followers who had been continually with him for some time. They were a group distinct from the Apostles.

The “Jews” represent unbelievers in general, while the “disciples” are the still uncommitted followers of Jesus. The mass of disciples take offense at his words and his claims just like the Jews in 6:41 and 52. They find Jesus' words “hard”, because to them they seem difficult, intolerable, and unacceptable to faith. They cannot and will not “hear” or inwardly accept them.

Jesus requires his disciples to accept his words, because it is he who has spoken them. That is what the supernatural act of faith involves: that act whereby, inspired and assisted by the grace of God, we believe that the things which he has revealed are true—not because we understand them—but because of the authority of God himself who reveals them and who can neither deceive nor be deceived.

Our Gospel text continues with, “Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, ‘Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?’”

Jesus knows the scandal caused by his words, but he neither revokes nor dilutes anything of what he has said. “The Son of Man ascending to where he was before” is intended to rectify what was simply a cannibalistic interpretation. The Ascension will perhaps surprise the protestors more, but it may eliminate their chief difficulty about eating the flesh of one who in celestial glory takes his place where he was from eternity. The Ascension, making a heavenly reality of Jesus’ presence, is essential for the Christian understanding of the Eucharist, which contains the three great mysteries of the Son of Man: Incarnation, Redemption, and Ascension.

“Where he was before” is a plain reference not only to the continuing existence of Jesus after his death, but also to his pre-existence. Jesus is going back to the Father who sent him. There is an implication that the Son of Man has descended. “Ascending to where he was before” will be the culmination of the mystery of who the Son of Man is; it will be the crowning act of the Incarnation, death, and resurrection and his return to heaven, “where he was before”, the final proof of his divinity.

“Son of Man” denotes Jesus’ heavenly origin and the necessity of his exaltation. Only when the Son of Man is exalted and glorified can his true identity be recognized. Only then will the Son of

Man give the food of eternal life and offer people his flesh and blood, which they must eat and drink to have eternal life. Those who believe in the Son of Man overcome the blindness of hearts; those who do not believe become even blinder (Jn 9:35-39). Jesus wants to arouse faith—that is his intention in his reply to the murmuring disciples; the question, together with the following sentence is meant to be an aid to understanding, and that is its real purpose. But to the degree that it meets unbelief, it can have the effect of leading to greater offense. Only in faith can the ascent of the Son of Man be “seen”, but from the world it remains hidden (Jn 14:19). If the ascent includes the whole cycle of the exaltation and glorification of Jesus, his return to the Father (20:17), the unbelieving world sees only the outward exaltation on the cross, and the unbelief becomes a judgment on them (Jn 3:18, 12:3, 16:11). Jesus’ intention is to appeal to the “disciples” for a faith in which they can really “see”, that is, spiritually experience, the ascent of the Son of Man.

Jesus continues in this Gospel to help his audience believe in him and his words. “It is the spirit that gives life, he said, “while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.”

The statement has been taken as referring to the Person of Jesus, to his words, and to men’s capacity for understanding. The most natural sense, after the mention of the Son of Man, is to refer it to Jesus himself. The ascending glorified Son of Man is empowered to bestow the life-giving Spirit (Jn 7:39; 17:2), the promised gifts of life and the Holy Eucharist. In his earthly mode of existence, he cannot fulfill the promises he has previously made. It is his spiritualized flesh and blood that will give life.

Another explanation regarding “It is the spirit that gives life” is that it is only when man, who is called to faith, allows himself to be guided by the divine Spirit will he surmount the offense of Jesus’ words; in his earthly human condition (his fleshly existence), he is incapable of this.

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Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“When the Pharisee with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands.”

Jesus’ adversaries seem to have been some local Pharisees of Galilee apparently egged on by certain scribes who came from Jerusalem.

The scribes and Pharisees accuse Jesus of collusion in sin; for he lets some of his disciples eat without first washing their hands. This was a violation of the tradition of the elders, they said, and of the tradition they were the staunch supports. The Pharisees now accuse Jesus of encouraging his disciples to violate their traditions.

The scribes and Pharisees were the religious leaders of the Jews. They were called scribes because of their knowledge of the Mosaic Law and the traditions added on to it; they were the elite among the Pharisees who prided themselves on their strict, rigorous observance of the Law and the human traditions. The Pharisees had no time or no understanding for their fellow Jews who often violate the scribal traditions – and even the Law of Moses itself sometimes. For this reason, they kept themselves apart from the ordinary people and developed a proud superiority complex. They performed many acts of virtue but their pride and sense of self-sufficiency vitiated their good deeds (compare Lk 18:10-14).

St. Mark reminds his readers of the heavy cloud that hangs over his entire Gospel drama. The opposition of the Pharisees and scribes to Jesus began very early in his public life. It was conflicts like this one over the issue of the washing of hands before eating that would bring to completion the Pharisees plot “how they might destroy him” (3:6). This conflict grew in strength daily until with the help of the Sadducees, their arch-opponents; they finally nailed Jesus to the cross.

Our Gospel for today explains, “For the Pharisees and in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. And in coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds. So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, ‘Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?’”

Very many of those to whom St. Mark’s Gospel was first addressed were Christians who had been pagans and were unfamiliar with Jewish customs. The Evangelist explains these customs in some detail to help them realize the significance of the events and teachings reported in the Gospel story.

Hands were washed not for reasons of hygiene or good manners but because the custom had

religious significance: it was a rite of purification. In Exodus 30:17 and following the Law of God laid down how priests should wash before offering sacrifice. Jewish tradition had extended this to all Jews before every meal, in an effort to give meals a religious significance; this was reflected in the blessings which marked the start of meals. Ritual purification was a symbol of the moral purity a person should have when approaching God (see Ps 24:3 and following and Ps 51:4 and 9); the Pharisees had focused on the mere external rite. Therefore, Jesus restores the genuine meaning of these precepts of the Law whose purpose is to teach the right way to render homage to God (compare Jn 4:24).

Originally, for the Jew the Law meant two things; it meant, first and foremost, the Ten Commandments; and second, the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch. Now it is true that the Pentateuch contains a certain number of detailed regulations and instructions; but, in the matter of moral questions, what is laid down is a series of great moral principles that a man must interpret and apply for himself. For a long time the Jews were content with that. But in the fourth and fifth centuries before Christ there came into being a class of legal experts whom we know as the scribes. They were not content with great moral principles; they had what can only be called a passion for definition. They wanted these great principles amplified, expanded, broken down until they issued into thousands and thousands of little rules and regulations governing every possible action and every possible situation in life. These rules and regulations were not written down until long after the time of Jesus. They are what is called the oral Law; it is they which are the tradition of the elders.

The “tradition of the elders” was regarded by the Pharisees to be as binding as the written Torah (the five books of Moses constituting the Pentateuch, the Law). This human tradition constituted the oral law or Halakah. By the time of Jesus, the prescriptions were already so numerous that observance of the Torah had become an impossible burden. Only the specialists, the

scribes, could hope to know them all, let alone observe them; while the “people of the land”, ordinary folk, were in inevitable ignorance (Jn 7:49). In the Gospel today, Jesus takes strong exception to the excesses of the Halakah.

The word “elders” does not mean in this phrase, the officials of the synagogue; rather it means the ancients, the great legal experts of the old days, like Hillel and Shammai. Much later, in the second century after Christ, a summary of all these rules and regulations was made and written down; and that summary is known as the Mishnah.

To the scribes and Pharisees, these rules and regulations was the essence of religion. To observe them was to please God; to break them was to sin. This was their idea of goodness and of the service of God. In the religious sense, Jesus and these people spoke different languages. It was precisely because he had no use for the regulations that they considered him a bad man. There is a fundamental cleavage here – the cleavage between the man who sees religion as a ritual, ceremonial, rules and regulations, and the man who sees in religion loving God and loving his fellow human being.

To the accusations of the Pharisees and scribes Jesus responded, “Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.’ You disregard God’s commandments but cling to human tradition.”

Jesus responds with a vigorous attack on these Pharisaic customs because they distract practitioners from the more important principles of the Mosaic Law, that is, they emphasize the dangers of ritual impurity (on the hands) to the neglect of moral defilement (in the heart) defined by the commandments. In the end, these traditions promoted by the elders are examples of merely human tradition that the Pharisees have wrongly elevated to an equal level with the revealed Law of God.

Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah 29:13 to show that they are doing the same things the people of the prophet’s day were doing. Isaiah reprimands Jerusalem for consulting its politicians while rejecting the prophets. Because their leaders routinely exclude the Lord from foreign policy decisions and rely instead on their own wisdom, their worship of the Lord has become empty and vain. No longer, says Isaiah, will Yahweh tolerate their lip service when their hearts are devoid of living faith. The Pharisees have fallen into the same trap of rejecting God’s wisdom in favor of their own. Jesus turns the Pharisee’s challenge about the manner in which his disciples prepared to eat bread into a wide-sweeping exposure of their “lip service” interpretation of God’s Law, quoting Is 29:13.

In their eagerness to maintain traditions, which had their origin in the opinions of earlier teachers, they neglect the essential obligations of God’s Law. Jesus accuses them of putting their tradition on the same level as, or even above, the Law of God. He rejected the Halakah (the oral law) because it was the work of men and because it could conflict with the law of God. The oral law had placed subtle but misleading reasoning about moral issues above love.

Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites because they were pretending to be something they were not. They appeared to be religious on the outside, but they were actually irreligious and far from God on the inside. As Jesus expressed it in St. Matthew’s Gospel, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites; you cleanse the outside of cup and dish, but inside they are full of plunder and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, cleanse first the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean (Mt 23:25-26).” The Pharisees thought that they were good simply if they carried out the correct acts and practices, no matter what their hearts and thoughts were like. Legalism takes account of a man’s outward actions; but it takes no account at all of his inward feelings or conscience. He may well be meticulously serving God in outward things and bluntly disobeying God in inward things – and that is hypocrisy.

The fundamental question is how is a man's heart toward God and towards his fellow man? And if in his heart there are enmity, bitterness, grudges, pride – not all the outward religious observances in the world will make him anything other than a hypocrite.

“[Jesus] summoned the crowd again and said to them, ‘Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come from within are what defile.’”

When Jesus made his revolutionary statement that nothing that goes into a man can make him unclean, he was wiping out at one stroke the laws for which Jews had suffered and died (see 1 Mac 1:62-63; 2 Mac 7). No wonder the disciples were amazed.

In effect Jesus was saying that things couldn't be either unclean or clean in any real religious sense of the term. Only persons can be really morally defiled; and what defiles a person are his own actions, which are the product of his own heart. This was new doctrine – shattering new doctrine. The Jews had and still have a whole system of things which are clean and unclean. With one sweeping pronouncement, Jesus declared the whole thing irrelevant and that uncleanness has nothing to do with what a man takes into his body, but everything to do with what comes out of his heart.

He begins with evil designs. Every outward act of sin is preceded by an inward act of choice. Therefore, Jesus begins with the evil thought from which evil action comes.

Jesus shows that the legal discrimination between clean and unclean is incapable of truly purifying the heart of man; for it cannot be more than a provisional expedient. And if Jesus can now pronounce the disposition obsolete, it is for one reason: because the definitive order has brought the provisional order to an end. This is not formulated, but presupposed. Jesus' abolition of the Jewish tradition of clean and unclean, manifests to whoever can understand, that a new order has emerged (see Mk 2:21-22).

Since Jesus traces true defilement back to the heart, the outward distinctions between clean and unclean as defined by the Old Covenant are no longer operative or binding in the New. These ceremonial distinctions have been superseded in two ways: First, ritual defilement was an external matter under the Old Covenant; whereas the New covenant penetrates to cleanse and govern the inward life of believers (Mt 5:8). Secondly, since Mosaic food laws effectively separated Israel from the Gentiles, these dietary restrictions were set aside in the New Covenant once Jews and Gentiles were gathered together into the same covenant family. The early church grappled much with the issues surrounding Old Covenant dietary laws and table fellowship in light of the Gospel (see Acts 10: 9-16; Rom 14:13-23; Gal 2:11-16; CCC 582).

Jesus explained, “From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile.”

Jesus addresses the crowd and explains the real meaning of cleanliness before God. A man is not made unclean, sinful, before God because of some unclean thing he may swallow by eating with unwashed hands. It is rather the evil designs that come from within, from a man's heart and mind that defile a man and make him a sinner. The evil begins within. This is the uncleanness which men must avoid rather than cultic impurity about which the Pharisees are so concerned.

In biblical terminology, the heart is the center of the person and the source of every decision that manifests itself through deeds. Jesus thus links true defilement with the heart, where evil intentions and actions have their hidden beginning (compare Mt 5:28).

His inventory of vices is similar to others in the New Testament (compare Rom 1:29-31; Gal 5:19-21; 1 Pet 4:3; see also CCC 1432; 2517-19). These evil thoughts that come from the heart, the seat of moral life, are designs of evil, not merely evil thoughts; they are not mere

temptations, but wicked designs; they are evil devising which issue in degraded acts and vices now mentioned in this catalogue of vices. This catalogue is not exclusive; other inventories mention other vices. The evil perpetrated by the sinful heart is limitless in number.

We will review some of these vices that are not so obvious in those listed by Jesus.

Unchastity means every kind of sexual vice.

Greed is unbridled desire or lust for possessing, which searches for happiness in things instead of in God. Malice is the desire and intention to cause pain, injury, harm, or distress to another.

Deceit is to give a false impression; it is to cause to accept as true what is false; such a person is not living in the truth.

Licentiousness is a disposition lacking any moral restraints; having a disregard for rules and right order; doing what one pleases and sinning without a qualm. It is lawlessness.

Envy is the painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with a desire to possess the same advantage. Such a person is saddened by the good of another.

Blasphemy is the sin of insulting God and showing contempt or lack of reverence for God and sacred things.

Arrogance is an attitude of superiority manifested in an overbearing manner or presumptuous claims; having certain contempt for everyone except oneself; it is prideful attitude and the peak of all the vices.

Folly is lacking of good sense or normal prudence and foresight in moral matters, having no sense of what is right. An older translation calls it an obtuse spirit.

Our Gospel ends with, "All these evils come from within and they defile." We pray for the grace to make efforts to cooperate with God's grace to overcome these sinful dispositions that issue from our hearts and cause moral defilement.

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 7:31-37

St. Mark tells us, "Again Jesus left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis."

The setting indicates that Jesus continued to travel and minister in Gentile territory. The route Jesus takes from the area around Tyre back to Galilee suggests a longer period of time spent in areas of significant Gentile population during which he performed miraculous cures.

The Decapolis is a federation of ten cities in New Testament Palestine. They were predominantly Gentile in population, and most of them were located east of the Jordan River.

"And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him."

These were the friends of the unfortunate man, most likely pagans, as the place is the region of the Decapolis. Their kindly action of bringing this man to Jesus reminds us of our obligation in charity to bring our friends to Jesus; we, too, must beg Jesus to heal our friends and neighbors who seem deaf to God's word and unable to speak his praises. Sacred Scripture quite often shows the laying on of hands as a gesture indicating the transfer of power of blessing (Gen 48:14-20).

"[Jesus] took him off by himself away from the crowd."

In the exercise of his miraculous powers, Jesus avoids ostentation. His humility in this respect was a contrast to the pretensions of false messiahs

who sought to win the favor of the people by extravagant promises of miraculous deeds.

The prevalent misconceptions of the nature of messianic salvation explain the measure of silence and secrecy with which Jesus sought to veil his miracles and his own identity at the beginning of his ministry. In the present instance there was an additional reason for privacy. The gestures employed by Jesus in curing this man were very appropriate to the cure, which he was about to perform. But pagans might have mistaken their significance and have interpreted them as part of a magical rite. It was part of Jesus' intention to preserve the messianic secret, which he revealed to his disciples only—and even to them by slow degrees.

We learn from Jesus' example to do good where no eyes see but his.

"[Jesus] put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, 'Ephphatha!'—that is, 'Be opened!'—and immediately the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly."

These gestures and signs were all part of the healing technique of contemporary wonder-workers. In Jesus' case they were sacramental gestures in that they effected what they symbolized: he "opened" the man's ears; he loosed his tongue.

