“The great day will close in on you like a trap.” The readings of the Advent season and even the readings of the end of the year tend to be dire warnings about the great dangers we face in failing to grasp the meaning and purpose of our existence. The Bible quotes the idea that life really is a story initiated by God and eventually completed by God. But the trouble with us is that in our daily lives, the time scale of this story is so vast that we get stuck in the middle, and we forget the beginning, and we forget that there shall be an end--and so the whole focus of the story can often be lost. So the question then is being raised: what really then are we here for? Many years ago there was a book written with the provocative title Is There Life on Earth? That is a very intelligent question from a biblical point of view. What is, after all, life?--not just breathing organisms, but life as the creation of God with intelligence and purpose and meaning--a life to which we are being invited to participate.

Now, in this great scale of time the end of the world may indeed be far away, but the end of each of us may not be. And this need not be a morbid consideration to simply recognize in our own feelings and in our own awareness that today could be our last. And if so how is it? How is our life in regard to what God intends, in regard to how the creator has fashioned it? In other words, who are we in God’s sight? It might be very different from who we are in our own sight. And this is another factor that we need to think about: our own memories. When we think about ourselves we think about ourselves through the use of our memories. But our memories are often very selective. Not only are they selective, but they are often focused on the wrong thing, for example, what has happened to us. Is that really important and does that really constitute who we are or our identity? Probably you have met someone in your life who has suffered a stroke, or perhaps been burdened with Alzheimer’s disease, or perhaps suffered an injury to the head. And you may have noted how the memory can be affected. And if the memory is affected in a deep enough way, then the entire personality changes because people forget who they are. They forget how they used to act. They forget even, perhaps, their own names.

Now, here is the thought the Scripture is trying to get us to think about: if disease or injury can so affect our memory, and how we act, and who we think we are, what is death going to do? What is death going to do to our memory? Will it stay with us just as it is now or will it be profoundly changed? But if our memory is profoundly changed, then who will we be? These are the issues concerning the last times as it is stated in the Greek “eschata,” the last things that Christian believers are supposed to consider from time to time. The Bible suggests that we are not the result of our memories at all in the first place, that our memories are almost irrelevant--remember selective as they are of certain supposedly important things perhaps that occurred to us in our lives. In fact, I remember my grandmother, who suffered for many years of many strokes, and her memory was very compromised. And one day I was talking with her, and I was able to get her to remember an orchard that we used to have in the yard. And she did remember the pear...
trees and the cherry trees and the roof of the tool shed I used to climb up on to pick the cherries, and she remembered all these things. And then a lady came by. She was a nurse, and she said, “Oh who’s that visiting with you?” She answered, “Oh I don’t know; he just sat down here.” So the connection with the past was not connected with me. So who is she, or who was she?

According to Scripture the suggestion is this: that we are actually not the result of our memories or things that happened, but we are truly the result of our actions and decisions; thus, we are always in the process of becoming. We are becoming someone at every moment of the day. Every choice we make is heading us in a direction. What direction is that? We need to know that. We need to see that. We need to see where we are going and what we are becoming. The great danger is that we won’t see that, and we won’t think about it at all and will allow the circumstances of our lives to dictate to us what we choose. We will become like a little twig in a river floating downstream, making no effort. We will simply react to whatever people around us are doing, or saying, or thinking, and we will be nothing but the product of our circumstances.

Now, Christ brings up quite often the whole issue of God and the way God acts. He does this because the great potential we have is to become like God, to act as God acts. After all we are made in the image and the likeness of God, and therefore we do have the potential within us to become as God is. In the peculiar language of the Greeks the Fathers used to say, “We are becoming God.” Of course, they meant if we are following Christ’s lead. Now, for example, Jesus points out that God is good to everyone, good and evil. He blesses with rain the just and the unjust; the sun shines on the good and the bad. Jesus points this out for a very good reason because God acts toward people according to God’s own nature, not according to the way people treat God. We are all in danger of simply treating people the way they treat us. We love those who love us and hate those who hate us. And Jesus says about loving those who love ourselves, “What merit is there in that? Even pagans do that.” There is no merit in that type of a life. There is no value in that kind of a life. There is actually no meaning in that kind of a life, except the meaning you can give to a machine that simply does what it is programmed to do. But we are not called on or created to be machines, programmed to do what or this or that. But we are actually created to be like God--able to treat others as we choose, not because of the way they are, but because of the way we are--because we chose to use as the basis of our behavior the nature of God Himself in whose image we have been created.

This is responding to the divine purpose in life and has many consequences, as does the failure to do so. I have frequently met homeless people who have come for help, for example. And I always ask homeless people this question, “Do you have any relatives or family?” And I think it’s only been on the rarest occasion that any person ever said to me, “I am completely alone in the world. There is not a living soul that I know.” I don’t know if ever once someone ever said that. Usually they say something like this: “I have a sister, but I am not welcome in her house. I have a brother, but I can’t go to him. I am not welcome.” We live in a world today where people feel justified in cutting off their own kith and kin; their own flesh and blood they care not for at all. If you remember not too long ago, in Chicago a police officer killed a homeless man. And for a couple of
days his family, that is the homeless man’s family, was making all kinds of fuss threatening to sue the police department etc., until a newspaper reporter said to the family, “Well, if this person was so important to you, how come he was homeless?” And then that family withdrew and receded into the woodwork out of embarrassment, I suppose. But how can we live in a world where people are so heartless? Because they have chosen to be. Because they’ve made a decision to be. Because they react to people according to the way they’ve been treated, not because they are using God as the true model source of what we can be and what we are called to be.

One of the great shameful things of human life and human history is the way we substitute who we are for what we could be, failing even to think about even the possibility that we could be very different, just assuming that the way we are is the way we always shall be. When we do this we are giving up on life, on God and on ourselves. Then we are letting life lead us; we are not leading life. And we are bypassing the fundamental responsibility of which speak the Law and the Prophets. And Jesus said the entire Law and the Prophets can be summarized by this: “Love God with your whole heart and mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.” And if we remind ourselves of the possibilities, and step by step and day by day we make choices to center ourselves in God and to utilize the great potential that God has given to us: first of all in our nature, and secondly, in the great sacrament of his love--which is our Church into which we have been initiated in baptism and through which we are called to this life of God--then we can be ready for that day that will close in on us like a trap, whenever that may be. And we can be at peace at every moment of our lives because we will be ready to make an account of ourselves, and we will be living salvation.
In the early Church anticipation was a very important theme. Sometimes one might think almost too important. Of course, the people awaited the messiah, or an alternate way of putting this is they awaited the messianic age which was thought of not as much always, as a person, as a period of time when God would restore the people. Now, what does it mean for God to restore the people? That’s the first question. In today’s reading we see Jesus’ idea of what the messianic age is about: the restoration of people who are crippled, blind, lame. But not everybody saw this as the messianic age; many people were anticipating something else. Even today it’s the same thing. There are people who anticipate the restoration of Israel in a very political sense. They are convinced that this is, you might say, their birthright. They are absolutely convinced that this is what we would have to call the will of God--they look at it this way; and they believe it. And they are very convinced, but Jesus wasn’t.

For Jesus the will of God is always tied to compassion not power--they are very different ideas here. Power, if you want to call it that, at the service of healing, but that is normally not what people think of as power. So in a sense, Jesus’ life was a life of reorienting people’s understanding of the will of God and therefore the nature of the messianic age and therefore the nature of the messiah. This was not easy for his disciples, of course. If you read the Scriptures you can see how constantly, they weren’t exactly arguing with him, but they were constantly saying, “Oh, but, oh but, oh but--but this and but that.” And he is saying, “No.” He is constantly pulling them in a new direction, and those who could be pulled in a new direction became the church. And those who could not be pulled in a new direction did not become the church. It was a parting of the ways. And this parting of the ways is always part of life. God is always trying to move us in God’s direction. The question is will we be able to or want to or choose to or even see it? Will our convictions--what we call our faith, our beliefs, that really means--will they really be amenable to God, or are we going to prevail? These are the issues that are raised.

And even people who followed Christ, even there--their anticipations, were they correct? If you remember the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, a very interesting story, the eunuch was reading out loud, which was the custom--it still is a good custom; the bible should be read out loud, even privately--he was reading out loud, and Philip heard him and said, “Well, now you are reading Isaiah. Do you want to know how about that was fulfilled?” And the eunuch was open. He said, “Ya, tell me all about it.” And then in a short way, a brief way, Philip shared his faith; he gave him a gospel presentation. And the eunuch said, “Well, I want to be baptized. I want to accept this.” And he was baptized. And then what happened? The strangest thing, he went home to Ethiopia all by himself. Now, what is the meaning of his baptism? The meaning of that baptism was he was anticipating the proximate return of the messiah. And that was one of the primary meanings of baptism in the early Church. Before St. Paul ever developed a theology of
dying and rising, before it was seen as a participation in the dying of Christ and a pledge of resurrection, it was already an anticipation of the return of the messiah.

Today we celebrate the feast of Francis Xavier, Francis Xavier, who was a great missionary, but a peculiar one. He went all over the world preaching the gospel, baptizing people and then quickly leaving. What was he thinking? He baptized thousands of people and then said, “Good-bye.” What was he thinking? There were no ministers left behind. There were no priests, no catechists, no--nothing. He simply baptizes them, and then left to go somewhere else--again to preach the gospel, to baptize and then leave there. What was he thinking? He was anticipating something, wrongly as it turns out. He was anticipating that, what--Christ would return very soon? He was getting these people ready for the return of Christ, really not thinking--not realizing that God’s plans are different.

So we have to be very careful of what we anticipate. Our anticipations can actually thwart our ability to accept the will of God, as those in Jesus’ day, who did not see in his work the fulfillment of the messianic promises, were thwarted in accepting Christ, therefore the will of God, and therefore the messianic reign and themselves, number one. Number two, even those who accept the messianic reign often do so in a way that is completely inappropriate to the actual situation, believing wrongly, for example, that the return of God will be instantaneous or extremely proximate, therefore not laying any foundation for communal life as Francis Xavier. So our ability to actually participate with God requires a great flexibility in what we anticipate. Searching for what God wants needs to be part of what Advent is for the Church and for believers everywhere.
In the early Church the term “shepherd” came to be used for Church leaders, possibly due to this image of the man who owns a hundred sheep and who goes after the stray. However this particular story, this parable, it’s truly a parable, is not about the church. The word “shepherd,” of course, was a very important term in the Jewish culture. It did not refer to rabbis; it did not refer to church leaders or teachers or priests or Levites or temple officials of any kind. It referred to the king. The reason why the term “shepherd” was used for the king was that the first great king of Israel had been David, a shepherd boy, and consequently the term stuck to the kings, especially of Judah but also of Israel.

Now, in the history of this term and in the history of the people of God, God expressed his displeasure, frequently through the prophets, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel, with the work that the kings were doing. He said, “My shepherds are not feeding the flocks; they are fleecing the flocks.” So the prophesies of Ezekiel and Jeremiah basically are a judgment against the human rulers of Judah and Israel. And in the prophets, especially Ezekiel, God says, “I shall come and shepherd my people. I shall come and shepherd my people.” So this is the background of this story, that God has already prophesied that “I shall come and shepherd my people.” So this is really a parable about the Kingdom of God because God is now going to be the shepherd, the king of the people.

However, in this earliest form, which we see here, the idea of the sheep actually refers to Jewish people not, to people in general. Jesus Himself, in his human nature, had to grow and learn and develop. Now, when the Syro-Phoenician woman, who was not Jewish, asked Jesus for a healing he told her, “My mission is to the lost sheep of the House of Israel,” indicating that he saw himself in his human understanding as sent by God to do this shepherding, but for whom?--Only for the lost sheep of the House of Israel. So the context, this story has to be seen in the context: number one, of the Old Testament and the history of the kingdom--the kingdoms: Judah and Israel, secondly in the total rejection of kingship, human kingship, by God through the prophets especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel, thirdly Jesus’ human understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do. Now, with this as background we understand now that Jesus is telling a parable. And a parable was always an exaggeration--something is told that makes people think, that calls them up short, makes them wonder well, what could this possibly mean?

So the fourth point is that anyone who really is a shepherd would know that no shepherd would ever leave ninety-nine sheep unattended and go after one sheep. Why?--Because ninety-nine sheep unattended would scatter. Now why?--Because sheep depend totally upon a personal relationship with the shepherd in order to stay together. If you have, for example, cattle on a open range you need a lot of help getting cattle together, cowboys and so on. That is not the way sheep operate. Sheep respond to the personal voice and presence of the shepherd. And this is the reason why this becomes a very
important image. Some people take it rather negatively when referred to as sheep as if they are stupid or dumb, lacking reason—that is not the point. The point is that sheep relate personally to the shepherd in that God now is saying, “In my kingdom I will relate personally to the sheep. And I will care for and direct their lives, and protect them from danger and lead them to nourishment.” So the images are packed with powerful issues, especially when we consider the sort of legalistic even materialistic sense of religion that had grown in Judaism. And Jesus is blowing this out of the water. He is saying that now, in him, God is fulfilling the prophesies. God is establishing his rule, and this rule will be a rule of personal relationship. And that those who don’t respond personally to the shepherd will be lost. God’s care and love is actually completely beyond reason in one sense, in other words the old image of what shepherd would not leave ninety-nine sheep?—Well, of course, no one would. But God would, so to speak, because, of course, God is always everywhere!

So the unreasonable love of God, the unreasonable concern of God for one little sheep is possible only because God is God, and to go after one sheep does not require him to really truly leave the others uncaed for. Now this takes some thinking. That is the very point in a parable—parables require thinking—you can’t just unthinkingly listen to it and then understand anything. But here is already the beginning of Jesus’ teaching about the need for personal relationship with God and a personal response on behalf of each individual sheep and the need to gather and the need to respond. This is already the beginning of the kingdom; it is in our midst; and we need to listen to the voice of the Shepherd.
“My yoke is easy, my burden light.” The terminology “yoke”—the word comes from a social arrangement of Semitic culture. It refers to, first of all oxen—oxen are yoked; but it is used also to refer to the serving class—servants were said to be yoked. Now some servants were what we would call slaves, that is they had no choice in the masters. Others were to some degree free in this sense—they could choose their masters, but because they had no means they were still more or less the same thing—more or less like a migrant worker. They could migrate; but no matter where they were, they were on the bottom. And in this sort of situation, of course it really mattered what qualities a master possessed. Some masters were considerate of those in their charge, and others were not. Some masters placed burdensome yokes upon their own serving people whether they would be farm servants or house servants.

The same is true today; some people like working for company X. Other people don’t. Some companies are well thought of; and others aren’t so. The point is this: the ideal that people seek in work today and probably then was a freedom that is unrealistic. Freedom for what? For example, a migrant worker might be terribly free not to work at all, but he would probably starve to death. We are free to be homeless. We are free to be utterly poor. The point is that we need something, and this is meant probably socially as well as spiritually. In a social sense it is true the poor need the rich; the rich need the poor.

Jesus was not a Marxist; he did not think in terms of restructuring society. He thought rather in terms of converting the quality of human beings—actually far more profound than that idea [Marxism]. Now he says, “My yoke is easy” because he recognizes that we are wandering Armenians, to use the biblical terminology. We are looking for a purpose in life, and we need direction; like the peasants who need the rich, we need God. We are free, of course, to starve. We are, of course, free to be homeless, but do we want to be? Like the prodigal son we really do desire to go home, and we really do desire to have a place in God’s kingdom—meaning and purpose in our lives. And that comprises a yoke, but Jesus’ yoke is easy. Jesus wants to be master, but he is an easy master. His burden is light. His burden in the sense there is something that was due; there is a sense of obligation; there is some gravity to commitment to Christ. Something is expected. It is not the freedom of aimlessness. It is the freedom that comes with knowing one’s purpose and recognizing the goal of life. And if we come to sense that we recognize also, in a sense, what Jesus’ concept of social development would be. It would be not a system of changing externally the form of organizations, economical or whatever, but rather changing the inward quality by which people relate to one another—again placing everyone under the yoke of the kingdom of God, a light burden, but a burden, a responsibility that becomes light precisely because God Himself shares it with us in the person of Christ, and leads us together toward the goal which is eternal life.
Today we celebrate something rather unique, a true feast day based upon not an event in the life of Jesus or Mary, but actually based on the life of the church. Now, I did not say based on the apparition at Guadalupe because the church will never officially say that an apparition took place. It cannot, in fact. The church is bound by a fundamental stricture. It may only teach revelation—what is revealed by God, at least it may only teach this as revealed. It may only teach as revealed what God has revealed, and what God has revealed has been revealed in Christ. So in a sense, with the death of the last apostle that revelation must have been complete. This is what the church has always understood. So an apparition is not in the nature of a revelation, in that sense; therefore the church has always maintained a certain kind of, you might say, neutrality about the phenomena of apparitions. However Christ always said, “By their fruits you shall know them.” And therefore in regard to all spiritual phenomena we can discern the value or the authenticity of them by looking at their fruits. Now, from this point of view ninety-nine per cent of supposed apparitions are worthless, not to say false; how would we know? But they are worthless because there is no fruit. Jesus says, “By their fruit you shall know them.” Don’t forget Jesus cursed the fig tree which was actually a symbol of the desicated and fruitless, you might say, religious heritage he was born into.

Now of all alleged apparitions the one that is most prominent is this one we are speaking of today, the apparition of the Blessed Mother at Guadalupe. Even if all the rest of them are totally false, this one must not be. Why?—Because the fruit, the conversion of literally millions of people, literally millions of people to Christ because they believed in the message that came through this apparition. That is an evangelistic message, a prophetic message. And it is a message that transcends words. What occurred? Well, over a period of three days an Indian, that is a Native American of Mexico, was met by a lady, and she was an Indian woman. This is a point that has to be made: she was an Indian woman. And he had no idea who she was. And she identified herself as the Mother of Jesus.

Now, if we know something about the history of the mission to Mexico, unfortunately the missionaries came on the heels of soldiers. And wherever Spain sent missionaries they sent soldiers first and the church was really, unfortunately, almost controlled by the government. The Spanish government felt no compunction at all about using the church in whatever way it would help itself. This is really part of our history. It did not only happen with Spain, but it was the most blatant case in the West. Similar issues also occurred in Russia, but they are outside the realm of the Roman Catholic Church. But Spain was perhaps the most blatant example within the history of the Roman Catholic Church of a government using the church for its own ends. So therefore, in a sense, from the very beginning the gospel was compromised. Why would people want to listen to the teachings of missionaries who are only there because of an armed occupation, where the soldiers of the occupation were reducing them to slavery and treating them with utter cruelty? Why would anyone want to listen to these people, and why would they even
consider this good news? You can see that from the very beginning, the mission in Mexico was doomed and not only in Mexico but throughout all areas conquered by Spain. And that is why practically all conversions to Christ came through this apparition—to an Indian, to a Native American who experienced, again, the Mother of Jesus as an Indian woman!

Now, of course, this could have remained forever just his, more or less, subjective experience if it weren’t for something even more extraordinary—that is she told this young man to go to the bishop and to tell him to build a basilica on this spot. And of course, well such a request would be taken rather dimly, I would imagine, by most bishops—so it was. And so he went back to that spot the next day, and she told him to gather roses. Well, this was December, and there were roses blooming. Again hard to believe, but that is the story. But what is more extraordinary than that is when he took these roses back, gathered in his cloak, and dropped the roses in the presence of the bishop there was on the cloak this imprint, that you have probably seen—except that the picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been tampered with. Some artist decided to add stars, little angels at the bottom. The gold is all added. Some idiotic artist thought they would make it nicer than it was. But the actual cloak itself, which is still on, you might say, on view at the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, is quite an extraordinary thing because first of all it is material. It is some sort of fabric that only lasts a few years, and this is still together after 400 years. Then on top of that it has no ink in it, no dye. It has been analyzed, and yet it has color, and the imprint is clearly that of an Indian woman. And in the eyes there is the image of a man. I mean they have actually analyzed this with these tiny microscopic instruments and so on, and they actually see in the eyes of the woman in a tiny way—I mean they only found this out recently with very modern forms of equipment—and they find these tiny little images upside down of a man. Now we do know through modern optics that in our eyeballs our images are upside down. So anyway this was a sign to the bishop that this was indeed the Blessed Mother. And it was not only a sign to the bishop, but this was a sign to all the native people of the Americas that God is their God and that Jesus is their savior! And we have a reason to celebrate this, and to relish in this beautiful extension of love and mercy to peoples of the Western Hemisphere.
In discussing the Scriptures it is important that we keep in mind that the word of God is primarily an oral reality, that the word of God is spoken, and that the spoken word rings primary as a living reality within the Church. The writing down of the word of God is an important manner of keeping the record, but it may never supplant the original. And for this reason there will never be one single absolute interpretation of the word. There will be a basic, what we call, literal interpretation which is defined by St. Augustine and Pope Pius the XII as being “what the mind of the author intended,” since God uses also authors in conveying to us his word, although not only authors--the prophets were not authors. Moses really was not an author either. The prophets, the great speakers and preachers, were not good authors. Authors were a secondary string, you might say, who recorded what the prophets said. And God uses authors, but he also uses prophets in conveying his word. And in terms of the written word, the literal meaning is what the author intended but not the only meaning. And so there is always a need to play with the meanings of Scripture, and in Hebrew this is called midrash--seeking an interpretation that fits the events of the present under the basic understanding that God is eternal and not bound by time, and God is always working among his people. God is always working in his creation. God is always at work, and his work has a certain pattern to it. And we need to seek the pattern. Presumably that is why we have the record in the first place, the word, so we can see patterns. How does God operate? God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, therefore God will not change the pattern of his dealings with human beings. This is fundamental understanding of the Church that God does not change, and therefore we can rely upon the principles that we understand at work through time.

Now there was an oral presentation that said that Elijah would return before the messiah to prepare the way for the messiah. And what does that mean? It is really hard to say what the original author meant by that, but we do see what Jesus is doing. He is interpreting that to mean Elijah is John the Baptist. Now this is probably not the literal meaning; that is it was probably not what the author meant. It couldn’t have been what the author meant. How could the author foresee John the Baptist? Jesus is saying, “Look the point is this, that the work of God exceeds the notions that prophets and authors have.” And so we need to have, if we have eyes of faith, if we are able to see what God is doing, we have to be able to go beyond what was prophesied because God’s works are greater than the prophesies of them. This is part of being a believer. Part of being a disciple is to know what the prophesies are and to know what the word of God has been--how it has been written down, but then not to be held back by that, but to go forward to see what God is actually doing--interpreting for one’s self and for one’s time what precisely God is doing. It has to fit into the pattern, however. It could not be something wildly different from what God did in the past--that would mean God changed, but on the other hand, it can not be something bound by the literal word or the literal interpretation of the prophesy because that would bind God, and God can not be bound. God is the infinite one who always surpasses expectations!
So Jesus is trying to teach the disciples not simply always to transfer expectations to the future, but to look to the present moment—how is God now fulfilling the prophesy? The four evangelists did this in writing the four gospels. They said now how are the prophesies that we’ve got from Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea and Elijah and Elisha—how are those now fulfilled in the present moment? And they wrote their gospel. And if you are familiar with the prophets in the Old Testament you see how they [the evangelists] are constantly saying—they are quoting Isaiah, or they are quoting Jeremiah; they are quoting Ezekiel, and they are showing how Jesus is, in fact, fulfilling that prophesy, Zechariah for example. However in every single case, Jesus really exceeds what the prophet said. He does more than the prophets ever said the messiah would do. He carries his people way beyond what was expected and perhaps for that very reason many of them never really actually benefited. They were holding on to their expectation, to their point of view, if you will, to their small point of view, their very petty perspective. God was moving forward to something far greater. So part of our celebrations at Mass should be our expectation that God in our own day is going to far exceed our expectations. Let us not allow our own previous way of thinking, or the way we were brought up, or what we were taught to ever hold us back from seeing what God is really doing now.
Science thought that the universe was exactly measurable; modern science does not agree with this. It has come to realize that mathematical figures are approximations of the true nature of reality. None the less, this is part of the heritage of the past. And in the heritage of the past the number seven was always sacred. There are seven days of the week, for example, seven sacraments in the Church. Today we have fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the Babylonian Exile and fourteen generations from the Babylonian Exile to the Messiah, which is a sum of forty-two. Now forty-two is an important number because it is very incomplete--the perfect number would be forty-nine, seven times seven, and since forty-two is lacking one of the sevens, one of the seven factors to make perfection, it is incomplete. So what it is saying is that starting with Abraham, in a sense, God is recapitulating the creation. According to the biblical mentality God created in six days; now they aren’t twenty-four hour days, but six was the important number. And on the seventh day God rested, seventh being perfection, rest, completion.

But at the same time there is this awareness that God can’t be complete; the world isn’t finished yet. Now, this is an idea that is found in the New Testament, not the Old. In the Old Testament everything was always considered the way it should be. If you were sick, well then, you should be sick. If you were paralyzed, you should be paralyzed. If you are poor, well, that’s the way God wants it. Don’t rock the boat; just accept it. But Jesus did not believe that at all. He said if a man was born blind it was so the glory of God could be revealed to him in the healing, in the restoration of his sight. And Jesus was constantly working on the Sabbath. You notice the rabbis were very upset with this. It wasn’t that he was healing people, but healing people on the Sabbath. It seems like he rested for six days and then worked on the Sabbath, always going to the Sabbath. Why? -To emphasize what this gospel is trying to emphasize: that the work of God is not over, in fact that with Abraham there is a new creation at work. And now with the coming of the generation of Joseph, God has completed the sixth day, the sixth generation.

Actually, it is the forty-second generation; it is the sixth period of this new creation. And Jesus will be the last day, the final rest, the total completion of everything. All things will come into Christ. All things will become completed in Christ. All things will be contained in Christ; therefore all is renewed in Christ. So Christ is then the beginning of something totally new, the completion of God’s redemptive work and then the beginning of a totally new creation.

So we see that in the biblical mind of the New Testament authors God is always recreating. Creation is not something in the past. And St. Thomas Aquinas reiterates this. Creation is not something that happened. Creation is something going on right now. God is right now creating. If God were not creating right now we wouldn’t be here. This is the ever dynamic idea which is New Testament. This is gospel. This is not Old Testament. Now, unfortunately a lot of Christian people labor under an Old Testament mentality of a static idea: creation is in the past, we are now, what will be
comes later. Wrong. That is not the New Testament view. God is now creating; he is always beginning something new. So we look to the earth and the history of humankind, that is one level; then we look to the chosen people, the call of Abraham, that’s another level. And then within that there is a very precise, you know, intervention at the time of Moses to create something that could not have even been done before that—a people well-disposed to God’s sense of righteousness because they were so victimized by evil. And out of that comes a new promise, a promise to David and to his descendants, and out of this there is finally Joseph. Joseph is really the fruit of all of this.

And in the history of Joseph there are not only the heroes; but there are also all kinds of other people, and they are not heroes—anti-heroes. Rahab, for example, was a prostitute, although she helps the people; so she becomes in that sense a part of the whole history. There are foreigners—the time of Ruth who married Boaz. So all kinds of people are thrown in here as part of God’s work. And if you read the Old Testament even they were quite aware of the fact that these people chosen were not really heroic people. They were not extraordinary people; it’s just that God chose them, and that is why they did what they did—because God chose them. And even if they were people with very great weakness like David, oh still God chose him and used him because God is God. It’s all in God’s plan. It’s not our world; it’s not our heroes; it’s God’s world. So he pulls this whole thing together and arrives finally at Joseph, who is actually completely unaware of his own history and what he is being called to. He had to be informed through dreams of what God asked him to do. And he adopts Jesus, and Jesus adopts him as the Incarnate Word takes on this entire history of the chosen people, the family of Abraham and of the entire human race. He adopts all of us unto himself returning, you might say, the blessing of being adopted in the first place by the guardian Joseph. So this inter-play of human actions, even though very imperfect and flawed, with God’s grace—that’s the story of the New Testament. And it calls us to be very aware of what is God doing right now, right today? How is God creating—making us, the world—his kingdom?
As we are today in an era of ecumenism, meaning an era of recognizing a common faith that all Christians share, we are partly in danger of losing what is unique to the Catholic sense of church. One of the things unique to the Catholic sense of church is the proper honoring of Mary. It is ironic that people who consider themselves people of the book or people of the word do not really hold Mary blessed; in fact, in the word it says, “All generations shall call me blessed.” This is after all the word of God. It is foundational to our faith. And in our Catholic tradition we have always held Mary to be this most perfect disciple. That is what Mary is: the most complete disciple of Christ. It is very important that we recognize the need for models--we do need models. And sometimes our models are not really that great. Even in modern secular society the young choose heroes, models for, you might say, ideals. And when those models show themselves to have clay feet, their frailties and weaknesses are multiplied a thousandfold in the children who revere them.

Now, Mary is held up by the Church to itself as truly “sanctissima,” meaning most holy one, that is she is the model without clay feet, which does not mean she was not human. One of the essential characteristics of Catholic theology is: humanity although factually and historically fallen is not intrinsically evil or even intrinsically flawed. Sin is not an intrinsic component of human nature. It is extrinsic. Historical? Yes. Existential? Yes, but not intrinsic. Now this was denied at the reformation. The reformers believed human nature was intrinsically evil. Well, if we believe that, then we will not strive to be really faithful to the model that Mary was. We’ll say, “That’s not possible.” In fact, we might not even believe she was [most holy], as many don’t. If we look very closely, however, at what she proclaims in today’s gospel, we see a person totally dependent on God. This is the model to discipleship. “He who is mighty has done great things for me; holy is his name.” This is not a goddess. And that must be said because there are people, even within Catholicism, who have made Mary into something like a goddess--someone almost independent of Christ, someone almost not in need of
salvation, someone almost not even human. And that is as false as it would be to
describe her as a sinner. She is paradoxically sinless and yet in need of salvation.

When we understand what that means, and what the Church has always said, we
understand a deep thing about ourselves—how God’s true desire for us is to be filled with
God. And we needn’t be preoccupied with our flaws more than we should be
preoccupied with God, and our desire to serve God, and be centered on God. And even
in parish life how many conflicts and frictions come up because we forget about God?
And we let people take the central role in our attention, in our focus. And this is true in
our families. And this is true in our businesses. But Mary has testified to the possibility
of living for God totally, and yet doing all the things necessary in the human situation
because she was totally human. And even her sinlessness was a gift granted by God in
order to help her do God’s work. And we all can become in this way sinless. It is not a
matter of fact; it’s a matter of quality. We can become filled with God. And we can
become most holy as we strive every moment of our day with all our energy to please
God, and that alone. So she is our model, indeed the Queen of all Saints, indeed the true
blueprint, if you will, of what human nature is meant to be.
As we gather tonight we hear a story we heard before, and we are in danger of allowing its meaning and its message to pass over our heads as we are tired, preoccupied with the requirements of this holiday, the needs of our families, various pressures. And yet it would be a shame if we were not to use this opportunity and the hearing of this gospel on this great feast of the Nativity of our Lord to consider perhaps in a new way what the meaning of Christmas is. St. Anselm, many centuries ago around the sixth century, wrote a small book called Cur Deus Homo?--Why God Man? The story we are talking about this evening is a very peculiar story and perhaps its strangeness is something we don’t notice because we are so used to it. But it is a story of how God actually takes upon himself human form, human flesh, a true and total human nature. This is called the incarnation of Christ. Along with the mystery of the Trinity it is the central mystery of our Christian Faith, our Catholic Faith.

Now, Anselm asked the question, “Why? Why would God become human?” Well, the answer was already formed, in a sense, in the Bible because the story of the chosen people was really told within a larger framework--the story of humankind and earth, the human kind of earth “Adama Adam, the earth man,” and how this creature, created in the image and likeness of God, created an abyss between himself and his creator, himself used in the collective, that our earliest forebears created an abyss not of physical distance. It has nothing to do with physics, but rather of quality. Having been created in the image and likeness of God we became very much unlike God. And there the story could have ended and would end if it were only ourselves concerned about the story. But that is not where the story ends because God, who had created everything in the beginning, was not willing to allow his plans to be frustrated and yet could not correct them by force, and so became one of us to correct the matter by love and by example and by exercising human will in a way totally and absolutely consistent with God’s will. So this is a story not of our attempt to contact God, which is the story of religion. It is really the story of God contacting us. So Jesus now is the son of God, the Word of God, the uncreated Word of God that takes upon himself the created nature which we also have, the human nature, and becomes a model for our life.