The fingers can signify a powerful divine action (Lk 11:20; Ps 8:4), and saliva is thought to have ability to heal wounds. Looking up to heaven was a sign of Jesus' intimacy with his Father rather than a plea for a miracle. He worked his miracles by his own divine power, but always in union with his Father. The sigh or groan may signify the draining effect Jesus' humanity felt as power went out of him (Mk 5:30). It may also have expressed the deep struggle and labor that he was experiencing, and his ardent desire for the healing to take place.

Jesus' words, "Be opened", give a direct command to the impeded tongue. The result was immediate.

Although it is the words of Christ that work the cure, he wished, as on other occasions, to use visible, material objects, which in some way were intended to express the more profound action the sacraments were later going to work in souls. Already in the first centuries, and throughout many generations, the Church used these same gestures of the Lord at the moment of Baptism, while she prayed over the one to be baptized: "May the Lord Jesus, who made the deaf hear and the dumb speak, grant that at the proper time, you may hear his word and proclaim the Faith."

The purpose of these gestures was to arouse in the man the faith required from those who sought the benefit of Jesus' power. Jesus could have cured this man by a word, even at a distance, but the actions performed in this case place in clear light the efficacious participation of his humanity in his miracles. This would not be so clear if he had cured the man by a mere word.

In the miracle of the deaf and dumb man, we can see a symbol of the way God acts on souls: for us to believe, God must first open our heart so we can listen to his word. Then we too can proclaim the mighty works of God.

At the moment of baptism, the Holy Spirit, the finger of God, freed our hearing to listen to the word of God, and unloosened our tongue in order to announce it throughout the world; and this is continued during our whole life. St. Augustine, in commenting on this passage of the Gospel, says that the tongue of someone united to God will speak of the Good, will bring to agreement those who are divided, will console those who weep. God will be praised; Christ will be announced. These things we will do if we have our hearing attentive to the continuous inspirations of the Holy Spirit and if we have our tongue ready to speak of God, uninhibited by human respect.

There is a deafness of soul which is worse than that

of the body, since no one is deafer than he who does not want to hear. There are many who have their ears closed to the word of God, and many, too, who become more and more insensitive to the innumerable invitations of grace. An apostolate which is patient, tenacious, full of understanding, accompanied by prayer, will make many of our friends hear the voice of God and be themselves converted into new apostles who will speak of him everywhere. This is one of the missions which we receive in baptism.

We Christians cannot remain dumb when we must speak of God and transmit his message openly: parents to their children, teaching them their prayers and the basics of their faith from their infancy; a friend to his friend, when opportune moment presents itself, and even making it rise if necessary; an office worker to his colleagues, offering them, by his word and example, a cheerful model to imitate, the student at the university, among those with whom he spends so many hours. We cannot remain silent during the countless opportunities the Lord places before us in which we can show to everyone the path of sanctity in the middle of the world. There are even moments in which it would be unnatural for a good Christian not to say something supernatural: the death of a loved one, a visit to a sick person.... People expect it of us, and we cannot defraud them by remaining silent.

St. Mark himself knew very well that Jesus was fulfilling the divine plan when he restricted his preaching to the Jews, and that he had given a command to the Apostles to bring his Gospel to all nations (Mk 16:16). Possibly, however, some of his Gentile converts were questioning why Jesus had not come to the Gentiles, but spent all his public life in Palestine. In this short episode, St. Mark shows that Jesus was interested indeed in Gentiles and showed his compassion for them by working miracles for them.

The healing of the deaf and dumb man in the pagan district of Decapolis shows that the

Gentiles, too, were to partake of the Messianic blessing. Mark, writing for Gentile converts, would naturally be anxious to stress this point. Although Jesus did not preach his passage openly among the Gentiles—he offered salvation firstly to God's chosen people—he instructed and commanded his disciples to “Go out to the whole world: proclaim the good news to all creation” (Mk 16:16).

“[Jesus] ordered them not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it.”

Jesus performed miracles as signs of the arrival of the kingdom of God. It was a manifestation of the presence of the spiritual kingdom in Jesus. Jesus' primary mission was a spiritual one. His preaching and its enlightening and consoling message were even more important than his healings. The feverish excitement and the proclaiming of his miracles would interfere with his spiritual mission. People wanted to use his power for political and military purposes. They thought he would be a worldly Messiah. That is why Jesus wanted the recipients of his healing to remain silent. But they could not help themselves. They had to proclaim him. The command of silence also emphasizes the humility of Christ. The disciples would have learned from Jesus' example the lesson that they were not to seek personal renown from the exercise of the power that they would enjoy.

“They were exceedingly astonished and they said, ‘He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.’”

When the crowd saw Jesus healing the deaf and mute man, they took this as a sign that the Messiah had come, and they saw a glimmer of the glorious future that awaited Israel. He fulfilled the words of the prophet, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf be cleared...” (Is 35:5). By healing the deaf and mute man, Jesus showed that the kingdom of God was upon us.

In today's miracle, the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy in Christ is especially stressed. The utter amazement of the crowd is emphasized and their comment, "He has done all things well," probably refers to God's creative activity: "God saw all he had made and it was very good" (Gen 1:31). So, Christ was introducing a new creation; while "making the deaf hear and the dumb speak" was a fulfillment of the messianic prophesy of Isaiah (see the first reading).

St. Mark stresses the effect that this miracle had on the crowd. They were pagans—Gentiles, for the most part—and Mark, writing for Gentile converts, was showing that other Gentiles had been most impressed by the miracle of Jesus. The healing also has the symbolic intent of showing that the Gentiles, once deaf and dumb towards God, are now capable of hearing God and paying him homage. They too have become heirs of the eschatological (end times) promise to Israel: "Here is your God; he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing. Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe. The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water" (Is 35:4-7a). In other words, the Messiah will bring about a new creation when he comes. He will change the world for better. He will bring gladness and joy. He will cause a new world to come into existence.

This new world will take place particularly in people. The sinner may undergo a deep conversion and become a saint. Those who turn to God through his messiah will be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. On this mountain of the kingdom they will become like the transfigured Christ (Mt 17:2). Then they will be able to hear the word of God, take it into their heart and carry it out in gladness. And having experienced its beneficent effects, they enthusiastically tell everyone who is willing to hear the good news of the arrival of God's kingdom.

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 8:27-35

"Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi."

These Gentile villages were just on the border of the extreme northeastern corner of Palestine. The Tetrarch Philip had rebuilt the town (already called after Caesar) and added his own name to distinguish it from another Caesarea on the west coast of Palestine.

The passage is the turning point of Mark's Gospel, for it climaxes Jesus' self-revelation with the disciples' first recognition of him as Messiah. In the next couple of verses, it will introduce the theme of the suffering Messiah, which will be developed in the succeeding chapters.

Peter is the first human being to recognize, or at least to acknowledge openly that Jesus is the expected deliverer. It is, in effect, an act of faith in the Messiahship, not yet the divinity of Jesus.

The blessing that accompanied Simon's name change to "Peter" is not mentioned in Mark as it is in Matthew (16:17-19). According to one ancient tradition, this omission reflects upon Peter for its Gospel information: it is likely that Peter would humbly omit from his preaching sayings of Jesus that exalt him above others.

"Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him."

Jesus imposes silence on the disciples because of the popular misconceptions regarding the role of the Messiah. Even though the disciples declared that he was the Messiah, they had no clear idea yet as to what it meant—the title had political undertones for them also. Therefore, Jesus ordered them to remain silent about who he was until the crucifixion and resurrection would make everything clear to them. Then they could and would preach the full truth to others.

“He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priest, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days. He spoke this openly.”

The importance of this passage in Mark cannot be overstated, for its main burden is to correct any possible false notion of the Messiahship involved in the confession just made.

Jesus’ words now come as a commentary on Peter’s admission; they are an instruction on the sense in which he is to be understood as an anointed one, a Messiah. They follow logically on his prohibition not to tell anyone about him. It is not only that others would not understand if the disciples were to tell them that Jesus is the Messiah, but that they themselves have not yet grasped the essential: that the Messiah is the Son of Man, who must suffer and die.

Although this announcement of his sufferings, death, and resurrection was crystal clear, it did not really register with the disciples. How could he who had such power from God be put to death and how could a dead man rise?

Jesus uses the title Son of Man in connection either with his glorious coming or with his lowliness (see Mk 10:45) or with his passion and death, that is, in instruction to his disciples on the nature of his Messiahship. Jesus thus transforms the current notion of the Son of Man as the eschatological judge of glory by fusing it with the figure of the suffering Servant of Yahweh.

The passage in today’s Gospel is the first of three predictions (Mk 9:30-33; 10:32-34). In this way Jesus intensifies his effort to instruct the apostles about the suffering that awaits both him and his loyal followers.

The prediction of the Passion and Resurrection was intended as a corrective to false ideas of triumphant Messiah. Now that the disciples firmly believed that Jesus was the Messiah, it was necessary that they should understand that he was a suffering

Messiah (see Is 53) who would be rejected by the leaders of the Jews.

For, at that time, there was a general consensus that the Messiah would accomplish his work by the possession and exercise of brute force. He would be a glorious and victorious figure to whom defeat and suffering would be entirely foreign. But Jesus cannot accept the title of Messiah as it was then understood; and since it is at least partly in that sense that his disciples apply the title to him, he must “warn” and forbid them to make their confession public. He hastens to remove any false impressions by proclaiming unambiguously that his earthly future would be one of ignominy, defeat, and suffering.

In saying that Jesus spoke this openly, it suggests that Jesus now departed from his veiled manner of self-revelation and spoke of his suffering and repudiation in unmistakably clear terms.

“Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.”

The account goes on to show that Peter and the disciples were not ready for a suffering Messiah. They wanted a leader who would deliver them from pain and death itself. The apostles are surprised, because they cannot and do not want to understand why the master should have to suffer and die, much less that he should be so treated “by the elders and the chief priests and scribes.”

It is now the turn of the disciples to react with shocked and strongly-felt disapproval. Acting once again through their spokesman, Peter, they in turn rebuke Jesus for such ideas, and attempt to dissuade him from such thoughts. If he is Messiah, they imply, any thought of such a future must be wrong.

“At this [Jesus] turned around and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.’ “

Peter, by wishing to prevent Jesus' suffering and death, was opposing God's plan as laid down in the prophets, especially in the prophecies of second-Isaiah (40-55; see today's first reading). Peter and his companions had as yet only a very human outlook on God's purpose in sending the Messiah. Jesus rebukes Peter for rejecting the prospect of suffering. Scandalized and perhaps frightened, Peter briefly aligned himself with the mindset of Satan, who similarly tried to divert Jesus from his mission to suffer (Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13).

The blistering severity of Jesus' reply is evidence enough that what is at stake is a matter of quite central importance, and that in two ways.

In the first place, when Jesus said that he "must suffer", he meant what he said. That was part of the firmly decreed will of God. Thus, to persuade Jesus to shrink from those events decreed by God was to tempt him to disobey the will of God, as Satan had tried to do in the wilderness (Mk 1:13); and he attempted still more in the accounts of Jesus' temptations in Matthew (4:1-11) and Luke (4:1-13); there the temptation is basically the same as it is here: to try to accomplish the Messiah's work by spectacular means, which would involve no suffering.

Secondly, the disciples were so vehemently opposed to the suggestion that Jesus must suffer because it goes against the grain to be the followers of a messiah who suffers instead of producing spectacular victories by an effortless exercise of power. And judged by ordinary standards, there seems no point in the suffering and death of the Messiah. So, by their reaction to Jesus' prophecy, the disciples reveal even more clearly than before, the truth about themselves, that their minds and wills are governed by the standards of this world, of the unredeemed, material man—they think as men think. What they have got to be taught, therefore, is that God thinks otherwise—that his standards are completely the opposite of those accepted in the world. And since this is something all men need to know, and there is no secrecy about it, the crowd is called to share the lesson.

Jesus wants to affirm once again that his mission is spiritual, not earthly, and therefore, it cannot be understood by using mere human criteria; it is governed by God's designs, which were that Jesus should redeem us through his Passion and Death. So, too, suffering, for a Christian united to Christ, is also a means of salvation.

"[Jesus] summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, 'Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.'"

As the Son of Man must suffer, so also must those who take him as their leader. The true Christian life demands that one is ever ready to sacrifice one's own convenience and pleasure if the Gospel law so demands.

This utterance of Jesus challenges all believers to authentic discipleship and total commitment to himself through self-renunciation and acceptance of the cross of suffering, even to the sacrifice of life itself. Christ's cross is a symbol of the redemptive suffering which all his followers bear.

To take up the cross is a graphic image of suffering. It refers to the Roman custom of forcing criminals to carry on their shoulders a crossbar to the site of their crucifixion (Mk 15:21; Jn 19:17). Jesus warns that disciples must be so committed to him that they are willing to endure persecution, hardship, and even death. The faithful, he assures them, will find resurrection and glory beyond the hardships of this life (Jn 12:24-26).

Jesus' words, which must have seemed extreme to his listeners, indicate the standard he requires his followers to live up to. He asks everyone to renounce himself, to take up his cross and follow him. For the goal he sets for human beings is eternal life. This whole Gospel passage has to do with man's eternal destiny. The present life should be evaluated in the light of this eternal life: life on earth is not definitive; it is a means to be used to achieve definitive life in heaven.

In the Passion, the cross ceased to be a symbol of punishment and became instead a sign of redemption. The cross is the emblem of the Redeemer: there lies our salvation, our life and our resurrection.

“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”

There is an underlying contrast between the physical life and the life of the soul. The person who sacrifices his life for the sake of Christ will secure the eternal life of the soul. To have saved one's life, or even to have gained everything that this world can offer is of no avail if eternal life has been lost.

Whoever wishes to save his earthly life will lose his eternal life. But whoever loses his earthly life for Jesus and the Gospel will save his eternal life.

What then does saving one's earthly life mean? It means living this life as if there were no other: letting oneself be controlled by the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1 Jn 2:16). And losing one's earthly life means mortifying, by continuous ascetical effort, this triple concupiscence; that means taking up one's cross. Consequently, it means seeking and savoring the things that are God's and not the things of the earth. St. Paul urges our ardent pursuit of the heavenly life in these words: “If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth. For you have died [to all ambitious earthly pursuits]” (Col 3:1-3a). The whole orientation of our earthly existence must be to increase the life of the spirit. “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no avail” (Jn 6:63). “All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of the field; the grass withers, and the flower wilts” (1 Pet 1:24).

Mark teaches that what is done for the sake of the Gospel is done for Christ's sake. Might this mean that those who do not know Jesus, but who live

according to his Gospel will be saved? There comes to mind these words of Jesus: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). “Come.... Inherit the kingdom” (Mt 25:34). They were surprised that their good deeds to others were done for Jesus: “When did we see you [in need] ?” they said (Mt 25:37). Today's Gospel says, “...loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 9:30-37

“Jesus and his disciples left from there and began a journey through Galilee, but he did not wish anyone to know about it. He was teaching his disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death the Son of Man will rise.”

The Galilean ministry is now at an end and the last journey to Jerusalem about to begin. This passage marks a milestone. Jesus had now left the North Country where he was safe and was taking the first step toward Jerusalem and the cross, which awaited him there. He did not want the crowds around him. He knew quite clearly that he had to write his message on the hearts of his chosen men. He had to leave behind him a band of persons on whom these propositions were written. He had to make sure, before he left this world in the body, that there were some who understood, however dimly, what he had come to say. His immediate concern was to warn his disciples of the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem. It is a revelation granted to them alone. For the second time Jesus was trying to impress on his disciples that it was necessary that he should suffer, be put to death, but that he should rise again from the dead.

The renewed prediction of the Passion was necessary because this was an aspect of the role of the Messiah, which the disciples found difficult to understand. Like the doctrine of the necessity

for personal sacrifices by the followers of Christ, it did not accord with popular expectations. Thus the journey to Jerusalem is punctuated by a regular reminder that its goal is the Passion. The atmosphere is subdued and threatening. Jesus' statement, "The Son of Man is to be handed over", will become increasingly prominent as the Passion story proceeds. Although there may be some allusion to Jesus' betrayal by Judas, the more basic meaning concerns the divine plan of salvation in which Jesus' death is pivotal.

In the light of the first Passion prediction (8:31) and the explanation surrounding it, one would think that the disciples could hardly fail to understand. Mark was developing an increasingly negative portrait of the disciples. Their minds could not grasp the possibility of any enemy overcoming him. That this should be part of God's plan "for us men and for our salvation", they did not yet know.

Many of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament spoke of a worldwide kingdom; all nations would submit to the descendant of David. Jerusalem would be the magnet that would attract all peoples. The prophets, however, were speaking of the true Messianic Kingdom, the spiritual kingdom that Christ would establish. The Apostles were as yet unable to see the true meaning of these prophecies. They took them as referring to a worldly kingdom. They had come to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah; therefore, he would overcome all enemies and all opposition and set up his kingdom. How, therefore, could his enemies overpower him, much less put him to death before he had accomplished his task? Thus they could not understand or believe his prophecies concerning his coming tortures and death.

Another element they did not understand was Jesus rising again. By this time they were aware of the atmosphere of tragedy, but they still could not grasp the notion of the resurrection. That was a wonder that was too great for them, a wonder they grasped only when it became an accomplished fact.

When they did not understand, they were afraid to ask any further questions. They were like men who knew so much that they were afraid to know more. A man might receive a verdict from his doctor. He might think the general purpose of the verdict bad, but not understand all the details; and he might be afraid to ask questions—for the simple reason that he is afraid to know any more. The disciples were like that.

"They came to Capernaum and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' but they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves, on the way, which one of them was the greatest."

As part of the journey from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples stop at Capernaum, Jesus' Galilean headquarters, presumably Peter's house.

The disciples had been bewildered by Jesus' further reference to this suffering; now their profound lack of understanding appears at its worst. They, disciples of a master so soon to suffer bitter humiliation and death, are on the way to Jerusalem where it will take place; and yet they are all too humanly involved in petty squabbling over precedence.

Nothing so well shows how far the disciples were from realizing the real meaning of Jesus' Messiahship as this does. Repeatedly he had told them what awaited him in Jerusalem; and yet they were still thinking of his kingdom in earthly terms and of themselves as chief ministers of state. There is something heart breaking at the thought of Jesus going towards the cross and his disciples arguing about who would be greatest.

Yet in their heart of hearts they knew they were wrong. When he asked them what they had been arguing about, they had nothing to say. It was a silence of shame. They had no defense. It is interesting to see how a thing takes its proper place and acquires its true character when it is set in the eyes of Jesus.

If we took everything and set it in the sight of Jesus, it would make all the difference in the world, if of everything we said or did, we asked, “Could I go on saying or doing this if Jesus were listening or watching me?” May God keep us from the words and deeds of which we would be ashamed when he should hear or see.

The discussion among the disciples may have arisen from the promise of the primacy made to Peter a short time previously (Mt 16:15-19). This shows how worldly, how earthly-minded his disciples still were. They dismissed his disturbing prophecy very quickly, and became engaged in arguing which of them was most important and who would hold the principal post in the earthly messianic kingdom, which they still expected him to set up. Later we shall hear of James and John asking for the chief positions in his kingdom.

“Then [Jesus] sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.’”

Jesus dealt with his disciples’ vying for first place and seeking their own glory very seriously. He sat down and called the Twelve to himself. When a Rabbi was teaching as a Rabbi, as a master teaches his disciples—when he was really making a pronouncement—he sat to teach. Jesus deliberately took up the position of a Rabbi teaching his pupils before he spoke. And then he told them that if they sought for greatness in his kingdom they must find it, not by being first but by being last, not by being masters but by being servants of all. Jesus transformed and sublimated ambition. For ambition to rule he substituted the ambition to serve; for the ambition to have things done for us, he substituted the ambition to do things for others.

Greatness in God’s eyes is measured by humility and service to others. As future leaders of the Church, the Apostles must shun aspirations for worldly honor and attention in order to serve Christ more faithfully and effectively.

Jesus set before his disciples the ideal of humble

and devoted service of which he himself had given the example. In fulfilling his own mission to found the Church whose head and supreme lawgiver he is, he came to serve and not be served (Mt 20:28). In his kingdom selfish ambition for preferment is out of place. Greatness in the kingdom will be estimated not by the distinction of high position, but by the degree of devoted service. The higher one’s position in it, the more one would have to be the servant of others.

In this Gospel passage the Lord wants to teach the Twelve how they are to govern the Church. He shows them that to exercise authority is an act of service.

Our Mother Mary considered herself “the handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:38). May she teach us the full meaning of that glorious Christian motto: “to serve is to reign” (LF 36). Having the attitude of servant supposes genuine love and humility. Such love and humility dispose us for divine union.

Thus, through humble, loving service of others, we are caught up in the divine reign and life of love. Moreover, we are serving Jesus himself through those we serve (Mt 25:40); through ministering to them we actually enter into communion with him.

“Taking a child, he placed it in their midst and putting his arms around it, he said to them, ‘Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.’”

In this scene we see Jesus as an affectionate person; he puts his arms around the child, which is a sign of love.

The child is not so much a symbol of innocence or humility as someone without legal status and therefore helpless. To receive a child is to perform a good act for an insignificant person, without hope of earthly reward.

The child represents the humble and unimportant among those whom the disciples will be called

to serve. Whoever receives such little ones with kindness for Christ's sake, receives Christ and the Father who sent him. If humble service brings so great a reward, ambition for the highest place in the kingdom is misplaced. A child has no influence at all; a child cannot advance a man's career nor enhance his prestige; a child cannot give us things. It is the other way around. A child needs things; a child must have things done for him. So Jesus says, "If a man welcomes the poor, ordinary people, the people who have no influence and no wealth and no power, the people who need things done for them, he is welcoming me. More than that, he is welcoming God." The child is typical of the person who needs things, and it is the society of the person who needs things that we must seek.

It is easy at some function to seek the society and the notice of some distinguished person and to avoid the have-nots. In effect, Jesus here says that we ought to seek out not those who can do things for us, but those for whom we can do things; for in this way, we are seeking the society of him. This is another way of saying, "As you did it to one of the least of these brethren, you did it for me" (Mt 25:40).

Jesus is also saying that his disciples must become by deliberate choice what the child is by necessity. This is the only greatness allowable in the kingdom of him who came to be the servant of all.

"Receives" is to be taken in the sense of "welcomes"; it means the loving service of the weaker members of the community, those who stand in greatest need of being served.

"In my name" means because of his connection to Jesus, because he belongs to him. A Christian is one baptized "into the name of" Jesus (Mt 28:19, Rom 6:3) intimately united to his very person. That is why one meets and serves Christ himself in the disciple and the Father in Christ. This then is the dignity of the Christian.

Jesus acknowledges that there is greatness in discipleship: the dignity, the greatness of service.

And this is so because the loving service of the least member of the community is service of Jesus and of the Father. Greatness in Jesus' church is found in service, and only there.

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 9: 38-48

"At that time, John said to Jesus, 'Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.' Jesus replied, 'Do not prevent him.

There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. For whoever is not against us is for us?" This scene reminds us of the scene in the book of Numbers 11: 25-29 when Joshua, Moses' aide from his youth, wanted Moses to stop two elders from prophesying because they were not in the gathering with the other seventy elders when the spirit came to rest on them. But the spirit had also come upon these two. But Moses did not stop them; he wished that all the people of the Lord were prophets and that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all.

The outsider recognized the power of Jesus' name; he used it as a powerful tool against demons that could not bear to hear it. This reminds us to utter Jesus' name and call upon him in moments of temptation. The demons are capable of presenting enticing images in our imagination, or stirring up tempting images in our memory to lead us into sin. The practice of exorcism was widespread in the Hellenistic period among both Jews and Gentiles. The apostolic church found itself faced with the problem of its attitude to non-Christian exorcists who invoked the name of Jesus (see Acts 19: 13-16). This episode of the exorcist occurred when he performed an exorcism by invoking the name of Jesus. Though unauthorized and unknown to the rest of the disciples, the man appears to have been successfully appealing to God with some kind of true faith in the person of

Jesus. Jesus' argument is based on his exercise of a power for good, and it is rightly cited as a principle of tolerance. If the man was exorcising in Jesus' name, he could hardly be counted as an enemy; for he who is not against us is for us. One who performs exorcisms in Jesus' name thereby recognizes his authority, and is unlikely to speak ill of him. The dispositions and faith of such a person may be imperfect, but his exorcisms are a commendation of Jesus and his teaching. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees who were irreconcilable in their opposition, he is making common cause with the disciples. The phrase "not following us" means that he is not a disciple. But the fact that he is casting out demons in the name of Jesus shows that the exorcist recognized the power of Jesus; he is thus not against Jesus and his disciples even if he is not joined to them. This saying of Jesus offers his disciples a directive; they are not to forbid one who acts so. The presumption is that one who does a good deed in the name of Jesus cannot be an enemy of his. In a Christian setting the statement means that one is a member of Jesus' church as long as one does not categorically separate oneself from him. Jesus challenges the disciples to be tolerant and open to others of good will. The Second Vatican Council teaches: "The Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honored with the name of Christian, though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter" (LG 15). "These separated churches and communities, though we believe they suffer from Defects ... have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church" (UR 3). "Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward". The smallest act of kindness shown to a disciple on the ground of his connection with Jesus

will not fail to have its reward. Such acts of kindness open us to God and his outpoured love. Here, we are not asked to do great things for others, things beyond our power. We are asked to give the simple things that anyone can give. God regards in a special way acts of service to others, however small. Jesus considers what we do for others as done to him (Mt 25:40). To these who show such love and compassion he will give his eternal inheritance, the kingdom of heaven (Mt 25:34). This is true because a loving disposition expressing itself in continuous acts of loving kindness shows that we are united to God who is love (1Jn 4:16). "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." To cause to sin translates the word scandalize, to put an obstacle in front of. Jesus' followers must avoid causing scandal to others (CCC 2284-2285). "These little ones who believe in me" may refer to the humblest members of the Christian community, simple Christians or to children. Since sin is the greatest of all evils, it is easy to understand why scandal is so serious and therefore, why Jesus condemns it so roundly. Causing scandal to children is especially serious because they are less able to defend themselves against evil. What Jesus says applies to everyone, especially to parents and teachers who are responsible before God for the souls of the young. Jesus utters a grim warning against any who would hurt these "little ones" by leading them to sin or even shake their faith in him. Deliberately to lead others astray, to snatch from them the hope that he has given them, is seen by Jesus as a most grievous sin: the very denial of his demand to love. Whoever scandalizes those who believe in Christ, especially children, will incur a most dreadful punishment. Death by drowning was a Roman punishment and was particularly repugnant to Jews; the warning, then, is very sharp. "The great millstone...around his neck" literally is "a donkey millstone"; it is a huge stone three or four feet in diameter weighing several hundred pounds turned on a pivot by oxen or donkeys; this is in contrast to the smaller hand mill worked by women.

Because public sin can embolden others to sin likewise, the consequences that await those who cause scandal are worse than drowning by the weight of a great millstone. Anyone who weakens the faith of Christ's followers, his "little ones", would be better off if he had been drowned before he committed this sin of scandal. A shortening of one's earthly life is of little importance when compared with the loss of one's eternal life. "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go to Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, where, 'the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'". Jesus uses hyperbole (exaggerated speech) to emphasize that drastic measures are needed to avoid sin. Because mortal sins merit hell, avoiding them requires us to take action so serious that it can be compared to bodily dismemberment. Morally severing bodily limbs signifies, for example, the amputation of intimate friends. When close companions draw Christians away from holiness, they must be cut off, or at least near occasions of sin must be curtailed. It is better for us to enter the kingdom (heaven, eternal life) without them than to maintain their company in everlasting misery. We see here the need for a ruthless determination to sacrifice even what is most precious for the sake of real life. Thus we see that a person's own enemy, his stumbling block, may be within himself (compare Mk 7:20-23). Occasions of sin are to be ruthlessly cut off. With the compelling emphasis of startling metaphor and threefold repetition, Jesus urges us to make the costliest sacrifices in order to avoid sin and enter into life. The vivid Semitic mode of expression of self-mutilation enjoins us, in the strongest possible terms, the costliest sacrifice. The hand, foot and eye represent particularly dear possessions. But

nothing, however precious or useful is to be spared if it causes us to commit serious sin. No sinful pleasure on this earth can be compared to the heavenly joy of eternal life, which we will attain as a reward for fidelity to God. It may be necessary to excuse some habit, to abandon some pleasure, to give up some friendship, to cut out something that has become very dear to us, in order to be fully obedient to the will of God. If there is anything in our lives which is coming between us and obedience to the will of God, however much habit and custom may have made it part of our lives, it must be rooted out. The rooting out may be painful as a surgical operation; it may seem like cutting out part of our own body; but if we are to know real life, real happiness and real peace, it must go. This may sound bleak and stern, but in reality it is only facing the facts of life. Jesus uses the strongest figurative language like blinding and maiming oneself before one would think of doing evil. Each true follower of Jesus must be ready to sacrifice what is nearest and dearest to him rather than commit a personal sin. Eternal life is worth any sacrifice. Jesus is very explicit; a person is obliged to avoid near occasions of sin, just as he is obliged to avoid sin itself; "Whoever loves danger will perish in it" (Sir 3:25). The eternal good of our soul is more important than any temporal good. Therefore, anything that places us in proximate danger of committing sin must be cut off and thrown away. Jesus makes sure we recognize the seriousness of this obligation. What about the person who finds himself so morally weak that he is unable to make an immediate break with the near occasion of sin? Such a one must prepare and strengthen himself through serious prayer, meditating on pertinent scripture passages and receive the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist frequently. He will also find assistance through spiritual direction and the support of a small faith community which focuses on prayer and the word of God. He must also strengthen his will through performing small acts of penance, sacrificial acts of self-denial and detachment in those areas where he is capable. Gehenna is translated "Valley of the son of

Hinnon". It was a ravine south of Jerusalem where human sacrifices were once offered to Molech. In the New Testament period, Gehenna served as a smoldering garbage dump where refuse burned continually. For that reason it became a dreadful symbol of hell. The prophet Jeremiah warned that there, the faithless ones of Israel would be destroyed by fire. As a site of ill omen, it came to symbolize the place of future punishment. Jesus evokes these associations to teach us that hell is a place of fiery punishments (Mt 5:22; 18:9; 23:33). In the afterlife, the bodies and souls of the wicked will suffer in hell for eternity. Other biblical passages corroborate this horrifying prospect (Is 33:14; 66:24; Rev 20:10). When Jesus speaks of the inescapable responsibility for choosing, he uses these absolute alternatives; it is either "life" (in the fullest sense), or "Gehenna" (annihilation or continual burning). Verse 48 emphasizes this by the phrase (derived from Is 66:24); "Where the devouring worm never dies and the fire is not quenched." Verses 44 and 46 containing the same phrase are omitted because they are not in all the manuscripts and were probably added by later scribes. The actual phrase about the worm which does not die, and the fire which is not quenched, comes from a description of the fate of Israel's evil enemies in Isaiah 66:24. Because of all this, Gehenna had become a kind of type or symbol of hell, the place where the souls of the wicked would be tortured and suffer. Gehenna stands as place of punishment and the word in the mind of every Israelite, conveys the grimmest and most terrible scene. The worm that does not die refers to the maggots eating the offal or waste parts of butchered animals' decaying flesh. This represents the eternal remorse felt by those in hell. Their consciences will never let them rest; it is through their own fault that they are suffering the eternal pains of hell. The catechism of the Catholic Church says, "The teaching of the church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, 'eternal fire'. The chief punishment of hell is

eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs". (CCC 1035).

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 10:2-16

"The Pharisees approached Jesus and asked, 'Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?' They were testing him."

Besides trying to get Jesus to make some statement that would turn the people against him, the Pharisees were laying a trap for Jesus as part of a strategy to eliminate him (3:6). They anticipate he will deny the legality of divorce and so draw upon himself the wrath of Herod Antipas and his unlawful mistress, Herodias. For it was well known that Herod, the ruler of this territory, and his consort had abandoned their spouses in order to remarry. Because John the Baptist had been executed for condemning their unlawful union (6:17-19) as he ministered in this very region (10:1), the Pharisees hope Jesus will meet the same fate as John by making the same outspoken mistake.

Before answering their question, Jesus asked them a question in return. "He said to them in reply, 'What did Moses command you?' They replied, 'Moses permitted a husband to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her.'"