Now, this of course is perfectly in accord with the nature we know we have; we must learn by experience. A parent would be cruel if he or she were to demand of his or her child behavior that that child had never been taught. That would be cruelty. God is not a cruel creator; so God models the very behavior that would be the fulfillment of our nature—that really would bring true happiness to our existence, our personal lives. And this is a matter of learning, as everything is for human beings because human beings are not instinctual beings. We might say children are somewhat instinctive; they instinctively trust their parents, but that kind of behavior is not really fully human, brought to full stature. Human beings brought to full stature do not behave instinctively at the core of their being. At the core of our being, we are free. We are capable of deliberate choices, and if anything is ever to be changed in the very nature of our personal lives they have to
change right at the core where we choose, where we decide. It is also where we learn. Jesus has come as the model of what we can be, of the way we can live if we choose, if we use our freedom and our intelligence to follow the model he presents.

But another thing must be noted: that God because he is not a cruel parent teaches by doing. He teaches us how to be trusting by trusting us. So much talk is made of the need for faith--and it’s very true, and trust--and it’s very true; and yet do we really realize that it is God who has trusted us first? The sending of his very own uncreated image into human life was a very risky thing! God took great risks to provide the reason for our feast. Was this wise? It is beyond us to say, but that is what God did, and in doing this he taught us how we also can trust. Now, in some respects, God’s trust in us was justified. It was justified with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the poor who had nothing to lose and who rejoiced when they found out what it was that God was doing. And yet on the other hand, it was not justified when the rulers and the teachers and the lawyers of that time, in that society, found out what God was doing; they decided they didn’t like it at all. And we know the rest of the story of his passion and death. That was their response.

Where do we fit in? Are we really like the shepherds? Do we really stay in solidarity with Mary, with Joseph, with Elizabeth, with Zachariah in being empty enough to receive this gift? God teaches to trust us by trusting us; he teaches us to love by loving us. The mystery is not that we love God; it’s that God loves us. There are so many religions in the world, and yet none of them have anything to do really with God--not this God, the God who reveals himself in the darkness. Most religions, if you actually study them, have to do with the spiritual world--the world of spirits. Spirits are creatures like ourselves, they may not be like ourselves, but they are creatures as we are. That’s mostly what religion is about. This is something else. It is very important that we understand what it is.

Christ comes not only as a model, but he also comes as a savior. Do we have a sense of needing salvation? This is a difficult one for modern people. We are taught to be self-sufficient, successful, high achievers, well accomplished--and all this is good to a point, but what does it have to do with God? The answer: nothing. What does it have to do with life beyond here and now? The answer is nothing. But what God is offering us is God’s own life, eternal life, life with no past and no future, the eternal present. Something that is hard even to know what it is; in fact we cannot know what it is; we can only wonder what it is. God’s own life is salvation for the human being made in the image and the likeness of the creator. Now this often meets, even with ourselves sometimes, with indifference. Indifference to God is not simply the province of criminals or the depraved or the ill-willed or the wicked or the malicious. The self-sufficient are also indifferent to this great offer of salvation. If we think we can, for example, save ourselves, make sense out of our own lives, explain ourselves or create something worthwhile all by ourselves then we are indifferent to the need for salvation. We are pretending we can do something that really we cannot. Even the highest most noble ideals will not change human nature.
But this story of Christmas is about the transformation of human nature. Jesus pointed out in his life that those who followed the law were missing the point--straining the gnat, swallowing the camel. God is not looking for better human beings. What God is looking for is children after his own likeness--very different. The criteria belongs to God, not to us. Christmas is not about our dreams or our ideals or our goals; it is about God’s dreams for us--what God dreams for ourselves, for our sake. If we try to save ourselves, our attempt will leave us exhausted, anxious and even probably guilty. On the other hand, if we accept God’s invitation to a new life, which is offered in Christ, that life will bear fruit which the world cannot give: peace, patience even with ourselves, and joy--a joy we cannot produce no matter how much we try. These are truly gifts, and they are given to whomever is poor enough to receive them. So ultimately Christmas really is about giving, and it is about gifts. And it is also about how our pride often makes us unable to receive. The great gift God is presenting to each of us is Himself. Was God right? Was God wise in trusting himself to us? That we will each answer every day henceforth. Our parish’s prayer is that this Christmas may bring each of you closer to the gift and to the Giver!
Today we celebrate the feast of St. John. But we might say which one? We now know that there are more than one follower of Christ named John. The tendency in tradition is to telescope, meaning to more or less collect various people together under one name. First of all, what a lot of people don’t realize is that the four gospels were written without anyone’s name on it. We say the Gospel according to Mark, Matthew, Luke, John. Those are names we have put on them, more or less, so we know which one we are talking about, but we really don’t know who wrote any of the gospels. So in a sense we named the evangelists. Who was the author of Mark? We don’t know so we call that person Mark. The same with the fourth gospel. I just read a reading from the Holy Gospel according to John, but who is that? We don’t really know. But there was a very special disciple that Jesus loved. He is not named in the gospel. If you read it carefully it keeps saying, “The one Jesus loved, the other disciple” and so on--never names him. And that is a peculiar characteristic of the fourth gospel, or what we call the Gospel according to John, that this very peculiar mysterious figure is never named--and yet this figure is the one responsible to some degree for the gospel.

Now if you go to modern day Turkey--Asia Minor, the city of Ephesus--the people there will tell you that this man was named John, and he was the one who took Mary and lived with her caring for her until she died in the city of Ephesus. This is an oral tradition. Whether it is valid or not we don’t know. It is not an apostolic tradition; it is an oral tradition found there in the area of Asia Minor. Now there is another John in the gospel named John son of Zebedee. Now Iraneus thought that that was the beloved disciple. We are, more or less, convinced today he was not. There was another John, John of Patmus, who wrote the Book of Revelation. At one point some believed that was also John son of Zebedee and the beloved disciple. The point is this, as we look back into our history we find out something very important actually, that we don’t know a lot of things--and that is okay because the power of the message is the power of the Holy Spirit, not the individual who wrote it.

Does it really matter who wrote the Gospel according to John? No, the church maintains it doesn’t matter. Why? Because its power and its message is based on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And we have reason to trust that the Holy Spirit is behind the gospel precisely because the Church believes that. This is a very important aspect of Catholic tradition that we do not really rely on individuals. This is different in the Protestant Church where for them it is very important that they know who it was that wrote what and so on. Ultimately the power of the word of God rests on the Church which is inspired by God. If the Church is not inspired by God, if the Church is not directed and guided by God, well then the words of the Bible--we would never know what they really meant. We would be on our own as it were, and that would be nothing but a tower of babble because I am sure you all noticed that even the most sincere Christians don’t always come up with the same understanding, and that is precisely why we have a teaching Church. St. Paul says the Church is
founded on the apostles and the martyrs and the prophets, and it is. And the self-same Spirit that was within the martyrs giving them the power to witness, the self-same Spirit that told them what to say when they were not prepared, the self-same Spirit that guided the apostles and their decisions in the early Church, the self-same Spirit that spoke through the prophets is still within our Church. The one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church--that is what it is. So we have every confidence that we are being directed by that Holy Spirit. Today we celebrate all those who are the spokesmen of the Holy Spirit. All those people who contributed to the Gospel of John, so we call it, or the epistles--the three of them we call John. All of them, all those inspired authors, we are celebrating them today. And we are rendering thanks to God for what they have done for us, giving us a window into eternity--teachings that will help our spirit grow into a Spirit of Christ.
There is a tendency to listen to the Scriptures in a defensive way. Something in us knows that the gospel is challenging us. Indeed Jesus’ entire mission was a mission of proclaiming completely new power and life and encouraging people to change their lives in such a way as they could become real receptors, receivers of this new life—he called the kingdom of God. Now in today’s prayer, he praises his Father for having hidden something from the learned and clever and revealed this very something to mere children. Again, defensively, we might imagine that the learned and the clever are one group of people and that mere children another group of people, but this is not really so. First of all we are all born mere children; no one is born learned; no one is born clever. We are born mere children. We may become learned and clever as we grow and develop, and, in fact, want to, usually. It is very handy to be learned. It helps us make money, compete in the world, become successful, accomplish many things, and all this is good—nothing wrong with it, but and this is the point of the gospel—it has nothing to do with our relationship with God.

Our accomplishments, our success, our competitive attitude—none of it has anything to do with our relationship with God. When it comes to God we are in fact all mere children no matter how young, how old, how accomplished, how unaccomplished, what a success, what a failure, none of that matters in relationship to God. And if we adult people who have all attained some degree of success in our lives, some amount of accomplishment, if we really want to relate to God, we have to come to God as a mere child because in God’s sight that is what we are. And as a mere child, and in that part of us that remains the very way we were born, in that part of us, we can experience revelation because God will reveal to the mere child in us what is in fact his own love, his own nature, his own mystery. This can never be explained to the sophisticated and educated part of ourselves; it can’t even be expressed in words. It transcends words, but does not transcend the powers of the human heart which we were born with.

Now, this part of the gospel, and the gospel is good news, in a sense Christ is saying that when it comes to God there is something that levels all of us. It is not exactly a playing field that has been leveled; but it is a field all right of relationship, and we are very handicapped if we don’t understand how this works—that a certain part of us never really grows up, never really becomes adult, but remains exactly as it was formed in the womb. Something in our very nature is right in the first place, undeveloped maybe, but right, and that is what God reveals to. When God makes contact with our heart, with the simple nature that he has created, we are transformed by the power of divine love, and we can grow, but we don’t grow old. We can grow, but we don’t grow sophisticated. We can grow, but we grow holy the more we allow God to touch us and reveal to us because love itself transforms those it touches into its own likeness.

Now, the sad thing is that many of us do not allow this to touch us very much because we are afraid, because we never really learned to trust in this great love of God. So this
great love of God has come to us in our own likeness in human nature--the mystery of the incarnation of the Word of God. And in Jesus we can see there is nothing to fear. The angels the night of Christ’s birth told the shepherds, “Do not be afraid.” Gabriel told Mary when she conceived by the power of the Most High, “Do not be afraid.” Elizabeth received the same message, “Do not be afraid.” We do not have anything to be afraid of except ourselves, our own unfounded fear of the unknown, our suspicions that are grounded in nothing except perhaps a limited experience of some unworthy human beings, our pride, our pride that prevents us from being the one to receive the great gift.

Now when we come to a funeral of a dear friend, a husband, a father, grandfather, it is good to consider the shortness of our lives--even 83 years are rather short. Every year Christmas comes faster. We all say that, and it is true. The longer we live the shorter every hour. We need to realize this least we fritter away in some vain pursuits or put too much of our resources where they really don’t belong. We need to reclaim something that many of us have lost--a sense of the simplicity of life that God has placed within us as our very birthright. So we are often weary and tired of life because we are spending too much energy on the wrong things. To all of us Jesus says, “Come to me. Come to me you who are weary and find life burdensome. I will refresh you with something more than life. Take my yoke upon your shoulders; learn from me.” Do we disciples of Christ really learn from him? “I am gentle and humble of heart.” Christ allowed the Father to give him everything. Are we so permissive? That is what it means to be humble of heart. “For yours souls will find rest; my yoke is easy, my burden light.”
Today our gospel paints us a portrait of the family of Jesus, and it is not basically a happy portrait. It is a portrait of a family divided and confused—the parents embarrassed and disappointed in the behavior of their young teenage son. Indeed the intention of the evangelist is not to paint a portrait of a happy family, but of a holy family because the basic conviction is that true happiness can only be found in the pursuit of holiness. You may say it is a derivative of the search and pursuit of a holy life. As such, happiness in its truest sense cannot therefore eliminate conflict, disappointment, embarrassment, misunderstanding, and even anger.

In today’s story Mary and Joseph are sorrowing—looking for their son who has in a sense given them the slip, on purpose, because he thinks he knows what he ought to be doing. So this is a study in what true love is. True love always requires suffering. That does not mean that all suffering comes from true love, but all true love requires suffering—and the suffering that stems from true love is truly redemptive. It partakes in the suffering of God Himself in becoming human because it resonates with the will of God which is to save. It sets us on a proper course—true love, that is.

There is another kind of suffering, however, that is very common. It is a suffering that stems from selfishness, from not getting one’s way, from, in fact, pettiness, smallness of being and purpose. The gospel is constantly challenging us to learn how to discern the difference between redemptive suffering that is rooted in true love and useless suffering that is simply rooted in our, more or less, self-centered human natures. Now any behavior motivated by true love will always have the quality of freedom in it. There will always be an element of letting go. True love lets go. True love is always free. Holding on the others, trying to control others on the other hand, is really not motivated by their best self interests; therefore it really isn’t true love. Even Mary and Joseph had to learn, you might say the hard way, how to let go. How hard those words must have been for them, “Did you not know I must be about my Father’s business?”

Possessive love, so-called love, is a companion to fear especially the fear of death. The fear of death involves the fear of all loss. It says in the Letter to the Hebrews that “The devil kept the world in bondage by the fear of death.” This is a form of compulsion. It is a prison; it is an enslavement. Love which is like that—fearful, compulsive, enslaving, controlling—that is not true love. It is a compulsion. It is a prison. It belongs to the devil. It prevents us from living life in the Spirit of Christ, which is the Spirit of true love, which is always free and which always seeks the best interests of the beloved. Possessive love—which is very common in our world and is the basis of almost all novels, movies, TV shows, and other forms of entertainment-- is of course to some extent natural given the fallen human nature. We are born in it, but it is not healthy. It is not life-giving. Healthy, life-giving love is a supernatural gift that comes as a redemptive grace from God through Christ, and it requires our willingness to
be open to it, to seek God, to acknowledge our own selfishness, and then to suffer true love’s demands.

If we think about our own lives, it is important that we note that it is not circumstances that make us happy. Circumstances are often believed by people to be what makes their life good or bad. And they imagine that if they changed unfavorable circumstances, that then they would be happy. What the gospel proclaims is that we will be ultimately happy only if we seek live-giving love, which is of course the pursuit of holiness, which is a process of letting go, which is always an openness to God, which is always a willingness to trust in God and to allow God’s rule to overtake us. In this way true happiness becomes something that happens in our lives as we recognize God’s constant purpose and the significance of our lives in God’s plan and purpose and the relative unimportance of our own dreams and plans and purposes. If we recognize this, it is important that we do not spend enormous amounts of time and energy in trying to change what is, in fact, insignificant aspects of our lives. While holiness, which leads to happiness, may involve suffering, it is really not difficult. It is simple, but it works against our own human selfishness.

Each of us must learn what our Father’s business really is. Each of us is born with a vocation in some way to serve God, to be of purpose to God, to advance the kingdom of God, in a family or in some other form of community life or somehow to work for the very same thing Christ came to work for--the spread of God’s kingdom. Jesus, who was of course the unique Son of God, only begotten Son of God, had a unique and a powerful sense of that at a very early age. But since we are all created in the image and likeness of God, we should recognize that we all have a birthright to that same sense because we have the same Father, and the Father has the same business, and we have to be about that business. As we do this our families will experience something surprising. Our goals may not be reached, but we will sense something else at work in our own lives, in the lives of those around us, in the lives of those we pray for, in the lives of those we serve. God’s will is not static. As we try to serve God we must be always growing and learning and moving on and letting others grow and learn and move on. Holding on is not love. Now, as we come to this feast day, we know that our lives would be very different in one sense from Jesus, Mary and Joseph, who were after all unique and unusual and even peculiar individuals; but in another sense their lives are meant to be a model for ours. The choice is will we suffer love’s demands or will we suffer the results of our selfishness? Suffering we will do; we cannot avoid it. Will it help others grow? Will it help us grow? Will it serve God? This is our decision; this our choice.
Today in our gospel reading is the beautiful Prologue of the fourth gospel. And it’s worth our reading over and over again and just thinking about what the author is really trying to say because the very central mystery of Christianity is the incarnation of the Word of God. Again it’s very difficult for us to imagine what this means, but what the gospel really says is that the Word of God is not created. The Word of God is uncreated expression of the very nature of Eternity, and they use this expression “en archai, in the beginning.” This itself is beyond our imagination because our imaginations are bound by space and time. This talking about “in the beginning” means not before time because there was no such thing as before time. But it means beyond creation. It means outside of what we can imagine. We imagine only that which is bound by time and space. That is how our imaginations are actually constructed. We always think of things. Things all have space. They all exist in time, but the Eternal One is beyond all that. We cannot imagine what the Eternal One is like. That is why it says in Corinthians, “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has the imagination of anyone ever imagined what God has planned for those who love him.” Because what God plans is not conceivable to us. So God does not deal with us primarily through our imaginations, nor through our thinking which is basically linked to our imaginations. God deals with us in another way.

Now, this gospel is talking about that; it talks about the word “light.” The Word, which is uncreated, is light. We say that in the Creed: “Light from Light, True God from True God.” And this light, of course, is an image because in the ancient world even then it was known that all life was related to light. That is actually very true. Light may be the very basis for all physics. Some physicists believe light is the most basic and most simple physical reality--so that is a theory anyway. If it is true, of course, it reflects the thinking of the ancient world that the most basic reality we know is light. Well, if we say the Word is Light from Light that means that the original Being, Eternal Being, is also described then as Light—which is an analogy, a comparison taking from our experience moving into what we can’t experience.

That is exactly what theology is all about. It is about moving from where we are [in thought] to where we can’t be through comparisons. Jesus did it all the time. Parables do that. And we have to do that because we are not dealing with something ordinary. We are dealing with the eternal. We are dealing with something quite different from ourselves. “My thoughts are not your thoughts,” saith the Lord. So we have to learn how to think the unthinkable. That is what a parable is about. That is what this Prologue is about. It is about trying to think about what we can’t think about, but we can try, and in trying--in this whole process of stretching our minds--light can enter into darkness. This is the experience we are talking about. We can have a glimmer, an insight, a consolation, a moment of truth, a peak experience, whatever--that is something like a crowbar prying us away from our ordinary thinking, our sensory world and what we ordinarily desire and are occupied with. And in this beautiful reading, of course, everything is centered on the Word--even prior to the incarnation.
Now, the Fathers [of the church] followed this thought completely and consistently—that the Word is the center of everything even before Jesus is born. Some Christians don’t do this. They only think about Jesus in the flesh and from the time of his birth onward, but they don’t think about prior to his birth. Prior to his birth the Word is still the center of creation, the pattern of everything, testified to in many different texts in Scripture and also at all times the source of light for all those who are enlightened. And so it remains today. “The light which enlightens every man was coming into the world.” So the role of the Word is greater, if I may put it this way, than the role of Jesus. The scope is greater. It has no time to it. Jesus after all is born in time. The Word does not only operate under the species of time. And that really is the basis for properly understood ecumenism—properly understood—that the Word, which enlightens every man, came into the world at the time of Jesus, but that the Word is always enlightening everyone who is open to God. Somehow we in time should be able to bring these two together: universal wisdom and our tradition based on Jesus. The incarnation of the Word of God should find some resonance in all cultures at all times since the Word is always enlightening everyone, presumably, if he is open to it. Now this beautiful mystery is presented for our contemplation, our mediation, our prayer, and if we allow it to, it will bring us our own experience and our own consolation and our own enlightenment.
Today our Church celebrates the Octave of Christmas, the Solemnity of the Motherhood of God, and the Feast of the Circumcision, and the World Day of Peace, and New Year’s. And they all really are the same thing—or not the New Year’s part. That is separate. But the rest are all reflecting the mystery of God, who has become human. And we cannot unpack that mystery in one day or one week. It needs to become part of the way we live. In today’s gospel it states that on the eighth day Jesus was named, “Yeshua,” Hebrew for Yah [Yahweh] saves. “Yah” being, more or less, the name of God in Hebrew. And he was circumcised, a profound religious symbol in Judaism. Now the meaning of this goes right into the whole idea of God become human. Jesus did not simply become human in a generic sense, but he became something specific because that is the way all human beings are. We are not generic. There is no generic human being. We may think we can live beyond the confines of a particular ethnic identity or culture or nationality, but we cannot. It is not possible. We will invent a new identity, like the very idea of being an American. An American is not Polish, necessarily, but may be; not German, necessarily, but might be; not necessarily African but could be, and so on. But it is the very nature of human life to have a culture. And it is the very nature of human life to have a religion. In the absence of any true religion, false ones will grow. History attests to this; our very present age attests to this.

Now, Jesus was not born a generic human being but specifically a Jewish human being and specifically a male Jewish human being, and thus entered into human experience in a very singular way, a very particular way. And that brought with it blessings and flaws. Now, Judaism was a very true religion in the sense that God had really called Abraham; God had called Moses; God had made a covenant with the Jewish people--actually not the Jewish people, but the twelve tribes one of which was the tribe of Judah. There were eleven other tribes as well.

Now, by the time of Christ, of course, that had been forgotten--that there were twelve tribes not one, for example. And the whole call to service and to witness that the covenant was had been somewhat forgotten. And the Romans have a saying for this, “Optima corruptio pessima,” which means, “the corruption of the greatest thing is the worse thing.” Now, Mary witnesses, of course, the very best of Judaism. She was a woman of total fidelity to God, total loyalty to God, total obedience to God, total submission to God, but she was also very unique and quite unusual, you might say one of a kind. What about the rest of the people into whom Jesus now is being introduced through the circumcision? What about the rest of them--the institutional formal Judaism? Well, in a true sense, that is what killed him. Of course it was Pontius Pilate and the Romans that legally and actually sent Jesus to his death, but that would not have happened if his own had received him--but his own did not receive him and this is a corruption of the best. Judaism, gift that it was, had developed something very bad. It is called by many things; one correct way of referring to it is self-righteousness which is a way of saying, “Well, we don’t really need God. We’ve got it made; we already have that.” That attitude is the corruption, not the fruit of the true religion of Israel.
Now, of course, God was not ignorant of the fact that this corruption had set into this chosen people. St. Paul says, “At the appointed time God sent his only son into the world, born of a Virgin.” At the appointed time--what does that mean? It may well mean at the time that was most necessary for God to do something because things were so utterly bad. So Jesus comes now, comes not only into human life but into Jewish human life, and he comes to bring something. And St. Paul puts it this way in the second reading, “To free those who were born under the law, to receive our status as adopted sons.” And he means son in a way that applies to males and females alike because it is the son who inherits, and he is talking about inheritance here. In the ancient world the eldest son inherited everything, at least quite often. Sometimes a man might adopt a slave to be a son. And sometimes those slaves were closer to their adopted fathers than the real sons. The real sons were often miscreants: divisive, suspicious, greedy, not at all loyal. Sometimes the adopted son was more a son in the true sense than the physical son. So the title of adopted son has this very great significance. Paul is saying we are like slaves who are being given an inheritance, which is a real relationship with God better than could happen by actually having God our physical father. In a sense Paul is aware of the fact that we are all from God in a physical sense--that all physical reality depends on God, lives in God, breathes in God and so on. But he is saying that doesn’t mean a whole lot because look how sons treat their fathers. They are little scoundrels in many cases, and he is saying, more or less, that is the human situation. And Jesus surrendered himself into a situation in which he was certainly going to lose his life, precisely to free us who believe from the law, and allow us to inherit what he has by right since he is truly the only begotten son of God.

Now, as we reflect on this it is very important that we don't think, “Well, those corrupt Jews! Thank goodness we are not part of that group,” because the same principle applies in Christianity and I would say even in a special way in the Catholic Church, which is really the true church, the apostolic church, the one founded historically by Christ, that historically comes from the very womb of the early church. “Optima corruptio pessima” even now--how the attitude, “We don’t need,” can be part of Christian experience. “We don’t need God; we already have God. We don’t need to listen to the Spirit; well, whatever it is--we got it. After all I was baptized; I went to Holy Communion and I was confirmed,” as if these are just, more or less, status symbols. Sacraments are really meant to introduce us to our inheritance--a life of sonship, a life of intimate relating to God the Father. For all of us, men and women, boys and girls, all of us are called to that relationship. And the greatest danger is that we use the riches of our own tradition of our religion and of our faith to prevent the spirit of adoption from ever entering into us and becoming part of our consciousness and conscience. Mary treasured all these things in her heart. We need to treasure all these things in our hearts as well and follow her example of true faith, loyalty, and devotion to God and not the example that was so rampant in the institution of Jesus’ day--which is rampant even in the institutions of our own day. We need to find out what it really means to be a true child of God and to live that relationship in Christ.
“Father, to you I offer praise; for what you have hidden from the learned and the clever you have revealed to the merest children.” This text is taken from the Gospel of Matthew. It is a very appropriate text for today’s liturgy as we honor the life of Virginia Elam, as we celebrate her life and death and the context of our belief in Christ and the resurrection from the dead. Now, it is always a temptation for us to think about this prayer of Jesus in terms of perhaps two different categories of people: the learned and the clever, and then the merest children. And from that group we will probably exclude ourselves from the learned and clever in all humility, and then conclude that we are mere children. Yes and No. We are and we aren’t. Actually both sides exist within us. Every adult human being is learned in some way because life teaches us. The learned and clever side of ourselves is a good side. It is important. Our learning, our education, our knowledge, our success, our achievements are all good. Jesus’ point is this: it is very good, but it is also relatively irrelevant when it comes to God because it is all passing; it is all earthly. It is not earthly in the sense of unclean; it is earthly in the sense of perishing, transient, ephemeral, not lasting. The child, on the other hand, is also a side of us--a side that many of us try to hide from. Jesus said, “Unless you become like a child you will never see the kingdom of God; you shall never enter the kingdom of God.”

There are many other references in Scripture to children, and they aren’t meant for the young; they are meant for all of us. We have to become like children in this way and turn to that simple part of us that can really regard God as father--with utter trust, without calculation. And that is indeed possible. One of the great privileges of being a priest is that people reveal to me what they don’t normally really reveal to anyone else about themselves. And the revelation of oneself, the true self, which you might say is more or less equivalent to the child, comes to the fore in the hour of death.

When we began our ceremony today I blessed the ashes, the remains of Virginia, with holy water. Holy water recalls baptism--you passed the font on the way in, flowing with water--because it symbolizes flowing water that comes from Christ. It flows from his side on the cross--that brings new life to the world. St. Paul says about baptism: “Do you not realize that we who are baptized were baptized into his death? We have died with him, so that we might rise to a new life.” Now these are not simply pious, poetic words. They are basic to the plan and purpose of God, who sent his own Son into the world “that we may have life.” New life cannot be centered on ourselves because that is what the old life is all about. That is the “old man,” the “old woman”; the old leaven is all about me and myself and my needs and my life. In the new life we center on God and on Christ. It is only by God’s grace and power we can do this, but it is also through our own willingness that God effects this transformation within us. A lot of times we may not even be aware of it because it works so deeply within us. It is like the child we think we grew away from long, long ago, but which is really within us.
And when we come to God and when we come to the various frontiers of our life we return to that child, and we may be frightened, or we may be fearful because as it says in Hebrews, “The devil kept the world in bondage by the fear of death.” That is the very opportunity for us to come to know the Father as we discover what is revealed to the merest children, what God has hidden from the learned—what is hidden from our education and from our experience and from our learning is revealed to the child within us especially at the frontiers of our life: at moments of danger, at moments when we start to recognize what is really meant by our mortality. Those are graced moments. Baptism prepares us for this. Baptism encourages us to live our entire lives affirming what the gospel preaches—believing God is a father, believing God is a brother as one like us except free of sin, and believing that God is Spirit who blows where he wills, who leads and directs and guides us in our every movement. We have nothing to fear. And yet much of our lives is spent really in the learned side, involved in the world, and forgetting what life is really about.

Now, I did not know Virginia as a learned woman, and I did not know much about her. I did not know much about her history, but I knew her. I met her—the true Virginia. A woman who had come to realize that her time on earth was strictly limited and who came in a real existential, spiritual way to encounter her Lord and to give herself to him and to prepare herself to meet him face to face. And in this she was utterly gracious and open and child-like and trusting—a wonderful example really for the whole Christian community.

I did not know Virginia in her ordinary life, and I don’t know most parishioners in their ordinary lives, but I do suspect that many of us waste away our ordinary lives because we remain disconnected to the great promises that come from our baptism. We remain disconnected from the great hope that is personally given to those who believe. We allow small things and passing matters to dominate so much of our time not being aware of the presence of Christ in our daily and humdrum lives. But this can be corrected, and perhaps I would add that Virginia herself is right now praying for each of you. We believe the saints have a mission. The saints in heaven are our prayer group, our intercessory prayer group, and they are praying for us—that we will come to know the Father as they have come to know the Father; that we will not spend a great deal of time, wasting a great deal of time in worldly affairs when we can, in fact, come to realize, even now at this very moment, the true nature of the Father’s love by simply being a child—by becoming once again a child that can see and enter the kingdom of God.

Very often, when famous people pass away, there are all kinds of statements about well—we should do this, we should do that. You know the greatest tribute we could give to Virginia is to take a little bit of what she was like: her gracious, lovely concern for others, her ability, even when she knew she was going to die, to play hostess—a kind of combination of Mary and Martha—that sense of real concern for others, to take a little bit of that and make it our own if it isn’t already. Or if it already is, to let it perhaps be fanned a little bit into a roaring flame, and to recognize how important we are to each other, and to truly repent of any bad feelings that would keep us away from each other, that divide, that put us at odds, that really allow the devil to work on us. All this is
wasting away what could be anticipation of heavenly life itself. And the gift is given in Christ. As we continue our liturgy we continue to thank God and render thanks and praise for the gift of life and the gift of Virginia. As we pray for her passage we pray also for ourselves that we who remain will comfort each other and be open to the Holy Spirit, that we will be willing to honor the memory of Virginia in whatever way we can and extend ourselves as she did in love and sympathy and compassion to others.
Today the Scripture speaks of the manifestation of God and Christ, and it is very important to recognize how peculiar this manifestation is. If we look at religious liturgy, myths and stories from around the world, one gets the distinct impression that most people associate God and the manifestation of God with acts of natural power and even violence such as, for example, the eruption of a volcano--considered a sacred manifestation of the divine in many places including ancient Mexico--or the coming of great storms, the sounding of thunder, lightning, earthquakes. All of these were thought to be manifestations of God.

Now, St. Jerome says that ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ because it is in Scripture that we find God’s view of God reflected in the experience of a certain people. It is like a divinely approved version of the nature of God, although, of course, up until Christ Himself, very few comprehended it. We see the prophet Elijah, for example. Elijah travels to Mount Horab and he also experiences an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. And he hears the roar of the mighty wind, but God is not in the wind. And he hears the crash of thunder, but God is not in the thunder. And then he hears the very gentle little zephyr, and God was in the zephyr--you get the picture? God is not to be identified with acts of nature, regardless of what your insurance policy says.

Now Moses, who is the greatest of the prophets in the Old Testament, Moses saw God in a burning bush that was not consumed, and he experienced someone addressing him. Of course, the bush is not God but a signal to get his attention; but the address was from God. And this was the essential revelation: that God is someone who addresses his creation. “I am who am.” A marvel indeed! A mysterious and spiritual presence not in any way physical.

Now, in Christ what we have is that God has manifested himself in the physical being of Jesus, the child. But what is most remarkable is that a child is not powerful, nor is there any marvel here. It is a normal, defenseless, vulnerable child--one that needs to be taken care of. And given the track record of the peoples of the world it is quite unlikely that they would see in this child the manifestation of God. And this is the great point of today’s feast in the Gospel according to Matthew. It isn’t obvious that God would manifest himself in vulnerability and defenselessness and smallness, weakness, but indeed this is the gospel proclamation.

Now, in proclaiming this Matthew shows us a tableau. And there are two groups of people in this story. The first are outsiders. They are called in our present translation “astrologers.” The word in Greek could mean also “magicians.” They are star gazers from Persia. The point is they are outsiders, and they are not honorable people. For the Jewish people, for Jewish culture and by Jewish standards, star gazing and astrology was considered illegitimate, and rightly so. It is illegitimate. It’s foolish and even silly. But the point is these foreign, silly or maybe even deceitful people are searching. Searching
is a very important component to the life of faith, a component that the Old Testament tended to ignore--and even in our own institutional life sometimes we don’t pay proper heed to. But Jesus talked about it, “Seek and ye shall find.” It is important that we search for truth, for God, for life.

Now, there is a second group of people: Herod and the people of Jerusalem. Now, they are not outsiders; they are insiders. And they are not searching, and they don’t want to find anything either. Why? Because they believe they already have. They are the insiders. They are the privileged few. And yet their very attitudes allow them to be ruled by fear--fear of losing what they think they have.

This brings us to our search for truth. We are not born into the truth. There is a statement, a very good one, “God has no grandchildren.” I am not a child of God because one of my parents was a child of God. I have to find God for myself--a difficult thing at times. Christ was very well aware of this. He said, “I have not come to bring peace, but the sword to divide father from son, mother from daughter, mother-in-law from daughter-in-law, father-in-law from son-in-law.” Is this painful? Yes, it is. Is it necessary? Yes, it is the necessary pain that is required of anyone who searches for the truth--that recognizes that there must be a personal commitment.