Moses permitted Israelite laymen to divorce their wives under the Old Covenant (Deut 24:1-4). This was a temporary concession tailored to the weaknesses of Israel (10:5). Jesus now revokes Mosaic divorce legislation by returning to God's original intention for every married couple: lifelong monogamy (10:3-9).

Divorce is one of many concessions that Yahweh made for Israel in Deuteronomy. These and other laws indicate that Deuteronomy was less than perfect law that lowered the standards of covenant faithfulness for wayward Israel (Ez 20:25).

It was always temporary and concessionary arrangement designed to permit lesser evils in order to avoid greater ones.

In Jewish law, a woman was regarded as a thing. She had no legal rights whatever but was at the complete disposal of the male of the family. The result was that a man could divorce his wife on almost any grounds, while there were very few on which a woman could seek divorce. At best, she could only ask her husband to divorce her.

When Jesus spoke as he did, he was speaking on a subject which was a burning issue; and he was striking a blow for women by seeking to restore marriage to the position it ought to have.

“But Jesus told them, ‘Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment.’”

Actually, Moses had merely permitted divorce. This legislation simply tolerated an abuse, which was due to their evil dispositions, their “hardness of heart”: their unteachableness, their failure to acknowledge God’s moral demands and to obey the higher law contained in Genesis. The deuteronomic text referred not to a law, but to a dispensation in view of Israel’s stubbornness.

“But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate.”

Jesus quotes Gen 1:27, “God made them male and female”; and, in the next verse Gen 2:24 as the reason why marriage is indissoluble. The reason advanced in Gen 2:24 is not that God created man as male and female, but that woman was taken from man and is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” and this reason explains a man’s urge to form a unity with his wife stronger than his affinity to his closest blood relatives.

God had no divorce in mind: by creating male and female God intended marriage to be for

one man and one woman bound together in the indissoluble union implied by “one flesh”. This monogamous union, moreover, was indeed indissoluble and unbreakable not only by reason of the two being one, but also because God himself brings partners together and is the author of the marriage union: “What, therefore, God has joined together, no human being must separate.” Jesus’ prohibition of divorce is absolute.

Ideally, there should be no question of divorce at all; for God’s original design was that a man and his wife should be made one; and what God has thus created into a single being, man ought never to divide. That is the real ground for the absolute and lifelong faithfulness of man and wife. The Christian ideal, then, is absolutely clear: unbroken, lifelong, exclusive faithfulness. The marital bond is spiritual, exclusive, and indissoluble. Since it is forged by God himself, it cannot be broken by any civil or religious authority (CCC 1603, 1640).

Jesus clearly states that from the very beginning, God’s plan for marriage was that it should be a lifelong unity of one man and one woman. Its purpose is the procreation of children and their education, as well as the mutual love and fulfillment of the husband and wife. These demand their lifelong bond. Divorce, which tries to break this bond, breaks the law of the creator who decreed what was best for the temporal and spiritual welfare of the human race.

Jesus seeks to restore marriage to the original form God intended it to have. Husband and wife are “two in one flesh” implying a covenant bond between persons far transcending physical union. Love, seeking only the good of the beloved, is the glue that keeps the marriage intact; love is, or should be, the call impelling a man to leave his father and his mother and to cleave in lifelong union to his wife.

For those who are believers, the solution to marriage difficulties is not desertion, but a determination to talk and work through the difficulties with mutual respect, forgiveness, and rekindling of love.

Jesus revealed marriage as a gift from God that is meant to reflect the union he longs to have with his people. Both kinds of union, between man and woman, and between God and his people, are meant to be so intimate that they must not be broken by anyone. It is indeed a privilege to be intimately united to God and another person in marriage.

“Christian couples are called to participate truly in the irrevocable indissolubility that binds Christ to the Church his bride, loved by him to the end (Jn 13:1). To bear witness to the inestimable value of the indissolubility and fidelity of marriage is one of the most precious and most urgent tasks of Christian couples in our times.” John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*

“In the house the disciples again questioned him about this. He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’”

Here, in answer to the disciples who were naturally surprised by teaching contrary to that which all Jews accepted, Jesus reaffirms that neither partner is set free through divorce to remarry again. Husband and wife are on equal footing in this respect. According to Jewish law, it was only the husband who had the right to initiate divorce proceedings. In Roman law, at the time of Christ, the wife had the same right as the husband.

Jesus declares that not only is divorce forbidden, but also that marriage following divorce constitutes adultery, because the first marriage bond has never been broken. The words, “against her”, referring to a man’s first wife, go beyond Jewish law, which did not consider that a man could commit adultery against his own wife. In Jewish law, “adultery” always signified sexual union between a married woman and a man other than her husband. Thus, whereas a woman could commit adultery against her husband, a man could not commit adultery against his own wife but only against another married man.

The second woman whom the divorced man marries is not his real wife. Any marriage relations with her are simply adultery; and by this adulterous association, he is offending against his real wife whom he divorced.

Jesus prohibited divorce under the assumption that the marriage involved is a real marriage. The Church teaches “the exchange of consent between the spouses to be the indispensable element that ‘makes the marriage’. If consent is lacking there is no marriage” (CCC 1626).

“For this reason (or for other reasons that render the marriage null and void) the Church, after examination of the situation by the competent ecclesiastical tribunal, can declare the nullity of a marriage, that is, that the marriage never existed. In this case, the contracting parties are free to marry, provided the material obligations of a previous union are discharged” (CCC 1629).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church also teaches this: “Yet there are some situations in which living together [in marriage] becomes practically impossible for a variety of reasons. In such cases the Church permits the physical separation of the couple and their living apart. The spouses do not cease to be husband and wife before God and so are not free to contract a new union. In this difficult situation, the best solution would be, if possible, reconciliation. The Christian community is called to help these persons live out their situation in a Christian manner and in fidelity to their marriage bond which remains indissoluble” (CCC 1649).

The Catechism goes on to instruct, “Today there are numerous Catholics in many countries who have recourse to civil divorce and contract new civil unions. In fidelity to the words of Jesus Christ – ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries she commits adultery’ – the Church maintains that a new union cannot be recognized as valid, if the first marriage was [valid]. If the divorced are remarried civilly, they find themselves in a situation that objectively

contravenes God's law. Consequently they cannot receive Eucharistic communion as long as this situation persists. For the same reason, they cannot exercise certain ecclesial responsibilities. Reconciliation through the sacrament of Penance can be granted only to those who have repented for having violated the sign of the covenant and of fidelity to Christ, and who are committed to living in complete continence" (CCC 1650).

The Catechism continues, "Toward Christians who live in this situation, and who often keep the faith and desire to bring up their children in a Christian manner, priests and the whole community must manifest an attentive solicitude, so that they do not consider themselves separated from the Church, in whose life they can and must participate as baptized persons:

They should be encouraged to listen to the Word of God, to attend the Sacrifice of the Mass, to persevere in prayer, to contribute to works of charity and to community efforts for justice, to bring up their children in the Christian faith, to cultivate the spirit and practice of penance and thus implore, day by day, God's grace" (CCC 1651).

"The separation of spouses while maintaining the marriage bond can be legitimate in certain cases provided for by canon law. If civil divorce remains the only possible way of ensuring certain legal rights, the care of the children, or the protection of inheritance, it can be tolerated and does not constitute a moral offense (CCC 2383).

"Divorce is a grave offense against the natural law. It claims to break the contract, to which the spouses freely consented, to live with each other till death. Divorce does injury to the covenant of salvation, of which sacramental marriage is the sign. Contracting a new union, even if it is recognized by civil law, adds to the gravity of the rupture: the remarried spouse is then in a situation of public and permanent adultery... (CCC 2384).

"Divorce is immoral also because it introduces disorder into the family and into society. This disorder brings grave harm to the deserted spouse, to children traumatized by the separation of their parents and often torn between them, and because of its contagious effect which makes it truly a plague on society (CCC 2385).

"It can happen that one of the spouses is the innocent victim of a divorce decreed by civil law; this spouse therefore has not contravened the moral law. There is a considerable difference between a spouse who has sincerely tried to be faithful to the sacrament of marriage and is unjustly abandoned, and one who through his own grave fault destroys a canonically valid marriage (CCC 2386).

"Some today claim a 'right to a trial marriage' where there is an intention of getting married later. However firm the purpose of those who engage in premature sexual relations may be, 'the fact is that such liaisons can scarcely ensure mutual sincerity and fidelity in a relationship between a man and a woman, nor, especially, can they protect it from inconstancy of desires or whim.' Carnal union is morally legitimate only when a definitive community of life between a man and woman has been established. Human love does not tolerate 'trial marriages.' It demands a total and definitive gift of persons to one another" (CCC 2391).

"And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them."

It was natural that Jewish mothers should wish their children to be blessed by a great and distinguished Rabbi. They brought their children to such a person especially on their birthday. It was in this way that they brought the children to Jesus on this day.

The disciples simply wanted to protect Jesus. They knew quite clearly that tragedy lay ahead and they could see the tension under which Jesus labored. They did not want him to be bothered.

They could not conceive that he could want the children about him at such a time as that. But Jesus said, "Let the children come to me."

This tells us a great deal about Jesus. It tells us that he was the kind of person who cared for children and for whom children cared. He could not have been a stern or gloomy and joyless person. There must have been a kindly sunshine on him. This little precious incident throws a flood of light on the human kind of person Jesus was.

"When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them, 'Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'"

Jesus' reaction suggests some important principle is at stake. He is indignant that anyone should think children unimportant. It is one of the few occasions when the Gospels tell us that Jesus became angry. What provoked the anger was the disciples' intolerance: they felt that these people bringing children to Jesus were a nuisance; it meant a waste of his time. He had more serious things to do than be involved with little children. The disciples were well intentioned; it was just that they were applying the wrong criteria. What Jesus told them quite recently had not registered, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (Mk 9:37).

It is important that children be well received, respected, and cared for. God intends them to be welcomed, loved, reared, and blessed in the security of a healthy family. That is one important reason why it is so important that the mother and father remain united in their marriage.

Jesus welcomes children into the kingdom of God and so lays a foundation for the Church's practice of infant baptism (CCC 1250-52). Since baptism is the doorway into God's kingdom (Jn 3:5), the early Church naturally administered the sacrament to young children (Acts 2:38-39).

Following the apostolic age, clear evidence for the widespread practice of infant baptism emerges

from the second and third centuries A.D., where early Fathers such as Origen trace it back to apostolic tradition. We learn from Tertullian that those who practiced infant baptism used this incident to support their practice. The Council of Trent (1547) later confirmed and promoted the practice (see 7 Can 13).

Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it."

God's reign can only be received by those who know that they are utterly dependant on God as small children are on their parents: they cannot earn it or deserve it, but only accept it thankfully as God's gift.

Children, better than others, are suited for the kingdom since the kingdom is a gift which must be received with simplicity. Jesus himself, in a true sense, is the kingdom; that is why children have a right of access to him. No one can enter upon the blessings of the kingdom who is not open and willing to receive the kingdom as a gift.

The disposition of a child (receptivity, a willingness to accept what is freely given) is necessary for all who could enter the kingdom. Consequently, to seek to prevent children from coming to Jesus would be to seek to keep from the kingdom those who are naturally the least unfitted to enter.

One must receive the kingdom as a child receives it: with trustful simplicity and without laying any claim to it.

"Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them."

Mark is the only evangelist who mentions that Jesus embraced the children. This helps us to see how affectionate and loving Jesus was. The parents had brought their children that he might "touch" them. The touch and the placing of his hands on them was a way of communicating grace to them. By his loving touch he conveyed his love upon them. Power went out of Jesus in this way, through his hands and his heart as he

embraced the children. That power contained blessings empowering them to live holy lives. This power for good resides in Jesus' priests to continue his mission of transmitting his blessings upon those who are open to receive them – the little ones who have great faith.

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 10:17-30

“As Jesus was setting on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”

What did this man see in Jesus that prompted him to kneel? Was it the majesty of the divinity that shown through his person? We are reminded of the crowd's reaction when they saw Jesus shortly after his experience of the transfiguration: they were “utterly amazed” (Mt 17:15).

His high esteem for Jesus moved him to address Jesus as “Good teacher”.

“Jesus answered him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.’”

Jesus is the radiant reflection of the Father's glory (Heb 1:3); it is to him goodness is to be attributed. Jesus diverted attention away from himself unto the Father. When people compliment us for some good quality we too must give the glory to God in the same way. This will take the attention from us and focus it on the one to whom it belongs. At the same time, it may save us from some uneasiness.

But the question Jesus asked, “Why do you call me good?” —was that a way of bypassing flattery? Or was Jesus hinting that the goodness seen in him was actually the divinity being seen and experienced?

“You know the commandments: You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not

steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother.”

Jesus has not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17). The commandments are the very core of the Law. Jesus reaffirms the necessity of keeping God's moral laws in the New Covenant. The Ten Commandments forever lead God's children to moral maturity and remain integral to our pursuit of eternal life; they are like signposts indicating the way that leads to heaven. Jesus cites five precepts of the Decalogue that command us to love our neighbor and parents.

We note that with the one exception, to love parents, they were all negative commandments. In effect, the man was saying that he never did anybody harm. But what good had he done? What positive good had he done to others? How much had he gone out of his way to help, comfort, and support others? The rich man in the Gospel of Luke went to hell because of his sins of omission (Lk 16:19-26).

Even if the man had observed these commandments he seemed to have felt that something was still missing.

“He replied and said to him, ‘Teacher all of these I have observed from my youth.’” In other words, he was still dissatisfied even if he had kept the commandments. He was wondering what more he could have done.

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, ‘You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’”

In order to have a deeper insight into Jesus' “looking” at the man, we must recall that St. Mark is recording the catechesis of St. Peter. He would have received all of the details from the lips of the Apostle. This explains Mark's reference to the way Jesus looked at the man. Peter would never forget the way Jesus looked at him: it changed the course of his own life. Jesus looked at Peter and said, “You are Simon the son of John; you will

be called Kephas” (Peter in Aramaic) (Jn 1:42). Jesus’ penetrating look touched the very core of his being; it was a look of grace that empowered Peter to become what he was named, the rock on which Jesus would build his Church. Jesus looked at this young man (see Mt 19:22) and loved him. This may mean that Jesus not only admired him, but showed him some gesture of affection. People need this loving look. Such a graced look comes from God. People need to know that they are loved eternally and chosen from eternity (Eph 1:4). We must look with love upon others in this way and become a sacrament of God’s love for others. Jesus is loving and affirming them through our eyes and affection. In this way they will be made aware of Jesus’ loving look upon them as they go through life.

Jesus invited the young man to follow him and to be a close disciple. But he states the condition of freedom to follow him: “Sell what you have [and] give to the poor.” For the young man had “many possessions” (Mt 19:22) to preoccupy him and divert his attention from the kingdom of God. And to follow Jesus we must be free of mind and heart. We are reminded of someone else who said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” But Jesus answered him and said, “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head” (Lk 9:57-58).

It is interesting to note that although Peter could say, “We have given up everything and followed you” (Mk 10:28) (compare Mk 1:18; Lk 5:11), he still had the use of his boat and nets. So although these did not preoccupy Peter, they were still at his disposal when he needed them (compare Jn 21:1-11; Mk 4:35-36; 6:32; 8:10). It is also interesting to observe that Peter also retained his home, which became Jesus’ mission headquarters in Capernaum (Mk 1:29; 2:1). We need certain possessions to survive in life: shelter, food, clothing, means of transportation, and money to buy all of these. But they must not become ends in themselves: we must use them to serve God and people and the kingdom of God. We use them to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. At the same time, we must keep our

hearts free from possessiveness. St. Paul urges, “From now on, let...those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully” (1 Cor 7:29-31).

For this young man the acceptance of Jesus’ invitation necessitated his dispossessing himself of all he owned and sharing the poverty of Christ, a necessity that was not imposed upon all. Just as celibacy is obviously for the few rather than for the many, but in the few can show forth an aspect of the kingdom of God that marriage does not (Mk 12:25; Lk 20:34-36); so it is with the life of evangelical poverty (Lk 12:32-34). What the Church as a whole cannot and should not do, can be a vocation of some to do for the Church. Such is the distribution of graces in the Church (1 Cor 12:4-31).