Now, this very need raises the possibility that our own beloved friends, parents, sisters, brothers, children will, in fact, leave the true faith. But maybe they need to if you understand the role of searching. Maybe their relationship with the faith is off in the first place; they have to leave in order to come. Painful? Yes, but also necessary.

Now, some people reject what they understand wrongly about God. For example, there are some very fine people on this planet who say they are atheists. Why do they say that? Because they don’t understand what God is. Their idea of God is wrong, and they reject it; so they call themselves atheists. Were they to know the nature of God they would not be atheists. There are people who reject the teachings of the Church because they don’t understand what the teachings of the Church are. So they say they are not Catholics, but they really don’t know what it means to be a Catholic. On the other hand, there are people who accept something wrong about God and claim to be believers, but what they believe is not true, and even those who claim to believe everything the Church teaches although they are quite mistaken about what that is. St. Augustine recognized all of this, and wrote about it in his book City of God in which he maintains there is a difference between those who really are following Christ, and those who belong to the institutional Church. He acknowledges and affirms that God’s will is for us to be both Christian and Catholic, both following Christ and [being] a member of the Church that signifies and embodies the unity that Christ prayed for. However he admits that there may be people who are following Christ, but not Catholic; and there may be people who are Catholic and who are not really following Christ. This is part of the flux that exists here and now because we are not yet perfect because things have not really settled. It is part of the nature of life because life is “in via, on the journey”--we are all on a journey. But for a moment we have to ask ourselves is it better to reject a mistake or to accept a mistake? Sometimes those who reject are closer to the truth. And, of course, God is not
finished with any of us. We all need a personal search for truth in Christ. But that truth will upset us. It will make us free on one hand; but it will also upset us because it will transform our lives, if we are ready for transformation and the sacrifice that that involves—and we are happy indeed for God has found us.

What Christ preached was conversion, and conversion comes in stages. The first stage is religious conversion which means we find a home. We find a place; we can be comfortable, but that is just a beginning. Some people think it is the end. It is not. Even the sacrament of Baptism is simply initiation into the mystery of Christ; it is the conclusion of nothing. Our conclusion is union with God in heaven. Religious conversion, which is affective in nature, emotional in nature, needs to be strengthened by intellectual conversion, and that means conversion of our understanding. No one can understand for someone else and no two people understand in the same way. We can share our understanding with others, but even there they will take it in their own way. Conversion in our understanding requires two things: that we understand, and that we take something—that the reality of God really fits into who we are, and our understanding fits the reality of God. In our very subjective culture the second part is often forgotten, as though if something pleases us that is enough. It is not. It needs to fit into our nature, but also it has to fit into reality and the nature of God. Thirdly, conversion is becoming a moral person. It is wonderful to profess beliefs and values, but Christ insisted that we begin to practice what we really believe. How do our actions really reflect the values Christ taught in the gospel—the values that the Church teaches today? That is a question each of us needs to grapple with. The gospel today proclaims that God is no longer hidden but out in the open—we still need to search to find God. And in this graced search Jesus assures us that the kingdom of God is all inclusive. It is all inclusive—it invites everybody provided they are willing to search. It only excludes those who are insiders, who believe they don’t need anything and who become closed and self-righteous. The Feast of the Epiphany is our feast as gentiles; as born of the nations, we are being gathered together, for God’s purpose, in God’s time.
“Beloved do not trust every spirit, but put the spirits to a test to see if they belong to God.” The first reading from the First Letter of John brings up a theme that is found in every spiritual author, and yet it seems the institutional Church and ordinary people tend to ignore this very important piece of advise. As we grow up we learn the meaning of words. Our parents point out to us what various things are called, and pretty soon the whole thing becomes very automatic. Language does not simply refer to things around us. Language is far more complex. And we start to talk about things that are not things. We start to talk about qualities, realities, or perceptions of realities and the whole thing becomes very murky. And yet we might imagine that it is not murky at all. We might imagine that everything is quite clear and that we are automatically calling everything what it is--calling a spade a spade, so to speak--that we are very simple, straight-forward people, but the world is not simple, straight-forward. And things play a very small role in our lives.

The real issues we deal with are not things. The real issues are spiritual qualities and realities that we cannot exactly point to. Our very feelings, for example, are a very central issue in our lives and affect and color our behavior, the way we treat others and even the way we see life. But in all of this there is need for great discernment. Do we take everything just as it appears to us? If we do, we are very deceivable. And Jesus referred to the devil as the “father of lies,” for a very good reason. The devil’s chief purpose is to lie. The very best way to get people away from God is to lie to them. And we live in a culture that is full of words and ideas and concepts and viewpoints and values which are all spun from deception. And very often so-called “simple believers” fall into all kinds of deceptions because they don’t discern where ideas come from: whether they are true, whether values are true values, whether their perceptions are in fact justified, whether their feelings are rooted in anything at all, or simply imaginary.

All of this is very important. It is all part of discerning the spirits, and it’s part of a true spiritual life—a spiritual life being a life that is conscious of the spiritual dimension of reality. That is what John is telling his disciples, his pupils. If you are going to be conscious of the spiritual world, you have to discern. You are being lied to every day. Lies can come from your own family. They can come from your friends. They can be deliberate or they can be indeliberate. Often talking about growing up we get the idea that only deliberate lies are wrong. No. Lies are wrong in themselves; they are very damaging. It doesn’t matter whether people really believe them—in fact they are actually worse if people really believe them. An honest liar is more destructive than a dishonest one because their honesty comes through in some fashion making their lie more believable. Therefore, and this is something we don’t recognize, morally we are responsible for what we believe. If we believe a lie, that is our moral fault, and it can be a profound one and a very damaging one. We need to discern everything. We need to question everything, “Is this really true?” And it can start with the stories we hear from one another about people. You know stories might have a little thread of truth, but
usually by the time it gets to our ears it has been so changed, distorted, and twisted it
isn’t really true at all. And yet the tendency of most people is to believe what they hear--
well, I heard it from her and she’s believable. Why? Why is she believable? Why is he
believable? Why is anyone believable? Only God is believable; that is what this text is
saying. If someone is not speaking with the Spirit of Christ, they are not believable. The
Spirit of Christ, for example, never gossips. St. Paul puts gossip along with sorcery and
adultery and murder as evils that Christian people do not engage in. This is not an
exaggeration. Morally, however, most lay people, most priests do not have a clue to why
these statements were made. It all has to do with this text here about deception, how
easily deceived we are, how greatly we need to discern everything we hear.

The most vulnerable of all are, of course, are the young. The young, of course,
believe each other--which is very tragic, but true. College students think that their
colleagues, also students, are great sources of information. Thus they are easily
deceived. And then of course they think the professors are also sources of information,
often misinformation because the professors are not spiritual beings who discern
anything, even if they are in Catholic universities, and so on. So people can become
quite used to lies and easily deceived, and pretty soon don’t know the difference and live
lies. And the problem in this is that nothing good can ever come from a lie. So if we
want freedom, and we want truth, we want to be free, and we want something good to
come from our lives, it has to be based on truth. And if we want the truth we have to
learn to discern. And we can do this because we have been given the Spirit of Truth. We
need to be aware of that Spirit, and pray to that Spirit, and listen to what the Spirit tells
us.
“God is Love”   Christmas Season   Tuesday, January 6, 1998   7:00 a.m.
1 Jn 4:7-10;    Mk 6:34-44    (Blessed Andre Bessette)

“The man without love has known nothing of God, for God is love.” Love is a constant theme in literature and in life. And yet not everyone really means the same thing by this word. The gospels proclaim that God, God’s very nature, is love. And it is important that we think and reflect on the meaning of this. Fundamentally there is something in life that is an attractive force that draws people together. But there is also its opposite, a repulsive force that creates enemies. Both these forces are part of nature. They create families--these forces--and they divide families. They create tribes, and they create herds, and they provide for the reproduction of all the species, and they also, you might say, trim the sails of all the species as they vie with each other for supremacy and domination.

Now, the term love applied to God does not refer to any of this. It is not natural attraction that is being spoken of, but rather it is the power and effective force of the will that creates and maintains everything, and embraces everything, and chooses to bring a very special part of the creation into a personal union. The love of God is to some degree impersonal in so far as it creates and maintains order. But the whole mystery of the gospel is based on the idea that God was not simply willing to create and maintain order, but that God wanted to establish a personal communion, an intimate relationship with the creation in so far as the creation is able to respond.

And what can respond? Only human beings can respond. Only human beings have the capacity to answer the invitation of God to a personal intimate communion. And this is, of course, the great, the truly great aspect of human life, you might say the crown of human life, the essence of human life--it is that we are capable of responding to God and living in a relationship--and without this our essential nature would really be completely missing. And yet how few people ever reflect on this as what makes them human. People can live their entire lives and they can exercise great creativity, imagination, industry, productivity in this world and never recognize what really being human is about. It has to do with this sense of being in communion with. And, of course, the very nature of God is that God’s communion spreads and includes--it is an inclusive kind of communion. We talk about the communion of saints. This is a very great mystery that we need to reflect on. This is part of the nature of love--that love can draw together, that the limits of our daily consciousness are really very temporary. The boundaries that we experience as self, as myself, this is a very temporary thing. We are not really created with permanent boundaries at all. Those boundaries are meant to fall and to melt as we are meant to establish an enormous degree of inter-penetration and inter-communion with God and with all the others who are desirous of this type of life--which is what is meant by the communion of saints.

But this surrender of boundaries itself is a work--a tremendous work. It is a work God has initiated himself in Christ. It is not the product of just a thought. It is not the product of just a wish. It is not the product of just a desire, but it is really a work. It is the work...
Jesus came to do and it involves struggle; and it involves great sacrifice—ultimately total sacrifice and total, utter surrender. Of what?--Of that self which is the boundary. And this is really what God is inviting us into. When we make an effort to love, if it is true love, it has got to be in this direction: sacrifice, surrender, struggle--because it is the way which God is working toward the goal God has in mind, this intimate communion of all conscious life.

Now, the evangelist says to us, “Love consists in this, not that we have loved God.” Too often love is presented as if it’s like a moral imperative. It is not a moral imperative. It surely is not. The world will continue without love, strange as that might seem. The world doesn’t need it. The world is a vast mechanism that doesn’t need love at all. Love is God’s plan. And God’s plan is something which needs to be accepted in a totally free way. And by being free it means it is not necessary. We don’t have to do this. This is a great privilege and a great prerogative to suffer and to sacrifice. It’s a great privilege and a prerogative that we are offered. It is an invitation, not something we have to do. It is not an obligation. It far exceeds what we would call moral imperatives. That is why the author says, “It is love that consists of this, not that we have loved God.” This is not our doing, but that “God has loved us.” This is the mystery and the revelation. And God has sent his Son as an offering for our sins. As we gather in Eucharist we offer that Son to the Father and we offer ourselves together--“the Total Christ offering the Total Christ to the Father.”
Our faith is conveyed to us in many gestures and symbols and supported by words. But words by themselves will only lead to quarreling among ourselves and within ourselves. So Jesus today presents in a story a teaching about his body and blood, his flesh, his blood and this, of course, needs to be taken very seriously. In many cases Christ says things that are logically impossible. “I am the vine.” Is Jesus a vine? Yes. “I am the door; I am the sheepgate.” Is he a door and a sheepgate? Yes. Today he says, “My flesh is real food.” Is that so? Yes. But in a way that exceeds the comprehension of the logical mind and the mere meaning of words.

Now at the death of a loved one, we should be, at least mildly, in a state of shock, even if the loved one is quite advanced in years and by all reasonable expectations has lived a long life. The death of a loved one is actually a very sacred moment in the life of every person. Because of the mild shock that should exist, there is an opening, there is a door, there is window, into the eternal--when the true meaning of the symbols of our faith might actually make an impression on the spirit for which they are intended, bypassing the quarreling of the logical mind.

Now as we brought the body of Gertrude into this church, I sprinkled the casket with the water from the font. The font which to the eyes is simply some moving water is really more than that. It is the source of eternal life for those who have faith. St. Paul says in his Letter to the Romans, “Are you not aware that those of us who were baptized were baptized into Christ’s death, that we died together with him so that we might live a new life?” Is it true we really died? Yes. But perhaps we never really understood what that death was all about, and perhaps we have spent our entire life trying to resuscitate that what St. Paul calls “old man”--I think in this translation “that old self”--that as Christian people we are to be rid of--that we have a right to be rid of, I should put it that way. Baptism is itself a door to a new life. Quite beyond the literal meaning of that it is a life in God; it is a life that is not limited as every kind of life we experience is. This mysterious life of God Himself is really what God is offering to us in Christ. Jesus says in the fourth gospel, “Unless a person is begotten from above by water and Spirit he shall never enter the realm of God.”

Our lives as we are, our physical lives, are by their very nature limited. When St. Paul talks about this sinful body, of course he doesn’t really mean the bones, the flesh, the blood, the nervous system, the various organs; that is not what is sinful. What he means is this body which is the house, the source of a blind drive to survive at all costs, that will do anything just to survive. That body is the sinful body. And people who have never been introduced to the life of God might be thought of as helpless prisoners of that body and of the fear of death that reigns in that body. It says in the Letter to the Hebrews, “The devil kept the world in bondage by the fear of death.” Human beings have a fear of death that is unknown in the rest of the living world. Is this because our creator is extremely cruel and wanted us to undergo a peculiar and strange form of suffering? According to Scripture, this is not the reason. The reason is that our very instincts have
been corrupted by our actions, by our choices and decisions, not only our own personal ones but those of the whole race—and this warp needs the healing grace of God to overcome it. And the healing grace of God comes only through Jesus Christ and through our acceptance of Jesus Christ in a true, free, voluntary way.

The gift is given in Baptism. Whether we ever actually allow that gift to bear fruit is our own choice. The Church prays for all of the baptized that we shall recognize what gift has been given—so that when we come to the moment of our death, it will not be the end of existence, but will be the entrance into a conscious participation in the heavenly life of God—for indeed this is our birthright through baptism. And the Church has always maintained that we do not have to wait for our death to exercise our birthright or to participate in the life of God—it just won’t be too terribly conscious or clear, but it can grow.

Now, for example, Mother Teresa of Calcutta was a woman who had really become so aware of the eternal life of God that she was able to live with very little reference to her own personal life. It was the life of God that made her world, and she extended herself beyond, what we would call, normal limits to care for the life of God—especially in the most frail vessels that she found. In the eyes of faith every single human being is a vessel of the life of God. Every human being is invited to a marriage feast; and according to the symbols of the Scripture, each of us is really a bride being invited to meet with the bridegroom, who is God Himself.

Now, on the way to this feast we are not to languish because of starvation. God has given us food for the journey—a true fore-taste of the bread which shall be our food in heaven—the bread that has come down from heaven, who is Christ Himself given to us as food in this Eucharist offered on this table of the altar. As we come forward to the altar to receive the body, the blood, the soul, the divinity of Christ, it is very important that we do so fully aware of the gift we are receiving and willing to make whatever changes in our lives that are necessary for a life of God to grow stronger because those changes will all be preparations for the day when we too will lie like Gertrude in the sleep of death. And then the true meaning of all of our actions and all of our choices and all of our decisions will be very exposed to the clear judgment of God and ourselves. And we still have time to prepare ourselves so what we bring to the Lord will be as beautiful and as worthy a gift of ourselves as we choose to make it.
Today the gospel says that the disciples were taken aback because they didn’t understand about the loaves. Their minds were closed. Because their minds were closed they were afraid. Fear is the constant companion of a closed mind. In the first reading the evangelist says, “Love casts out all fear.” A closed mind however is closed to love and therefore afraid. But, of course, it might not realize this, because of the way we use the word love. What many people call love does not cast out fear; in fact, they are always afraid they will lose what they think of as love or their beloved--or they are jealous, that is possessive of their beloved. But jealousy is a form of fear too--a fear of losing.

There are many forms of fear. Fear has to do with punishment the author says. Fear really has to do with losing and one form of loss is punishment. The word for loss in Latin is “damnatio” where we get the word “damnation,” which really means loss. Loss is what fear is all about. And guilt is connected to fear. Guilt is actually a form of fear. Guilt is actually fear of punishment. Now the very strength, power, that keeps guilt alive in a person is the very strength or power that keeps people afraid--it is the very power that keeps them from love.

Were we to really surrender to love, then we would have no more guilt because the force and strength that keeps guilt and fear at work would be gone. It would be superseded by something far more powerful--love itself. Even in our experience we know that our emotional life can only have one emotion at a time, even though we may oscillate from one to the other. There is just so much strength and power we have within our emotional lives. But love, which is meant here the love of God, is something that supersedes all of that--brings it all together, weaves it, you might say, into a whole. And this is the work of the Spirit. It casts out all fear in the sense of fear of death, or fear of loss, or fear of punishment. It doesn’t necessarily destroy the instinct of caution; but it does cast out fear, which is really rooted in our self-centeredness, because when we really are connected to God, and when we really surrender to God then we have to let go of that self, which is a kind of false god. And when we let go of that, there is no more source for fear it this sense--there is nothing more to lose because we have already surrendered.

We have given everything up, and that is the very basic idea of Christ’s sacrifice. He has surrendered everything to the Father. He has done this not only for himself; he has done it for us. But he has not done it for us so we don't have to; he has done it for us so we will be enabled to follow and do exactly as he did--surrendering everything to the Father. And when we surrender everything to the Father, there is no more false self. If there is no more false self, there can be no more fear of loss. If there is no fear of loss, there can be no guilt. People talk about Catholic guilt all the time. They are only confessing--how they have not surrendered to God. Love cast out all fear and guilt. And love is God.
And all we need to do is surrender to love--that is what the meaning of our Eucharist is. The Eucharist is the way in which Christ gave us to bring our lives to the Father, the pleasures and the pains, the joys and the sorrows, all are woven together into one fabric and offered to God. And everything finds meaning in the love of God. But without the love of God, there is no sense really because there is nothing whole--everything is fractured. So as we continue, again to go back to St. Augustine’s beautiful phrase: “The Whole Christ,” meaning ourselves, “offer the Whole Christ,” meaning ourselves and, of course, Jesus to the Father. This is our Eucharist.
“Tell no one, but go and show yourself to the priest.” First of all, when we use the word “priest” we have to be careful about what we mean. This priest here being referred to is a priest of the old dispensation, a Jewish priest. And in a way the nature of a Jewish priest is very different from the nature of a priest in the Church. A priest of the Church is based on the idea that Christ is the High Priest of the new dispensation. That is very different from the old dispensation. So these are very different kinds of, you might say, offices. The priest of the old dispensation was first of all not a sacramental minister as is a priest of the Catholic Church, for example. What was the old dispensation basically about? It was about law and about holiness. And holiness had a lot to do with physical realities, physical cleanliness. We say even today, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” I personally believe that, but it is not really a theological truth. But in Judaism it was a theological axiom, you might say. So holiness was a physical thing and there were all kinds of laws connected to physical hygiene--without physical hygiene you don’t have holiness. Now, the priest was in charge of the law in general, remembering the law, adjudicating cases. He was kind of like, what you might call, a judge, more or less the kind of judge that you see on TV--you know, these judges that settle small, little claims. That is what a priest was. They settled claims; they settled problems and they settled on the basis of the law. Everything in Judaism had to do with law.

Now Jesus here says, “Tell no one.” Why?--Because he is not looking for notoriety. He does not want everyone with a problem to come looking for him. Eventually that happens anyway, but that is not what he wants. But what he does want is for the priest,
who is in charge of the law, to acknowledge that he has the power not only to heal, but to make holy. Leprosy, as a physical disorder, was considered also a lack of holiness since hygiene and holiness were connected. And any kind of sore, any kind of wound, or any kind of blood, or any kind of anything that comes out of a human body—all of it is unholy. That is how they thought. Therefore a leper was unholy. Jesus made the leper not only healthy, but holy and wanted the priest to acknowledge this. And that is the meaning of the statement, “Tell no one, but show yourself to the priest.”

Now we see that in Christ’s ministry the whole problem was that the priest would never accept that Jesus really had this power—that Jesus manifested the Holy Spirit. They wanted to believe that the Holy Spirit was still up in heaven with God, and that was it. The heavens were shut because that is what the prophet Malachi said, and that’s it. And they did not want to look, and they did not want to see the Holy Spirit at work making people holy. And for this reason Jesus refers to the sin against the Holy Spirit which is the unforgivable sin. Not to see the Holy Spirit at work is unforgivable because the Holy Spirit is the power of God. The Holy Spirit is God. That is why we say that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And God the Father we will never see on earth. God the Son appears in the person of Jesus; Jesus ascended to the Father, but the Holy Spirit is still at work. And we need to open our eyes and see. All men and women need to open our eyes and see the Holy Spirit at work!
Today there is a great deal of confusion in many people’s minds and in secular society; there is a great deal of reason for it, but within the Church there really isn’t. What the gospel says today is, “He must increase, while I must decrease.” Put in the mouth of John the Baptist, that is a very significant statement because it isn’t simply a personal opinion, but, in a sense, it is the whole meaning of the life of baptism. In baptism we die, and St. Paul says, “We have died with Christ.” He doesn’t mean that merely in a figurative way. He means something really is gone that previously was central to our existence, and now something new has been born, generated, given from above, and that must now grow and become stronger.

Now, that something new is really what is referred to in this sense of “He must increase.” That which is new within us must increase; the Christ in us must increase. And it is something that is very different from what I was--I must decrease, whatever that is. St. Paul says on commenting on baptism, “Of course,” he says, “I still live my own life.” Well, in one sense, yes, that is true. I still have my own life. I still have my own body. I still have my own needs. I still have my own whatever, but it is no longer the center of who I am, and its needs can no longer be the most important thing in my life. And its desires can no longer be what drives me. I have become a new creation.

Now, the problem is, and this is what the Catholic Church has always taught, that baptism really frees us from bondage to sin, but freedom from bondage is one thing--actually living out the new life is quite something else. We are free to live the life of Christ--that doesn’t mean we will live the life of Christ. And in every single relationship,
before every single decision and every single choice, we chose either to live as Christ would live, that is we allow Christ to influence and direct and guide our decisions and choices, or we don’t. We return to the old self and we say, “No, I will do this,” and then I’m increasing and Christ is decreasing. And there is this dynamic in Christian life. It is evidenced in all the saints starting with the early apostles and St. Paul through all the saints; they all tell their story of this dynamic of Christ increasing and I decreasing and I increasing and Christ decreasing. In this there is tension, and this is what life is about. You mustn’t think that it is simply a matter of magic that God waves a wand over us, and we are reborn and that’s it. That would be a parody of true life. Life is really life, and it is living; it is dynamic. And every day we are living our life, as it were, anew, and the power to live anew is from the Spirit of Christ.

I think if we even analyze the nature of other forms of life, we say they don’t have any freedom—nor do human beings in bondage to sin. They have no freedom any more than an ant has freedom or a bee or a rose—you may like a rose, but a rose has no freedom to do anything but be ... what? ... a rose. It may smell nice, but that is because it is compelled to smell nice. That is a kind of a bondage; nature is kind of a bondage; we call it instinct.

Now, in Christ we are actually free to be spiritual beings, actually, the Fathers said to become God. This requires a willingness to follow Christ: a life of surrender, a life of sacrifice, a life of true love—which is a life of I decreasing and Christ increasing.
“You are my beloved Son; on you my favor rests.” Today we celebrate, we remember, we pay heed to a cardinal event in the life of Jesus. His baptism is really the beginning of his public life. Now, it is important that we understand the setting of the story: it is the ministry of John the Baptizer, who has called upon his people to repent, that is, to undergo a change of mind and heart concerning their past, both personally and collectively. It is important that we recognize that what is ill with human life has both collective and personal components. It is far too easy to take either/or, believing that what is wrong with life is either a collective thing or merely a personal thing. In the first case we have revolutionaries, who believe that the world and its institutions are totally corrupt and that they are the standard to renew humanity, not recognizing that the corruption and the distortion is also part of themselves. And if we want to study history we see the result of this kind of thinking. Robespierre ends up on the guillotine himself. On the other hand, it is also true that some people seem to think that the problems of life are just themselves. You might recognize what psychologists call neuroses in this condition--everything is my fault: if I were only better, if I were only more loving, if I were only more faithful, if I were only more giving--then my life would be better. Well, that is not exactly true either. Both of these points of view are wrong and render any attempt to improve life totally vain.

The truth is that there is a collective disorder in life, which we call sin; and there is a personal disorder in life, which we call sin. And it is beyond our power, by ourselves, to do anything about this, which is precisely what John the Baptizer was proclaiming--the need for a messiah, the need for a savior, the need for help from beyond ourselves. The anticipation of this help was, in fact, on the way--and that he discovered, in fact, already at work in Jesus of whom he said was the “one who was coming whose sandal strap he is not worthy to loose.”

Now, if the meaning of baptism is the recognition of sin, both collective and personal, then why was Jesus baptized? Why did Jesus insist on being baptized? This is a very important question. The answer lies in this the very mission of Christ. He is not a hero. This is not a hero’s journey. Jesus is not a guy looking for God. He is not even a great prophet. That is not what the Scriptures proclaim. He is not like Ulysses or Aeneas or Jason looking for the golden fleece, or for truth, or for anything. Jesus is from God; he is the Word of God. He is God; before all things were, he is. In his incarnation he accepts human nature, but human nature, in itself, is not corrupt--it is a creation of God. He did not share in sin through his incarnation. In his birth and circumcision he became Jewish and took upon himself a particular culture at a particular time and place. This also did not involve sin because sin does not reside in culture--although culture is affected by sin, it is not the source of it. Sin really resides in the human will, in the human consciousness and in the intellect--the spirit of humanity. It is Jesus’ decision now, in his baptism, to enter into that consciousness, into that will--as St. Paul puts it, “He became sin.” What does that mean? It means that he freely and deliberately entered into the condition that
was created by sin, which is a condition of separation and alienation from God. If we
don’t understand what Jesus did in his baptism, we won’t understand his ministry at all.

It was very clear to the Fathers [of the Church] that Jesus had some awareness of God
that was quite unusual, otherwise he could not have done what he did; he could not have
been who he was. His work, his healing work, his teaching came from a source that is
not available to ordinary human beings. This is called the Beatific Vision; it means an
intimate knowledge of God, appropriate to the Son of God or the Word of God. It has
always been known--also by theologians who reflect on this--by the Church that reflects
on this, that during the passion Christ surrendered that knowledge of God and
experienced total abandonment. The road from baptism to Calvary is a road from
affirmation, “This is my beloved Son,” to complete abandonment, “My God why have
you forsaken me.” Jesus’ journey is not to God--it is away from God. He was with God
in the beginning, but he leaves God. In the baptism he decides and chooses deliberately
to surrender his intimate knowledge of God--perhaps only for a time, perhaps gradually
over a long period of time, no one can say for sure--in order to meet us, where we live in
abandonment, in desolation, in separation. Why? Because he is the savior, and he saves
by becoming one with our very condition.

Now, as Jesus becomes one in our loneliness and abandonment and separation, he is
able to lead us to the Father. And by the very door through which he entered our
abandonment and desolation and sin and separation, we return to the Father. The door is
baptism. The door is baptism and with baptism, affirmation. When we are baptized we
are given freedom in the Spirit of Christ, and we are given affirmation. “You are my
beloved.” As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Spirit begets spirit; flesh begets flesh.” We
need to be begotten in the Spirit of Christ to know God, to eventually take the Beatific
Vision for ourselves. That is the goal of salvation.

As we are lead to the waters of baptism, we are given the freedom to either please God
or not. On this earth we remain always free either to please God or not. We are not
saved in some sort of definitive way--that is heresy. As long as we are on earth, we are
free to serve God or not. We are saved when we enter into the Beatific Vision with
Christ after passing through the fullness of life. And like Christ, we live out our decision
every day. Our journey, the reverse of his, toward God not away, is the journey that we
live out in our choices and decisions amid acceptance and rejection of others toward
ourselves, amid the decisions of other people to love us or hate us or to be indifferent, in
a society that either promotes justice or does not--in these very circumstances--we decide
to journey to the Father with Christ, or we choose our own way. Baptism makes us free,
but in no way are we compelled to follow Christ or to live a new life. But each day we
grow closer to what we have chosen--union with God or life with ourselves.
“If anyone eats this bread he will live forever; the bread I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world.” In all creation we human beings are uniquely concerned with our own life and death. We share a great deal with the animal kingdom, mammals like us have sensory experience, and drive to survive, and so on. But animals give no indication of any concern about living forever or awareness of death. Although they have an emotional life and care for their own--at least certain species have strong feelings for the herd, the mother frequently a strong attachment to the young--there is no animal that prepares for death. This is our preoccupation. It is our concern. And it is a part of us that is not sensory, and transcends sensory experience. And for this reason it can be a frightening thing in so far as we can be frightened by what we don’t know. The Letter to the Hebrews says, “The devil kept the world in bondage by the fear of death.” Bondage and fear--what does that mean? To be in bondage means to lack freedom. In a certain way what Scripture is trying to say is that when we are afraid of death, we really cannot live. And yet on what basis do we have the right to anticipate death? We cannot through our own thoughts or experiences enter into death or know anything about it. And it would seem to be foolishness to believe simply what we imagine.

Now, it is precisely in this the Gospel of John proclaims “I am the bread that has come down from heaven.” This is Jesus speaking. Now, that term “bread,” of course, doesn’t necessarily mean literally bread. That term is used to describe the manna that fed the people who were wandering in the desert for a long time. And in this wandering they were totally dependent upon God because they really didn’t know where they were, and they didn’t have any means to support themselves. And Scripture looks upon this as a school, a time of training for people to learn how to trust. And actually the longer they failed the lessons, they never did learn how to trust. Now, Jesus is comparing himself with that manna, that food that, more or less, without any effort appeared--without any effort on their part--appeared to feed them. Without any effort on our part, Christ comes to us. This is not a merit from life. This is not a result of our prayers, or good works, or virtue or anything. It is gift. God sends Christ to us as a gift. And he sends Christ to us that we may have true life--this very something that we can anticipate and think about--but not touch or control or know anything about.

Now, today modern medical technology has made many advances; for example, there are new hips that people can have placed in them when their old hips give out. There are new knees that can replace their old ones, and many other parts. But there is no replacing the whole. And there is no replacing life itself. What God offers is not a replacement, but an entirely new life; in fact, his very own life. That's the offer! God’s very own life is being given to us. We need to accept it. And to accept it means to accept Christ, his teachings, his way of life, his values and his truth.

Now, we can quarrel within ourselves or among ourselves about the meaning of everything. But the point is: Christ comes to us as the truth himself. He says, “I am the truth. I am the way. I am the life.” To accept God is not to accept certain statements or
theories or beliefs. To accept God is to accept the person of Jesus, to acknowledge our need and our desire to live eternally, to acknowledge our total dependence upon God, to learn from our own frailty, to learn from our own sins, to learn from our own desires that we cannot fulfill our deepest longings, that we cannot attain by our own power what we deeply desire—which is to live! Our best insights into human existence simply points to our own demise. So we need something else that is not of this world; it is not something we can control; it is not something we can achieve or attain by our own effort. What we need is a gift of life.

This gift of life is presented to us in sacramental signs--baptism, which we recalled as the body of Ruth was brought into our church and I sprinkled it with the holy water that is from the font. The font is the doorway, the gateway to eternal life--but it’s through death. St. Paul says, “Are you not aware that those of us who were baptized, were baptized into death with Christ.” We participated in his death, and thus we live a new life. First of all we have to be willing to let go of what we know of life in order to accept what God is giving us. Even God cannot fill something that is already full! So accepting God’s gift involves emptying ourselves of who we are, and what we are, and what we have, and being empty vessels. Secondly, St. Paul says, “We died with Christ.” The experience of new life comes with others; it is not a solo trip. Why? Because we are created as one family, one human family. If we are to live a new life, we have to live it with others committed to the welfare of all. This is God’s will.

After we are baptized and are given the promise of eternal life, we are also fed through the sacramental signs of the Eucharist, which embody of themselves the gift that Jesus made of himself to the Father. “Take and eat. This is my body given up for you.” Jesus gives himself to the Father for you and for me; and he invites us “Do this in memory of me,” making of your life also a gift. Let your body also be broken in love. As we gather for the Eucharist, at the table, we are invited to offer ourselves with Christ to the Father. Jesus says, “Take and drink. This is my cup, the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you so that sins may be forgiven.” In ancient sacrifices blood was poured out upon the altars to signify the purification of the people and the preparation for a communion sacrifice. As Jesus extends the gifts to us by his own gift of himself to the Father, we are purified and we are made ready to be in communion with God. But he also says we need to forgive others. In the Lord’s Prayer he teaches us to pray “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” If we want to live the new life, we have to live a life of forgiveness, extending peace and reconciliation to those who have offended us. This is God’s way. This is God’s life.