“At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.”

Jesus wanted the man, to become his disciple; but there is one condition: the renunciation of his riches. He is being asked to sacrifice the ground of his security and of his social status. Called to discipleship (“follow me”), he is being taught that Christian discipleship is costly. But this renunciation is necessary to free the heart in order to be disposed to discover the hidden treasure of the kingdom within us and to acquire the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46).

Nowhere else in the Gospels, except in this story, do we read that a call of Jesus to follow him was refused. This helps us to understand the difficulty that many possessions can bring to those who want to attain eternal life. The “many possessions” of the rich young man probably had to do with the ownership of property and the financial benefits accruing from it. The sadness of the rich young man is a dramatic witness that riches can come between a man and the following of Jesus. If we should notice a trace of sadness in our heart, perhaps it is because the Lord is asking from us something which we do not want to relinquish. Maybe we have not yet freed our heart from some earthly attachment.

“Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ The disciples were amazed at his words. So Jesus again said to them in reply, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’”

It is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God because the kingdom is a spiritual reality; but riches lead to luxury, sensible pleasures, leisure, and self-gratification. The rich are severely tempted to live on the level of sense, which makes them indisposed for the spiritual kingdom and communion with God. The rich are exposed unduly to worldliness, materialism, and the pleasures of the flesh. And Scripture says, “Do you not know that to be a lover of the world means enmity with God?” (Jms 4:4). Moreover, St. John warns us, “Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world” (1 Jn 2:15-16).

The self-centeredness and self-indulgence fostered by the world are directly opposed to the humility and self-denial commanded by the Gospel (Mk 10:43-45; Lk 9:23). Prosperity can easily make a person arrogant, proud, self-satisfied, sensual, and oblivious to the poor. It is difficult for the wealthy not to give in to the temptation of luxurious living when he is surrounded by such abundance. That is why Jesus said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.” But the Apostles did not understand this. They were amazed that Jesus could make such a statement. The reason for their amazement was that Jesus was turning accepted Jewish standards completely upside down. Popular Jewish morality believed that prosperity was the sign of a good man. If a man was rich, God must have honored and blessed him. Wealth was proof of excellence of character and of favor with God.

No wonder the disciples were surprised! They

would have argued that the more prosperous a man was the more certain he was of entry into the kingdom.

So Jesus reaffirmed what he had said, “...how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Since wealth, power, and prestige generate false security, Jesus rejects them utterly as a claim to enter the kingdom. Achievement of salvation is beyond human capability and depends solely on the goodness and mercy of God who offers it as a gift. Jesus makes it abundantly clear that having many possessions is an almost insurmountable obstacle to the possession of the kingdom of God. Riches are not evil in themselves, but man tends to focus unduly upon them. Undue attachment to wealth is a form of idolatry: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (wealth) (Mt 6:24) is the way Jesus expressed it. It tends to displace God and takes possession of a person’s heart and absorbs all his energies.

The impossibility of passing a camel through the eye of a needle is a proverb to bring out Jesus’ point regarding the impossibility of a rich man entering the kingdom of God. This difficulty is sorely demonstrated by the young man by his refusal to part with his wealth and embrace the Gospel. It is a formidable obstacle to the kingdom.

“They were exceedingly astonished and said among themselves, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God.’”

The person who trusts in himself and in possessions can never be saved. The person who trusts in the saving power and the redeeming love of God can enter freely into salvation (see Jer 17:5-8).

No rich person could ever renounce all his wealth or use it with Christian detachment unless God gave him the grace to do so; God can give that necessary grace. What is humanly impossible

does not exceed the power of God. With the aid of grace, and by attaching himself to God as the supreme good, the rich man can be saved.

He is moved to use his wealth to help his deprived fellow humans. He can temper wealth's hold on him or his love for it by giving some away (10% is the suggested amount) to the Church. This helps to free him from greed. Prayer and reflection on the word of God (see first and second reading) obtains the grace the rich man needs to practice self-denial. He moderates his inclination toward ease, recreation, leisure, and pleasurable experiences. His efforts toward self-restraint for the love of God and his word enables him to live on a spiritual level so he can enjoy the presence of God in the kingdom in anticipation of the eternal joys in heaven.

We are completely incapable of reaching salvation on our own. The human family descended from Adam suffers from a wounded nature and is unable to obey God completely or consistently without divine assistance (Rom 7:21-25): only by cooperating with God and his grace can we fulfill the righteous requirements of his law (Rom 8:4). By ourselves we can do nothing (Jn 15:5), but with the Lord's help all things are possible (Jer 32:17); Lk 1:37; CCC 2082).

"Peter began to say to him, 'We have given up everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brother or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age; houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come.'"

The word "persecution" speaks of the utter honesty of Jesus. He never offered an easy way. He told people straight on that to be a Christian is a costly thing. It also tells us that Jesus never used a bribe to make men follow him. He used a challenge instead. It is as if he said, "Certainly you will get your reward, but you will have to show

yourself a big enough person and a gallant enough adventurer to get it." Jesus never promised that within this world of space and time there would be a kind of squaring up of the balance sheet and settlement of accounts. He did not call people to win the rewards of time. He called them to earn the blessings of eternity. God has not only this world in which to repay.

The reward for investing completely in Christ will be fully obtained in eternal life, but we will also get it in this life. Jesus says that anyone who generously leaves behind his possessions will be rewarded a hundred times over in this life.

Unlike the rich man Peter and his companions had left their all and had answered Jesus' call. They are assured that they will not go unrewarded. Nor do they need to wait for recompense in the afterlife: they have their compensation here and now in the warm fellowship of authentic Christian life.

St. Jerome says, "Whoever abandons fleshly things for Christ's sake will receive a spiritual recompense whose value by comparison with earthly things is as a hundred to a small number... Christ had in mind the spiritual kinship and the bond of charity which unites all those who make the sacrifices demanded from every true disciple. The true follower of Christ acquires new kindred far more numerous than those whom he may have abandoned for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. In this new relationship dominated by charity, all are brothers (Mt 23:8) and 'children of God'" (Jn1:12; Acts 2:44; 4:32).

The recompense granted in this life does not, however, exclude suffering and persecution at the hands of people.

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary

Time

Mk 10:35-45

“James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ He replied, ‘What do you wish me to do for you?’ They answered him, ‘Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left.’”

Mark shows us the weaknesses of the Apostles. They were ordinary men. It was with people like us that Jesus set out to change the world—and did it. James and John were ambitious. When victory was won and the triumph was complete, they aimed at being Jesus’ chief ministers of state. Maybe their ambition was kindled, because more than once Jesus had made them part of his inner circle, the chosen three. Maybe they were a little better off than the others. Their father was well enough off to employ hired servants (Mk 1:20), and it may be that they rather snobbishly thought that their social superiority entitled them to the first place. In any event they show themselves as men in whose hearts there was ambition for the first place in an earthly kingdom.

Mark shows us that they had completely failed to understand Jesus. The amazing thing is that this happened shortly after Jesus’ most definite and detailed forecast of his death. It shows as nothing else could; how little they understood what Jesus was saying to them. Words were powerless to rid them of the idea of a Messiah of earthly power and glory. Only the cross could do that.

It is amazing that they could still connect glory with a Galilean Carpenter who had incurred the enmity and the bitter opposition of the orthodox religious leaders, and who was apparently heading for the cross. There is amazing confidence and amazing loyalty there. Misguided, James and John might be, but their hearts were in the right place. They never doubted Jesus’ ultimate triumph.

We can admire the Apostles humility; they

do not disguise their earlier weaknesses and shortcomings from the first Christians. God also has wanted the Holy Gospel to record the earlier weaknesses of those who will become the unshakeable pillars of the church. The grace of God works wonders in people’s souls; so we should never be pessimistic in the face of our own wretchedness; “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

James and John ask Jesus for the principal places in the glorious kingdom they were sure he was going to set up when they reached Jerusalem. They were not thinking of his glorious reign in heaven—as yet they could not accept that he would be put to death; much less, therefore, could they have any idea of his resurrection to glory. Jesus was gentle with them for he knew they had not yet grasped that his kingdom was not of this world. He had told them that it was in heaven that they would achieve the glory which they would have earned. If they would have a place in his kingdom, they must imitate the sacrifice he was about to make to establish that kingdom—the path to glory is through suffering.

The disciples have been naïve, not realizing what it was they asked and what might be the implications of their request. When we ask for anything in prayer, we should be ready, always, to accept God’s will, even if it does not coincide with our own; as St. Teresa says, “His majesty knows best what is suitable for us; it is not for us to advise him what to give us, for he can rightly reply that we know not what we ask” (Interior Castles, Second Mansions, p. 216, A. Peers). James and John ask for the favored places of Old Testament usage, the right and the left, when he establishes his kingdom.

“Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?’ They said to him, ‘We can.’”

The metaphor of drinking the cup is used in the Old Testament to refer to acceptance of the destiny assigned by God. In Jesus’ case,

this involves divine judgment on sin that Jesus the innocent one, is to expiate on behalf of the guilty. Thus, drinking of the cup concerns Jesus' forthcoming suffering. The Old Testament uses this image to depict the misery that God compels the unfaithful to drink (Ps 75:8, Is 51:17; Jer 25:15). Although Jesus is innocent and pure, he consumes the cup that was filled for sinners.

Jesus' baptism refers to his crucifixion and death for the salvation of the human race. The notion of baptism is symbolic for immersion in trial and suffering and overwhelming calamity. The baptism is the passion which will plunge Jesus into a sea of suffering.

The request of James and John for a share in the glory must of necessity involve a share in Jesus' sufferings, the endurance of tribulation and the suffering for the Gospel. They will share in Jesus' cup and baptism as they encounter persecution in the early church. The New Testament recounts the martyrdom of James in Acts 12:2 and the exile of John in Rev 1:9. They did go through the experience of their master: for James was beheaded by Herod Agrippa; and, though John was probably not martyred, he suffered much for Christ. They accepted the challenge of their master—even if they did so blindly.

“Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared.’”

Yes, James and John will indeed, Jesus promises, drink his cup and partake in his baptism. On the whole, this first part of the answer to the brothers' request has been affirmative. They do not appreciate what they really ask nor have any idea of the heavy cost, but Jesus does promise them that having suffered like himself, they will enter into his glory.

There is no short cut to God's favor; for disciples, as for the Master, the path to glory is through suffering (Lk 24:26; Acts 14:22)—an aspect of

Jesus' teaching of great significance to the little martyr church for which the Gospel appears to have been written.

Jesus is not empowered to grant these first places in the kingdom to whom he pleases; they have already been allotted by God. The appointment of places in the kingdom is at the Father's disposition only; discipleship does not entitle one to receive a special reward nor to make any demand.

Jesus can only point out the way to glory by his own death. He is not empowered to dispense glorification; for like the day of his Parousia, it is a matter hidden in eternal counsels. Only the Father knows how he means to reward the various players in the drama of salvation. Jesus never usurped the place of God. His own whole life was one long act of submission to his will, and he knew that in the end that will was supreme.

“When the ten heard this [the two brothers' attempt to have first place], they became indignant at James and John.”

The indignation of the other disciples exposes their own jealousy and shows that they too are thinking in terms of promotion. James and John's move to assert their superiority stirred deep resentment among the other ten. Immediately, the old controversy about who was to be the greatest began to rage again. This was a serious situation. The fellowship of the apostolic band might well have been wrecked had Jesus not taken immediate action.

This episode reminds us how human these disciples are and how much they, as we, had to struggle in order to overcome pride and other vices to become saints. God can work through us as he worked through them to sanctify our sinfully inclined human nature.

“Jesus summoned them and said to them, ‘You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt.’”

In the kingdoms of the world, the standard of greatness was power. Their rulers practiced absolute despotism; they exercised complete dominion over their subjects. The test was how many people does a man control? How great an army of servants has he at his beck and call? On how many people can he impose his will?

Jesus continued, “But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.”

The ambitions voiced by James and John lead Jesus to clarify the true nature of Christian leadership. His disciples are not to imitate the pomp and tyranny of Gentile rulers, but the humility and service he has been modeling for them during his ministry (Jn 13:14-15, CCC 1551). Theirs must be a humble service of love. They must be the servants of the Christian Community, ever ready to help their fellowmen without counting the cost and without expecting any reward on this earth.

In the kingdom of Jesus, the standard is that of service. Greatness consists, not in reducing other men to one’s service, but in reducing oneself to their service. The test is not, what service I can extract, but what service can I give.

The disciples are to reverse the customary practice whereby those in authority rule by force; their new norm of conduct—to be the servant of all—is made possible by Jesus’ own mission of service. Jesus solemnly asserts that, in the community of his disciples, there is no place for ambition. His Church is a human society: there is need for authority; there must be leaders. But those who lead will serve their brethren, and the spirit of authority is diakonia (service). Surely Jesus has intended the paradox and asks for it to be taken seriously. There is the shining light of his own example: he served God’s purpose, the salvation of his people, by laying down his life in the service of men.

The principle of authority is admitted, but the manner of its exercise is bluntly characterized as

service. No, not only the “servant” Jesus boldly demands, but the slave of all! The great Paul was unashamed not only to call himself, but to make himself “a slave to all” (1Cor 9:19; see 2 Cor 4:5). Thus he could, with so much greater authority, urge his brethren to be servants of one another in the freedom of love (Gal 5:13). This service ennobles because it is a service of disinterested love and is consistent with true freedom. For it is the service of setting others free to achieve their full potential in Christ. Yes, the words of Jesus are clear: unlike worldly rulers, concerned with power and glory, his disciples are to serve, without pomp or display.

Being a servant demands spiritual maturity. In order to be able to serve others worthily and effectively we must be able to master ourselves and possess the virtues that make this mastery possible. Only a person who is humble and has great love is able to serve in the way Jesus served. This supposes that we are people of deep prayer and union with God to draw divine energy for such supernatural activity.

We are called to model ourselves on Jesus, who concludes this Gospel with “For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The use of the title “Son of Man”, which denotes Jesus’ authority, reinforces the paradox of his voluntary lowliness. The Messiah is given that title when he receives dominion, glory, and kingship (Dan 7:13-14). But this will be fulfilled when Jesus will be glorified in the mystery of the resurrection. Until then, he is the humble Servant of the Lord described by the prophet Isaiah (52:13—53:12).

His life was that of a humble, obedient servant of God, obedient unto death. He did not come to dominate others or to be their servant.

In what sense is Jesus to “serve” people? He will give his life as a ransom for them; the ransom is the price that must be paid to free a slave or a captive.

In the Old Testament, kinship relations gave rise to the obligation of protecting one's parents, siblings, and cousins. Family members thus took responsibility for paying the ransom price for other family members who were taken captive or sold into slavery (Lev 25:47-49). As a divine Father, God became the "Redeemer" of Israel (Is 41:14; 54:5), who ransomed his beloved son from Egypt (Ex 4:22-23; Deut 7:8).

In the New Testament, God purchases his people from slavery in sin (Rom 6:16-18) by the price of Jesus' own life (1Pet 1:18-19). His saving death thus ransomed us for freedom and fellowship in the family of God (1Cor 6:20; Col 1:11-14; Rev 5:9).

In Mark, ransom is to be understood as an offering for sin, an atonement offering. By laying down his life for a mankind enslaved in sin, Jesus fulfills the saying about the Servant in Is 50:10-11 (see first reading): Jesus has paid the universal debt; he has given his life to redeem all others. Jesus died to fulfill the Servant's destiny and his service is that of vicarious and representative suffering.

Jesus speaks of his life as profiting many, that is, all, as in the sanctification of a multitude by the Suffering Servant. In his person, the Son of Man is one with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. He dies that a multitude may live. His is to be a self-giving whose benefit will be of incalculable extent. It is all inclusive. St. Paul writes, "As in Adam all men die, so in Christ all will be brought to life" (1 Cor 15:22).

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time Mk 10:46-52

"As Jesus was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd..."

Jericho, some fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem and about five miles west of the Jordan, was a pretty and luxurious spot. Thus the journey that began in Caesarea Philippi is reaching its destination in Jerusalem.

The crowd which Mark mentions would probably have been the pilgrim throng making its way to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Passover. It would have been at the most-frequented places, such as Jericho-Jerusalem gate, that blind men would sit to beg; begging was the only means that afflicted people had to gain their food.

"Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging."

Mark records the name because the man was probably known in the Christian community. It is usual for him to supply the name of a person to be healed. His vivid presentation comes from recording Peter's eye-witness accounts.

"On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, 'Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.'" The word "cry out" occurs in connection with manifestations (6:49) or recognitions of Jesus' Transcendence (1:24; 3:11; 5:7; 9:24, 26; 11:9); but for the first time this noisy acclamation of Jesus by a Messianic title is made by someone other than a demon.

The title "Son of David" designates Jesus as heir of the promise made to David through Nathan (2 Sam 7:12-16; 1 Chr 17:11-14; Ps 89:29-38). It refers to the Messiah who was expected to be a descendant of King David and the rightful heir to his throne (Is 9:7; Ez 34:23-24). "Son of David" was the most widely used title of the Messiah. Son of David was a title which Jesus never used of himself because of its nationalistic overtones. Here, however, it is plain that Bartimaeus uses it without prejudice and that his faith, to which the healing wonder is ascribed, is faith in the merciful dispensation of God: restoration of sight to the blind is one of the works expected of the anointed Servant of the Lord according to the Greek text of Isaiah 61:1.

The title "son of David" the blind man gives Jesus indicates that he, a blind beggar, actually sees who Jesus is more clearly than the disciples and crowd who have been with him all along!

The blind man represents the Gentile nations saved by Christ. Jesus bids them to rise up from their spiritual blindness, throw aside the mantle of their sinful habits, and follow him down the road to glory.

We take our sight for granted. We take this occasion to thank God for being able to see and enjoy the beautiful world in which we live. We thank God also for the gift of faith, which enables us to see the spiritual world we live in.

“And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more, ‘Son of David, have pity on me.’”

In 3:12 and 8:30, Jesus rebukes and commands silence; but here Jesus shows no displeasure over Bartimaeus’ acclamation. The repetition not only emphasizes the acclamation, but contrasts it with the gradual restoration of the blind man’s vision in 8:22-25, and with Peter’s gradual recognition of Jesus as Messiah in 8:27-30. Bartimaeus’ outstanding faith obtains an immediate healing from Jesus. His faith was effective in drawing power from him for the complete restoration of his sight.

The blind man asks mercy in the form the Christian is accustomed to in Greek and Roman liturgies; *Eléeson* (have mercy). The efforts of some to silence him are unavailing. These may be opponents of Jesus offended at the messianic title, or his friends familiar with his sensibilities on the point. The man is un-intimidated. He believes that he is in the presence of Israel’s Messiah. Isaiah 61:1 (according to a reading of the Hebrew text which the Septuagint preserves) giving sight to the blind will mark his days.

The blind man’s persistence in the face of opposition attracts Jesus’ attention.

“Jesus stopped and said, ‘call him.’ So they called the blind man, saying to him ‘Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you.’”

Jesus cannot resist the poor man’s call for

mercy—a call that came from the bottom of his heart. He will hear our call, too, as we cry out to him for mercy at the beginning of Mass—or at any other time—if we really mean it.

“Jesus is calling you” to come to him in faith to be healed of blindness. We pray to be able to recognize our need and to respond to his call like this blind man.

“He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus.”

This detail symbolizes the eager alacrity with which the call of Jesus should always be answered. He cast away everything that might hinder him. Then he “sprang up and came to Jesus”. Those who come to Jesus must cast away the garment of their own sufficiency, and the sin that, like long garments, cause them to stumble. “Let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:1-2).

“Jesus said to him in reply, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man replied to him, ‘Master, I want to see.’”

Jesus’ question is the same as that to James and John (10:36). Their request for seats of honor contrasts with the humble request of Bartimaeus. This shows that the blind man has seen better than they. The nature of Jesus’ kingly authority stoops to serve.

Jesus asks us as he asked the blind man, “What do you want me to do for you?” He is interested in us and in our needs. He will help us if we ask him.

Bartimaeus becomes the one and only person in Mark’s Gospel who calls Jesus “Rabboni”, which means “my master”. (This intimate way of addressing Jesus appears in the New Testament; only here and in John 20:16, when Mary Magdalene meets the risen Jesus near the empty tomb.) Bartimaeus’ cry and action reveal his deep faith. Jesus is “his Master”! It is just such profound

trust in Jesus that Mark wants to elicit from the Christian recipients of his Gospel.

“Jesus told him, ‘Go your way; your faith has saved you.’ Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.”

Faith, the necessary prerequisite for a miracle, and an essential demand of Jesus’ preaching, could not, before the resurrection, have meant an act of belief in Christ as a divine person. The Evangelists, writing as Christian believers, tend to color “pistis” ([Greek] for faith) in terms of the specifically Christian faith to which it was leading. During Jesus’ ministry it would have meant a receptivity to God’s healing word proclaimed by Jesus, together with a confident self-abandonment to God, whose saving power was being exercised in and through Jesus. The statement, “Your faith has saved you,” refers primarily to the restoration of the man’s sight; but he was probably also granted the light of salvation, for “he accompanied him [Jesus] on the way”.

The cure of the blind man is probably symbolic of what will happen to the disciples, now blind to the meaning of Jesus’ passion and to the necessity of their sharing his suffering. As the man was given sight, so, after the resurrection, will the disciples come to see that to which they are blind.

Bartimaeus’ reaction to Jesus and his willingness to follow him on the way of discipleship contrast with the disciples’ misunderstanding and blindness displayed during the journey.

Mark offers his community the hope and encouraging example of the early disciple of Jesus. (The phrase “followed him on the way” was a familiar designation for discipleship in the early church.) Consequently, after Mark presents the very difficult teachings of Jesus about the Christian attitude toward divorce, riches, and ambition, this miracle-discipleship story becomes Mark’s rallying call to his Christian reader in their own situation, on their own way of the cross, “You have nothing to fear from him! Get up! He is calling you!”(49).

Bartimaeus got the spiritual graces to throw in his lot with Jesus. He did not know where Jesus was going, but he was convinced that he was the Messiah, the Son of David, foretold by the prophets; therefore he was determined to be one of his followers. That he became an outstanding member of the early church, where Mark labored and wrote, seems probable from the fact that Mark gives us his name, as if the name was known to Mark’s readers.

Our Lord had passed through Jericho a few times during his public ministry. Jericho was on the route from Galilee to Jerusalem. Bartimaeus was very probably sitting on the roadside begging for alms on these occasions also. It was only on the occasion of Jesus’ last journey through Jericho that his faith moved him to appeal aloud for help from the one and only person who he was convinced could grant him his request. His appeal was heard.

There is a deep spiritual lesson for all of us in today’s Gospel story. Like Bartimaeus, many of us have been sitting by the roadside for years, not moving a foot toward our eternal destination. We have been blind to our true interests. Our sole preoccupation seems to be to collect the paltry alms that this world would deign to drop in our laps. But we are even more to be pitied than Bartimaeus—he knew that he was blind; we are unaware of our spiritual blindness—we think everything in the garden is rosy and colorful when we see only the colors we want to see; but we are blind to the things that really matter. We have ignored the presence of Jesus in the many reminders he has sent us up to now. Are we not sitting idly by the roadside, engrossed and enmeshed in the affairs of this world, oblivious of our real purpose in life and blind to all the danger signals that Jesus regularly is sending out to us?

Surely we will feel the need to cry out in our heart, “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!” Jesus heard his prayer and gave him sight and energy to follow him on the road of life. Our cry of faith will reach Jesus and he will enlighten and energize us.

Jesus stopped and called the blind man who threw off his mantle, sprang up, and came to Jesus. What is holding us back from springing up and going to Jesus? What are we clinging to that's keeping us from going to Jesus? If we cannot throw it off, we must cry out to Jesus and he will help us. Then we will be free to follow Jesus along the way of life in great joy as we begin to see a whole new world, the spiritual world, and begin to see the drab old world glisten through the new eyes of faith.

All Saints Day

Mt 5:1-12a

Jesus went up the mountain and began to teach the crowds. St. Matthew sees Jesus as a new Moses who is proclaiming a new revelation.

Jesus sat down as a sign that he was ready to teach, since teaching was normally done in a sitting posture. It also conveys one who speaks with authority.

In the beatitudes, Jesus presents a complete change from the usual and generally accepted human values, such as those of the Pharisees. They saw earthly happiness as God's blessing and reward; they looked upon unhappiness and misfortune as God's punishment.

In general, ancient man, even among the people of Israel, had sought as his chief wealth, pleasure and power, and being held in high regard by others. He considered all these things as the acme of well-being, the fount of all happiness. Jesus here proposes a totally different way. He exalts and blesses poverty, meekness, mercy, purity, and humility.

The beatitudes institute a moral revolution. They are opposed to the conventional values of the world and pronounce blessings on those who do not share in these values. Not only are the external values of wealth and status repudiated, but also those goods of the person that are achieved and defended by self-assertion and strife.

The beatitudes lay down the religious dispositions and moral conduct that Jesus demands of all who want to follow him. They are different aspects of the demands for sanctity directed to everyone who wants to be Jesus' disciple.

Let us hope that as we review these beatitudes, our desire for holiness will become the axis around which our whole life will revolve.

"Blessed" means happy or fortunate. In each of the beatitudes, Jesus begins by promising happiness; he also points out the ways to achieve it. Everyone has an irresistible longing for happiness. Our Lord points out in the beatitudes the ways that can lead to limitless and endless happiness, both presently in the kingdom of God, as well as throughout eternity.

The beatitudes are not simple statements; they are exclamations, congratulations: Jesus is saying, for example, "O the blessedness of the poor in spirit! Theirs is the kingdom of God!" It is a blessedness which exists here and now—not postponed to some future world of glory. It is not something into which the Christian will enter at some future time; it is something into which his holy disposition has already brought him into: the Kingdom of God.

This beatitude is serene and untouchable. It is a self-contained joy which is completely independent of all the chances and changes of life. The greatness of the beatitudes is triumphant shouts of bliss for a permanent joy that nothing in the world can ever take away.

Let us now look at each of the beatitudes and try to understand what dispositions Jesus is calling us to acquire. In this way, we will come to see how well disposed we are for union with God in the kingdom. By the "kingdom of God or heaven", we mean God's presence in us, ruling our hearts through his grace and its virtues and gifts. To the extent that we surrender to God and his will, he will be able to rule our hearts more completely.

1 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

In other words, the poor in spirit, who cling to nothing, are already enjoying God’s kingdom. God lives in and rules hearts which are free for him. Empty your heart, and God will fill it with himself. Free your heart from creature attachments in exchange for the enjoyment of God himself.

Poverty of spirit has more to do with a religious attitude of neediness and of humility towards God than with material poverty. That person is poor who has recourse to God without relying on his own merits, and who trusts in God’s mercy to be saved. This religious attitude of poverty is closely related to what is called “spiritual childhood”.

A Christian sees himself as a little child in the presence of God, a child who owns nothing: everything he has comes from God and belongs to God. He is totally dependent on God for everything.

The poor are aware of their own lowliness. Their poverty of being does not allow them the arrogance and assertiveness of the wealthy and egoistic.

The poor in spirit stand without pretense before the Lord, realizing their lack of self-sufficiency. They are the humble and the helpless that put their whole trust in God.

In this beatitude, Jesus announces that the reign of God is being given to those very people who are wretched, powerless, and poor. They looked to God to help them, and their waiting and leaning on him has not been in vain. Their accepted earthly deprivations have disposed them for the kingdom of God, which is now theirs.

2 “Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

In other words, those who turn from the world to God, through loss and grief, will be comforted by God himself.

We so often wrongly place our hopes for happiness in this world. Sooner or later this world fails to meet our expectations. We become disillusioned and saddened by it. Our experience of loss and frustration with this world and the grieving that follows it make us turn toward God for solace. God is mercifully present for us. His loving embrace comforts us. He cures our ills and heals our wounds. He turns our sorrows into joy. Indeed, with the enlightenment and change of direction that it has brought us, our mourning became a blessing. It has disposed us for the spiritual kingdom. We have allowed God to enter and rule our heart.

Another experience that brings us sadness is sin. In sin, we choose something other than God. Our preference for a creature may be serious enough to actually separate us from God. For one with a delicate conscience, separation from God brings about the greatest sorrow.

We are also grieved when we see others who live in sin or who commit sinful acts which hurt others. We mourn interiorly as we see a good God ignored, insulted, and abused. When we return to God through Reconciliation, our hearts are gladdened as we are received by our merciful and forgiving God. We experience anew the blessedness of the kingdom of God within our own hearts.

3 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.”

In other words, the meek and gentle of heart possess the land of the kingdom in God’s self-gift.

The meek are those who have the fortitude to bear sweetly and gently the trials and adversities of life. They are sustained by the presence of God who rules their hearts.

The meek face hardships with patient endurance. Suffering patiently, in this way, is very effective in bringing about spiritual transformation in the person. Accepted suffering quickly spiritualizes us into the image of God (compare 2 Cor 3:18). “Although our outer self is wasting away, our

inner self is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor 4:16).

The meek person shows great strength as he or she remains serene, humble, and steadfast in adversity. The meek do not give way to resentment and discouragement. They are sustained by God, to whom they remain closely connected. They can truly say, “My strength and my courage is the Lord, and he has been my savior” (Is 12:2). God himself is the source of their meekness.

Jesus tells us, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29). In other words, accept the crosses and burdens of life; humbly bear with them instead of pridefully and angrily rebelling against them. Such an attitude toward them will sanctify you and make you like Jesus. He is the servant of the Lord, who “though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth” (Is 53:7).

Such suffering, meekly borne, purifies our passions, especially that of anger. Patient endurance purifies our hearts and makes us gentle. And in our stilled, loving hearts, we discover God’s indwelling presence and that, in the whole process, we have come to possess the “land” of the kingdom of God within our very selves.

4 “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”

In other words, those who hunger and thirst for holiness will be satisfied with the fullness of God himself.

They experience an overwhelming desire for God, whose holiness they have tasted, giving satisfaction to their famished souls. Righteousness refers to God’s own holiness, which he shares with us through sanctifying grace. We try to do what is right by doing God’s will. By pleasing God in this way, we live in union with him and share or participate in his own divine life of holiness.

We seek to increase this holiness, deepening our union with God, by spending as much time as we

can in prayerful reflection on the word of God and communion with God himself. We also seek God as we hunger and thirst for him in the Holy Eucharist. We seek his mercy in the sacrament of reconciliation. Our hunger for him increases with hearts freed from sin.

We express our hunger and thirst for God by yearning for him throughout the day. If he is the great love of our life, we express our longing for him. We are careful not to let other loves captivate our hearts or become consumed or distracted by the attractive creatures God has made. We keep God in the fore of our minds by reciting the mysteries of the rosary. We also increase our hunger for God by associating closely with God-loving friends. We try to go to daily Mass. We spend time with Jesus in the tabernacle. We love him with all our heart. We also express our love for him in other people through various forms of service.

In various ways, we express our deepening desire for God’s own holiness in him and find ourselves being more and more satisfied with the one we have consumed and into whom we have been transformed.

5 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

In other words, those who are merciful and compassionate toward others open their hearts to receive the mercy of God for themselves.

By forgiving others, we dispose our hearts to receive forgiveness. By dispossessing our hearts to give to others in need, we free our hearts to receive God’s outpoured love.

We have understanding for other people’s defects and shortcomings for we are aware of our own. We can overlook them and help others cope with theirs, loving them despite, or even because of, the character weaknesses we see in them. We can be merciful because we have been shown mercy ourselves. We pass on to others the mercy that has been extended to ourselves. We share the very mercy of God, which we have received

and assimilated. We then proceed to reflect God's own steadfast love to others. This faithful, unconditional love of God becomes our own. We live and thrive in that divine "hesed" love through our union with God who suffuses us with his own merciful love. We ourselves are surrounded and permeated with that mercy; we cannot but convey it to others.

6 "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God."

In other words, the clean of heart let nothing mar their communion with God, so they enjoy the knowledge of his presence.

Their single-hearted allegiance to God keeps their heart free from any impediment that would block the sight of their indwelling God. The pure of heart let nothing come between them and God. They are determined to always do what is pleasing to him. They are committed to doing his will. They prudently avoid occasions of sin. They fortify themselves to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil. They unite themselves more firmly to God through prayer; they meditate on the word of God daily as well as receive the Holy Eucharist. They go to confession and receive reconciliation often to be purified from sin and receive new strength for fidelity to God. They befriend holy people to receive support in maintaining a pure love for God.

They try to deepen that purity of heart by detaching themselves from creatures that call attention to them unduly and tend to usurp their love for God unto themselves.

The pure of heart are prudently careful to keep away from harmful images that would absorb their attention. These would then distract the person and interfere with spirit-to-spirit communion with God.

The pure of heart enjoy being in the presence of God. They cherish the privilege of this personal knowledge of God and do everything they can to avoid losing it. They realize how "blessed" they are.

7 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

In other words, those who foster reconciliation and harmony among others prove themselves to be children of a peace-loving God.

Those who go about reconciling others through understanding and forgiveness are children of God like Jesus, whose great desire was that all might become one (see Jn 17:22-23).

To be peacemakers, we first of all must be at peace within ourselves. We are at one with God in following his will for ourselves. This unity of being with God makes for at-one-ness within us and with God. God himself is peace. He continually identified himself to St. Catherine of Sienna as "Sea Pacific": an ocean of peace. The prophet Micah revealed that the Messiah would stand "in the majestic name of the Lord, his God" and that "he shall be peace" (Mic 5:3-4). When Jesus came, he had that peace and gave it to his disciples. "Peace I leave with you," he said; "My peace I give to you" (Jn 14:27). That peace is of God; it is the most common experience we have of God. When we are intimately united to God, we exude that peace and can communicate it to others. It is a grace, given and received as God's gift to us. We must lovingly communicate this gift of peace to others. We do this by a loving friendliness as we mingle amiably with others; we unify people by our conversations that speak well of others. We bring out their goodness and their virtuous accomplishments. We do not allow other's negative comments to live on. We let them die.

We want all to think well of each other. We try to reconcile differences between people. We forgive others and encourage them to forgive one another. We like Jesus, desire and work to bring all together in love. For, we are all children of God with one Father. We live together in the love and unity of the Holy Spirit.

8 "Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

In other words, those who endure persecution and mistreatment because of their pursuit of holiness are already established in the power of the kingdom of God.

Those who are attacked and made to suffer because they are leading holy lives are already receiving the blessings of the kingdom of God.

Fidelity to God's wills disturbs those who live godless lives. These sometimes attack the faithful to discourage them from their holy practices. This beatitude tells us that suffering various kinds of attack or ridicule from others in this way is particularly blessed by God. He strengthens them to endure and be sanctified by the experience. The very suffering endured for the love of God puts them in touch with God, thus enabling them to experience his reign in themselves.

Persecution may be experienced in subtle ways. Sometimes those who, out of fidelity to God, have large families are ridiculed. Refusing to cheat in school may result in having peers hating you. A person insisting on modest behavior on a date, for love of God, may result in being shunned or rejected. Faithfulness to Sunday Mass may cause you to be left out of activities and eventually dropped by those you thought were your friends.

Jesus warned us, "If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, the world hates you... If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (Jn 15:18-20).

Jesus further explained, "I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world" (Jn 16:33).

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mk 12:38-44

"In the course of his teaching..." Jesus spent much of his time teaching; that is how he imparted the truth. Jesus' word sets us apart for God: "Consecrate them in the truth", Jesus prayed. "Your word is truth" (Jn 17:17).

That is why it is so important that we consume and assimilate that word through serious meditation every day. It is his word that forms us into his disciples, if we live in it; we carry it out in obedience with love. That word will steep us in the truth, in the real world of God. That word will empower us to live in God and according to his ways. As St. Paul put it, "...the gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.... For in it is revealed the righteousness of God" (Rom 1:16-17). That word will enable us to live virtuous lives and to avoid sin and its enslavements. Jesus expressed it this way, "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31-32).

Jesus explained that he himself is the truth. "I am...the truth," (Jn 14:6) he said. In this statement, he speaks as God using the divine name, "I am" (Ex 3:14). Jesus is stating, therefore, that he is the Supreme Reality; he is God. He communicates himself to those who receive him in faith through his word. Moreover, Jesus consecrates himself to his Father through his passion, death, and resurrection so that we can be immersed in this Divine Reality that he is; as he expressed it, "And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth" (Jn 17-19). Baptism united us to him initially, and the Eucharist makes him present so we can deepen our union with him. In this way, we are set apart, consecrated in truth, into holy living, living in God for God. This helps us understand why Jesus took his role as teacher so seriously.

"Jesus said to the crowds, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to go around in long robes and accept

greetings in the marketplaces, seats of honor in synagogues, and places of honor at banquets.”

The scribes were those who were learned in the Law of Moses. “They prided themselves on their superior knowledge and also on their strict observance of the letter of the Law. They despised all the other Jews who knew little about the Law and did not always keep it to the letter. In doing so, the scribes were violating one of the two basic precepts of the Law: love of neighbor” (Sunday Readings).

“The scribes are condemned for their bad example, which was all the more reprehensible in those who set themselves up as zealous defenders of God’s Law” (Catholic Commentary).

“In this passage, Jesus makes a series of charges against the scribes. They liked to walk about in flowing robes. A long robe which swept the ground was a sign of a notable” (Barclay). “The robes were an outer garment; that of the scribes was distinguished by its length and voluminousness. There were special occasions when these were worn: at prayer, giving judgment, performing a vow, visiting the sick; which could make them an especial means of self-advertisement. It is not necessarily the customs which are condemned but the vanity with which they are practiced” (New Catholic Commentary).

“Properly, the time for them to wear these garments was at prayer and during the performance of certain other scribal duties; but according to this passage they were parading their piety by wearing them continually” (Nineham, D.E., Pelican Gospel Commentaries). Such use of these robes, “other than prayer and religious duties, constituted an ostentatious display of piety” (Jerome Biblical Commentary). “The kind of scribes criticized here were putting themselves on public display, especially in religious contexts” (New Jerome Biblical Commentary). “They liked to dress in such a way that it drew attention to themselves and to the honor they enjoyed” (Barclay).

The scribes “wanted to be noticed by people and be saluted reverently wherever they went among them” (Sunday Readings). In the attitude of the scribes we see “the picture of men who expect the greatest deference to be paid to them in virtue of their religious superiority” (Nineham). They loved “to be greeted with deep ceremonial bows in recognition of their superior position in the community as experts in the Law” (Jerome Biblical Commentary).

“Even in the place of prayer [the scribes] had to have the highest places” (Sunday Readings). “They liked the front seats in the synagogue. In the synagogue, in front of the ark where the sacred volumes were kept and facing the congregation, there was a bench where the especially distinguished sat. It had the advantage that no one who sat there could possibly be missed, being in full view of the admiring congregation” (Barclay).

“They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation” (Mk 12:40).

“In their avarice, the scribes did not refrain from victimizing the most defenseless section of the community. They gained possession of the property of widows, either by using their expert knowledge of the Law in order to defraud them or by a pretense of piety which was calculated to impress” (Catholic Commentary) in order to receive contributions.

“Lawyers in antiquity could serve as trustees of a widow’s estate. A common way of receiving their fee was to get a share of the estate. Lawyers with a reputation for piety had a good chance of improving their prospects of participating in this process” (New Jerome Biblical Commentary). And yet, “they disobey a special commandment given to their forefathers by Moses, ‘You shall not wrong any widow or orphan or stranger’” (Ex 22-21; Collegeville Bible Commentary).

“The long prayers of the scribes and Pharisees were notorious. It has been said that the prayers were not so much offered to God as offered to

men. They were offered in such a place and in such a way that no one could fail to see how pious they were who offered them” (Barclay).

“In order to attract attention and admiration, they lengthened their public prayers. Because of their motive, however, their prayers had no value in God’s sight. They played on the gullibility of pious widows of wealth with financial profit to themselves” (Sunday Readings).

“They took large sums from credulous old women as a reward for the prolonged prayer which they professed to make on their behalf” (D.E. Nineham: Pelican Gospel Commentaries).

“Their hypocrisy in making long prayers only adds to their guilt. The vanity, avarice and hypocrisy of the scribes are directly opposed to the humility, detachment from wealth and sincerity of spirit inculcated by Christ” (Catholic Commentary).

“As a result of their greed and hypocrisy, these lawyers will receive a stiff condemnation at the last judgment, the highest court of all” (New Jerome Biblical Commentary).

“It is possible that Jesus’ relations with the scribes were not so uniformly negative as these verses suggest” (New Catholic Commentary). “In general, the passage [may] be regarded as altogether too sweeping and unqualified in its attack on the scribes as a class. No doubt there may have been bad scribes, but there were also a larger number of very good ones” (D.E. Nineham, The Pelican Gospel Commentaries).

“He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury.”

“The building known as the Treasury was situated within the temple area. In it were kept the treasures of the temple together with vessels and vestments used in services” (Catholic Commentary). “The temple treasury usually means the cells where the valuables were stored; here it may designate the women’s court around whose walls were placed

thirteen trumpet-shaped chests for offerings” (Jerome Biblical Commentary). “The “collecting” boxes were called the ‘Trumpets’ because they were so shaped. Each of them was for a special purpose, for instance to buy corn or wine or oil for the sacrifices. They were for contributions for the daily sacrifices and expenses of the Temple” (Barclay).

“The usual way of giving offerings was to put them in one of the thirteen trumpet-shaped money-boxes labeled ‘doves for the holocausts,’ ‘incense’ etc.; the various necessities of the Temple services (New Catholic Commentary).

“Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents.”

The giving of alms is spiritually valuable. The book of Tobit says, “Give alms from your possessions. Do not turn your face away from any of the poor, and God’s face will not be turned away from you. Son, give alms in proportion to what you own. If you have great wealth, give alms out of your abundance; if you have but little, distribute even some of that. But do not hesitate to give alms; you will be storing up a goodly treasure for yourself against the day of adversity. Almsgiving frees you from death, and keeps one from going into the dark abode. Alms are a worthy offering in the sight of the Most High for all who give them” (Tob 4:7-11).

The book of Sirach tells us, “Water quenches a flaming fire, and alms atone for sins” (Sirach 3:29).

“Authentic almsgiving springs from a merciful heart. By almsgiving we can become detached from the things of this world. Almsgiving, in whatever form it may take, is an expression of our love and generosity to the Lord. Almsgiving lies within the reach of every person who wants to practice it.

“Our gifts have to spring from a compassionate heart, one that is filled with love for God and people. Over and above the material value of our gifts we need to keep in mind the importance of our interior disposition.

“He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully’ (2 Cor 9:6); this was how God multiplied the food which the widow of Zarephath put at the disposition of Elijah; in like manner Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes” (In Conversation with God).

The widow “put in two small coins worth a few cents”. “The Greek word [for coin], lepton, means literally a ‘tiny thing’” and was used for the smallest coin in circulation.

“Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, ‘Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.”

“The story of the poor widow provides a contrast to the conduct of the scribes. The woman’s inner dedication and generosity also serve to introduce the passion narrative in which Jesus will display those same qualities” (New Jerome Biblical Commentary).

“The teaching of Jesus in the Temple concludes in Mark’s Gospel with Jesus drawing a contrast between people who want to save their life, to gain the whole world, but who will end up by forfeiting it, and a woman who is willing to deny herself, to give up her ‘life’ (International Bible Commentary). “The second incident in today’s Gospel story highlights true humility and true charity. The poor widow, forgetful of herself and of her own needs gave her all, her last penny.... She made the sacrifice without publicity and without seeking the praise of her neighbors. It is this deep contrast between the outlook on life and religion, and that of the scribes in the first that connects the two incidents. While the scribes sought to

earn the respect and praise of their fellow Jews as well as all the financial gain they could come by—from the practice of the externals of their religion, this poor widow’s religion was practiced in secret and it was God alone that she looked for any reward that he might deign to give her. As we say in today’s first reading, we can be sure that she was not left without the reward she deserved. The widow of Zarephath was given a temporal reward. The same generous God did not let the similar act of supreme generosity on the part of the widow in Jerusalem go unnoticed” (The Sunday Readings, Fr. Kevin O’Sullivan, OFM).

Even though the poor widow put in only two small coins worth a few cents, Jesus dared to say that she put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. He could make such a statement because it was more costly for her; she made a real sacrifice to support the Temple; the rich contributed from their surplus wealth. Because of the sacrifice entailed, “her want is a richer source than their abundance” (New Testament Reading Guide). As Jesus put it, “She, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood”.

The disciples are very dear to Jesus. So he calls them and us to himself because he wants all of us to understand what will lead us to the heights of transforming union with God. He makes a solemn statement issuing from his deep insight into truth. He points out that the poor widow, although she gave very little money compared to the wealthy donors, actually gave more than all of them. The reason why this is true, he explained, is because she gave everything she had—she had nothing left. The larger gifts were coming from the overflow of their wealth. It cost them little by way of personal sacrifice. Their gift had value, however, because it required some form of detachment needed to part with their wealth. But their donation did not deprive the donors from essentials. These people were blessed by God for their gifts to the extent that their hearts were freed from possessiveness and according to the immensity of love the gifts expressed. But these gifts were sacrificially less costly than the poor widow’s gift. And that is the point Jesus is making.

The fact that we give less than others is not the final determining factor in evaluating our gift. The personal sacrifices involved, accompanied by the charity and purity of intention, are important determining factors that give increased value to our gifts. We pray for the gift to be selfless and utterly generous in making our contributions to the Lord.

“Our Lord uses this little event to teach us the importance of things which apparently are insignificant. Give the Lord what you can: the merit is not in whether it is big or small, but in the intention with which you give it.... By the same token, our actions are pleasing to God even if they are not as perfect as we would like” (Navarre Bible Commentary).

“We have to give things, but we also have to give ourselves. Let us not be miserly with our time, our wealth, our energy. There are so many needy people and worthy apostolic ventures awaiting our compassion in much the same way that [Jesus] observed the poor widow in the temple. He has a look of love for both of us.”

“The Lord praises acts of generosity for the sake of divine cult as well as all gifts made with a pure heart. Jesus values the disposition of the giver more than the gift received. He looks not only on the amount given, but into the very heart of the donor” (In Conversation with God).

“Jesus observed the crowd putting into the collection box. He takes notice of what we contribute to pious and charitable uses, whether we give liberally or sparingly, whether we do it unto the Lord or only to be seen by men” (Matthew Henry’s Commentary).

“Here is a lesson in giving:

“Real giving must be sacrificial. The amount of the gift never matters as much as its cost to the giver, not the size of the gift, but the sacrifice. Real generosity gives until it hurts.

“Real giving has a certain recklessness in it. The woman might have kept one coin. It would

not have been much, but it would have been something, yet she gave everything she had. There is a great symbolic truth here. It is our tragedy that there is so often some part of our lives, some part of our activities, some part of ourselves which we do not give to Christ. Somehow there is nearly always something we hold back. We rarely make the final sacrifice and the final surrender.

“It is a strange and lovely thing that the person whom the New Testament and Jesus had down to history as a pattern of generosity was a person who gave a gift of half a farthing. [A former British monetary unit equal to ¼ of a penny]. We may feel that we have not much in the way of material gifts or personal gifts to give to Christ, but if we put all that we have and are at his disposal, he can do things with it, and with us that are beyond our imaginings” (Barclay).

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time Mk 13:24-32

“Jesus said to his disciples: ‘In those days after the tribulation....’”

Jesus is speaking about the end times, which concerns the end of the Old Testament world and the end of the world. That time will be one of great tribulation, stress, and suffering.

In the verses preceding today’s Gospel, Jesus foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and the severe sufferings that the people were going to experience. “For those times will have tribulation such as has not been since the beginning of God’s creation until now, nor ever will be” (Mk 13:19). The destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. and the end of that world foretells and exemplifies the end of the whole world. This will certainly happen at some time in the future. To prophesy this event Jesus uses the apocalyptic language of the prophets:

“...the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from

the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”

“The language and imagery used in this passage are frequently found in prophetic and apocalyptic descriptions of God’s intervention in judgment upon cities and nations.

“The language is metaphorical (symbolical), and the striking imagery of disturbances in the heavenly bodies was intended to suggest the power and majesty of God. Jesus makes use of this accepted terminology in order to describe the coming of the Son of Man. His words need not be taken literally as an enumeration of signs in the heavens which will precede the end of the world. They are rather the recognized mode of signifying that God is about to intervene” (Catholic Commentary).