And at this time, when we come to lay Ruth to rest, it’s important that we celebrate her life. Her life was gift! Everything is Gift! Everything God has created is a gift. As we come to celebrate gift, the gift of Ruth in this particular case, the gift of ourselves, we have to recognize that each of us is given for a reason; and we are called to leave something of ourselves in the creation. I am sure in some way or another Ruth has touched each of you. She has given you something of herself. It is important that you honor her life by giving something of yourself to others, recognizing again the finality of
our human existence, recognizing that every day we are given an opportunity to make something of ourselves that will last beyond the grave, something of ourselves that will be born into eternal life--that each day we choose the kind of gift we shall be. This is our great privilege as the image and likeness of God. Jesus ends his teaching, “Unlike your ancestors who ate and died nonetheless, the one who feeds on this bread shall live forever.”
In today’s reading Jesus’ early ministry is described, and it has three components: proclaiming the good news, healing the afflicted, and expelling demons. Now the biblical author distinguishes between healing the afflicted and expelling demons. For a long time the idea of demons has been considered very unsophisticated, something that people should forget about, a relic of an antiquarian view of life. Now, we see all kinds of interest being paid to such things as Wicca, spiritualism, spiritism, and the like and even a renewed interest in ancient shamanism--and all of these have to do with the spiritual world, at least potentially. Now, first of all an observation must be made that ancient perceptions and modern perceptions are not exactly the same, but that doesn’t mean one is better than the other. In some respects modern perceptions may be better, but in other respects perhaps ancient perceptions are better--more complete, more exact.

One way where modern perceptions are better, for example, we distinguish between sickness and handicaps. Now if a person is deaf we don’t call them sick and indeed they are not. Or if they are paralyzed and that is the result of an accident we don’t say that they are sick, because they are not, but they are injured; they are handicapped and they are afflicted. Now, the New Testament, following an ancient way of looking at things, simply would categorize all this as affliction--in fact; most of what Jesus did was to heal those who we would call handicapped or injured or congenitally deformed. Most of the time when it is actually described what he is doing, he is restoring sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf; he is giving paralytics a chance to walk. What about what we call disease? Well it says he cured all, so it would include what we call disease as well.

Now, what about demons? Some imagine that is simply an ancient way of looking as mental illness. But let’s not be so fast. First of all what is mental illness? Some of what people call mental illness is really a physical sort--in other words, the cause is in the brain. Early onset Alzheimer’s we know is caused by a gene; therefore it is a physical illness, even though its manifestation affects the mind. So what is mental illness? Perhaps this category is simply a poor category itself. Some of what we call mental illness is really a physical illness. But then there are many other things that are not really physical in nature: behavioral disorders, obsessive disorders, compulsive behavior, self-threatening behavior, pathological criminal behavior. What are all these things about? Are they really illnesses? Are they caused in some physical thing in the brain? Highly unlikely. Very few pathologists really believe that’s the case.

Whenever the human will is affected we are talking about the spiritual world. Now, of course, the will can be affected by the health of the body; doubtless that is true--we are one component, we are one, you might say, one unity with different components. But we are not only affected by the physical world; we are affected also by the spiritual world. When we fail to recognize this then we are really handicapping our perceptions, and we are acting in a very foolish way.
Now, it is very clear that Christ believed that expelling demons was an essential element to his ministry. Even in modern, you might say, medical science there is a distinction between what we might call, a predisposition to an illness and the actual coming down with the illness, which requires some other trigger. Let’s say our family has a predisposition for cancer. Does that mean we will have cancer? Only if we experience the trigger; and what would that be? Well, it could be environmental, or it could be viral, or it could be something else we don’t know. Well, think of this then in terms of our spiritual behavior--that is our free will behavior. Some people may have a greater predisposition than others to certain, you might say, negative ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. But a predisposition is not necessarily the same thing as a disorder. What causes the disorder? Well, it has to be a trigger. And the trigger is what we call in the Scripture a demon. It is not a physical thing; it belongs to a world we can not grasp with our quantitative analysis, but it is very real. It affects people where they live, where they feel, where they think--which is all the laboratory of human behavior. And Jesus believed he needed to deal with this world in order to free us for God’s kingdom. He looked upon the spiritual world as an obstruction to the freedom of justice that God wants human beings to possess.

We, as the followers of Christ, need to be aware of this and to recognize our neediness and our darkness and what we have often called the power of sin, the power, for example, of pride. Can pride be the cause of completely disordered behavior, obsessions, compulsions, pathologies? Yes. What about envy? The same, and so on--all the capital sins. They are all capable of distorting life, and that is why they are called capital sins--that is where the capital comes from. They are capable of so much damage. So if we become more aware of this we will be able to more monitor ourselves and realize what kind of healing we need and pray for it. For some strange reason we find that the more explicitly we pray the more explicitly God answers our prayers.
Our evangelist, John, brings us to the wedding feast of Cana and the story of the water made wine. There is something jarring about the story so not only improbable, but really impossible; and that, of course, is the whole core of the story, the meaning of the story. There are many transformations that take place in our experience in nature. For example, no one is surprised when grape juice is transformed into wine; of course, if it happens in a totally natural way it is not very good wine. It needs to be done in a very careful and nurturing way to produce good wine. None the less, it is a natural process. No one is surprised when raw dough is transformed into bread in the oven. It is a marvelous change, and yet it is one we are very used to, and we take it for granted. And our being used to changes in life—especially the changes that feed us, if you think of food, all food undergoes transformation, if not before we eat it, when we eat it—therefore, the very subject of the gospel, which is a gospel of transformation, [can help us see] how we are becoming something else. None the less, there are many mysterious elements in our own existence, and our familiarity with life often clouds our sense of awe and our capacity to marvel, which is actually unfortunate because our very ability to sense the presence of God depends upon our ability to marvel and stand in awe.

Now, one of the great, awesome questions raised by great thinkers is where does life come from? Strangely this preoccupies many modern thinkers much more than the issue: where does existence come from? Be that as it may, it is a great question today. And some scientists believe that life comes from some outer space place brought here by, for example, an asteroid. That may be true, but it is an unfortunate idea. It simply postpones indefinitely our admission of the fact we can’t know. We can’t know the origin of life, and we can’t know the origin of existence because it is beyond us. It’s not in our power. It’s not in our experience. We see the fruit not the cause.

When Christ preached he had certain rather simple ways of saying a great deal. One of his statements was, “With God are all possibilities. With God are all possibilities.” One of the things that means is that whatever happens, happens because it can. That may seem to be a truism not worth thinking about, but it’s actually very profound. Everything that happens happens because it can. Life emerges because something has given potential for life. Something beyond our grasp, beyond our control has made life possible. Every moment of time and every point of space is actually directly linked beyond our experience but directly linked to eternity whence everything comes. All that is comes from God. And whether we ever become what God wishes us to become depends on whether or not we can agree to live in dependence upon God’s higher wisdom and believe that God’s purpose for us is far greater than anything we can imagine. “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has human imagination imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.” If this is true, this calls for a deep trust in the whole process of life. It says in Ephesians, “We live and move and have our being in God.” God is not something distant or beyond us but rather we are living and moving and having our being in God, but we do not perceive this?
Now the crucial question for our times and, of course, the crucial question for every time, for every culture, for every society and for every human individual is: will we live according to God’s purpose? This has greater urgency today, however, than ever because we are developing new and greater means to do what we want, and if what we want is not in accord with God’s purpose, it is all the more destructive. Another truism: “Pride goeth before the fall.” Our illusory ownership of life and the world is simply the beginning of a downward spiral toward hopelessness and death. What we see in our world today, such as abortion, suicide, mercy killing, so to speak, are symptoms of this downward spiral to hopelessness and death. They are the cause of nothing; they are the symptoms. The cause actually is pride itself—the illusion that “life is mine; this is my life; I will do with it as I please.” Strangely, pride can exist in even the most forlorn and destitute of persons. It is after all an irrational passion. We needn’t think of it as the companion only of great presidents and corporate leaders. It can be found anywhere in anyone, and its power is quite unbelievable to destroy, to bring down, to crush.

Life in fact, according to the word of God, is not ours. It is God’s. It always was. It always shall be. We are merely stewards of something on loan to us—responsible for our care. We have to understand that no matter how hopeless or pitiful we think we are, or others are, we are not ever beyond the pale of God’s creative touch! Where does life come from? It doesn’t come from any inorganic matter, but somehow God uses inorganic matter in producing it. Where did the wine at Cana come from? It did not come from the water. It came from Christ. At all times we are in touch with eternity. At every moment of our day, no matter where we are, eternity is present, even though we may not be aware of this. Now one thing that all the scientific explanations of life have in common is water. Scientific explanations and mythical ones and biblical stories all talk about water. Water was used in the beginning of our life in Christ in the font of baptism. Now the water itself didn’t do anything. It was the matrix, the medium of God’s new life given to us freely with love by God. At every moment of our life that same God is always giving us life. Baptism is the promise and the permanent sign to us of God’s intentions. We are never hopeless; the world is never hopeless because it comes from God. This is not something we can see or prove, or demonstrate logically, but it is a revelation given to us in Christ. And Christ’s work began in this very peculiar way in John’s Gospel, as he tells the story, this peculiar transformation of water into wine. The impossible becomes a sign of what God is doing in us. “Thus did Jesus manifest his glory, and his disciples believed in him.”
“No one sews a new patch on an old garment.” Now, what does this have to do with spirituality, or faith, or growth? Well, St. Theresa of Avila says that we cannot grow in knowledge of God without knowledge of ourselves. The opposite is also true. We really never grow in knowledge of ourselves without growing in knowledge of God. The two have to go hand-in-hand because the truth is one, and if we are bereft of the truth in ourselves how will we discover the truth in the nature of God? Or if we are following false images of God how will we ever really know who we are, who are made in his image? So actually growing in the knowledge of God, which is one way of describing what spirituality is, requires knowledge of self, and it is amazing how we don’t know who we are, how we don’t really have an accurate picture of ourselves. Now, for example, if you went to the doctor and you had all sorts of tests made and they got mixed up with someone else do you think your diagnosis would be accurate? Would you like the treatment? Would it work? You might never know and yet since we have so many inaccurate pictures of ourselves, even if we try to grow and develop spirituality, for example, we’re probably not going to do very well because we have the wrong diagnosis; we have the wrong picture; we have gotten the wrong x-rays. It is not ourselves we are dealing with. What’s the old garment?--Ourselves as we are, not as we picture ourselves to be, but as we are.

Too often we take the gospel and we try to put a little patch of gospel, a little bit of faith, a little bit of spirit, a little bit of truth and we try to sew it onto the fabric of the way we have always been, which we never bothered to even figure out. And it works for a
while. We might have an aura of spirituality or whatever you want to call it, but in the long-run it doesn’t work; it pulls away. What Christ is preaching is a new life transformed from head to toe, from inside to outside, totally and completely changing ourselves and that, mind you, is transformation into who we really are. Jesus says, “He who seeks his life will lose it.” We should start taking that very seriously. “But he who lets his life go will discover life”—discover our true identity. And in all this we need, of course, the work of God Himself and of his Son and of his Spirit. Do we really let the transformation of grace do its work? In a sense getting out of the way, not being in control. Being in control is seeking our life. It is the enemy of every true kind of spirituality. We have to get out of the way; we have to let go of ourselves. We have to let other people tell us things. Actually other people, strangely enough, will be very honest. If we just listen, they’ll tell us a lot about the way we really are. We can let go of our pictures and listen to what they say--they’ll be telling the truth. And then we bring that truth to Christ and we allow that truth to be transformed by the Truth which is Christ. And then we will grow in true spirituality and faith. We will be, in fact, new skins and the new wine of the kingdom can be poured into us.
"The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." All law is really made to serve our needs. And the meaning of law is essential to understand how to carry it out. Now, what Jesus was confronting in today’s reading is a situation that is common in all established institutional forms of religion. Laws are created; rules are made always for a good reason. What is the reason? The law is never independent of the reason for it. Unless we know the reason for something we don’t know what the true meaning is. And the problem that Jesus constantly ran into was people following not the inner meaning or purpose of law, but something else, some sort of outward conformity to some norm they didn’t even understand. What is the purpose of the sabbath? It is to give people a rest. Now, because of the nature of people that idea of resting had to be more further defined, or at least people believed it had to be. So instead of starting with the idea of resting on the seventh day, next thing you know the rabbis are saying, “Well, you cannot carry such and such on the sabbath, or only so and so many paces,” and so on. So then an entire, you might say, system is developed to keep people at rest. But what’s the point? It is often missed.

Now, today the disciples are walking through standing grain and are picking off the heads of grain. Technically this is harvesting; so therefore they are breaking the sabbath. You may not harvest on the sabbath. But what is it? It is actually nothing. Maybe they were even eating the grain; I don’t know. That would be also forbidden, of course. But the point is that they don’t have any sense of what the meaning of law is. Recently I was
reading a book on the decline of monasticism in the middle ages up until the time of the
reformation. And it was the same process. People followed rules, established originally
by very wise men and women in order to give a certain discipline and focus to life, but
then the whole idea and purpose of it was forgotten. But only the results were
remembered, and then carried out in such a way as never to produce the fruit originally
intended, which is a life of higher consciousness, of course. In this way the very idea of
monasticism fell into, you might say, disrepute. And so it will be with everything that we
do without awareness. For us to be devout we have to be aware; we have to be
questioning; we have to be wondering; we have to be really trying. There is no
mechanical way of pleasing God. External observance by itself is meaningless. “The
sabbath is made for man, not man for the sabbath.”
Today’s story from the gospel is about the nameless force and power of false religion. Basically, we believe that God is the origin of the law, the Torah. God gave the Torah to the twelve tribes so that they would actually be free from ignorance of justice and be able to become a beacon, a witness to the world of what a just society would be. But as I mentioned yesterday, the whole meaning of the law had become lost. So Jesus’ mission is twofold. It is to restore the original meaning of the law which he does in many of his teachings, especially those that begin with the phrase “In the beginning.” But also it is to supersede the law because according to the New Testament thinking, the teachings of St. Paul for example, it was never possible for the law to bring the fullness of God’s love or the fullness of God’s salvific will. It didn’t have it in it; so, however good it was, it was inadequate in the first place, but in addition to that it had been perverted by misunderstanding.

And here is an example where the Herodians and the Pharisees are willing to destroy Jesus because he is a violator of their law, missing the whole point--again about the Sabbath, which was yesterday’s point too. “Man is not made for the Sabbath, the Sabbath is made for man.” Man is not made for law, but law is made for man. The meaning of the Sabbath is a time of resting from labor and from our preoccupation with ourselves, and from our belief that everything depends on ourselves. That is the fundamental meaning of the Sabbath, but it is perverted when it accuses people, for example, of picking grain walking through the field; or even worse, when it accuses someone of violating the law of God by doing the work of healing. This is really getting into what Christ later calls blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, which he also says is an unforgivable sin—it’s not to see the work of the Holy Spirit; it’s not to even observe what is going on; it’s to rather settle for something far less; it’s conformity. And it turns out that mere conformity with law is really never what the law intends in the first place anyway, and so even that is a violation of the spirit of the law. So Jesus says, “Well, is it right to do a good deed on the Sabbath?” And they are silent. The silence is menacing; it is an evil silence. It is the silence of people who don’t want to be confronted; it is a silence of a closed mind. That is why Jesus looks at them angrily, in a sense, because he senses how they are closing themselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in their midst. We ought not to imagine that this is only an event that happened long ago; it is an event that repeats itself consistently throughout our history.

Now there are people who overdo the issue of battle. In other words their personality is, more or less, made up in such a way that they are always finding life to be a battle. But we do have to recognize that life is a battle, that there is a very powerful contention going on within our spirit for domination, it is the Holy Spirit, the spirit of God, the Spirit manifested in Christ versus the spirit of evil who wants domination and control of our souls. And if we are ignorant of this we will be easy victims. Mere religion, following laws and external devotion, will never save us in this great struggle. We need the power of the Spirit Itself, the Holy Spirit given to us in Christ. It says in Ephesians, “Our
contention is not against flesh and blood.” Unfortunately some people--although their intuition that there is a battle is a good one--we all need a certain sense of this--unfortunately many people are sidetracked by battles, for example, in business, or in family, or with people. They don’t recognize that the real battle is a spiritual one, “not against flesh and blood” as it says in Ephesians but against powers in the heavens--the invisible enemy that tries to defeat us even using religion itself, turning it into its own weapon. So it is not simple to be a true believer. It is not a simple thing. There is no such thing because to be a true believer one has to be very flexible and alert and aware of the Spirit. That is what Christ is calling us to. We might take solace from David who, in battling Goliath, recognized not his own strength, but rather the wisdom of God--the only real weapon we have.
We all learn how to speak from the world around us. And anyone who has any familiarity with a foreign language knows that there are no two identical languages, and there are many expressions that cannot be put exactly into another language from a former one. And this becomes more extreme as we travel farther and farther apart in terms of culture. In this way our world, our culture, tells us what is real. In a subtle way it also tells us what is not real by not talking about certain things. For example, I am sure many of you as children had real experiences of God, but I would be willing to bet you never talked about them to anyone because no one ever invited you to. It wasn’t something people talked about. It’s not part of Anglo-American culture. Last year when I was pastor in Bolingbrook I interviewed the confirmandi. There was only one child out of the entire group of interviews who did not tell me about some very authentic experience of God. I invited that discussion in the privacy of my study. Not to condemn anyone, but their parents had never invited them to talk about these experiences. It just isn’t done in our society. In this way we are, more or less, brainwashed--actually, it is a good word--we’re brainwashed to believe certain things and not to believe other things. To be a person of faith in 1998 requires a great deal of personal courage, not to stand up against machine guns or lions or even stones, but to profess and to confess the reality of the spiritual world in a culture that simply doesn’t observe it, know anything about it, or talk about it in any kind of real way.

Now, of course, we’ve all heard the expression “Nature abhors a vacuum”; and therefore, in the vacuum created in our modern society, a great deal rushes in to fill the space--but it isn’t authentic spiritual reality. It’s factious, half-truths, misbegotten concepts and ideas, misunderstood, misapprehended, leading to utter confusion. Perhaps even silence would be better than that. None the less, this is our existential situation. This is where we find ourselves today if we live in this country at this time.

Now in today’s gospel reading Jesus summons the twelve, his chosen friends, his close companions, his colleagues. And he sends them to preach the good news. And he gives them power to expel demons. These two mandates, orders of Christ, are fundamental to his understanding, to Jesus’ understanding of his mission. He was sent to preach the good news, and he was sent to free captives, which is not to be confused with people in jail. That is not what he understood. He never went to jails to free people. But he freed captives. What captives was he freeing? He was freeing captives of evil. Now you can bring up the issue of evil--we are in trouble because what does it mean? Our society, our culture does not recognize it.

A book was written several years ago called The People of the Lie by a doctor, a psychiatrist. His view was this: he says that psychiatrists have got to understand that evil is something quite distinct from, let’s say, mental illness or emotional illness, or behavioral disorder. And in his relatively non-theological way he described what he meant. He said that it isn’t due to something else. People aren’t evil because something
happened to them or because of a malfunction in their brain. He described people who are perfectly free to do as they chose but who chose to do evil. He says that that is what I mean. And, of course, to bring up the issue he was also knocking down a few other little pet theories of modern times—that we are really not free but are all determined in what we do by our environment, by our genes, by our parentage, or whatever. He says that that’s not his experience after working with hundreds of thousands of people over many years. Some people’s freedom is very diminished, but we are really free people. Only we don’t even have a sense of what is evil. And if we don’t have a sense of what is evil, we don’t have a sense of what is good either. Just notice how people respond to, for example, a serial killer or a lurid movie about the Third Reich, for example, like “Schindler’s List.” How do people respond? Well, they say things like: “Those people must have been insane. Those people must have been crazy.” Well, what about Pol Pot who killed at least fifty per cent of the people in Cambodia only a few years ago? What about Joseph Stalin who ordered the murder of twenty million people in Russia and the Ukraine? “Well, they must have been disturbed.” No, probably not. People who are crazy or disturbed may do evil things, but they do them in a sporadic, haphazard way. It’s more an irruption that goes awry than actually a deliberate purposeful action. But the Third Reich was nothing if it wasn’t deliberate and purposeful; so was communism; so is the work of a serial killer. All these are examples not of craziness or insanity but of evil—people who chose to do evil freely.

Now in order to understand what evil is, we have to understand that God is the author of all that is—living and non-living, visible and invisible—and that for everything that is, there is a purpose, that in all of God’s creation there are only certain beings who actually are free like God, free to choose, to determine what they will do. This is known as freedom. Now when we do not determine to live according to the purpose of the Creator then we are actually mixing with evil; it may be grave or it may be slight, but it’s evil anyway—evil in any life, any scheme, any decision, any choice that is not consistent with the purpose of the Creator. And Jesus understood that evil could also victimize people, and therefore he set out to deliver people from evil. Now I’m very careful; I have been very careful in the way I’ve said these things because this whole matter can be very misunderstood. There was in Jesus’ day, for example, the Pharisees who said, “Well, if you’re born blind it’s your own fault, or that of your parents.” They saw evil also in the world, but they saw it in the wrong way. They went about understanding evil by deduction. They saw something bad; they deduced that the person was guilty of some trespass. Jesus said, “That’s not true. Those who are blind are not guilty of sin”—at least that’s not why they’re blind. Those who cannot walk are not guilty of sin; that’s not the reason they can’t walk. Job, after all, suffering all that he did was not really guilty of sin.

So the mystery of evil is quite complex and does require our humble and reverent attention. We play a role because we are free beings, and we advance into the ways of God in the world or not. And if it’s not, then we obstruct the ways of God. Now it is obvious that from the very beginning human beings have been against the principle of divine purpose. The sin of Adam has become the heritage of all flesh. Notice how that’s put: the sin of Adam, the human being, becomes the heritage of all flesh—that means all living, breathing biological matter including human beings, but not only. The choice of
humanity does not stay only with the individual. Our choices spread out and influence all of creation. We have been influenced by the choices of our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers, going all the way back to the beginning. So this is a very complex world. When Jesus came to deliver people from evil he first proclaimed the good news. The good news is that no matter how much evil has already entered into life, God is coming, has come, is coming in Jesus to bring light and truth and healing. But Jesus does not bring this light and truth and healing to us in such a way that we remain utterly passive. Today in the gospel Jesus is calling twelve chosen to become very active collaborators with him in the work of delivering the world from evil. And every disciple, every disciple is called on to become an active collaborator with Christ in delivering the world from evil. And this requires spiritual discernment first and foremost that we may recognize and be aware of and observe what is going on, what is happening in our midst, and not to become indifferent to good and evil as if it doesn’t really matter, as if our choices don’t really matter. They all matter. Everything matters. We need to pay attention.

Now that doesn’t mean, as I’ve said already, that those who are sick, those who are blind, those who are lame, those who have cancer, are suffering because of their own sins; but in a sense, we can say we are all suffering because of sin. This is true. The Bible confirms it. We all suffer because of sin. And the healing and the redemption of the world will take place only by deliverance from evil. It’s one process. And Jesus does not free us, heal us, or redeem us by taking us out of the world or out of life, but within the very process of life. Through the good news he empowers us with a new vision of what life can be, what God really intends. And through his grace he gives us the power to become a new being, from head to toe reborn; born again in water and Spirit in the font of baptism we have a new life. And our healing begins when we recognize that in baptism we have died. We have died to mere physical human existence. And if our desire for healing is really our simple desire to survive at all costs, we will be sadly disappointed because salvation is not from death but through death. Through Christ’s death we all die and are brought to new life. And that new life is not a life of our imagining, nor a life where our preferences and wishes and desires are prominent at all; but it’s a life where the purpose of God has to be, must be, can only be the leading guiding principle—the life of the body of Christ.

In the body of Christ we learn we are all very vital members of one single body, that we all have a very important function. Is the pancreas more important than the brain? Is any one organ more important than another one? No, they’re all equally important, but if one doesn’t work, that one is the most important. If your liver is malfunctioning, that takes all your energy; that takes all your attention; that consumes all your anxiety, or if it is the pancreas or something else. These organs we don’t even see, don’t even know what they do; they become very important when they don’t work. Then we recognize how foolish we were to take them for granted. Likewise how foolish we are to take ourselves or each other for granted in the body of Christ. We are all tremendously important organisms, organs, parts, members of one body. And if we don’t do what we’re supposed to do, that body isn’t working right.
Now God’s plan for healing has to involve the whole body. The whole body is sent to bring about the deliverance of all creation from evil. This is a big order, but it is the mission of Christ. It will not be accomplished finally for a long time, but it has already been accomplished in eternity where Christ dwells with the Father. And we have access to eternity in Christ. And we have access to the very sacrifice by which Christ entered into eternity which is brought to us in the Eucharist. The very blood of Christ that he poured forth in front of the Father is given to us so that sins may be forgiven, so that we may be free from every form of evil in ourselves, every form of misdirection, so we can live the life that God wants us to live which is a life enjoying abundance in the body--each of us finding our proper place, each of us desiring and anticipating the health of each other, wanting it as much as we want our own health, recognizing there can be no distinction. As long as we maintain some sort of distinction between ourselves and others, as long as we think that our own personal welfare is more important than the welfare of the person next to us, we are living in the flesh, not in the Spirit. And as such we are departed from the purpose of God, and we need to be delivered. So it all goes back to that. That’s why Jesus starts with the proclamation of the good news and then deliverance from evil. Until our wills become oriented in the right direction, the rest cannot go on.

So we praise our doctors who are experts in the physical functioning of the body. And we’re thankful to the pharmacists and to the various therapists who deal with malfunctions of our physical organism. Praised be Jesus Christ for them. But not all that ails the human existence is physical. We also praise God for the existence of trained therapists who through care and compassion can deal with the traumas people suffer in life from abuse and neglect and outright assault. But beyond the scope of doctors and medicine and therapists, there is the world of our own will, our own spirit. It is there that God begins the healing process. And he will begin it perhaps for some people here tonight as you bring your will, your spirit, to God offering yourself in union with Christ in the Mass, in the Eucharistic sacrifice. This is really the beginning of all true healing according to Catholic tradition--offering ourselves to God the Father, through Christ in the Eucharist. As St. Augustine says, “The whole Christ,” meaning you and me “offer the whole Christ,” meaning you and me “to the Father,” with Christ, who is the first born of the new creation. And thus his destiny becomes our destiny, and all his promises become our promises. How will all this all play itself out in our actual daily lives? No one knows but God. And if we want to begin a true life of faithful obedience to God then, in fact, we shouldn’t really care. If God is God and we are willing to follow God wherever God leads us, then in a sense, that has to be our true desire and our true choice--to let God be God and lead us however God chooses to the fullness of life that he has promised. Amen.
We see that in today’s calling of the apostles one of the fundamental ministries they are given is the ministry of deliverance, the ministry of expelling demons. Now, the Church always has continued the apostolic ministry that Christ gave to his chosen ones; that is the Church’s purpose. Exorcism therefore, the ministry of deliverance from evil, has always been one of the fundamental ministries of the Church; however this is obscured today because people do not actually believe in evil in the first place. They have no sense of evil. Evil has been reduced to a category of mental illness. When evil is confronted people say, “That person must be crazy; that person must be insane”; thus, people have written off, for example, Adolph Hitler and the Third Reich saying, “Well, they are all crazy,” or Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and the various killers and the murderers of our own time. People say, “Well, they’re just crazy.” Well, that is not really true. Crazy people, in the true sense, are not able to do anything quite right. Crazy people may, in fact, do something violent but never in a methodical, purposeful way. When we see, and I don’t mean this as a pun, the execution of completely destructive plans: that is evil. And evil comes, of course, in many degrees.

And it is very important that we understand that evil belongs not to the material world but to the spiritual. Now, that’s perhaps a basic problem. Our modern sciences do not admit the whole idea of purpose in the first place. Purpose cannot be found in the material world. Purpose cannot be found as, you might say, an element within the laws of nature. Purpose cannot be found in the very workings of the quantitative universe; therefore it’s eliminated as a relevant concept. Indeed it is not a material idea, nor does it belong in the material world. It is, however, a spiritual idea. Anything having to do with will, purpose, choice, decisions, these are spiritual faculties, the spiritual side of our nature. And this is where evil works. Evil is ill-will. It’s evil purpose. It’s purpose that goes against the fundamental purpose of God. So we won’t know evil except in contrast to what is, in fact, the divine purpose, or the divine goal of life which is revealed to us, of course, in Christ. Since we have been anointed by Christ--we have been baptized, we have been given a new life--it is important that we have and develop a sensitivity to the will of God; then we can contrast it to the existence of evil. One can’t exist without the other. People’s numbness to evil is simply part of their numbness to the will of God. There simply is no sense of in what direction God is trying to lead us, or that, in fact, our lives are supposed to have direction in the first place--that all things are ordained toward the end for which God intends them. This is very important that spiritual beings have this basic idea: that all things have purpose, that all things are ordained by God, and that whatever detracts from the ordained purpose is evil, and that evil can sometimes become a freely chosen path of life, and in our actual existential experience often does; and therefore there really are evil people in our world. There also are crazy people, but that is not to be confused with evil people. So when we confront disorder we have to really be very wise in discerning and evaluating what is the real nature of the disorder. Is it really and truly insanity or craziness, in which case this should have all the hallmarks of utter
chaos, or rather is it purposeful, intelligently planned, deliberately carried out? In which case it is not insane or crazy but evil.

We live in a world where many have chosen an evil path. It is our ministry to deliver people from evil. Now, how do we do this? Well, of course, not by ourselves but through the power of Christ. Some people may even be victimized, in a sense are victimized, by their own wrong choices, their own, you might say, foolishness. Over a long period of time people become victims of their own habits, choices. And if there were merely a material world they would be hopeless. But it is not a merely material world. It is a world in which the eternal is constantly in touch with every moment and every point of space; and therefore at all times there is a pregnancy of hope, and Christian believers are called to bring that pregnancy into fruition through the ministry of deliverance.
Most of us have an image of Jesus’ family which is very unrealistic. We imagine that Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived as a threesome in some little home. That is very unlikely. Today a family of three is considered relatively normal. Then, in the ancient world, it was not normal; and it was not even a viable social unit. It is most probable because of these references to Jesus’ family that Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived with a larger group—what we would today call relatives. Well, relatives are family whether we like to admit it or not. In the ancient world relatives were much more important than they are today in terms of survival, social organization, work, and so on. The point of the various references to Jesus’ family is that they are all negative. It never says, “Jesus’ family came and supported him. Jesus’ family came and gave him solace. Jesus’ family came and became his disciples.” It never says that. It says, “Jesus’ family came and said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” This is a very important reference; Mark doesn’t make it for nothing.

We talk a great deal about the importance of good example, training in the home, and that’s true. But good example, by itself, does not produce good results. It is just a component; it is an important component, but it is not, of itself, an efficacious cause of good results because human beings are too complex. We are all free beings; we have free wills, and we also are born into a fallen human nature with a proclivity toward darkness. Therefore when anyone comes to the truth this is a kind of intervention. It is a kind of revelation on a small scale. We are not born into the light; we are not born with a sense of God. This is acquired.

Acquiring begins with baptism, but is not accomplished in a fruitful way by baptism itself. It is nurtured by the sacramental life of the Church. But, by themselves, sacraments, with no other input and no participation on behalf of the individual, are going to produce nothing. That is why the Church talks about valid but fruitless sacraments. St. Augustine talked about it—valid but fruitless. Nothing is wrong with the sacrament, but it is not bearing fruit. Why? Because there is a lack of personal participation, personal conversion. There may be that they don’t take any of this very seriously. They seem to think that they are just kind of, more or less, well, part of the family. Well, so were these people; they were part of Jesus’ family, but it didn’t do them any good. They regarded Jesus as crazy.

There are people today who consider themselves part of the Christian family, but, in fact, they believe the gospel is crazy. They think Jesus is out of his mind talking the way he does, challenging them the way he does, requiring what he does to be part of the team. The kingdom of God, “the only absolute Jesus preached” according to Pope Paul VI in his wonderful Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii Nuntiandi,” the kingdom of God is not, is not a matter of flesh and blood. That is why so many references are made in Scripture to, for example, “If you do not hate your father and mother for my sake, you are not worthy of me.” Or again, “I have not come to bring peace but the sword to divide mother
from daughter and father from son,” and so on. Why are there all these references? Because flesh and blood family--that is not what it is about. We are not just included in the kingdom of God because our parents are, because our brother is or our sister or our children. It is a personal invitation that has to be personally answered. People who think because they have been baptized, because they received First Communion, because they were altar boys, because whatever, somehow they are included because of that--in the kingdom of God! They are sadly mistaken. They are going to some day have a terrible awakening.

In order to be included in the kingdom of God we have to accept Jesus, and accepting Jesus means accepting all that he taught, all that he was, and all that he stands for. It is not just a name; it’s the person, and the mission, and the whole reality of who Christ is. And it doesn’t happen in a moment. There may be, more or less, significant moments in our lives, moments of more, greater or lesser awareness of a decision, but it’s not a momentary thing. It’s a matter of one’s whole life growing toward God and seeing that in Christ and only in Christ is there true meaning and the true significance of what human life is for. Ultimately, only in Christ is there peace; only in Christ is there security; only in Christ is there light.
This morning St. Luke tells us that Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit. He is referring, of course, to the Spirit that had been given him at his baptism. This Spirit had left a mark on Jesus so that his return was empowered, to use Luke’s word. “He returned in power.” He had been changed; his life had been altered. And as he entered the synagogue, as he was wont to do, he found a passage from the prophet Isaiah that described exactly how he felt about himself. He says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and he has anointed me, and he has sent me.” This will constitute Jesus’ whole purpose of living from this point until his death. He has been anointed. That means he has been empowered by God, and he has been sent. The rest of his life will be a mission from the Father. And it will be a mission that is very [much] in many ways a parallel to the great prophet Isaiah. It is a prophetic mission, and it is specified in three ways--four, really five--but three basic ways. Number one, is to bring glad tidings to the poor. Number two, is to proclaim, and three is to announce a year of favor. Now the proclamation has three parts to it: proclamation of liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners.

Now, the first part--the proclamation of glad tidings to the poor. We often think about poverty in a very materialistic way; poverty is not having enough money, but there are worst forms of poverty. As pointed out by Mother Teresa, “The worst form of poverty is not being wanted, not being wanted.” The poorest of the poor are those whom no one wants--glad tidings for them. Another grievous form of poverty is not having any hope. Now by and large, people in the world have very little hope for improvement. And this is largely because of the way in which people have interpreted life. There is a word called “fate.” It describes the way most people think about life. In our Christian upbringing fate plays no role; perhaps we are not quite aware of how outside of the gospel, fate is almost the fundamental doctrine among the cultures of the world. You go almost anywhere and that’s the prevailing idea--fate. We are born in a little place, and there we stay. If we are born a noble, well, we remain a noble. If we were born poor, we remain poor; and if we’re crippled, we’re crippled, and so on. Generally the idea is this: that God is identified with the way things are--and the way the world is, is the way God wants it to be.

And this idea even found its way into the teaching of the rabbis in the time of Christ, and Jesus himself rejected it totally. God is not identified with the way things are. God is not identified with nature; the work of nature is not the work of God. God created nature, but now the work of nature is not the work of God. This was a revelation given to the prophets from Elijah onward. “God is not in the earthquake; God is not in the thunder; God is not in the movement of the wind.” It is too easy for people to identify God in this way; even insurance policies talk about “acts of God”; what they really mean is acts of nature. That is an anti-Christian stipulation; you may, on religious grounds, reject it.
God is not identified either with the structures of society. Society is something we have created. We have built culture; that is our product, not God’s. So God does not identify with it. The haves, the have-nots, the rulers, and the keepers, and so on—they are not God’s people. God didn’t set it up. Now, to identify God with nature is called paganism; to identify God with culture is called idolatry. According to Scripture, idolatry is much worse than paganism, but both are objectionable because both of them are ignorant of the true nature of God. Thus the glad tidings to the poor is that the will of God is totally independent of the way things are both in nature and in society; and God, independent of the creation, is inaugurating a new creation which is to be marked by qualities that only God has—such as justice and peace. And this is already beginning in Jesus in the very announcement that we hear today.

Secondly, the proclamation, the threefold proclamation: freedom to captives, sight to the blind, release to prisoners—it is very easy for us to misunderstand this. It is a proclamation. When the prophets proclaim something they always say, “From God this message is coming.” And the prophetic word has power to begin to change the course of events which, of course, are, as I just mentioned, different from God’s will. So through a proclamation the will of God, independent of society and nature, begins its work. But it is an inner work. The word works within people. The captivity referred to is an inner captivity, the prison an inner prison, the blindness inner blindness. If we were to go to Stateville and let out all the prisoners, would that change in any way their condition? Actually, no. They would still be the same people, and they’d still get into the same kind of trouble they were in before—because the sad truth of our own times is that our penal system does not reform anyone. The system can’t; people may reform on their own for totally independent reasons, but the system can’t reform anyone.

Indeed it is not the circumstances of life that are the cause of any problems in the first place, including our own, although we might like to think so. “If I had a better boss, if I had a better wife, if I had a better husband, if my family were more understanding, if I had more income, if my circumstances were different—I would be happier. I would be better off.” Circumstances do not determine who we are, and no matter how they change we would be the same because what has made us the way we are is not the circumstances of our lives. The word, the prophetic proclamation, is addressed to who we are and to what captivates us: to what holds us bound, to what imprisons us, to what blinds us to the power of God, to the life of God, to love itself!

In another passage Jesus says, “The truth shall make you free.” Do we welcome the truth? Very often, no, because we’re not comfortable with something different. We like our old clothes, our old shoes and everything the way it always was. We don’t want new clothes or new shoes; we have to break them in. We don’t like the truth that would set us free if that’s going to cause a change in our life. Basically people don’t like change. And we are not free, to the degree we are not, because we don’t want to be. That’s what the prophetic word is saying. “You want to be free? You can be free. The truth will make you free.” If you don’t want to be free you won’t be—your choice. When we fail in a personal relationship it is so easy for us to blame someone; the problem with that is it
assumes we know. That assumption itself is self-centered. We don’t know. We don’t know how other people tick; we don’t know how other people feel.

What we always need though is forgiveness, to give it and to receive it, to recognize our failures are not that important. We have to move on; we move on when we forgive, when we are forgiven. We need healing precisely so we can grow. This is what the prophetic word inaugurates; but, of course, the very nature of a word is that it has to be listened to. And in another image Jesus says, “It is like a seed that has to be planted.” So we have to listen and we have to plant.

Now, there are many qualities in ourselves we could look at. Pride is number one as an obstacle to growth, narrow-mindedness, all the capital sins we could mention--basically everything negative in our emotions and in our attitudes. All these diminish our life. So we are free now through the prophetic word to be rid of them. We have to see what they are. That’s part of what the prophesy of the Scripture is trying to do--let us see. That is recovery of sight to the blind. We are all blind; we have blind spots. But not only do we personally have blind spots, but our society has blind spots. And sometimes our own healing and our own release comes when we become involved with something bigger than ourselves: when we work for the healing of our social order, when we become alert to what’s wrong with our country.

Right now, for example, a burlesque is being played out; you are probably aware of it, on the television, on the radio--all kinds of people shocked at our president’s personal life. The scandal is that they’re not shocked at his public life, at his stand on, for example, abortion and his vetoing of a law that was meant to protect children already born, partially. That should shock--but it doesn’t! This is a sadness of our society, the blind spot in our society, what we will put up with because of what we want--an exaggerated personal liberty, not for the common good, but for something else. This too is something we need to look at because the prophetic word is addressed not only to us as individuals but to us as Church. And what can we do to alert our world to its own blindness, to bring release to prisoners, liberty to captives all around us--imprisoned really but not by bars, by false ideas, by false visions of what life should be?

Now, there is one small way you might want to help. There is a movement right now to repeal the veto of the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban. And we have been given permission by our bishop, with legal advice that this is an appropriate exercise of religious liberty, so that we can talk about it. In your pews there are cards. Those cards are actually postcards written to our two senators. I’ll give you a few moments if you would like to fill your name in there and sign it, and when you are all finished we will proceed as usual.
The story of David’s desire to build a temple of cedar for the Lord reminds me of the story of John D. Rockefeller. J.D. was not noted for his generosity. He became aware of the fact that people considered him something of a skinflint. He hired a, what we would probably call today, business manager or someone to help him with his image. And this man suggested he start giving away dimes to the poor—which he did. Of course, they were real dimes—silver not, like ours—copper. But then he built a magnificent mansion and bestowed it upon the Episcopal Bishop of New York. And people questioned why he had bestowed this magnificent largesse upon the Bishop of New York. And he said, “Well, I don’t see why bishops shouldn’t be able to live like the rest of us.” Well, that is more or less David’s idea too. God should live like the rest of us—in palaces, but that wasn’t God’s idea.

What God’s idea is all about is in the parable of the “Sower and the Seed.” And this is a very important parable for various reasons. First of all the idea is presented that God’s purpose is to bring about a harvest. And it’s important that we think about what is a harvest? Harvesting has to do with fruit. Farmers do not plant their fields because they enjoy the work. Farmers plant fields because they want the yield. This is a way of Jesus saying, “God did not create the world because God enjoyed the work. He created the world for the yield.” What is the yield? Now Jesus is not going to draw pictures. In fact, he says to his inner circle, “To you the mysteries of the reign of God are revealed but not to those outside. They will only hear parables.” Now this is a quotation, of course, from Isaiah where he says, “Hearing they will not understand; seeing they will not perceive.”

There is something about understanding parables that requires effort. We have to think about it. What does that mean? What is a yield? What does God want? No simple answers. Questions! Jesus is asking the questions! What does God want? And along the way, “How come you’re speaking parables?” the disciples say. And he says, “Well, if you really want the answers you have got to look for them. I’m going to give them in a certain way, but then you will have to find them.” And the whole idea Jesus is constantly talking about is the need to search, the need to seek new life. Seek for God. Seek for God’s purpose. Seek for one’s own purpose. Don’t expect things to be presented on a platter. Don’t expect things to be drawn in large pictures.

There has always been a certain sort of tribalism in the world. Tribalism is basic, I think, to our survival instincts. We identify with our physical bodies and therefore then with our families and whoever we live with, our whole culture and so on. This can affect religion. And it did. It did in Jesus’ day. There was a tribalistic spirit in Judaism. And this idea of the parable of the “Sower and the Seed” is meant to attack that to some degree. It is meant to say, “Look, you do not come to God as a tribe. You don’t even come to God as a family. You come to God as a person, searching and willing and trying, listening and perceiving. And ultimately it’s a revelation. It is not our seeking
that brings about the answer. The revelation comes from God. But if we’re not in the
right space, having the right attitude, when the revelation comes we won’t even be aware
of it. So he is trying to hone his disciples’ awareness to prepare them for the moments
when God will speak, very confident--this parable is a parable of great confidence--that
the yield will come. The harvest will be great. It will be thirty, sixty or hundred-fold,
which in terms of that time was a miraculous harvest. The harvest is great. The harvest
will be wonderful, and with that confidence he encourages his disciples to be part of it.
Today we have a lesson on the hidden nature of sin. One of the great problems with people who aspire to be disciples of Christ is that they imagine they know what sin is, and this is actually rarely true. Well, we do and we don’t. David, for example, was well aware of the fact that he had committed adultery, but that was not really his sin. It was only a tiny part of it. So when Nathan [the prophet] tells him [David] the story of himself, he changes the circumstances slightly but frames it quite rightly as the abuse of power, the abuse of a poor man by a rich one. Kingship in Israel was considered not a political thing but basically a ministry. David had been chosen by the Lord to serve the people as king. He was anointed. He was as much a minister of the Lord as any prophet and more than any priest. And yet David abused this power in taking the wife of Uriah. Now David would have been and was doubtlessly quite content to admit the passion of adultery, but that was not the whole story. He used his kingly authority to make sure that Uriah would die in battle. And then he used his advantage as king to take Uriah’s wife as his own. Now in our own lives we also often do not see the real sins we commit. We may see some infraction of a law, but we don’t actually see the abuse of our position, of our power; and we all have power, especially with Christ.

In the story of the disciples in the boat this is a story of a hidden kind of sin. Now they would be quite content to say, “Well, we were just afraid.” And Jesus says not only, “Why are you terrified?” He says that, but then he says, “Why are you so lacking in faith?” To lack faith is to betray trust. To betray trust is to abuse one’s authority. We have been given authority by God. God has entrusted his life to us. We have been given a very privileged position, but the position is privileged for service to the world. Why was Israel called in the first place to receive the law? Israel was called because God had chosen them to be an example of justice. Having suffered injustice they were prepared to know the value of justice. And so God entrusted the law to them; he did not impose the law upon them. The verb is “entrusted.” God entrusts us with law. God entrusts us with wisdom. God entrusts us with his message of truth. This is not an imposition; it is not a burden. It is a privileged relationship of service. And when we don’t trust we are really breaking that relationship; we are harming that relationship, or we are ignoring that relationship. And that has to be seen in a true and profound sense as sin.

Ultimately all sin is somehow a lack of faith. What do we do when we sin? We rely on ourselves. What did Adam and Eve do in the Garden? They relied on themselves. They decided for themselves what would be good and what would be bad. They rejected the wisdom of God. They rejected the help of God. Now, of course, it does not seem this way when we are doing this. When we are relying on ourselves it seems like, “Well that’s all we can do.” The disciples thought, “Well, all we can do is be afraid. We are going to drown. All we can do is fear.” That’s not Jesus’ view. He reprimands their fear. It was a lack of trust—just as Nathan reprimanded David because he had betrayed a trust God had given him. As we attempt to grow in the spirit of holiness we need to look and see.
One might say that in this little story in the Gospel of Luke our evangelist has presented the whole of the gospel. It is the story of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, to be sure devout Jews, fulfilling prescriptions of the law. And yet in the fulfillment, the very fulfillment of the prescriptions of the law, simple as they were, I might even say peculiar as they were, something else is already at work--and not only or even specially in this story in Jesus, nor in his mother, Mary, nor in Joseph, but in the prophet, Simeon, and in the prophetess, Anna. They are spokespersons for the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit makes the story the beginning of something entirely new. It is a recognition that the fulfillment of the promise of God is really upon us. It is a recognition that all that God promises God is now delivering, but this is not available to the human eyes. It is available to only the spirit of the prophet and anyone who would listen to the spirit of the prophet. And so often in Scripture, for us to recognize or understand the ways of God, looking is useless; but listening is important.

No one could see in the temple at that time anything different from the ordinary. The sight itself is a prophet’s sight; you might say a privileged revelation. But that was not kept by the prophet or the prophetess as a personal treasure or a secret. But it was shared in their proclamation, and thus has it always been that God discloses the divine plan to this prophet or that prophetess throughout time; and they in turn speak to those who listen. Indeed Isaiah says, “Seeing, they will not perceive.” And that is always the case--seeing we don’t perceive, but listening we can, if we are open. We can hear and understand if we have a willing spirit. And this is the very spirit that is needed for us to participate in the fulfillment and the deliverance--the two words used today.

Judaism had many wonderful little customs, and every people and every culture have all kinds of wonderful prayers and customs. They are all good, and they are all completely ineffective. All of them ineffective--and completely ineffective without the Holy Spirit! It is the Holy Spirit that puts us in contact with the true God, the authentic disclosure of the true God and really allows us to live. And this is what Anna and Simeon see and tell us about and told Mary about and told Joseph about--they didn’t know either. They had to learn. Close to Jesus as Mary was, she had to learn; and even Jesus, in his human nature, had to learn. “He grew,” it says, “in wisdom and strength.” He was filled with wisdom. So he learned, in his human nature, that the power of the Holy Spirit was working in him and how the Holy Spirit would use him for the glory of God. This is also our way, the way the Spirit is made available.
Today there are two stories of Jesus’ ministry; and they both are stories of faith, but different kinds of faith. For example, the woman who is having the hemorrhage--she was in a crowd and many were actually coming up against Jesus “hemming him in,” as the Scripture says. They were all touching him, but in her case the touch was effective in bringing about healing. Now this was a physical touch, but not merely physical. You must always remember that Jesus is the incarnation of the Word of God, the enfleshment of God’s own self expression. So therefore, God is physically present in Jesus; but on the other hand, it is only through faith that people see God present in Jesus. It is possible to see only the surface, to imagine Jesus just the son of Joseph, for example, as did the people of Nazareth.

So everybody in the crowd saw Jesus, the incarnation of the Word of God, but they did not all see him as the incarnation of the Word of God. Even this woman may not have understood, and probably did not actually, know who Jesus was, but she, none the less, perceived more than the crowd. She perceived in him a source of health and healing for herself. And so, for her, touching Jesus became a source of new life; and it was experienced in a very physical way. She felt it physically; it says so. And Jesus felt it physically--he felt something leave him! What left him? What left him, and why did it leave him at that moment and not before and not after? This is a story of faith and how this woman was ready, how this woman was open so that her physical touch of Jesus was a moment of healing and more than that. Jesus says to her, “It is your faith that has cured you.” He didn’t say, “It is your touch that has cured you.” He did not say, “It is I who have cured you.” So there is something to this faith in her that made the contact and that made healing possible for her at that moment.

Later on it’s on to Jairus’ house. Now, the little girl who was healed in Jairus’ house--she does not have any faith that we know of; in fact, by the time Jesus arrives, she is already dead. Where is the faith in this case? Well, it is really the faith of her father who intercedes for her. It is so very often that the people who are really sick or dying in the many ways people can die: they may be dying mentally in terms of losing all hope; they may be dying spiritually in the sense of losing all relationship to others; or they may be dying physically in the sense of all life leaving them. Sometimes the people who are dying are the least able to touch Jesus, to go to Jesus, to have faith, to pray. Especially, for some reason, certain illnesses--certain illnesses leave people almost unable to pray. Is it physical, or is it mental, or is it deeply spiritual? I don’t know--maybe a little bit of all of them. But it’s true; some people, when they are most in need of God, can’t even pray. That does not mean that healing is not possible, because of the intercession of others. St. Thomas Aquinas believes that praying for others is even more important than praying for ourselves. He says because when we pray for others, when we put ourselves in the place of others and intercede for them, actually we are placing their values and their welfare and their health above our own, and that itself is an act of Divine . . . he calls it Charity. This does not mean taking up a collection for something. Divine
Charity, in Thomas’ thinking, is the love that God has for us. So we are all invited then to become intercessors for others, recognizing that through our faith others can be healed. It is not a “do-it-yourself” program—faith. We can intercede that others will be healed, others who don’t have the where-with-all, be it physical, mental, or spiritual, to pray for themselves or to believe for themselves in their own healing. And the Church really is being called everyday to prayer for the salvation of the world, and especially for those who have been baptized. Sad to say, some people never pray for themselves, but perhaps you and I can keep them in mind.
“He could work no miracle there, so much did their lack of faith distress him.” St. Thomas Aquinas says that it is through the humanity of Jesus that God worked the work of redemption. The humanity of Jesus is a very essential therefore to salvation. That is a key to understand today’s story. Jesus was not a “faith healer.” Jesus was not a faith healer. Faith healing is a form of mind over matter. If you have enough faith, then you heal. Faith in this case is really, what you might call, positive thinking, and there is a small amount of truth in it. In fact, there is hardly any idea at all that doesn’t have a little particle of truth in it, however much of a distortion it may be. There is truth in the fact that we are created to be healthy. That is true. Human life, all life is actually created to thrive. And very often we, our attitudes, our emotions, are an obstacle to the natural healing drive or power that God has placed within our nature; so there is a great deal of truth in the fact that we can aid our own healing. That’s true. Faith healers use this, and in some sense probably help people to become more positive and to aid their own healing process; but that is not what Jesus did. Jesus did not aid people by making them more positive so they would become healthier.

What Jesus did was to touch them with Divine compassion, which is different. This is, strictly speaking, a miracle. It says here, “He could work no miracle, although he did heal some.” Healing is one thing; miracles are another! The miraculous power is the power of Divine compassion working through his human nature, his human hands, his human heart, his human words, his human touch. The healing Jesus gave is truly the gift of a supernatural nature. It is not simply aiding the natural processes that are already at work. It is not simply clearing away obstacles to what is otherwise a natural process. It is something more. It is supplying what nature cannot supply. It is strictly a supernatural gift. This is what we call a miracle. And there are many signs in the Scriptures of Jesus’ miraculous power, but here it says, “He could not use it, so much did their lack of faith distress him.” It is not that faith is a necessary ingredient, or that faith itself is the active agent producing the effect of healing. That is not the idea. The idea is that faith is the receptive awareness within people that allows the supernatural compassion of God, that is God who is Love, to touch them. Now, why do I go to all this explanation. It is very important for ourselves to see something; a lack of faith is not an empty jar. A lack of faith is not simply something missing. A lack of faith is a jar filled with something else. If we want to be totally disposed to the mercy and the compassion of God, we have to find out what that something else is, if it should be within us--and pour it out! Then we can be disposed to the gift.
People are surely not all the same; and when Jesus ministered he found different kinds of responses. There were, of course, his disciples who followed him closely and learned from him how to serve others. There were the opponents, his enemies who eventually crucified him. And then there were these other people in the middle, the crowd. And the gospel today describes them as “like sheep without a shepherd.” They are not described as enemies of Christ; they are not described as opponents; they are not described as adversaries; they are not described as sinners, in the sense of evil people. They’re described as “sheep without a shepherd.” The vast majority of people in the world are like this, really not evil, but they are like sheep without a shepherd; therefore they are still in a sense lost. Sheep without a shepherd are lost; they don’t know where they are! Sheep cannot fend for themselves. The very nature of a shepherd is that a shepherd establishes a personal relationship with the sheep. One shepherd can actually tend quite a bit of sheep because the sheep know the shepherd. Sheep without a shepherd wander all over the place. They get lost, and they can even starve. They are not like some animals that are able to forage for themselves, fend for themselves, get their own food and so on. They, more or less, have to be lead.

Well, this describes, actually, the human condition for the vast majority of people. We need to be lead, guided and directed, and God wants to be the one to do it--but now sin has intervened and disturbed God’s plan. Sin here does not necessarily mean deliberate and grave evil; but its effects are evil because sin as a corporate reality, as something that began in the Garden of Eden, according to the story in Genesis, at the beginning of human history--this sin puts God out of the picture. Sin puts God out of the picture; that’s what it does! And it leaves all of us without any direction, without any center. The center of our lives has been lost because we’ve excluded it.

Jesus comes and remedies the situation by great teaching. It is rather strange, but that is what he does--he gives great teaching. What do you think it was about? Well, it was probably about everything because, in so far as God has been excluded from our lives, we don’t understand anything. We don’t understand our own experience. In so far as God has not been perceived at the center of everything that has ever gone on with us and in us, we don’t understand the meaning of life, the purpose of life. St. Theresa of Avila has a very strange comment. She talks about how we have to actually forget; we have to forget the way we remember life and learn new memories. Well, a lot of people think that is rather strange, but I think it should be taken seriously. We have to learn anew how to see ourselves with God at the center.

If we take gospel teachings and we simply tried to incorporate them into our lives as they are, that’s like sewing a new patch on an old garment--it won’t work. We really need a new garment, and the new garment is a new way of perceiving life with God at the center. If our experience in life has been an experience of abandonment, we need a healing of our memory because we have never been abandoned by God. We may have
been abandoned by people. We may have been abandoned by our parents. We may have been abandoned by our mates in life. Our families may have abandoned us, but God has never abandoned us. And if our experience is an experience of abandonment that experience itself is very flawed; somehow we have pushed God out of our experience. We didn’t do it deliberately; this is the affect of the general sin, the original sin into which we have been born.

And Jesus now comes to restore the proper order, to let God become central to our lives, to allow us to have a personal relationship with God, as a shepherd with the right sheep, so we will be cared for and directed, so we won’t be lost, caught in the brambles, or starving because we don’t know how to forage for food. We will be led into the green pastures. This is what God wants to do to us and for us. It was prophesied by Ezekiel: “I shall become their shepherd.” This is what now is being fulfilled in Jesus; he is becoming our shepherd, and we need to listen to the shepherd, heed the shepherd’s voice. Learn anew about what life really is, not think we know it already. We need to be taught all over again what life is all about from God’s point of view. Jesus is the one who will do that.
Today we are beginning the first “Mass with My Class,” which is an opportunity for our younger parishioners to join together and participate in the Mass in a more, you might say, active way: by skit, they participate in the readings, by sharing in some of the thoughts that go into the homily. So those of you who are older than the fourth grade, I ask you just to imagine for yourself, for a little while, that you are back in fourth grade and go along with our young friends. Today we have a story about something really marvelous that takes place. It’s a miraculous catch of fish. The story was enacted before Mass began. Now, as you listen to that story, what was the reaction in the disciples of this marvelous and miraculous catch of fish? What was their reaction? Tyler, Margaret Ann, Eric? They were surprised, true--only surprised? Anything else? What other emotions did they feel? Emily? They were excited, true. What else? Erin? Something very clearly there besides surprise? Yes? They felt unworthy, absolutely. They felt unworthy, and even more than unworthy--they were actually terrified! They were terrified!

Now, do you think that is rather odd that here Jesus’ friends were terrified when he in their very midst works this wonderful thing, this miraculous catch of fish? Don’t forget the story--they had been fishing all night long, and they had caught nothing and Jesus said, “Well, go out there and on the right lower your nets.” And they said, “Well, we don’t think it is going to work, but if you tell us to we will do it,” and so much fish that two boats began to sink. And they were terrified. Why do you think for a moment that they were terrified? Would you be terrified? I think we might be. When God comes in someone’s life and does something very marvelous it can be terrifying, and it is very common for people to be afraid--afraid of God. Yes, indeed. Many people, many of us, are afraid of God. Let’s be honest. It is not unusual. It is not strange to be afraid of God, even though God has never shown us any reason why we should be afraid of him.

In Jesus, God was constantly trying to put a hand out, a hand of friendship, a helping hand, trying to establish some sort of contact to help people understand that God really is on our side. And St. Paul said, “If God is on our side, who can be against us?” That’s what St. Paul said, and he is talking about this experience of being afraid of God. But it is so and has been so since time began that men and women, boys and girls are often afraid of God. And what does Jesus say about this fear? Colleen, what did Jesus say when Peter said, “Get away from Me”? What did Jesus say? Well, he didn’t actually say, “I forgive you,” but he could have said that; it is basically the idea. Yes? He said--that’s right--“Don’t be afraid.” And how we all need to hear that message of Jesus! “Do not be afraid.” Of course, there are all kinds of terrifying things that go on in life; but we don’t have to be afraid of God. We don’t have to be afraid of God because God is really on our side. And God is working in our world to make things better for us. Of course, he needs our help; a lot of times he doesn’t get our help, or he doesn’t get other people’s help--so things don’t get better, necessarily.
But this is not supposed to be that way because you’re here; because you’ve been born, things will get better because you are going to listen to Christ. I see it already; you are listening to Christ, and as you grow older you are, right now and next year and the year after and from then on, you are going to make a change in the world. It’s about due. It’s time for a change in the world, and it’s coming about through you, and through your faith, and through your willingness to trust in the Lord and the Lord’s ways.

So is every age, is every day, is every period of time the same? No, there are periods of time when people don’t trust in God; there are periods of time when people begin to trust in God, and this is a time when people are beginning more and more to trust in God. Of course, with good reason because of all the terrible problems that exist in our world. But the main thing is there is no problem, there is no situation, that is so awful, that is so terrible that is beyond God’s power. “All things are possible with God.” And a lot of people who have gone before you, people my age, for example, a lot of my generation did not really believe in God. I can say, on a whole, most of my generation did not believe in God; or if they did, it was in a very, very sort of minor way--yes, but not really too much. And that’s very sad because a lot of goodness that could have happened in the world didn’t because people did not believe.

But now I believe in you it is going to be different. I think your time, your period in life, your generation, your age group is going to be different. I think you are going to bring grace into the world because you are going to cooperate--you already are--in a deep way what God has planned. But you also will be challenged, and there will be days when you are afraid. You have to remember this gospel: “Do not be afraid.” There is nothing to be afraid of. “All things are possible with God.” There will be dark days; there will be hard days, but when we really don’t know what to do, just ask Jesus. The disciples didn’t know what to do; they hadn’t caught any fish, but they said, “All right, if you say so, if you say so, we’ll do it again.” That’s a very important lesson that if God directs us, if God guides us and God wants to every day, that then our work will be successful. And when we believe this and we don’t live a life of fear, then we become friends with God. And the more friendly we become with God, the more God can influence us and bless us and bless the world through us. That’s the good news, and we’re here to celebrate that good news and to spread it in our world. So I thank you for what you are doing already, and what you shall do for the Lord because it has begun already.
Of course, there is nothing that’s unimportant in the gospel, but today’s reading is extremely important for those who really want to follow a spiritual life. Jesus grew up as a Jew; and, of course, the Jews had a very high moral standard. The moral standard, in a sense, began with Moses and the reception of the Ten Commandments. As time went on, of course, it seemed that ten weren’t enough, so therefore more commandments were devised. By the time the Book of Leviticus was finally edited, around the time of the Babylonian Exile, there were over six hundred and thirty laws; but that wasn’t enough either; so the rabbis continued to elaborate new laws to cover more situations. By Jesus’ time there were over ten thousand oral laws. They eventually found their way into the Talmud, which was published after the time of Christ. Now, all of this started because of the fundamental insight, which is completely valid, that our conduct is very relevant to God, that our relating to God and our worship of God has to take into consideration our behavior, our way of treating other people, how we live, and even how we eat--thus the Kosher rules.

However, what Jesus tried to get at is that there is something even more profound in our relation with God than our conduct, and that is our very being. By this he means something that is more profound than our physical being. He is talking about our spirit; and it is really the spirit that is the cause of our conduct, rather than our conduct influencing our spirit. Our conduct, good or bad, does not make us good or bad. The rules we live by, the food we eat, none of this makes us good or bad; it may improve our health, or decrease our health, but it doesn’t make us good or bad. There is something deeper within us that is the question here--the “recesses of the heart,” he calls it. And he is particularly concerned about healers, the feeling nature which lies in the recesses of our heart, our feeling nature with its desires, with its emotions, all of which are motivations, all of which--we also have to consider--are actually good. Our emotional life is basically a good thing; it is part of the way God made us. All emotions have a particular purpose.
But here’s the question: Are we simply supposed to be the product of our emotions? Is our conduct to arise, as it were, automatically from whatever we feel? That’s the point. For example, we observe in life that people fall in love. Why do they fall in love with one person and not another? That’s unexplainable. Well, is our conduct and our decisions--are they to simply emerge out of our feelings? In other words, are we simply to marry people because we fall in love with them? If so, then we should justify all adultery. That’s the point--if we are simply to be products of our feelings and desires. Jesus’ point is we cannot be the product of anything! We have to take responsibility for and become very knowledgeable about the deep recesses of our hearts, and direct our feelings and our emotions and our desires in wholesome directions. This way we become pure; but if we do not pay attention, if we simply allow whatever we feel to come out, to take some form of action within us, then we are really impure. We are impure because we are really living in darkness; we are not even aware of what is going on within the recesses of our hearts. So Jesus here is saying that we cannot live in a way pleasing to God in a mechanical way. If we want to please God, we have to become very conscious of what we feel and very responsible for how those feelings influence our lives.
In this morning’s readings we are presented with an idea of justice that is meant to be present in the here and now, an earthly reality very different from the idea of the final judgment, of which we are relatively familiar—the ultimate triumph of good over evil, the final division of the good from the bad, which is a very unique idea in the New Testament. But the idea of justice as presented in today’s readings in Jeremiah and in Luke—this idea is not unique to the New Testament, but found also in the Old. And it has to do with the idea that God, who is good, has created the creation in such a way that evil cannot triumph for a long period of time—and we have to understand “for a long period of time.” Evil can have momentary moments in the sun, so to speak, but over a long period of time it cannot last. Why? Because it goes against the very nature of the creation. There is something in the creation that is intrinsically good and just and cannot tolerate evil and disorder. Now, again, we have to be very careful we understand that this is on a scale of time that may exceed our own personal lives. For example, if you were living in Auschwitz in 1942—where would the justice of God be? It would be invisible at that time. And at any point in the history of our own lives or the history of the world we cannot take a snap of that moment and say, “This is justice.” No, not necessarily, but over the long period of time there is a justice that demands that human beings conform.

Now this idea, which is considered Jewish, which is Jewish in its original idea, has been rejected, of course, by most modern thinkers. But one modern thinker, himself a Jew, Jacob Bronowski, suggested that we have been a little bit premature in rejecting this idea. He asks, for example, “Well, whatever happened to the Third Reich?” It really didn’t last. And we might say, “What ever happened to apartheid in South Africa?” And whatever happened to the “evil empire” of atheistic communism? It lasted for seventy years, and there are people who don’t even live seventy years; but it’s not around now, except in a very truncated form. What about European colonialism? A clear denial of justice, but it’s gone. And what about the Mafia—organized crime? For a while it seems that they are immune to justice, but really in the long run they are not, and we see they end their days in fear and bloodshed and hopelessness.