“Mark has expressed this key section of the apocalyptic drama in language almost entirely drawn from the Old Testament. The passage is properly a collage of prophetic texts. The cosmic signs which accompany the Parousia are part and parcel of Jewish apocalyptic descriptions of the day of the Lord, for they, too, looked to Old Testament texts” (Wilfred Harrington).

The passage we are dealing with here is called apocalyptic literature; its “principal theme is eschatology, that is, the last stage of the history of humanity and of the world and its future consummation in the kingdom of God or the future world” (The New World Dictionary Concordance to the New American Bible).

“The cosmic portents preceding the coming of the Son of Man echo certain Old Testament texts: Is 13:10; Ez 32:7; Amos 8:9; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Is 34:4; Hag 2:6, 21. Nowhere in the Old Testament, however, do they precede the coming of the Son of Man. The list of portents is a way saying that all creation will signal his coming” (New Jerome Biblical Commentary).

“It would seem that at the end of time, even irrational creatures will shrink before the

Supreme Judge, Jesus Christ, coming in majesty of his glory, thus fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament” (Navarre Bible Commentary).

“There really is no other way, except this kind of picture-language to allude to events which are bigger than human—all that lies, as a believer in God knows, behind and above history as well as within it” (Cambridge Bible Commentary).

“Some Fathers, such as St. Jerome and St. John Chrysostom understand “the powers in the heavens” to mean the angels, who will be in awe at these events. (These angelic spirits were thought to be charged with the movement of heavenly bodies.) This interpretation is supported by the liturgical use of describing the angels, taken together, as “virtues coelorum”. But many other commentators think the phrase, like the preceding words in the text could mean ‘cosmic forces’ or stars of the firmament” (Navarre).

“And then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in the clouds’ with great power and glory, and then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky.”

The coming of the Son of Man is the crucial affirmation of this section. “It is the climax to which all else leads.” Jesus identifies himself with the royal figure of Daniel 7:13. Drawing from the details of its original context, Jesus implies that he will be enthroned with the Father and receive a worldwide “kingdom” and “everlasting dominion” (Dan 7:14; Mt 28:18). The oracle foretells his heavenly Ascension (16:19) as well as his Second Coming in glory (Acts 1:11; CCC 673; Ignatius Bible).

“While apocalyptic writing is recognized by its scary and dark imagery of trial, tribulation, and turmoil in the heavens, there is also the consoling light at the heart of it all, which overcomes the darkness.” Here, that consolation takes the form of the glorious Son of Man, Jesus, coming on the clouds to gather his chosen and faithful ones from all over the earth. Mark borrows this encouraging

picture of God's deliverance from the promises of the Old Testament prophet Daniel (7:13-14).

"Mark's readers today, as well as his first readers, might well be lifted up by this promise of God's final victory over whatever difficulties or darkness envelops them and their world. Encouraged by this hopeful vision, they can accept more readily their responsibilities to be a consoling light for those who may not yet have experienced the hopeful side of the Gospel promises" (Collegeville Bible Commentary).

"The Son of Man has already manifested his authority on earth" (2:10, 28). In Mark's perspective he has, already, for the salvation of men, suffered, and died, and raised from the dead. Yet, he is the same Son of Man who will be revealed at his Parousia, for the Parousia marks his definitive manifestation. Then he will be seen: seen in fullness instead of being dimly perceived. Only then will he be seen in power and in the glory of his Father. This is the real message of hope for Christians.

"This promise and this hope they cling to while the Lord is absent." It is this that enables them, no matter what their present situation, to endure to the end.

"We were already warned that only those who, here and now, in this vale of tears, are not ashamed of a suffering Son of Man, will rejoice in his glorious coming." That is why Mark will go on, insistently, to urge watching and readiness for the coming, and for the faithful ones, that coming will be joy indeed. The Son of Man [according to Mark] will not come to execute judgment. The one purpose of his appearing will be to gather together the scattered people of God—a familiar Old Testament expectation. Here, they are his elect; they belong to Christ (see 1 Thes 4:15-17; 2 Thes 2:1). This gathering will be the last task of those ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation" (Heb 1:14). (Wilfred Harrington, Glasier Bible Commentary).

"The coming of the Son of Man with the clouds may also refer to Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension. It symbolizes "the establishment of God's kingdom on earth." The destruction of the temple by the Romans is God's judgment on the chosen people and brings the old order to an end, but it also marks the inauguration of the new era of salvation, the establishment of the Messianic kingdom on earth and its extension to all nations. This is the joyful and consoling aspect of the birth-pangs represented by the destruction of Jerusalem. The gathering of the elect is explained...as the entry into the Church of the 'remnant' of the chosen people who believe in Christ. Together with the great mass of Gentile converts, this minority will form the new spiritual Israel, the Church founded by Christ" (Catholic Commentary).

"Learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that he is near, at the gates."

"The fig tree's natural process of growth in spring and summer is compared to the sequence of events leading up to the coming of the Son of Man. When you see these events happening, know that the Son of Man will come soon."

"A fig tree is singled out because in Palestine, where most trees are evergreens, the appearance of buds or leaves on the fig tree is a sure sign of the end of winter and the beginning of summer."

"When Christians see the destruction of the temple and its possession by the abomination of desolation they will know that the prediction of Jesus had been true; and then, too, they will know that the coming of the Son of Man is near. As to when 'all these things are to be accomplished,' the end will come in 'this generation,' that of Mark himself; the Son of Man is 'at the very door' indeed" (Wilfred Harrington).

"Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

“Probably ‘all these things’ allude to the destruction of Jerusalem. Christ meant that it would come to pass before the contemporary generation of Jews had passed away...not more than forty years elapsed from the time Christ spoke until the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.” (Catholic Commentary). “Many of these living in the year 30 witnessed in the year 70 the fulfillment of this prophecy” (The Sunday Readings).

“The death and rising of Jesus did usher in the last age” (Wilfred Harrington).

The mystery of Jesus’ Resurrection and Ascension is the Son of Man coming on the clouds when he received dominion and kingship and established his kingdom, the Church. He will come again in glory at the end of the world at his Parousia.

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

These words underscore the divine authority of Jesus’ teaching. “His words are more reliable than the stable universe itself” (Ignatius Bible Commentary). “With this sentence [Jesus] adds a special solemnity to what he is saying: all this will definitely come to pass. God has only to speak and his words come true; only he who is Lord of the universe has all existence in his power—Jesus has received from the Father all power over heaven and earth” (Navarre Bible).

Jesus is making an emphatic declaration of the permanency and truth of his teaching. “The created universe: heaven and earth, will end one day, but the truths which Jesus brought to man will continue to have their effects all through eternity” (Sunday Readings).

“But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

“There appears to be a contrast between two distinct situations. In one case, there will be warning signs and the general period is revealed; in the other, there are no signs and no information

is given about the time. Hence, the admonition, ‘Take heed, watch; for you know not when the time.’”

“The statement that the Son, i.e. Christ, does not know the time of the Second Coming is to be interpreted in the sense that it was not part of the Messianic Mission to reveal this information to people. Christ, as a divine Person, knows all the secrets of the Godhead, but it was not the will of the Father that he should make known to men the time of the Last Judgment” (Catholic Commentary).

“The message we must learn from today’s Gospel comes across without any ambiguity or doubt: we must always be ready to face our judgment for we know not the day or the hour when we will be called from this life. When or how this world will end is of no great importance to us; what is important is that we shall leave the world very soon and our eternity will depend on the state of our consciences at the moment of our departure.”

“This is the steadying thought the Church, in her wisdom, wishes to put before our minds today. We all know we must die some day. We are strangers and pilgrims on this earth. Many of us are so immersed in the things of this world that we forget or try to forget that we must leave this world soon.”

“Let us appreciate the truth that our death on earth is not the end of life, but rather the beginning of the true life that will never end. ‘Life is changed (by death) not taken away.’ Our death is the doorway through which we pass into unending life...”

“We cannot avoid a sudden death, but we can avoid an unprepared death by striving always to live in peace with God. How would I fare if I were called to render an account of stewardship tonight?” (Sunday Readings)

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe Jn 18:33b-37

"Pilate said to Jesus, 'Are you the king of the Jews?'"

This title "king of the Jews" is an accusation that originates from Jesus' enemies (Lk 23:2). It functions as a slogan that is meant to convey to Pilate a threat to Roman rule (Jn 19:12). But that is because the Jewish leaders had an incorrect understanding of the nature and role of the Messianic king: theirs was a worldly concept of his rule over nations. Jesus' role is that of Suffering Servant (Is 53) and Good Shepherd (Jn 10). Jesus' rule transcends political government. His kingship does not conflict with earthly rulers.

Having experienced Jesus in person, Pilate's overwhelming impression of Jesus is most favorable. He finds nothing offensive in Jesus. He finds no guilt in him. Yes, he is a king. Jesus' stately, noble and powerful presence convinces Pilate beyond the shadow of a doubt. Thus, although forced through weakness to allow Jesus to be scourged and crucified, Pilate posted over the crucifix: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: this is what is conveyed by the letters: INRI.

We are reminded of the penitent criminal hanging on the cross next to Jesus. Jesus' majestic presence and peaceful self-possession convinced him of his royalty so that he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Lk 23:42).

Jesus' indwelling presence perceived through faith perfected by the gifts of wisdom and understanding transmits to the pure a heart of like perception of Jesus' royalty. And since he is the king of love, having given up everything for love of us, we perceive a royalty that is clothed in divine love.

In response to Pilate's question, Jesus answered, "Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?"

"The accused criminal asks questions as if he was the judge, and from the first words of Jesus it is the prefect who is on trial! Pilate is a man who is facing the light and who must decide whether he will prefer light or darkness" (compare Jn 3:19-21) (The Anchor Bible, Raymond Brown).

"Jesus does not know how Pilate has heard of this accusation and asks the governor how he has come by it—by his own sensitive observation or by the accusation of others, that is, his Jewish adversaries" (Pelican Gospel Commentaries, John Marsh).

"Jesus offers Pilate the opportunity of assuming his own attitude toward the light rather than simply serving as the channel of the hatred that the world has consistently shown it" (Jerome Biblical Commentary).

"Pilate's reply is completely self-disclosing... the whole matter is a Jewish charge, and as such means nothing to Pilate. All that the governor wants to know is what Jesus has done to engender such hostility" (Pelican Gospel Commentaries, John Marsh).

"Pilate answered, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?'"

"Pilate saw there was something false about the Jewish accusation and so he questioned Jesus the prisoner, in order to get the true facts... He, therefore, asked Jesus what he had done to merit this treatment from 'his own nation', his fellow Jews" (The Sunday Readings, Kevin O'Sullivan).

"Jesus answered, 'My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here.'"

"Jesus' answer to the question separates his kingship from anything that could threaten Pilate... He has no followers fight to secure his release" (New Jerome Bible Commentary).

“Jesus does not deny his royal mission, but he disassociates it from the political form of government that concerns Pilate” (Ignatius Catholic Study Bible).

“Jesus told Pilate that the priest’s accusation about his claim to be king was not a true one in the sense that they wished Pilate to understand it; but he was a true king and was founding a new kingdom which was a spiritual kingdom, one not concerned with political causes. His kingship was not of this world.

“That Pilate understood Jesus’ kingship to be something other than political is clear from his later attempts to free Jesus” (The Sunday Readings, Kevin O’Sullivan).

“So Pilate said to [Jesus], ‘Then you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say I am a king.’”

It is Pilate who uses the word “king”. But Jesus did not like that term because it had political implications and was usually misinterpreted in his regard. It could easily imply that Jesus’ kingship was in opposition to Caesar’s rule. “Jesus immediately explains further in what sense he understands himself to be a king... He originates from another world and has no other purpose in this world than to bear witness to that other world and its reality” (The Gospel According to John, Rudolph Schnackenburg).

“In Pilate’s sense of the word, Jesus is not a king. In another sense, as Jesus has already implied by speaking of his kingdom, he is a king. He is not a worldly king, but a king who has ‘come into the world’ and the essence of his kingship is ‘to testify to the truth’” (Jerome Biblical Commentary).

“For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

“Jesus does not deny that his kingdom or kingship affects this world, for the world will be conquered by those who believe in him (1Jn 5:4). But he denies that his kingdom belongs to this world;

like him it comes from above. It belongs to the realm of the Spirit rather than to the realm of the flesh.

“Jesus will not categorically refuse to be known as a king, but he indicates that he prefers to describe his role in terms of testifying to the truth. Jesus has no real subjects as would be true if his kingdom were like other kingdoms; rather he has followers who hear his voice as truth. Only those who belong to the truth can understand in what sense Jesus has a kingdom and is a king. The real reason that Jesus has been handed over to Pilate is precisely because he has borne witness to the truth: ‘The world hates me because of the evidence I bring against’” (7:7) (The Anchor Bible, Raymond Brown).

“[Jesus] had come into the world as man to teach men the fundamental, real truths concerning God and man. Christ’s message would be accepted gladly by all lovers of truth and likewise would be rejected by all those who preferred the darkness of ignorance” (The Sunday Readings, Kevin O’Sullivan).

“Jesus implicitly calls on Pilate to take a stand, to range him on the side of truth and life... Pilate has understood sufficiently to know that Jesus’ teaching offers no threat to imperial security” (Jerome Biblical Commentary).

Jesus is “the heavenly witness who speaks those things in the world which he has seen and heard with the Father and who reveals this knowledge to mankind as the ‘truth’ which brings salvation (8:32). This entire ministry is bearing witness to God, who turns himself in love towards the world and desires man’s salvation.

“‘Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice’; Jesus holds against the unbelieving Jews that he has proclaimed the truth to them and they reject him, because they are not of God (8:47). Now Jesus appeals to Pilate to listen to his voice if he wants to be ‘of the truth’, i.e. of God. In positive contrast to those Jews stand the believers who listen to the voice of their shepherd (10:3; 16:27).

Pilate is challenged as to whether he would belong to this or the other group. The revelation of God as found in Jesus compels a decision, causes a crisis (see 3:18 ff) (The Gospel According to John, Rudolph Schnackenburg).

“The true kingship which Jesus exercises is not a matter of political power, but one of hearing and believing the truth. ‘Everyone who is of the truth,’ says Jesus, ‘hears my voice,’ that is, knows that I speak, and bring, and am, the truth, and receives it from me with gladness and obedience” (Pelican Gospel Commentaries, John Marsh).

“[Jesus] came to bear witness of the truth—he rules in the minds of men by the power of truth. He came to be a witness, a witness for the God that made the world, and against sin that ruins the world.

“[He came] to reveal...to the world that which otherwise could not have been known concerning God and his goodness to men.... By his miracles, he bore witness to the truth of religion that all men through him might believe. He conquers by the convincing evidence of truth; he rules by the commanding power of truth; he came as a light into the world.... The subjects of this kingdom are those that are of the truth. All that are in love with truth will hear the voice of Christ” (Matthew Henry’s Commentary).

Truth comes from a Hebrew word “whose primary meaning is to be solid, stable, firm. ‘Truth’ then is said of what is solid, secure, something in which one can place his hope or confidence, for it neither fails nor defrauds. God’s truth, then, is his fidelity, the guarantee of the truth of his words and promises, and the power which overcomes all obstacles, even that of man’s sin, to bring to fulfillment what he pledged to do” (Dictionary Concordance to the New American Bible).

“Truth is the divinely revealed reality of God, manifested in the words and the person of Jesus Christ....

“Truth is usually the revelation of God through and in Jesus Christ. Truth here is...the solid and

firm reality of God which is reached through faith and which saves” (Dictionary of the Bible, John McKenzie).

“The great Christian innovation is the fact that Christ is himself the truth (Jn 14:6); not insofar as he is God, but because as word made flesh, he has in himself the fullness of revelation, letting us know the Father (1:18) Jesus explains the meaning of this title when he puts it between two others. He is ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life’. He is the way that leads to the Father, precisely because he, the man Jesus, as Truth, passes on to us in himself the revelation of the Father (17:8, 14, 17) and because in this way he communicates divine life to us” (Dictionary of the Bible, Xavier Leon Du-Four).

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