Now this idea is not, in fact, exclusive to Judaism because it is a belief that this justice is in the creation, so we should see signs of it in other religious and moral cultures. And indeed we do. The Chinese speak of “Tao,” a very similar idea. The Indians talk about “Dharma,” again a spiritual sense of justice residing within the created order. But even so we find that modern secular philosophers, beginning with the enlightenment, although they rejected almost everything of our spiritual past, did not reject this idea. For example, Thomas Jefferson speaks of how the creator endowed human beings with certain inalienable rights. What is that all about? It’s about a justice that the creator has put in the creation that can’t be taken out of it; and it has inspired almost all modern ideas, which are still around. This leads to two conclusions: if you want to be successful in life, work for justice because justice will succeed. Secondly, evil is basically stupid; and it will ultimately fail, and always has and always will.
Now, from a practical viewpoint: if it is true that justice will ultimately triumph then why and in what way should Christian people be concerned about the state of justice in the world? Well, this is a very important question. What should we be doing or what should we be thinking about? St. Thomas Aquinas remarks that the difference between a moral person and an immoral person is not really the goal of his or her life—it’s the means they choose to get there. This is a profound insight. Bonnie and Clyde did not want anything you don’t want, but it’s the means they chose to get it that made them notorious. The means we choose to get the ends we want, which is basically a happy life—that is all important!

Now, in some cases we have no means at our disposal. In this case this is what the Bible calls the “poor.” The poor have no means. The poor have no options. The poor have no resources. And Jesus in today’s gospel speaks directly to the poor. And he says, “Blessed are you who have no means. Blessed are you who have no options, and blessed are you who have no resources; the kingdom of God is yours,” albeit in anticipation of the final outcome of justice. So those of us without means are invited to share in God’s justice through anticipation, which is one of the many facets of faith. But this is not the end of the gospel; there is another part to it. “Woe to you rich; your consolation is now.” The rich are those of us who have means, who have options, who have resources. And if we remain indifferent to justice, then “woe to us!” That is the force of the word.

Now Christ Himself was completely and totally non-violent. The biblical word for non-violence is meekness. “Blessed are the meek; they shall inherit the earth.” In light of that, what should a Christian person’s attitude be toward menaces? They exist, after all. No one who has any sense could deny, for example, that Saddam Hussein is a menace. He has hired at least fifty scientists to construct biological and chemical weapons. That we know. That is true. But what we don’t know is whether they are actually capable of doing it, whether they’ve been successful. We have no idea about that. So what should our attitude be toward Saddam Hussein and his country of Iraq? History shows us that it is very dangerous for any country to precipitate violence against another one; again the Tao, the Dharma, the justice of God is at work. Our leaders are calling for a preemptive strike against Iraq—in our national interests—they say. But that is the same thinking used by Hashimoto and Tojo in 1941 in the bombing of Pearl Harbor. They said, “Well, we’re trying to prevent the 6th Fleet from attacking us.” This type of thinking always falls back on the attacker with great havoc. Why? The justice locked into nature. Now, even our own State Department, or rather the Pentagon estimates that if the United States does attack Iraq, at least one hundred thousand Iraqis’ lives will be aborted.

Now, last month we celebrated pro-life month. And I urged you to write to your representatives and senators and tell them what you believe about life. Well, I’m urging you to do that again. Life is life, preborn, born, whatever; life is life! That’s our Catholic view, our Catholic moral principle. Now, we may think that this is a different situation from, let’s say, others. We, after all, weren’t planning on attacking the Japanese in 1941. Well, how do we know what we were planning. We don’t know. We don’t know what the Iraqis are planning. We don’t know another person’s intention, and we cannot act on
what we think another person is going to do. We can only act on moral principles. And that is something we need to think about and communicate to others, especially people with influence.

Finally, Jesus Himself had among his company his chosen twelve, Simon, the Zealot. Who is he? Well, he was a member of this party that believed in taking life into their own hands. The Zealots were violent people; today we call them terrorists, probably. Equipped with the means, they would terrorize anybody in order to get--what? Their chosen goal, which they believed was right. Jesus was constantly sitting on Simon trying to teach him a different way to live. The question is have we really learned the lesson? Do we really believe in zeal or do we believe in peace? Only time will tell.
Today we have a story of Jesus being exasperated with his opponents. They seek a heavenly sign as a test. Now, of course, they really didn’t seek a sign at all because there were all kinds of them. We have to understand that the very nature of a sign is that it has to be seen. The problem was not a lack of signs; the problem was they didn’t see them, because to interpret signs, to see signs, involves the will. One of the many facets of faith is belief. Faith is not just belief, but belief is part of faith. And belief is a matter of choice. We choose our convictions. We may imagine that we are convinced because of the evidence, but this is not true. St. Thomas Aquinas points this out when he discusses the nature of belief. He says, “In belief there is never a preponderance of evidence.” That’s why we remain free to believe or not to believe, because there is no preponderance of evidence. It could go either way—so that belief is a choice, a free choice; and interpreting a sign is a form of believing.

The reason the Pharisees wanted another sign is that they didn’t want to believe the ones that were already there. In a sense they wanted God to prove to them, through some sensible datum, some sensible given, that Jesus was really from God. But, of course, this is mixing up two completely different orders of reality: the sensible world and the real world. God is not a sensible thing. God cannot be perceived by the senses. So never will we, through our senses, ever be forced to acknowledge God. If we were, then God would no longer be someone that we freely believe in. God would just become part of the world of fact, like the sun in the sky. But God will never become like the sun in the sky, because God is not part of the physical world. He will never impinge upon our senses in this way. God will always remain in the world of reality, hidden behind the senses, to be perceived by those who want to perceive him, to remain hidden to those who do not want to perceive him.

Now in fact, in our world itself, everything we see is a sign, if we know how to look at it; if we want to look at it. Look at a flower. A flower shows us beauty, and behind the beauty there must be the artist who created the beauty; so a flower is a sign of God, for those who want to see it. Life itself is a sign of the creator—for those who want to see it! Recently, scientists have come to the conclusion that there is not enough time from the cooling of the earth until life forms to say that this happened by, you might say, a natural process of random events—they are admitting this. So this could be just the very moment when scientists would come and say, “Well now, this must be the intervention of the creator.” But don’t go so fast. Atheistic scientists are now saying, “All life came from some other planet.” See, no matter what is shown, it doesn’t matter if you don’t want to see it! It is a choice. And this will always be the case. So in our daily lives do we really see God? Well, it is a matter of do we want to? If we want to, God is there. If we don’t want to, then God is hidden. And thus we are free, and so is God.
The healing stories in the New Testament are told on two different levels. On one level there is the physical condition. On another level this physical condition is a symbol of the spiritual condition of the entire race, the human race. Now in today’s story, Jesus heals the man who is blind—by taking him out of the village and telling him not to go back. What is the significance of this detail? Well, some years ago when laser surgery was developed, it became possible to operate on the eyes of children, who had been born blind. The surgery was performed on some teenagers, and the results were startling to the doctors involved. First of all, when the children’s eyes were actually opened, when the bandages were removed after the surgery, they did not actually perceive objects, but only patches of color. They had to learn how to perceive objects. That was a learning process that had to be engaged. For example, they might be very familiar with a book by touch, but they didn’t know what a book was by just looking at it. They had to learn what a book looked like. They were helped, of course, by other senses like touch. That is one point: that we are taught by others and by experience how to perceive. We are just talking about material things. Secondly, it was progressive—the learning process—as is the healing today. Thirdly, this is quite startling, not all the children actually liked being able to see. This the doctors were not prepared for! I recall one girl who walked around for quite a long time with her hands on her eyes. A boy tried to pluck out his eyes. Many of the children actually became very depressed. They reported that they did not really like the way they looked; for example, when they looked into the mirror, they had thought they were more beautiful than they really were. They thought the world was more beautiful than it really was, and this brought them into depression.

Now, I think all of this parallels also our spiritual blindness, and is the reason why Jesus took this man out of the village and told him not to go back. Our spiritual blindness is based upon the world we live in, the culture we live in, the crowd that we live with. We’re not taught how to see. If we are really ever to have spiritual sight, we have to, as it were, remove ourselves from the culture we’re living in. We cannot look at...
Spiritual Blindness

life through the culture we’re living in. We have to be removed. It will not happen overnight; it is a progressive process of healing. But why are we blind? Partly, I believe, we are blind for the same reason many of the children were depressed and covered their eyes and tried to pluck them out, because maybe we don’t want to see. If we really see reality clearly, maybe we won’t like it. So maybe our blindness is self-induced; that’s the suggestion, after all, of the Scriptures anyway. To the Pharisee Jesus says, “If you were blind there would be no sin in that, but you say, ‘We can see,’ and therefore your sin remains.” So there is something voluntary about the spiritual blindness of our culture, of our village, of the crowd we live with; and to be able to see requires a certain kind of courage, willingness to look at what, perhaps, is not so pleasant, and to have the faith and the courage to deal with it. So the man born blind in the story of John and this particular man, who is not said to be born blind, but who is blind, represents for us a condition of ourselves as a people; and it is Christ who is trying to extricate us from our culture, from our blindness, from the crowd--and to restore our seeing.
Whenever we have special masses I never choose special readings because I have found that whatever the reading of the day is, that is the reading that we need to hear. Today Jesus is talking about being a disciple. The only thing is, it is very important to note, he is not only talking to his disciples; he’s also talking to the crowd, the hangers-on, the curious, or perhaps those who have come for healing. It is to all of these that he speaks these words, “If any one wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self.” Now, we have all been deprived of something in our lives. We’ve been forced perhaps by death to surrender a loved one to the Lord, or perhaps a move has separated us from a close neighbor or companion. And often these kinds of separations are very painful. Then on another level some of us have had to undergo separation from our spouse, through death, that might be painful, through divorce, that might be more painful with possible recriminations and feelings of guilt and failure. Separation and surrender can be very difficult.

But here Christ is talking about something that is far more profound than surrendering a relative, a spouse, a friend, a companion. He is talking about surrendering our very selves—who we are. And he says, he uses the word “to deny our very self.” Now, what is this all about? First of all, of course, it is a paradox; this whole teaching is framed in the nature of a paradox: “Those who seek their lives lose them; those who are willing to lose their lives gain them.” Perhaps the basic paradox is that this is really good news when it seems like bad news—or even impossible news. How could anyone deny the very self that we are? We’ve spent our entire lives on a project developing who we are: growing up, getting educated and all that. And to some extent that is who we are, but that isn’t really what he is talking about. Perhaps you have often heard the statement: “What you see is what you get,” or another statement that I have often heard: “Well, that’s just the way I am.” These statements are often used to refer to the perceptions that people have, that we have, that we are set, that we are a closed book, that we are exactly who we are and always have been and always will be.

And this is what Jesus is trying to pry us free from: this idea that our world, existence and identity has already been determined. It has not; in fact, that’s the good news: that the person we think we are, the person we have always been, that isn’t really who we are in the sight of God—that God has a much better idea of who we are, and that we can discover who God thinks we are, if only we live with a certain sort of surrender, or we might call it even self denial. But self denial here does not mean giving up something; it means giving up who we are. It doesn’t mean getting a new personality. It doesn’t mean taking a new name. It doesn’t mean any of the things we might think about, and it really can’t be put into so many words in a very simple way. It has to be thought about, meditated on.

What are the very things that are constantly causing you trouble in your life? That need not be part of who you are. There are various ways in which we have adopted;
because of sin in the world, we have adopted negative ways of responding or reacting to life. You see it in others much more easily than you see it in yourself. For example, some people are always angry. They are always mad about something. Why? Because their lives are so difficult? Because their lives are so unjust? Because so many difficult and terrible things have happened to them? Probably not. They’re mad all the time because that’s the way they are, and then the way they interpret the experiences of their lives sounds very terrible. Not to say that people don’t have very disastrous circumstances at certain times in their lives; but when there is a pattern of anger, that is just part of “me.” If I’m always angry, that’s me! And if I’m always angry, I’m always going to find something to be angry about, someone to be angry at--that is for certain. And Christ is saying, “Look, you really want to live? You can let go of that.” You can deny that that’s yourself. That really isn’t. That is maybe the way you have always been, but that’s because our world has been marred and is no longer the way God intended it. But that can be healed; that can be redeemed.

Or other people are always afraid. You can see it in their eyes! You don’t know what they are afraid of, but they are always fearful, frightened, overly cautious, overly timid. They are indeed prisoners of this fear. Is it really because their neighborhood is so much more dangerous than your neighborhood? Not really. That’s not why. In fact, there are people--and I just read about a family of ministers, really, the parents are ministers, Baptist ministers, who moved from Wilmette, Illinois to the inner city of Chicago, and they are not afraid. They are in one of the most high crime areas in the state of Illinois, and they are not afraid! Fear comes from within us--and it enslaves us! And the greatest fear is the fear of death. It says in the Letter to the Hebrews, “The devil kept the world in bondage by the fear of death.” Fear can be a terrible taskmaster. Some people go through life fearing what other people think, fearing whatever might happen tomorrow that might be disadvantageous and difficult. And Jesus is saying, “Look, that doesn’t have to be who you are. You can deny that and be healed and live without fear.”

And there are other people who are always anxious, always worried. I remember one lady--and I used to think it was actually pitiful; I used to chat with her once in a while--it was rather pitiful because she was constantly worrying about someone or something. And one day she spoke, trying to flatter another person, and she said, “You know, that other lady, she is really a wonderful lady, because no matter how many problems she has she would always worry about yours.” And I said to her, “That’s not necessarily virtuous.” But worry and anxiety can tear out of us any sense of peace and leave us constantly agitated, constantly on the brink. Anxiety, of course, can have so many different demonstrations or exemplifications. Some people, because they’re anxious, never stop talking. Some people, because they are anxious, never think. Some people, because they are anxious, are constantly doing something. But anxiety will deprive us of peace. And Jesus says, “Look, you don’t have to be like that. You can deny that and be healed.”

Now, there are many statistics today from modern day secular doctors and practitioners of medicine who tell us that our spiritual attitudes and practices impinge very strongly on the physical, mental and emotional health--and I myself have no doubt!
One Jewish gentleman, a professor at Harvard medical school, became curious as to why some of his patients were healing and becoming better, and others of his patients were not, even though objectively looking at their diagnosis there was no reason why one should get better and the other shouldn’t. So he started asking—and what did he find out? That people who are getting better are putting their trust in God. They may or may not be Christian; most of them were, but some were not—but they put their trust in God. They surrendered their anxieties. They decided they were not going to worry about their health. They surrendered their fear of death. They decided they weren’t going to be afraid of dying. And I don’t know if he included it, but I’ll be willing to bet that they also dealt with anger, if that was a basic issue in their lives.

One of the problems is what we do with ourselves while we are healthy. While we are healthy, we often, I would say almost always, tend to get involved in very negative patterns. Now, these are not necessarily the cause of our illnesses, but I’ll tell you what happens: When illness does come along, and will sooner or later in one form or another as long as we are living on this planet, if we have been living with negative patterns, those patterns already have dug a pit that is very hard to get out of, and they sap our bodies and our minds and our souls of the energy that God has already placed there to help heal us. Another book written quite a few years ago, by, again, a secular practitioner of medicine, showed that the human body is constructed in such a way as to always heal. Just cut your finger; it will form a scab. First of all the blood will clot rather soon unless you have a terrible deficiency of vitamin K, but the body actually heals. And this is a general rule and principle: We naturally heal from everything that’s wrong, but if we carry around a lot of negative baggage then we don’t let the natural processes work.

Recently, another study shows that people who attend church regularly—not necessarily any particular denomination, but attend church regularly—are healthier people and get better quicker than people who don’t. Not only this, more interesting, that the children of parents, especially of mothers, the children of mothers who attend church regularly are healthier. They have fewer problems with depression in their teenage years, and there are fewer suicides among the teenagers. That is because through God we have not only nature on our side, but we have something else—a supernatural power that comes to our aid bringing support and strength and wholeness.

The whole of creation is created to be good. When God created the earth and all its inhabitants he saw what he created and he saw that it was good—it still is! But there are flaws, the flaws that come through our own carelessness, not our personal carelessness, but the carelessness of the human race, the foolishness of the human race by not following the will of God and not allowing God to be central to who we are, then pushing God away and putting God on the periphery of our lives has caused a great deal of woundedness—the effects of sin, and we bury them in our lives.

But Jesus Christ has come into our world in order to bring a new process of redemption and re-creation. He is the first fruits of the new creation, and we have all been joined to him in our baptism. And moreover in the Eucharist we are joined to his sacrifice. St. Paul says in Corinthians that “Christ died for our sins that we could become
an offering to God.” That’s the meaning of the Eucharist. That is the meaning of the mass. We become the offering to God because Christ died for our sins. Christ died for our sins by offering himself, by denying his very life, by surrendering the very thing that, you might say, instinctively we grab onto, by willingly letting go of his godliness, of taking the life of a slave and accepting death on a cross. And in so dying in this sacrificial death, Christ has brought us life. And now as St. Paul says, “We become an offering to God.” As St. Augustine explains, “We, the whole Christ,” made part of Christ in baptism “offer the whole Christ,” that means you and me and Jesus “to the Father in the Eucharist.”

This sanctifies everything that we are. And this makes holy and redemptive the suffering we endure. This enables us to discover exactly what Christ means when he says, “Whoever will save his life will lose it.” If we live by our instincts and if survival of our own physical life is the highest priority in our lives, we are losers—certainly and surely at some point. “But whoever loses his life for my sake and for the gospel’s will save it.” And we are in that very process right now. We are in that very process of being lifted up as an offering to God. As we continue we need to pray for the sanctification of our whole world, of our Church, of one another, who have come here today, that we will be able to be that offering sanctified by the blood of Christ. And as we await the redemption of our bodies, we will be able to share the first fruits of redemption, which is hope—the hope that comes from the Holy Spirit. And as we share in the hope that comes from the Holy Spirit, we have a right to the fruits of the Spirit: of peace, patience, clearly with ourselves, and kindness, not because we are nice but because God is holy and we have been given the food of holiness, and goodness, and fear of the Lord—which is the beginning of wisdom.
Today I would like to reflect for a few moments on the Letter of James. In today’s letter James is speaking of the great power in speech; and it often amazes me to realize how Christian believers, basically good people, do not, in fact, guard their speech—that there seems to be no awareness of the great power that is within human words. Now in Judaism, of course, it’s a different case. In Judaism everything was measured by external conduct. Jesus was always moving the focus more inward; for example, he said, “If a man looks with lust upon a woman, he has already committed adultery.” Why? Because an outward action, like adultery, begins in the inward place of human thoughts, desires, feelings; and if one makes choices within oneself, that choice is already real to some extent—even if it’s never carried out. Again Jesus says, “Anyone who is angry with his brother is a murderer.” We know anger can kill. And what Jesus is saying is if we inwardly choose to be angry, and to remain angry with our brother, with our sister—and that means brother or sister in the faith, primarily—then we are already guilty of murder. Is this parabolic? Is this an exaggeration? Yes, to some extent—but nonetheless it is not an exaggeration to be dismissed. It is an exaggeration that is trying to warn us about something: Who we are in the sight of God is basically who we are within ourselves.

Now, how we speak about people—this is the point that is being brought up in James’ Letter. How we speak about people is once removed from how we think; yet not quite seen, by us anyway, as outward behavior. How we treat people already begins by how we think about them and how we talk about them! Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” Well, then we need to love our enemies in the way we think about them, and the way we talk about them. We cannot think that for one minute that we are loving our enemies when we speak badly of them. We’re not loving them! Jesus says, “Do good to those who curse you.” If we are to do good to those who curse us, we have to do good with our tongues. We have to speak well of them. This is the power and force of the gospel. This is what actually brings a change to our actual being, our actual nature. If we think for one moment that we can simply avoid some sort of overt harm in a physical sense and thereby fulfill the law, or fulfill Christ’s command to love our enemies, we are kidding ourselves. We have to love people in our speech! And this, of course, is very difficult.

Unfortunately we think that we are just being truthful when we say what we say about people, but are we really very truthful? Do we really know this other person? Do we really understand where this person is coming from? Do we really understand this other person’s intentions? Indeed, we never understand another person’s intentions! And it is sad within Christian families and within the Church also, which is a family, a parish family, we have all these people, who believe they are following Christ—who are not doing so at all because of the way they are talking about each other. And so if we want to really become true disciples of Christ, we have to go out of our way, deliberately and consciously, to speak well of those who are our enemies, starting with our own families. When we are really upset with someone, and this is part of life, we always get upset with people, then we have to find a way of thinking about them that emphasizes their better
half, their better side. We know very well that no one is all bad; so we have to accentuate the positive. Saying that everyone is not all bad, of course, is already admitting that we do have faults. Everyone does have faults, but when we pick at faults, when we accentuate what’s wrong with someone we are really making the matter much worse, and we are harming ourselves as well. So we need to reflect again on this Letter of James, and realize that his advice to us needs to be taken seriously. “See how tiny the spark is that sets a huge forest ablaze! The tongue is such a flame.”
“Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.” Religion is a matter of the ultimate meaning of life. Religion is a matter of getting in contact with the whole of our reality. But in this whole process, often religion in a sense becomes perverted--if that be not too strong of a word--in the sense that our nature is imposed on God. This is obvious in the mythology of the Greeks, the Romans, the Babylonians, the Egyptians; the gods in those myths act like spoiled children; they act like little potentates; they are full of every shortcoming and pettiness that can exist in the human heart. Now, in contrast the religion of the Jewish people, the religion of Israel, begins with a sense of the holiness of God--which means the “otherness” of God. God is not like people. “My thoughts are not your thoughts,” saith the Lord. “Be holy for I am holy.” And the holiness of God is in a sense described in the decalogue, the Ten Commandments, giving basic, you might say, responsibilities to a community, to respect one another, care for the weak, and so on. But even in Israel this process of making God like us prevailed.

And today Jesus is addressing his own Jewish contemporaries--and us. And he is saying, “Look, the goal in life is really to become the way God really is.” The goal of life, and the goal of law, and the goal of morality is for us to become as God really is. His pedagogy shoots to the heights; he transcends and supersedes the law as the Jewish people knew it. This does not mean that he is throwing the law to the wind, that he is saying it doesn’t matter how people live. Quite on the other hand, Jesus is saying that all of us have fallen short of the glory of God; and now he is trying to reorient us in the direction that he knows from within himself--not a direction he has learned from his culture. And this is the important thing: What Jesus teaches is not what he has learned from the world around him, from even reading the Bible; but it is what he knows of the Father because he is Son, and because he relates to the Father in a heartfelt and direct way.
The problem with the way he found his fellow believers is that they were in a sense mimicking a God who doesn’t exist! They had become very judgmental and condemning because, of course, they had this law. And they didn’t only have ten commandments; but they had six hundred thirty-six by the time the Old Testament was finished in writing, and ten thousand other stipulations that were in oral form in his day. They have now become called the Talmud. Now, his point is that it would be very virtuous and very holy to be judgmental if God were, but God is not. For us to be condemning people and judging people is really for us ourselves to be off course. And there were many people in his day and there are many people today who do not believe him—who do not believe that God is mercy, who do not believe that God is compassionate, who do not believe that God is love. Of course there is a particle of truth in those who believe that God is judgmental. There is a particle of truth. Take, for example, parents who are very critical and judgmental in rearing their children; their children become very critical and judgmental, and judge and criticize their parents. So we do get back what we give. And this is why Jesus says, “Judge not, and you will not be judged. Learn to forgive, and you will be forgiven. Condemn and you will be condemned; condemn not and you will not be condemned. The measure you measure with will be measured back to you.” And so this is the final question. Judgment and pardon are really in our own hands. Which shall we choose?
Mark is giving us another example of Jesus’ deliverance ministry. For many modern people this is very difficult to comprehend or relate to because we do not see this same phenomenon in our own contemporary society. However, according to travelers, missionaries and anthropologists, this similar phenomenon does exist in, what we would call, more primitive cultures. For what reason? Probably because of a greater openness to the spiritual world. A spirit does have to have an entrance, an invitation as it were; and the entrance usually occurs in childhood, according to experts. Now, in many primitive societies this kind of behavior, that is convulsions and being thrown into fire and water and so on, is considered actually a sign of a vocation to be a shaman, which means a spirit-filled ecstatic. Ecstatics are often used by primitive societies as, you might say, leaders or prophets or directors of the social and religious behavior of the society.

Whatever the actual meaning and reality, what Mark is trying to tell us is that there is nothing that lies outside the power of Jesus to bring healing and health. So Jesus here is bringing new life to a child who seems to be a corpse. The point is made, of course, that the only reason why these things happen at all is a lack of faith, at least that’s the reference to an unbelieving crowd. Jesus says, “How long must I endure you?” So there is a sense here that Jesus is calling on the crowd, the father [of the possessed boy] and his disciples to a deeper sense of trust. If you think about it, this is one of the great problems of every human life—to trust that all things work out for those who love God. The disruption of our normal course of life, by accident, by disease, by whatever, in no way removes us from the power of God. But often it seems that we desire more regularity and comfort and predictability in our lives, than we really want the protection and the care of our heavenly Father.

Polycarp is the saint of today’s celebration. Polycarp was a bishop during the early days of the Church and learned through his own experience, in the midst of persecution and torture, the presence of the Father, who never lets go of his children. Even though we may be ignorant of the spiritual world, and perhaps that’s not even a problem, we need to be aware of the power of the Father: the love and the care of God that is with us at all times, and to address that Father in prayer, to be encouraged that no matter what happens to us we are always being loved, we are always being cared for, and we are being led through our trials to life eternal. With God and with faith all things are possible!
We know that the Jewish people had been given the law, and it was their responsibility and duty and obligation to carry out the will of God as expressed in the law. What we find in so many instances in the life of Jesus and his teaching of his disciples is not that there is a failure to comprehend the law, as much as there is a misperception of the very nature of God, whose will the law expresses. Frequently Jesus’ teachings are really about not the law so much as they are about the lawgiver. He knows the lawgiver, and therefore knows the law, whereas the doctors of the law and the rabbis know the law—but not the lawgiver.

In today’s story it is a slightly different tack—but very similar. It is very simple—the disciples don’t know themselves. They lack an accurate objective perception of themselves. They’re arguing about who is most important. Now, first it might seem like a childish, little thing, a squabble; but it is a little more than a squabble because Jesus puts too much emphasis on it. If we think about it, it’s the very nature of our consciousness to be rooted in our human bodies. Our consciousness, which is capable of knowledge of God, a meeting with God, is physically located in our bodies. And therefore we do have a certain sort of body-centered consciousness, which means that everything we perceive is going to be perceived from the standpoint of where we are standing, which is going to give a very relative slant to everything we see and everything we sense and everything we perceive. And the point is that we need to exercise something to overcome this natural self-centeredness.

Now, there is an interesting parallel in regard to the universe itself. Scientists say that, in fact, every part of the universe is the center; there is no center of the universe—every point is the center. That is a perfect description of human consciousness. Every point of consciousness, that is every individual, is the center of it. Now, we have to recognize that that’s true about everyone. Everyone is just like ourselves. If we could only understand that everyone is just like ourselves, that itself would remedy this almost natural tendency for a self-centered, self-important perception of life. But it does take a little bit of effort.

Now, Jesus used a child in this particular context because at this time, actually, children were not highly valued. Are they valued today? Perhaps they are in some areas and not others, but at this time they simply were not highly valued. And I think that’s a reflection of this very self-centered way of thinking about self. If we think about self in a very self-centered way, then we evaluate people on the basis of things like accomplishments, achievement, success, power, possession, wealth—and in that sort of evaluation children don’t rank at all! So Jesus is tearing away the whole facade, you might say, of artificial evaluation of human life and importance. He is saying, “No, if you look at a child you will see everything; in fact, if you accept a child, as such, you are actually accepting God.” Everything that is divine, the image of God Himself, is right in that child. What we value is really something we’ve invented.
So Jesus is really trying to get his disciples to start looking at life, actually, in a more natural way, meaning not in an artificial way, meaning not through the eyes of a socially constructed culture. And the word for this in our tradition is “humility,” which comes from the word “humus,” meaning earth. To be humble is to be earthy; it is to be natural. It is to be set on the earth, as opposed to being taken up with a manmade, invented, socially conditioned, cultural evaluation. And this is something we need, as spiritual men and women, to consider and to be aware of--how our society is always trying to tell us what things are worth, and how we need to develop new eyes to see the truth.
It is very important for us to listen to Jesus’ remarks in today’s gospel. He is perhaps not telling us what we think he should be telling us, or what we always thought he was telling us; but he is telling us something very important. He is not telling us to pray, for example, but rather he says, “When you pray, go to your room, and shut your door.” That’s the mandate: to go to your room, and shut your door. He says, “When you give alms, do not let your right hand know what the left is doing.” He is not telling you to give alms; he is assuming that you will, but he’s saying, “When you do, don’t let your right hand know what your left is doing. And when you fast,” he is not recommending fasting, but saying, “When you fast, do not look glum like the hypocrites.”

Now, these instructions have one thing in common: they are all advocating discretion and secrecy. This is a very important component to Christ’s understanding of faith--discretion and secrecy. It says in the Book of Genesis that after Adam and Eve sinned they hid themselves from God. In a sense the whole idea of sin is pretending that there is something that does not belong to God; there is some part of myself that is not God’s where I can hide, and this, of course, is a lie. This is what sin is: this basic lie that there is something that does not belong to God. Now, the very idea of hypocrisy comes from the Greek word for “actor.” When Jesus calls people hypocrites he means that we are actors, playing a role in our public life that is not consistent with who we are in our secret life, the inner life, the private lives that only we know about.

Now, one of the things that is most sad to see, as a priest, is people who have been baptized, confirmed, communicated, who have even attended mass perhaps quite often in their lives, but who have no personal sense of God. In their room with their door closed--there is no God! They have never learned to pray in this intimate way, in the privacy of their own secret little world. And sadly there is something about this that is even very unhealthy. After all, where can we go where God will not be? Where did Eve and Adam escape to in trying to hide from God? Into mindlessness--if we really desire to escape from God we will end up in mindlessness. Jesus is warning us: “Do not be satisfied with the prayers you have been taught, and with praying with other people in beautiful and public liturgies. That is all well and good, but you also have to go to your room, and shut your door, and pray to your Father, who knows all that is done in secret, because God wants to have a very personal, a very special, a very intimate relationship with everyone of you.” And only you can make that possible; only you can take God into the secrecy and the privacy of your own hearts.

His second admonition: “When you give alms”--you know, it is very heart warming to feel appreciated, and everybody wants to feel appreciated; everyone likes to be thanked. The confirmandi of our parish have had various service projects, and most of them report how good it feels to do something for others. Indeed, a good observation, and a fact of life--it feels good to be wanted; it feels good to be thanked. However, in this lies a great danger. If the good works we perform are only performed for us to be thanked, for people to show their gratitude toward us, for us to be applauded and approved of, if that’s
the real motivation—which of course it was not for the confirmandi—but if it were to become our motivation, which it often can become our motivation, then soon we will not be pleasing God at all. And we will not be doing what we are doing for God’s sake; we will be doing it for our sake, for what we can get out of it, for the profit, for the return—and then it is a business deal; it is not a work for God. So Jesus says, “When you give alms, don’t let your right hand know what your left is doing.”

And thirdly, “When you fast”—self-denial is always recommended by religious leaders; however Jesus Himself doesn’t really talk very much about it. It can be good to give up something, to give up food, to give up drink, to give up something that we like very much; however there is a rather sad and even sick idea that many people have that God likes people to be miserable—that if we were really pleasing to God, we would be miserable people, gloomy and sad; and this is not true either. This is part, of course, of the basic lie that was created by sin itself: that God is holding something back from us, that God doesn’t want us to have something that we really need and will make us happy. This is not true. So self-denial is not to make us sad or gloomy or miserable or uncomfortable or anything like that. Self-denial is for the purpose of making us free of the things that tend to dominate us. And since that’s the purpose, when we fast, when we sacrifice, when we deny ourselves, we should do so with a sense of freedom and peace and happiness, because we are doing it for our own good to gain freedom!

So these are three ways now that we can look at Lent. Lent is a time to develop a personal relationship to God by praying in the innermost secrecy of our own hearts, by accepting Christ into our lives as our master, as our savior. Secondly, Lent can become a time, by our own choice, of doing good works in a very secret and private way, so no one will ever find out about it, just so that God will be glorified! This becomes an act of faith precisely because we are not relying on anyone else to reward us or to notice; we are depending totally on God; thus, it is truly a work of faith. And lastly, we can learn to discipline ourselves in such a way as to actually enjoy life more. The true and ultimate purpose of self-denial is to enjoy more the blessings that God has given us. If you are really to come to the Lord this evening, and to make this time—the next six weeks of your life—somehow different, somehow more available to God, then you are disposed to receive the ashes and the reminder that they are to us: that life is short and we need to work while the light lasts!
“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, where we was tempted by the devil.” Today’s story about Jesus directly follows the story of his inauguration into public ministry at the baptism. We celebrated this several weeks ago. What it reveals to us is that spiritual life is a battle, a form of combat, a private conflict between holiness and evil. The tension between the two we call temptation. And it is very possible that we do not appreciate the value of temptation in our lives, because it is the very existence of temptation that enables us to choose who we shall be, what kind of person we become. The absence of temptation, then, would be a very serious problem. It would also be an absence of freedom. Temptation itself is a result of the attraction of opposites: evil is attracted to holiness. It may sound strange. The spirit of evil is attracted to the spirit of holiness wherever it sees it, wherever it perceives it, and seeks to undermine and control it.

In Jesus this attempt is completely rejected and foiled. But Luke wants us to be very clear: Jesus’ temptations are our temptations, and they all have to do with power. And so they’re really not talking about, to be very honest, children. At this point they’re not talking about children. Children do not really have power. It is talking about the temptations that come as we grow into power, as we move from childhood into adulthood.

The first temptation of Jesus: the temptation to turn stones into bread. Now, first you might say, “Well, what is so bad about turning stones into bread?” First of all, evil always comes to us in the guise of something good; never does evil show itself as evil! St. Thomas Aquinas says that if we saw evil as evil, we would never want it. We only want what appears to be good. But here is the subtle temptation: it is to use our power for our own sake. Jesus was hungry. He had been fasting. The devil says, “Use your power to transform the stones into bread to feed yourself.” This is the very idea that everyone has in the world: to use whatever power, talent, and ability they have to feed themselves. But Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, says, “But man does not live by bread alone.”

Now, some of you may be young adults in the transition between childhood and adulthood. And you may be wondering about what you are going to do with your life. Well, in society, in our culture, the basic idea is do something you like; do something you enjoy--use whatever talents you have to take care of yourself. Well, partly that may be all right, but in it is a hidden trap: we cannot make ourselves happy. God’s plan for us is not to satisfy ourselves by exploiting the gifts he has given us and thereby arriving at some kind of fulfillment—that does not work. It is not the plan. That is a temptation! God’s purpose is, the plan of God is, that we use the gifts that God has given us in service to others, in love of others; and through love of others we find our fulfillment. We can only find fulfillment when we actually replicate in our own selves the very nature
of God. And God created us, God created human beings, in order to have someone to bless and to give gifts to. That is the first temptation.

The second temptation. The second temptation is really also very subtle. It isn’t to worship Satan; that is not the temptation. The temptation is to believe the lie: “All these kingdoms have been given to me, and I give them to whomever I choose.” That’s the lie! The evil spirit has no authority and no power in our world except the power to deceive; thus, Jesus calls the devil “the father of lies.” When we believe a lie, we do give power away; we give away our own power. We give away our own judgment, and we become slaves to whatever lie we believe. So the temptation, the second temptation throughout life, is to believe in a lie. The power of evil only has power because of our gullibility. Many religious rites of many cultures can be explained basically by saying, “Well, the good powers—we don’t have to worry about them; but the evil powers—we have to worry about them; we must appease them.” So appeasing the powers of evil is an ancient, primitive, religious motivation. It’s still with us! Many decisions people make have to do with appeasing evil, not confronting evil, not standing against evil—as if it has some power to hurt us! Believing that is a sin.

Third temptation: to abuse the power of faith. Not all uses of faith are really good and appropriate. The devil tells Jesus, “Well, you are the Son of God; throw yourself off the temple. God won’t allow you to harm yourself.” Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, says, “You shall not tempt the Lord, your God.” Again, even in the area of faith, it is so easy for us to be distracted from what God asks us to do; and then to think that God will make up for whatever it is that we’re not doing. This type of faith is really tempting God. God does ask of us certain things, to take a certain responsibility for ourselves. And when we throw all caution to the winds and throw all responsibility to the winds and just rely on God, as if that’s faith, we are not believing in God! We are tempting God—the third temptation.

Now, the gospel proclaims to us the victory of Christ over all temptation and over all sin. We symbolize this in the cross itself. Christ has led us through the field of temptations to his own victory on the cross. The cross assures us of God’s victory and the victory of good over all evil—the final triumph. Jesus spared nothing loving us. He spared no cost but gave himself totally that we would come to know the truth, that we would come to serve the Father, that we would come to offer ourselves in service and sacrifice. He has brought us forgiveness and reconciliation, and this we need to acknowledge and keep before our eyes at all times. As we confront the tensions and temptations we have in this world, we have to also keep in mind our faith: [the fact] that we have victory and we have triumph in Christ. Why? Because we have been given the Holy Spirit, and we have the word of God. As we hear from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Now, as we begin the holy season of Lent and are reminded of the temptations that Jesus and all of us face in the battles of life, we need to be reassured of who we are, who has claimed us as his own, who has paid such a great price for our freedom and salvation.
The children of our parish, who are preparing to receive our Lord in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, have recently experienced God’s love and forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation. Today we affirm their identity in Christ and celebrate the forgiveness Christ has won for them and for us by the cross. I now ask all the children who have recently received the sacrament of reconciliation to stand with their parents.

My dear children, never forget that you are a child of God. You are Christian brothers and sisters and members of Christ. Always remember him and be faithful to him. Parents, I ask you to mark the forehead of your child with the sign of the cross. May it always remind you of Christ and how much he loves you. Mark the eyes, ears and lips of your child with the sign of the cross. May you see the works of Christ, hear his words, and speak as he would speak. Mark the sign of the cross over your child’s heart. May Christ always live in your heart. Now, children, I ask you to come forward and stand in front of this assembly. Don’t clump up; you can move down that way a little. Now, to show our support for these children and their families, please let us all stand and extend our hands over them in prayer. By the sign of the cross, the sign of triumph and love, may Christ gather these children to the Lord. May all of us, who are marked with the cross, be a sign of strength to them. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen. You may be seated, but, children, please stay here--children. [A clear, plastic cross on a black cord was placed around each child’s neck by Fr. Paul and Deacon Harry.]
One could be a little confused comparing the different texts of our Scripture concerning the nature of salvation. There are after all different, you might say, schools of thought: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John for four, and then, of course, St. Paul for five. Not all totally agree with each other; for example, yesterday at mass you heard the 10th Chapter of Romans where St. Paul said, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that he has been raised from the dead, you will be saved.” Later on in that same chapter he says, “Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Now, that is what we might call the “faith” school of thought; it emphasizes the importance of faith in salvation.

Today we have the gospel reading from Matthew, which is not the faith-school of thought; and we have to realize that even in the very, very beginning of Church the disciples of Christ realized that the faith approach of St. Paul, who began so many of the early Churches, had to be in a sense modified by the remembrances of what Christ taught. And this is one of the very few times when we hear Jesus ever talking about judgment. And when he talks about judgment he talks about a reality of true division between the good and the evil, and the justification, the eternal reward of the just, and the condemnation of evil. But who are the evil? In this text, what’s very important that we note, there’s no mention of faith--no mention of faith, and no mention of the Ten Commandments!

Not to say that we should not have faith, and not to say that we should ignore the Ten Commandments; but when the inspired author, Matthew, puts into print the very essence
of what the judgment is about, he just doesn’t happen to include those things. He says this to the condemned, “I was hungry and you gave me no food.” Now, did one of the Ten Commandments tell us to feed the hungry? Not really. The presumption here is that we have a spiritual faculty that can perceive need. “Whatever you did to the least of my brothers, you did to me; whatever you neglected to do to least of my brothers, you neglected to do to me.” This requires a faculty, a perception, an intuition into need and into the connection between need and God, and God’s will—-that it is God’s will that we care for others. That just as Jesus is the incarnation of the Word of God, so in some sense analogous to that incarnation, the will of God is connected to, embodied in every human being—-so that we cannot ever say that we don’t see God! We really do. We can’t really say, “Well, we have never encountered the will of God.” Yes we have. Whenever we’ve seen need, we have.

So this is a challenge, of course, for the true disciples to really find the will of God in the need of others, and to live a life of love and service. Now, we cannot do that without faith, of course. So faith is presumed; faith is presumed. But it isn’t simply faith in the words, or in the expression, or in the confession with the lips; it is a faith that lives deeply within our hearts, in our motives. In Matthew’s Gospel, in another text, Jesus says, “It is not those who say, ‘Lord, Lord,’ who shall enter the kingdom, but those who do the will of God.”
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Praying the Our Father  First week of Lent,  Tuesday, March 3, 1998  7:00a.m.  Is 55:10-11;  Mt 6:7-15  (Blessed Katharine Drexel)  (OurFathe)

In today’s reading Jesus gives us a great deal to ponder in regard to what we are doing when we are praying. Just a few basic points for the day: first of all, when we are praying we have to know precisely whom we are addressing. The word “god” in the singular or in the plural could be used in some form or another like “anybody.” But Jesus was very clear on who God is; and so he does not address the prayer, “O God,” because that could mean just too many different things. He says, actually in the original, “Abba,” which is an Aramaic word for “Daddy,” because Jesus is convinced that the best way to think of God is as a strong, supportive and caring Daddy, who can be trusted implicitly to not only know our needs, but to desire--and this is a very important point--to desire to help. He criticizes the idea of rattling on like pagans as if the purpose of prayer is to convince God to help--that is never the problem. We do not have to convince God to help. God is our Daddy and God wants to help.

But helping is not necessarily so simple. Why? Because our priorities are often wrong. So the next point is: if we are going to talk to God, if we are going to ask God for help, we have to be willing to reorient our priorities. Pope Paul VI put it this way, “The only absolute in the teaching of Jesus is the kingdom.” The kingdom refers to God’s plan for us. And if we want God’s help, we have to be willing to accept the help God is going to give us; and that has to do with this plan for the kingdom, which is really a new creation already begun in Jesus. God’s help will never be outside the realm of the kingdom because the kingdom is the absolute--the total vision God has, the total plan God has for

Our Father
us and for our well being, which, of course, has to be connected to every other person; and all of creation is all connected. Too often our sense of self is too isolated from other people, and we think God will now help us in our isolation. Wrong! That is not possible because God is God. God is the Father of all creation, and therefore God’s help for all of us has to be all consistent with the kingdom.

So our priority has to be that the kingdom come and that the will of God be done on earth. This is the third and last point for the day: that we must see that God’s will is not done on this earth; this is a mistake many of the Jews made. They assumed that the way things were, were the way God wanted them. Jesus was constantly confronting this wrong idea. The way things happen on earth does not reflect the will of God, and therefore we are not to be resigned to the status quo. Praying for the will of God to be done is very different from being resigned to the status quo; the status quo does not represent the will of God. And this requires a change in our way of thinking, in most cases. For some strange reason, people grow up thinking that the way the world works is God’s will! That is not true. Jesus was constantly assailing this thought. If God’s will ever is to be done on this earth, it will be because people, first of all, begin to comprehend what it is, and then choose to bring it into action. And this itself is a great work; it is, in fact, the great work that Jesus came to inaugurate. And if our hearts and our desires are focused on this--the coming of the kingdom and the doing of God’s will on earth as it is in heaven--then and only then are we in the right place to ask for our daily needs--bread and everything else.
“This is an evil age that seeks a sign.” Perhaps a better translation would be “demands a sign.” Of course, there are signs all around us; in fact, every single, created thing is a sign of the creator. What Jesus is referring to is, of course, the demands of human egoism that does not, in fact, seek and find but rather demands and does not find. For Jesus Himself said, “Seek and you will find; knock and the door shall be opened. Ask whatever you will and it will be granted.” God is an open God, a God who wants to bless his children. And yet, on the other hand, God is not the kind of God who will prove anything to anybody. And that’s the key to understanding why Jesus says, “This is an evil age.”

There is something in the disordered human will that we call the will of egoism, the self-centered will, that does not really want to see. If we only knew how to look, we could find God in one another; we could find God in the beauty of nature. We could find God everywhere! So, those who do not find God, there is something then wrong within them. Yet, they may still demand that God prove to them that he is and that he loves them.

So now, maybe we need to bring that a little closer to home and to realize that that tendency is something in all of us. That we may potentially or actually, perhaps, have even hidden demands that God prove that he really is in charge of the world, or that God really is capable of caring for his creation or for ourselves in particular. St. Paul says, “We walk not by sight, but by faith.” This means it’s actually central that we do not have certainty about the things of God; that as we walk in our daily affairs we are, as it were,
required to be searching, not demanding that God find us, but that we search for God; that we become
open to the blessings God is wanting to give us, not demanding the blessings we believe he ought to. There is a strange way in which we actually tend to, try to, become God: deciding for ourselves what we need, deciding for ourselves what is best, deciding for ourselves how we need to be loved. But this itself is a lack of trust; this itself is a lack of faith. The Queen of Sheba knew how to search out even the simple wisdom of Solomon. How much more should we know how to listen for the wisdom of God!
Jesus grew up in a culture with a remarkable level of observance. But here in today’s gospel reading he is trying to pull people back somewhat from focus on the observance, the behavior, the law, and the norm, to a deeper part of themselves in the area of their feelings. He says, “The law says, ‘You shall not commit murder,’ but I say anyone who is angry with his brother is a murderer.”

It is in the laboratory of our own emotions that human behavior has its origin. It is said feelings are neither right nor wrong; they just are. Which is true to a point, but they just are real motivations! Actions come from feelings. Feelings are the motivating factors in our decisions. So they are very important. But it’s not so simple because anger doesn’t necessarily, for example, arrive at murder. Jesus was angry. He was angry at the money changers. He was even angry at the Pharisees and the scribes and the high priests, and that’s evident in his teachings. So anger doesn’t necessarily arrive at murder. It may arrive at something else. Martin Luther King was angry at the injustice created by racial hatred. In a similar way, love itself, which we might imagine to be a wholly positive emotion, is not really. In the name of love many crimes have been committed.

The real problem is, of course, not being aware of our feelings. If we are aware of our feelings, whether they be love or anger, fear or anxiety, or anything else, we can consciously direct how those motivating factors actually work their way out. And this, of course, is the way that Jesus is indicating a child of God lives! But if we are unaware of what our emotions are, we can be sure they will work their way out in a very negative way. So if we suppress or shove down our various feelings about people, whether we
may judge them to be negative or not, the ultimate result will be negative. So that the
main factor Jesus is trying to say is we need to be aware of what is going on inside of us,
otherwise we will be liable. Our emotions are a wonderful factor that make us what we
are in many ways, but we have to make them our allies and not our opponents on the way
to the kingdom.
“You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In this teaching there is a clear departure from the way of Israel. The way of Israel was given in the covenant of Moses, defined by the Ten Commandments and the other ordinances of Israel. Now, the way of Israel is basically doable within human nature. With the right emphasis, with the right degree of effort, human beings can live by the law of Israel, perhaps not perfectly, as St. Paul points out; but nonetheless it is a doable thing. But what Jesus is teaching about is something else. It is intrinsically undoable in our human nature. It is not saying, “Love those who love you, but love those who don’t love you. Love your enemies. Don’t bless those who will bless you, but bless those who persecute you.” This is not doable within human nature because human beings are very frail and vulnerable and like every other living organism need to protect and defend themselves against enemies, opponents, and anything that threatens.

So Jesus is now saying that there must be a strength and power in his disciples that is by no means limited to nature—where we get the idea of the supernatural. There must be a supernatural energy and a supernatural motivation in anyone who effectively follows this teaching. And as Jesus Himself demonstrated in his own life, to effectively follow this teaching will likely end in the death of our nature—that living the gospel leads to death. And Matthew proclaims this as the “good news” because of the life which is supernatural is greater than death. Now, Jesus’ disciples understood this as a call to martyrdom. Legend says, although we don’t know for sure, legend says that all the apostles died as
martyrs. It may well be; Peter did and Paul. And the Church was actually based on the martyrs and apostles, that their witness to this higher life is what gave life to the Church. And without this there would be no Church. We would not be here today.

Now, Lent is a time of traditional mortification. And that’s well and good; but we have to understand the real, ultimate purpose of mortification. It is to give greater freedom and power to the supernatural life by marking more clearly within our own consciousness the line between our nature and the life of God, which we were given. So that in the words of St. John the Baptist, “I must decrease, while Christ must increase.” I, in my own frail, mortal nature, must become more and more aware of its own frailty and mortality while the Christ, born in me through baptism, becomes more and more the center of my identity, and the center of my awareness, and the root of my consciousness of who I am. Now, in so far as any practice or any prayer or any time spent during Lent lends force to this process, which is really not our work at all but God’s work in us, then that is indeed a noble and pious work which will enable us to more fully celebrate the Pascal mystery as his, really, anniversary approaches.
“This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him.” The story of the transfiguration is a story of enlightenment. The goal of many sophisticated people, especially many sophisticated religious people, is enlightenment--what is called in the East, “Buddhahood.” Today Peter, James and John experience a burst of light: the glory of God shining forth in their teacher, Jesus. And this is indeed a blessing. However our evangelist, Luke, wants to make it very clear this is not the goal of life, nor the goal of religious life; in fact, it is simply a point on the journey. And Jesus insists that the disciples descend the mountain and return to the world as he leads them on an exodus from death to life. And along the way, Jesus is leading his followers from religion, as it has been practiced, to true faith--which is something very different.

In the whole story there is, of course, this very paradoxical symbol of the cloud. The Egyptians and many ancient peoples worshipped the sun--Ra or Atun or Aten or many other names they gave to the sun--which is after all understandable because the sun is physically the source of life. Without the sun there would be no photosynthesis; without photosynthesis there would be no life--that is true enough. But it is very clear that the inspired authors of the Bible studiously avoid the image of the sun as reflecting God. Rather as God leads his people from a life of slavery in Egypt into freedom and the service of God in covenant, he is with them not through light--but in a cloud! This speaks to them of his presence--and by a pillar of fire at night. In Jesus’ baptism, and today in the transfiguration, the cloud is back. The cloud that causes depression, the cloud that obscures the sun, the cloud that causes our days to be dismal--that very cloud is now a symbol of God’s presence. And from the cloud comes a voice: “This is my beloved. Listen.”

And so this story is told to us, to the believers, followers of Christ, believers in God, to see whether we are really following. Are we really, after all, on a journey? What are we living for? Do we even ask the question? Do we think that God is our ally in our climb to success? Do we find God in the victories of life--our successes, our triumphs, our achievements? If so, we have to be very careful to realize this is not the whole picture and does not correspond at all to the story that we read of God’s presence with his people. God is in the cloud that blocks our vision and in the darkness that obscures the light; and the lesson is clear: when we cannot see we need to learn how to listen. St. Paul makes a point of this. He says, “We walk not by sight but by faith.” There is something incompatible about sight and faith, but there is nothing incompatible about listening and faith. In fact, it is by learning how to listen that we can follow in faith the way of God. And if we listen in the darkness of our own lives, when things seem very dreary and when we are very depressed and when we cannot see anything to hope in, we will hear this voice: “You are my beloved. Listen.”
There is no real fulfillment for us on this earth. There is no fulfillment in religious experience. There is no fulfillment in Buddhahood or enlightenment. Our fulfillment comes only by leaving our mountains and continuing our journeys--never staying put, never becoming static. This was the great temptation that Peter, James and John faced. “Let us build a tent and stay here.” This is the temptation really of all religious people: to become static, to become frozen in some delightful experience, which is really meant to be an indication of what is to come, not something to pull us back into the past! So we need to follow Christ as he leads us on the exodus from death to life.

Now we have our Catechumens with us, who are on their own journey of faith--finding faith, nurturing faith. And I ask you to stand now and pray with them before they leave. There are cards in your pew--if you pass them out. Let us pray together. [Prayer said from the card.]
We see in our Scriptures that there is a clear indication from the very beginning that things are not as they should be. And this marks our Scriptures and our creation story apart from all the other, so called, creation myths throughout the world in this very idea that things are not the way they should be, they are not the way God created them; but in a sense everything is all convoluted and perverted by human choice. Now, the result of this convolution, as it says in the Book of Genesis, is that Adam and Eve, who incidentally are not an ethnic group--Adam and Eve are not the beginning Semites or the first Jews or the first anything specific--but rather are the first human beings, again the universal idea, quite different from, again, the creation myths of other cultures. And they hid from God. They hid from God because in their choices by supplanting God’s wisdom with their own wisdom, God’s knowledge of good and evil with their ideas about what everything was good for, they had made themselves God’s rival. And in this they corrupted, and that’s not too strong a word, the very nature of human consciousness. And this corruption is what St. Augustine calls original sin. And the result of original sin is a natural--now natural--not really natural but natural through the fall--tendency to want to be like God: that is the center, that is the first, that is the greatest!

And this is exactly what the story of Zebedee’s wife is about. In that culture the only way a woman could really gain, you might say, a great position was for her son to do well, not her husband--her son! A woman whose son became a great man was a queen, a great lady of that particular society. Zebedee’s wife comes with her two sons, with this idea of getting ahead, of being the greatest, of being in first place; and she makes a request. Now, of course, she is not unreasonable; so she really doesn’t ask for her sons to be number one because after all there were two of them. And she recognizes the superiority of Christ, and so she asks not for number one but for number two and number three. She is obviously a compromiser!

And Jesus now takes this moment and the ensuing argument that comes from the rivalry--which is natural now in our fallen nature--among men. He takes this very situation and he uses it to teach something first of all about the very nature of God. God is the kind of God who just loves to serve. The Son of Man is coming to reveal the very nature of God. So if we really want to be first, he is not going to dissuade us; but he is going to, more or less, redirect how we understand what it means to be first. Or if we really want to accomplish something, he is not going to take away that desire; he is simply going to redirect it. And how is it going to be directed? Toward service, not toward oneself but toward everyone, toward all! To become the servant of all is to really understand the nature of God--and thereby attain the fulfillment which is in some blind sense being sought all along in our fallen nature, by our desires for success and accomplishments, and being number one, and being first. So Jesus does not take his disciples out of the world; he doesn’t take them away from society. He doesn’t even deny their fundamental desires. He simply redirects them toward love and toward service, which is the real way in which we can find our fulfillment and our happiness because this is
the way that really corresponds to the nature of God in whose image we have been formed. Now, this takes quite a bit of reflection to see how our true best interests and our true self interests are very different from our instincts and very different from our social conditioning--and how it takes perhaps an experience of desert to bring that clearly to mind.
Today we have a special mass for our fifth graders, and I have a few words for them so you can just imagine that you are ten years old and listening from that part of yourself. This actually should not be too hard because, according to Madison Avenue, that’s the exact target of all the advertising—ten years old! Now today, boys and girls, we see a story about a fig tree. And you might wonder what fig trees have to do with the gospel. Now, how many of you have actually seen a fig tree? Can you tell me anything about it? No? Anybody else? Well, I don’t suppose many of you have seen fig trees because they don’t grow in this climate, except in a greenhouse. I used to have to take care of one when I was in school. And I must say it wasn’t a very attractive tree; and first of all it was very stubby, kind of like a big bush more than a tree. But it did have this wonderful thing; it had this beautiful fruit. And that’s why fig trees are fig trees, because they have this beautiful fruit. Now, when I was a boy, we had a grove of different kinds of trees: cherry trees, pear trees and apple trees. Now, why do you think we had that grove? Anybody want to hazard a guess? Why do people have cherry trees, apple trees? Because we liked fruit. We liked to cook it, to bake with it, to eat it. And that’s the reason why people have fruit trees. Now today many people are not really planting fruit trees, not at least the kind of fruit you can eat! They plant ornamental fruit trees like, for example, crabapple trees. Have you ever had a crabapple pie? Anybody? The purpose of a crabapple tree is to give beauty; it’s an ornamental tree.

Now, in a sense people are like trees. We all have a different purpose. And because we have a different purpose it’s very important that we don’t compare ourselves to others. When we compare ourselves to each other we are doing a disservice to ourselves. You see, a fig tree, for example, is actually kind of ugly; but it has good fruit. An ornamental crabapple tree is very beautiful, but it has lousy fruit. So everyone has a purpose according to what God has put into us. When we compare ourselves to each other, we often don’t see the purpose that we have as individuals. We see what somebody else has, and we wish we had that. That’s not fair to ourselves—which brings up another thought.

Young people always tell me—they say, “Life is not fair.” Well, indeed it is not! Not now anyway. Life is not fair, but also life is not over. Life is “in process.” We’re in the middle of it. We can’t tell if life is going to be fair or not—just or not—until we get to the end of it! That’s the idea of divine judgment. At the end of life there’s judgment, and then we will see the justice of life. But now we can’t tell. And the reason why we often think that life is unfair, partly because it is at this stage, but partly because we don’t actually see what our gifts are or what our duties are—what we can do with our life’s gifts. See? We’re spending time looking at others. For example, we say, “They have more talent than I do, or they have more friends than I do, or they have more brains than I do. I wish I had what they have.” But what do you have? There is no one who does not have the gift of godliness. And in some way or another that gift is reflected in your own self, or could be if you let it. You have to allow the godliness that is in you to shine. That means
you have to believe in yourself. Believing in God without believing in yourself does not do any good. You have to believe in yourself as well as God, who created you.

So as you look now to life, you see, well, you may have problems other people don’t have. That may well be true. That may well be true! And that is your job right now to just deal with your life as it is. Maybe in your home your parents aren’t together any more and maybe that has caused you a lot of pain. If that’s true, that is what God wants you to deal with right now--the pain of separation. Or maybe one of your parents has died. Or maybe something else has happened in your life that has caused you great pain. If so, that is where God is in your life right now. That is what God wants to deal with and not something else--and not with some issue that is in someone else’s life but not in yours. So for you to come to the Lord, you have to come as you are--that’s the real person you are right now. That’s the person Jesus wants to deal with.

On the other hand, maybe you are the kind of person who has lots of talents and lots of abilities and good health and a wonderful family and plenty of everything that anyone could ever want. Beware! These gifts are not given to anybody to be squandered. These gifts are not given to anybody just for their own use. Jesus made this point. He said, “God is good to everybody, good and bad.” He says, “The rain falls on the good and the bad. The sun shines on the just and the unjust.” Think about it. God is good to everybody. God blesses even bad people. So don’t think [that] if you have a lot of blessings, those are rewards because you are a great person. That is not what Jesus said. They are not rewards but blessings; and they’re given for the use of God’s people and the kingdom, not just for yourself! And when bad things come into your life, those are not punishments. Jesus made that very clear. God only blesses. Evils come into our life because of all kinds of other reasons: human will, the laws of nature, biology, and whatever. So all good things come from God. They are meant for our use and everyone else’s. And that’s why Jesus used the example of a fig tree. See, a fig tree is not ornamental. There is no reason to keep it around if it is just going to be there. It’s there to bear fruit. And if you are blessed, then God expects you to bear fruit, to bring those blessings into his kingdom, to bring those blessings to other people--to share, to share what you are and what you have. That’s God’s way!

So as we think about ourselves now, we have to ask God to help us to really know who we are and where in our lives he is working with us. We have to be willing and able to bring our pains and our suffering to the Lord, but also we have to be able to acknowledge our gifts and our blessings; then we can be truthful people and real people. And God can use us wherever we are and however we live. God can use us for his work. And that is what he wants to do. So let’s take a moment now to close our eyes. We will just make a little prayer to the Lord. Lord Jesus, help me to see myself as you see me. Help me to open my heart to your love. Amen.
“Do you think that these Galileans were the greatest sinners in Galilee just because they suffered this? By no means! But I tell you, you will all come to the same end unless you reform.” At the heart of Jesus’ message is a call for reform, but a very special kind of reform; in Greek, “metanoia” means really changing the way we think because our behavior, the way we act and the way we react to life, is all a product of our basic view or vision of life. At the root of the human problem--that is a human society full of disorder, violence, selfishness, disregard for others--at the root of all of this is really not, according to Christ, ill-will or malice but much more so ignorance. Now the ignorance being discussed here is not a lack of knowledge of facts or information, but rather it’s the lack of the personal knowledge of God. Were we to really know God, we would act very differently. But as it is, our ignorance leads us to a very serious blunder--a primary one Jesus Himself dealt with constantly--mistaking the way things are in the world with the will of God.

Now, this is a blunder that Jesus Himself dealt with in his own life, and we still deal with it today. People believe that God is the actual source of the way things work in the world. On the other hand, Christ Himself taught his disciples to pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” meaning that the will of God is really done only in that place we call heaven--but not on earth! Earth is the result of other wills and laws other than God’s at work; therefore resignation to the current state of affairs is not obedience to God at all. Untoward events, disasters, sickness, wars, accidents, all kinds of evils are not punishments sent by God. They are not caused by God at all; on the other hand, achievements and success and many blessings are not really rewards. God blesses both the good and the evil because God is love and God loves to bless. So Jesus put it this way: “The sun shines on the just and the unjust; the rain falls on the good and the bad.” Regardless of human moral qualities, God blesses us. But at the same time our life is not unrestricted blessing. It also suffers from other causes: the laws of nature and biology and human will itself.

Now, if we do not understand this very rightly, our personal relationship with God will be poisoned. We will take certain things that happen in life as the hand of God; in fact, the Jews at the time of Christ did exactly that. And that’s what he is talking about in today’s gospel. If someone suffered an accident, they said, “Well, that’s God’s punishment.” If someone got sick, “Well, they deserve it; God is moral he wouldn’t do that without a reason.” So that everything was always connected to God as the cause. Jesus’ point is: God is only the cause of good; evil comes from other sources. If we don’t understand this, our ability to relate to God as a source of healing and salvation will be impaired. And our personal feelings toward God will be poisoned, as they often are in people who have suffered, you might say, great misfortunes and who think they are a personal response from God. And thus Jesus says, “You too shall come to the same end unless you change the way you think, unless you undergo metanoia.”
Now, life is an arena in which we freely create the kind of person we become. Freedom itself requires the possibility of failure; freedom requires the possibility of evil; freedom requires the possibility of everything we experience. The reason for it all is that it allows us to sort among the various possibilities that exist in our lives and to choose the kind of person we shall be. Now, these choices may often be unconscious or barely conscious. So we will reflect on ourselves, and if we do not really like the way we are turning out, then we have to realize that at least unconsciously we have been making choices we really don’t like and we really don’t want for ourselves—therefore the need for reform, changing the way we think, changing the way we choose and decide. Now, life is not in this condition fair. Life is not fair, nor is it over!

The justice of God in Christ’s teachings is something that does not exist now. It exists only in the messianic age, the period of fullest redemption, that we are being asked to work toward. Everyone is born and works and lives in different circumstances. Some people seemingly have very sad and even pathetic circumstances. It seems some people have more than their share of evil, of mishap, of misfortune in their lives; where it seems that other people are full of all kinds of blessings and benefits. They have abilities; they have intelligence; they are successful; they are healthy. One thing we have to realize in this unfair world is that we and all people are not made happy by the circumstances of our lives. The idea that we could become happy if we had different circumstances is really an illusion—the very fact that freezes us into staying the way we are instead of realizing that we can change, but from within, in our attitudes and responses to life.

On the other hand, it is very important that we recognize the lesson of the fig tree. Those people who have been blessed, who have more resources or health—they have a great deal to answer for! As Christ put it, “From those to whom much has been given, much will be required.” These benefits are not given to people for their own enjoyment; none of our blessings are given to us for ourselves alone but to share and to use for the sake and the kingdom of God. Christ put it this way asking the question, “What does a man benefit if he gains the whole world and loses the life of his soul?” That is very possible if we think that the blessings we have are really just for us and not for all, and not for God, and not for the kingdom. Like the fig tree that fails to bear fruit, the prosperous who do not bear fruit for God shall be cut down.
We can see from today’s two readings that not only in the time of Christ, but also in the time of the prophets, that many signs and wonders, especially healing, were an integral part of the message of God: speaking in sign the intentions and the purposes of God, bringing transformation, wholeness, health, joy—inward and outward to those who are able to receive. Now, this, of course, is one of the great problems today in proclaiming the word of God because we live in an era of what we must call disbelief. For example, Jean Jacques Rousseau, a famous philosopher of the Enlightenment, said, “If it weren’t for all the miracles in the New Testament, the world would fall at the feet of Jesus.” A similar idea is reflected by George Bernard Shaw, who wrote a rather extensive essay on this topic. “Miracles,” he says, “are so incredible that they detract,” and I am more or less paraphrasing him: Miracles are so incredible that they detract from the otherwise very credible narrative. They throw a shadow of suspicion over any dogma associated with them. Well, these are actually the spokesmen of our own times, of our own culture. And it’s a culture of disbelief!

Now, even our translations, modern translations of the Bible, do not really comprehend this in the way they even translate the Greek words concerning disbelief. For example, this story from Luke is a story about his [Jesus’] arrival in Capernaum. And in this area of Capernaum he is not able to work any miracles, except a couple. In our modern translation it says, “He was so distressed by their lack of faith.” Well, that’s not what the Greek says. The Greek says, “So much did he marvel at their disbelief.” Well, that’s a different idea. Lack of faith is a lack, like a lack of intelligence, a lack of experience, a lack of wisdom. It’s the absence of something. Disbelief is not! Disbelief is a decision, a choice, whereby we whittle down life so it’s small enough so that we can control it.

Typically that has been, and we see in the first reading from the Book of Kings, the very way of men of power. Men of power whittle down life so that they can control it. In the story of Naaman who is it that actually has any real belief? Well, it’s only the slaves—the poor, powerless slaves. They are open! They don’t disbelieve! They say, “Well, in Israel there’s a prophet. You can go there.” And at first, of course, Naaman is open to the thing. So disbelief is not simply black or white—there are degrees of disbelief as there are degrees of having faith. So he is kind of open at first, somewhat open. He goes to the king of Israel, who has no idea there is even a prophet! Again, this is very significant: the king of Israel is the shepherd of Israel, prime representative of God according to the institute of Israel, the anointed of the Lord—he has no idea that there is a prophet at all, or that the prophet has any ministry of Israel. But his servants do. So once again, the ignorant, the worldly ignorant, the worldly powerless, are open. Then Naaman goes. Well, his openness is limited! He’s willing to submit to the prophet, but under his terms. When the prophet tells him to go into the Jordan he’s absolutely furious. He’s insulted! His pride is wounded. This is not the way he would do it. This shows you there is a great deal of disbelief in him as well. He wants everything in his control, according to his way of looking at things. But again, his servants come to the rescue—the
ignorant, the
powerless come to the rescue and say, “Well, wait a minute. This is so simple. Why don’t you just go along?”

And this becomes paradigm for the Church, for us--if we just go along with God and be not disbelieving, the power of God will be cleansing us. But when we want things our way, when we want to believe that we know better, that’s when we disbelieve. It’s not a lack of anything; it’s a decision. It’s a decision to be in control! And when we decide to gain control of our lives, we can be sure they’ll be out of control! When we decide that we cannot control our lives, then the power of the Spirit will be able to work.
[Today’s gospel reading would be good for us to recall, if we are ever tempted to put a limit on the amount of forgiveness we are willing to give--or receive!] First of all to understand the idea of forgiveness we have to understand the idea of debt. Sin creates debt. Now, there are different ways of incurring debt--usually we think of credit. But there are different forms of debt. We can create debt by force or by stealth. For example, Dwight Eisenhower said, and I am not quoting him exactly, but he said, “Every bomb flown, every battleship launched is a theft from the hungry of the world.” It’s a very biblical insight. But there is a debt created by an inappropriate use of the goods of the world. That’s what sin is--it’s an inappropriate use of something. It’s an inappropriate decision based, of course, on self-will as opposed to divine will, self-love rather than divine love. And this creates a debt against God, but also, and this must be underlined, against others. And not just others in general but certain others--in the case of Eisenhower’s example the poor, the hungry of the world. That’s the idea of debt; debt is the result of sin.

Now, the story that Jesus tells us is a story of how forgiveness can actually take hold and change the life of the world. Why do wars persist? Wars persist because the debt is never paid back. A war launched to pay back one debt creates another. This is true on a macroscopic scale in regard to the many nations of the earth, but it’s also true in our own personal lives. Every act of vengeance, every attempt to get back at someone just creates another debt; and so like a chain reaction evil reproduces itself. Jesus came to break the chain of cause and effect that allows violence and evil to multiply in our world. And he insisted that we learn how to cancel debts. In the Lord’s Prayer in the Latin language the words for forgiveness refer to “debita nostra” forgive us our debts, not trespasses as in the English--debts--a clearer, closer, more, if I say more Christ-like idea.

Now, what are the debts that we need to forgive? Every time we are offended there’s a debt. It could be only in our imagination, or it could be in reality. It almost doesn’t matter. Sometimes imaginary debts are worse than real ones because there’s no one to deal with in regard to an imaginary one. Imaginary hurts sometimes hurt longer and worse than real ones because there is no one who can come and say, “I’m sorry.” So we have to be very careful about what we hold in our hearts. If we feel cheated, and it is very easy for us to feel cheated, we are holding debts--as it were a ledger within ourselves keeping accounts. Who has let us down? Who has offended us? Who has rejected us? And these debts create something in us that is only going to allow evil to multiply. So if we are to find a better world, if we are to allow the kingdom of God to come, then we have to cancel debts. We cannot insist that people pay us back what they owe us. It has to start actually in our families and our homes and our parents. Many people feel somehow let down by their parents, and frankly, objectively many people are let down by their parents. But if we carry this debt in our hearts throughout our whole lives, we are simply poisoning ourselves. Many people have been offended and let down by their spouses. Objectively this has actually happened. Again, holding this debt does not hurt the offender; holding
the debt hurts the offended. It must be canceled if we are to be free! And this could go on and on.

The basic principle is: We need to cancel debts so that we can be free of them, and free of the evil that they will create in us—because if we do not cancel debts, in some way or another we will hand on to others the offense we received. It won’t necessarily be retaliation against the offender, but it will be against someone else at some point when we lose control of ourselves. And the more debts pile up within us, the more we will lose control. So the absolute necessity for every true believer is to take an inner stock of oneself, to recognize any accounts that have piled up, and to cancel all debts. This does not mean that there are not people who have offended us, and this does not mean that they don’t owe something. They do, but we have to allow God to be the one to determine how all that is rectified. “Vengeance is mine,’ sayth the Lord,” even in the Old Testament. Christ, who spent three-fourths of his time trying to teach forgiveness, surely believed that if we are going to have justice in the world, it has to start with forgiveness.
If any teaching caused puzzlement to the scribes and Pharisees, it was probably this one. This reading from Matthew tries to define Jesus’ own intentions as a teacher. The scribes and the Pharisees and anyone else would be forgiven for being confused because what Jesus is expressing in his intention is not necessarily what could be observed outwardly. The New Testament is replete with examples of Jesus’ outward disregard of the law. Therefore this teaching has to be put in the context of this outward disregard for what the law actually says. And the interpretation is this: This is really not an abolition of the law, but a fulfillment of the law. The idea behind that is that Jesus really knows the law in a way no one else knows it because he knows the one from whom the law has come. He knows the heart of the Father.

Now, there will always be people, whether in Jesus’ day or in our day, whether in his religion or ours or any other, who are satisfied with some sort of conformity to the ideas and the rules of a particular religion, that are satisfied with identification with a particular religious group--satisfying one’s need to belong. But Jesus always carried us beyond the level and degree of outward conformity with ideas and rules to seek meaning, truth and true obedience. Now, today we see a great deal of chaos in our world and in our Church. This can be seen either as something totally disagreeable, a result of a lack or loss of perhaps discipline or a willingness to conform and observe the rules, the teachings of the Church, or it could be seen as the beginning of an entirely new level of faith, wherein people are actually looking for and find the meaning, the significance of what the Church teaches. In a practical way it affects the way they live; it affects the choices they make.
is not merely something that is externally conformable or observable. This process is itself a very messy process. And not everyone can go at the same level; not everyone can proceed at the same pace. And yet in this chaos there can be a great deal of growth and spiritual awakening and conversion on a much deeper level than simply identifying with the group--mentally agreeing with ideas and teachings, physically conforming with various rules and rituals--but entering into the very meaning!

So what seemed in Jesus’ day to be abolishing the law, Jesus claimed was not abolishing anything, but in fact fulfilling the inner direction and significance of the law. And in our own time the exact parallel: What might seem to be an abolition of a certain sort of uniformity and even order might really be a growth to a much deeper level of awareness and union with the heart of the Father. Five hundred years ago the Christian Church was torn asunder by hundreds and thousands of divisions that persist to this day. Now, how could that have been if these believers had really know the founder? So where do we stand about ourselves? Do we see abolition or fulfillment?
The evangelist, Mark, wants us to realize how basically conservative Jesus’ teaching really is, that at it’s basis it lies upon the well known, well accepted, received teaching within Judaism. What is quoted here, of course, is Deuteronomy Chapter 6--the famous Shema, or watchword of Israel. Now, the first thing we must say about this is it is far loftier in it’s intent than the, so called, Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are mostly prohibitions, only two real commandments: “Keep holy the Sabbath” and “Honor your father and mother.” The commandments are basically social in nature, but this is beyond the social order. This gives an orientation to the mind, the heart, the inner person. Now, in this orientation of all of our mind, heart, and soul toward God, we have to recognize that we really are very rarely ever so united that we really love anything or anyone with all of our heart or all of our soul or strength or mind. This lack of totality is precisely the problem: we are divided. We vacillate from one moment to the next. Some people could be considered almost different persons from one moment to the next so disunited are we on the inside. That’s the first point: If we are ever to live out this spirit of even the Old Testament, we need to achieve a much more profound unity within ourselves.

Now, if Jesus stopped there it would not be in any way revolutionary, but he did not stop there. He went a step further. He picked another law also in the Old Testament in the Book of Leviticus Chapter 19. A law that was really one of many, one of six hundred thirty six I believe it was, written stipulations. And he picked it out, and he said, “This
one, this one is included in loving God with your whole heart and your whole mind—that when you love your neighbor you’re not being divided from the love you give God. The totality of love that you give to God includes your neighbor. You’re not diverting anything from God when you love your neighbor. You’re not taking anything out of your own heart and mind or soul that belongs to God when you love your neighbor because God loves your neighbor.” And this thought, of course, comes from the individual genius within Jesus Himself trying to bring people to see how God is and how devotion to God can be nothing but imitation of God, becoming like God. That’s the only thing that’s worthy. If God loves my neighbor and I love God, then I have to love my neighbor as God does. God’s love is unconditional, not being based on his being a good neighbor! He’s drawing us closer to the heart of the Father, showing us that the only way to really be obedient children of God is to allow God to sire his own loving nature within us. And if we are to love our neighbor with that same love that God does, well of course it almost goes without saying, we have to love ourselves in that same way!
Christ is, in today’s gospel reading, trying to focus on an area of life that is easy to ignore. We like things simple, and even in Scripture sometimes the sacred authors oversimplify the issue of virtue. For example, in 1 Timothy it says, “The love of money is the root of all evil.” You’ve heard that expression, but it’s not really true. “The love of money is the root of all evil.” It’s not the root of all evil; it’s the root of a lot of evil, but not all evil. In the Far East the Buddha taught that all evil is rooted in sexual lust. Well, a great deal, but not all evil. There is a proneness to look at evil as something outside of ourselves, something tied up with things or persons, but always with behavior, with use, with choices. But Christ is trying to show us that sinfulness in its radical nature is really attitude—a choice yes—but not necessarily one made by ourselves personally and consciously, but an attitude that then informs our decisions and colors everything.

In this way John of the Cross came to the conclusion that of all the capital sins, and there are actually seven of them except one, of all the capital sins the worse he says is pride. Pride is worse than greed. Pride is worse than lust. Pride is worse than anger even though anger can cause murder. Pride is worse than all of them. That’s what John of the Cross says. Why? For the very reason Christ produced this parable. We can actually develop all kinds of virtues while holding on to pride; in fact, this is the great danger of good works. We can become generous to a fault, as pure as the driven snow, totally controlled in our intake of food, diligent and zealous in all of our activities; and yet in our own inner attitudes think that we are superior, better than anyone else—precisely because of our virtue! Now, this is what Christ called, or an example of what
Christ called “straining the gnat, swallowing the camel.” Because if we think of sin as an enterprise of trying to make ourselves equal to God, pride is the success of that enterprise. And so if we are really to become god-like, we need to become grounded in a truthfulness that is not inflated, that is not artificial, that does not compare oneself with someone else. You indeed may be superior to someone else, but maybe you started out like that; so that’s not a virtue--that’s just a happenstance! We cannot compare ourselves to other people.

What we need to compare ourselves to is the person God has called each of us to be. And no matter how much we have practiced virtue and no matter how much we have accomplished in our lives, there is still a space to go. There is always something of God that is still lacking within us, or we wouldn’t still be here! This world is a world of growth; and if we have already drawn [grown] to our maximum, we can’t stay here. So the mere fact that we’re here means we’re all the same; we all have to grow. There is still something lacking. The only thing we need to compare ourselves to is that ideal that God sees in us that he is still calling us to. Everyone else around us--we don’t know where they started, and we don’t know where they will finish; and they aren’t our business. “Everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled; everyone who humbles himself shall be exalted.”
“‘My son,’ replied the father, ‘you are with me always, and everything I have is yours.’” Today’s parable focuses on the image of father. There are many different images that we might have for God; some of them are good and some that are not so good. The New Testament is an elaboration of the images that Jesus used and accepted for God, and among them all, the most important is the image of father. The image of father for each of us is a different one. It may be positive; it may be negative; it may be neither--neutral. It is said that in modern society fathers are often invisible in family life--often gone. In Jesus’ day fathers were not invisible. In that particular kind of society, called the patriarchal society, security depended well-nigh totally on father. And not only security, but everything else of a material nature: one’s social standing and one’s wealth and one’s position in a society; all was determined by who one’s father was--so that you became socially, culturally what your father was.

Now, Jesus uses this sociological fact to try to startle his listeners into realizing that they stand to inherit a vast fortune, but one not measurable in material terms--that God really wants to treat us as his children making us heirs to everything he is and possesses. And yet the sad truth is that we live mean, small, often dispirited lives at a great distance from the God who wants to recognize us as his own and bless us with the inheritance of eternal life. And this distance and the pain and misery that follows is really our own fault. It is we who have distanced ourselves from God, and not the other way around. At the center of this parable, and many of the parables if not most of Christ, is the heart of the father! And Jesus endeavors to bring his followers into a closer more intimate connection with the heart of the father!

In the parable of today there are two sons. Each of them has distanced himself from the heart of the father: one in an obvious and blatant manner, the other in a more hidden and occult manner. Now, the prodigal son represents an aspect of life that is very common: people turning away from God and, as it were, doing their own thing! The other son represents another very common aspect of life: people who really are for whatever reason and for whatever motivation obedient to God and to the teachings and laws they believe God has given, and yet they remain likewise far from the heart of the father. Although the elder brother never leaves home, never disobeys his father, he is distant and really longs secretly for the company of his own friends. The friendship on the level of the father is not something that fills him with satisfaction or desire. He is cold and unresponsive.

Now, in Jesus’ own ministry we see the prostitutes and publicans, public sinners, who are experiencing reconciliation in the ministry of Christ. And this spectacle was criticized by the religious right, the well-ordered religiously rigorous people who controlled that society. And Jesus’ purpose in telling this story was doubtless to invite them into a similar repentance; after all, penitents often make the best followers. The problem was, and is today, that oftentimes people who are cold in regard to God do not recognize there is
anything wrong with them. People who lag in personal relationship with God don’t see anything wrong with them because they follow the law like the elder brother. They never disobey God. In some external way they feel that they have done everything that’s possible to do, and maybe they have; but they aren’t everything they could be, which is a different issue, which Jesus is bringing up! Becoming a true follower of Christ is not a matter of doing everything that can be done; it’s a matter of being what we can be—children of God, really relating to God as father, really full of the feelings the father has for others. “Everything I have is yours.” If everything God has belongs to us, then in a sense we should share his compassion and his burning anxiety for all his other children. And this is a great privilege, not a burden or a duty that can be executed like following orders; but it is a new way of living that we can only come to through conversion, through recognition of God’s great love.

And so we need to wonder and to question ourselves: Do we really desire God above all things and beyond all others? Do we really desire to please God? What could that really mean? It’s not a matter of doing; it’s a matter of being! Do we really want to be the person that God wants us to be?—Like him? The elder brother could not share the father’s joy; thus, deprived himself. Are we thus depriving ourselves? If so, we are in need of reconciliation, not for what we have done wrong, or for what we have not done right, but for who we aren’t yet! Joyful children of a very happy father! Jesus is encouraging all of us, good and bad, to a new way of life. Lent is a time for us to reflect on who we are, especially who we are in relationship to God, and whether we are really in a true sense benefiting enough from the wonderful blessings that God wants to bestow upon us. Someone who wants to be a child of God needs to tell God that. Now during this Lent in the next couple of weeks we will have opportunities to celebrate the mercy and the reconciliation of God. In particular we will have a service on March 30th, Monday evening at 7:30. And I would invite all of you to come, even if you don’t have anything to say! Just come to celebrate the joy of the Father!
“Unless you people see signs and wonders, you do not believe.” It’s necessary for us to recognize that Jesus in today’s gospel story is peeved. He has already stated that “a prophet is not accepted in his own country,” and yet that’s where he is, in his own country--heathen Galilee! There is a relationship between faith and signs that our evangelist, John, tries very carefully to present to us. “You people do not believe unless you see signs and wonders.” But on the other hand, signs and wonders cannot be worked without belief; but that’s a remark made in Capernaum in Mark’s gospel. So people do not believe in God’s signs, but there are no signs without belief! Ironically it is precisely in Galilee, Jesus’ home territory, that the first two signs are worked--the sign at Cana and this one. Because although a prophet is never accepted in his own town, and that’s true; but on the other hand, Galilee is not a believing kind of place anyway. In a typical, traditional Jewish sense it’s really a heathen territory; it actually was a colony of Jews living in a foreign land. So whatever Jews lived in Galilee were foreigners. That’s the other side of the story: There were enough foreigners to allow signs to be worked.

Faith and signs--they are inter-related. We have to ask ourselves, ”Well, what is a sign a sign of?” It’s not a sign of power--primarily. It’s not proof that Jesus can do what others cannot. That’s not the way to present it. The signs are signs of the kingdom. The kingdom is a dimension of the creation that we normally don’t experience or see. And the sign is a manifestation of that dimension that is, more or less, breaking through into what we might call our normal experience. But the sign does not work except in so far as our normal experience is disordered, which is another way of saying from God’s
viewpoint
abnormal. So the sign is a window for us to see into the will of God. A sign is a way for us to get hold of what God really has intended from the beginning for us and for our earth. What we take for normal is not normal in God’s sight. What we think is natural is really sub-natural. God has other intentions. And whenever there’s willingness at least to suspend disbelief, then the kingdom can break through as it did in today’s story—even though Jesus was peeved.

We have to understand Jesus’ interest is in the kingdom itself, not so much in the individual issues that people bring to him. Why there are not more signs is that there is not more desire for the kingdom. Too much we are preoccupied with our own little needs, our own wants and desires, our own moans and illnesses. Jesus is not primarily concerned with that. He’s concerned with bringing the kingdom, whose power restores all things, to the original intention of God. But Jesus’ priorities are not our priorities; thus the peevishness of Jesus, even though he does grant the request because he is a compassionate man. But he is also trying to teach and to lead people beyond where they are. At one point it says, “This is a evil generation because it seeks a sign.” A true sign is a sign and a work of transformation. A true sign is a miracle, a manifestation of God’s kingdom and God’s will. He taught his disciples to pray this way. We must always pray, as we do at every Eucharist, “Thy kingdom come.” This has to be our priority. And as we can bring our own hearts and desires into that priority, we will see many signs and wonders accompanying our own.
In today’s gospel reading we have yet another example of Jesus’ healing ministry, yet another example of a miracle, which means the manifestation of the kingdom; thus, it is important for us to always study these stories and recognize the circumstances—how they are different and how they are the same. Now, in regard to these various stories, we have seen stories of healing where the healing itself is initiated by the one who is sick or disabled, such as the Syro-Pheonician woman with the hemorrhage. Jesus said to her, “Go, my daughter, your faith has been your salvation.” We’ve also seen, in fact twice in Capernaum, healings where the healing was initiated by someone else. In one case it was a father on behalf of his son. In another case it was a centurion on behalf of his servant. In each of these cases there was a clear component of faith. In this particular case we do not see a component of faith, nor do we see that the healing is initiated by the one who is sick or by someone else—by Jesus himself. He picks him out as it were from the crowd, and asks him if he wants to be healed. Why? Why does he pick him out from the crowd? Why does Jesus go after him? He doesn’t know who Jesus is. There is no seeking on his part at all. There is no faith.

Now, the various evangelists, four evangelists, show us these different stories to show us that when it comes to the healing ministry of Jesus, what is primary is not the particular needs of the people—that is not primary. What is primary is the purpose of the kingdom. The evangelist wants us to clearly see that this man is fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time, which in a sense is a kind of poetic justice because he has been there for thirty-eight years. And thirty-eight in the Bible means long, but not long enough! Forty would be long enough; thirty-eight means not quite long enough, a long time but not long enough. He has been waiting for the movement of the waters, but he is never able to participate in this natural spa, whatever it was. By this particular moment it suits the purpose of the kingdom to restore him to full health, and to use him to proclaim the message of the kingdom, which is basically: The Sabbath is over.

The Sabbath law was a very important law and custom for the Jewish people, and was rooted in God’s own behavior as they understood it, as described in the Book of Genesis: “And he rested on the seventh day.” But something almost perverse took over this beautiful law and custom of resting in honor of God’s own creative, you might say, primacy. The Sabbath rest was to honor the fact that we in our work can really do nothing and get nowhere without God. That’s the meaning originally, but then it gets perverted in a certain very peculiar way. And the rabbis and the various theologians were convinced that the resting of God meant that God had finished with the creation. It’s done. It’s the way God wants it. It’s perfect. And this meant that people who were lame, who were deaf or who were dumb or who were poor or who were in any way in adverse circumstances, that was just too bad—because the world was the way God wanted it! And God must have a reason because God is a very moral God, very wise God; so if you are in adverse circumstances, there’s a good reason for it. Pity you.
Jesus is saying, “That is wrong! You have taken an originally beautiful idea and perverted it. God is notfinished! The world is not the way God wants it! The will of God is not done on earth, as it is in heaven. The sick are not the way God wants them. The blind and the lame are not being punished for someone’s sin or for their own. The poor are not to be written off as luckless. God is in fact very much at work beginning the new creation. And this man is called into service for the purpose of proclaiming that: The Sabbath is over.”

Now, as we look at our own needs, it is very important that we see them in the prospective of the kingdom; even now, and as it has always been, healings will take place when they suit the purposes of the kingdom! And if we can help ourselves in any way, the greatest way we can help ourselves is to orient ourselves toward the kingdom, to become volunteers in proclaiming the kingdom, to become willing evangelists, envoys of this new creation that God is beginning, and has been beginning in his Son, and will continue to construct and build and shape and form until it’s completed because God is God--and his will shall be done.
“Has no one condemned you?” Jesus said, “Nor do I condemn you. You may go. But from now on, avoid this sin.” This story is a story that in so many ways reflects the spiritual genius, insight, and compassion of Christ. He is completely dedicated to the moral ideals of the law. And when it comes to sexual ethics, it might be necessary to repeat what the moral ideal of the law is. It is that marriage is the threshold of all appropriate and virtuous sexual activity. Outside of or before marriage there is no appropriate sexual activity. And Jesus clearly upholds this principle. And yet he does so in a way that is completely novel, completely new with him. He recognizes that considering the nature of humanity in its present condition, affected as it is with sin and weakness, that this moral principle is very lofty and for some very burdensome. As with all of his teachings, he never imposes them with force, which one could not say for the law itself. Jesus never imposes anything with force. He recognizes that each person must come to accept principles, ethical laws and norms, for herself or for himself. It cannot be imposed.

Secondly, he recognizes that there is even a greater issue than the integrity of the moral law, because the issue that Christ is always addressing is pleasing God. The real motivation behind everything he does is pleasing God—not avoiding punishment, not avoiding other’s disapproval, surely not that, but pleasing God! And the most important part of pleasing God is actually becoming like God, “being imitators of God,” says St. Paul. Now, how do we imitate God? How do we become like God? First of all we have to know what God is like. We are born all potential. A child comes out of the womb all potential. Potential is both good and evil because the child has a free will that may or may not choose good, beneficial, desirable, admirable qualities to bring into his or her character. So we’re born all potential. And the goal of life is to finish the job that God and nature has begun. We are the ones who finish the work of art and present ourselves to the Lord of all. As we leave this earth, this is who we have chosen to become.

Now, in this process the most important thing is that we understand precisely what God is like so that we can in our own unique way incorporate those qualities of godlikeness into ourselves. For this reason Jesus was always harping on the issue of being a child of God—not a concept too often heard in the Old Testament but constantly at the forefront of Christ’s own teachings—because a child is like a parent in some way, that is a child has the same nature as a parent--different personality but the same nature. In a similar way we all have our own personalities, but we’re to have the same nature as God through adoption--through adoption and through grace and through redemption. And this, of course, is Christ’s great work: to make that possible for all of us because it’s not the case as we are. So he teaches us that we have to be like God—and that is compassionate! “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Be perfect as your Father is perfect.” And the perfection of the Father is a perfection of love and mercy. And so if we are to become like God, we have to become perfect and compassionate, loving and merciful. If instead we become perfect in rigidity, if we become forceful or
violent people, even with a good ideal in mind, we will fail the basic test, which is to become like God. This means that every true follower of Christ is engaged in ongoing conversion! The life of a disciple cannot be static. It’s ongoing, always moving toward the goal of incorporating God into our own personal natures. God’s work, yes, but with our cooperation.

Now, in the life of a true disciple there is no room for guilt. Guilt comes from condemnation, and condemnation does not come from God; so guilt does not come from God. Strangely, guilt comes from a failure to become a disciple in the true sense. It comes from clinging to our own self-centeredness. Forgiveness involves letting go of guilt, of condemnation as well as self-righteousness. And so it says, “With God there is mercy and plenteous redemption.” St. James talks about love’s ideal law. And he is very well aware that all human beings fall short of love’s ideal law, but this is no cause for guilt. It’s cause for a renewed desire to let go of our self-centeredness and let God fill our emptiness. It is motivation to become less so that God can become more within us; thus forgiveness and grace from Christ brings freedom from all guilt and condemnation in the joy of Christ’s Spirit.

Now, during Lent we are encouraged to reflect perhaps more closely on ourselves and on the condition of our relation with God, especially in so far as it is effected by ongoing conversion. Perhaps from time to time we find the need to express our own sense of frustration or failure, or we find the need for a special blessing to lift us from depression or guilt or a sense of failure. This is why the Church has been granted by God the grace of reconciliation. This is a wonderful benefit that comes from the sacrament of Holy Penance. It is to make us able to live a new life. It is to make us able to rejoice in God in spite of ourselves, in spite of our failures. Well, tomorrow evening our parish will celebrate a communal sacrament of reconciliation. And in the next two weeks there will be other times available to you to celebrate this great mystery of God’s love. And I would urge each of you to do what you can to celebrate this sacrament of forgiveness because the sacrament of forgiveness is really a victory celebration of mercy over condemnation.
If we reflect upon the formation of our conscience, we can see that it is a rather complex development. Our earliest sense of conscience comes from feelings we perceive from those who care for us. Their anger, their displeasure, their rejection causes us to feel bad, and we learn to relate this to our behavior. This is a very basic and primitive kind of response within young human people. Now, Jesus was always challenging the formation of conscience people had. And there are two reasons for this. The first one is that it is very possible that the people who care for us are themselves not that keenly tuned into the will of God. So if we pick up their values, we may be picking up biases, prejudices, ways of acting, which are not really objectively the will of God. Now, the prophets had already said that over and over again: that even the leaders of the people were not really objectively following the will of God. They felt that they were. They felt they were doing right. They felt justified. They felt righteous. They felt affirmed. The prophets and Jesus said, “But you’re not really righteous, and you’re not really following the will of God.”

If the will of God can’t come to us that way, not in an indirect way, the will of God is something else. And it takes something in us that is not simply a natural feeling to perceive God’s will. We need the gift of the Holy Spirit. We need an openness. And we need a profound sensitivity that is detached from the desire to be approved of by others, which is one of the most powerful forces in our emotional lives--the desire to be approved of by others. The sad truth is that this very desire to be approved of by others, which in the beginning motivates us to conform with the values of our caregivers, our parents, our families, also motivates us to do every kind of evil. It is a desire to belong. And how much evil has been done in the world by people who just want to belong! In order to belong they will exclude others. In order to belong to those they want to belong to they will hate and they will kill, but what’s worse they will grow bitter and they will poison their own personal lives.

Now, objectively the will of God is really for each of us to thrive and to be fully alive from head to toe. St. Irenaeus says, “The glory of God is man fully alive,” “man” meaning “human being” fully alive--“homo.” And so in the Letter to the Ephesians St. Paul is trying to encourage us to look at what is it in our lives, although we may not think it’s in the wrong, although we may not feel there is anything at all wrong with it because it is not contrary to the way we were brought up, and it’s not contrary to the people we live with, and it’s not contrary to the people we want to belong to. But what in us is really causing us trouble? What is turning us inwardly into a negative or cold or distant or judgmental person? The Pharisee that invited Jesus to dinner was not a bad man, but he really didn’t invite Jesus because he loved Jesus. And he didn’t really invite Jesus to be able to learn and to grow from this encounter. He was holding Jesus at a distance wondering what he might get from him, or wondering perhaps how he might put something over on him.
It’s very easy for us to think of God just like we used to think about our parents, someone we need to placate. But that is not what God is about--being placated! God is
about creating something new, and he’s inviting us to be at the forefront of this new creation. He has invited us to become part of it by baptizing us into his Son, becoming really and truly adopted children of God. And what he wants us all to learn how to do is to live as children of God! And this turned out to be no easy task. The love that Jesus speaks of is not the love of our knowledge. The love that Jesus speaks of is a love that knows how to suffer, to endure. It’s a love that is of God. The Crucified Savior Is No Stranger--that’s the title of a book. It’s a lot to think about. We mustn’t think of Christ hanging on the cross as something that happened a long time ago effected by people other than ourselves. We are always crucifying Christ in ourselves and in others when we don’t learn how to accept and cherish as this sinful woman did to Jesus in the Pharisee’s home. It was a simple act, and yet it spoke volumes of her desire.

And sometimes believers, or desire, becomes so cold. We want to keep God at a distance. We want to please God, but we don’t really want to get close. And the gospel is constantly beckoning us to become close, to let God come into our hearts, to let God become the very center of our lives! This is really the meaning of our baptism, but how do we really let that baptism live in us? So back to the Pharisees and the prophets and Jesus. The prophets and Jesus are trying to tell us: “Look to yourself. Try to think about what are you doing with your life! Where have you been crucified and where are you crucifying others?” It is precisely in these places where Jesus wants to come tonight. He wants to bring his healing love and his forgiveness, not his judgment, not his condemnation. Jesus understands all forms of weakness. But we must also learn to understand weakness in ourselves and in others and to bear them. By bearing them we are really loving as God loves. Now, tonight we are not going to spend any time with a written, formal examination of conscience. The gospel is our examination of conscience. We are going to spend some time in prayer and ask God to show us how he wants to come to us, and how he wants to heal us, and how he wants to make us fully alive.
Both of today’s readings are about a very important religious topic, namely Judgment.

Now, the word for judgment in Greek is usually used to mean condemnation. It’s in that sense that Christ once says, “Judge not less you be judged.” It means do not condemn and you will not be condemned. But judgment is actually a larger issue. It has to do with deciding what is true. In this sense Christ never said, “Judge not,” because we do have to judge what is true. “Judge not” means only do not condemn; it does not mean do not discriminate. Discrimination is a very important action, choice, decision that we make because it is our own commitment to the truth. And what we commit ourselves to in truth is a measure of who we become. Nothing good can ever come from a lie. And so if we fail to judge the truth, we will fail to become anything of value. So judgment is a very essential part of our own growth and maturation as human persons.

Now, Jesus says to the Pharisees, “You judge by appearances.” In the story of Susanna as well it was a judgment by appearance. What does this mean? It means we deduce from outward appearances what is true. Now, in some regard this may be valid in some incidental, everyday matters. But in regard to the truth, the truth used in the biblical sense, the truth that will make us free cannot be deduced from appearances. The truth about other people cannot be deduced from appearances. There is a great evil in gossip. Gossip is all about appearances. St. Paul puts gossip in a list of great evils equal to sorcery, adultery and murder. Now, most people do not sense the true malice of gossip. The malice does not exist simply in the evil intention of those spreading the gossip, it’s in the very deduction from appearances. It cannot lead to truth. We cannot
know from
appearances what a person is like. And when we judge people in this way, we do them a great disservice, and commit a grave offense against God. That is why the Church has always remembered and maintained this rather strange story of Susanna in the Book of Daniel.

If we are going to judge according to God, we need the help of the Holy Spirit. We need an aid beyond our own senses and our own reason. Unaided reason cannot attain to the truth that makes us free, the real truth. And so there is need for all believers to be very careful, to be very cautious about how we make decisions, about how we judge, including ourselves, but especially other people. We have to be very cautious. We cannot judge on appearances. We have to look beyond and beneath appearances, beyond and beneath. Through the help of the Holy Spirit we come to the real core of reality. The Pharisees in many ways were good men. Jesus could look at them in the face and say, “You know neither me nor the Father, and if you knew me you’d know the Father.” This, of course, is a profound idea: we know Jesus; we know the Father. In some small degree that’s actually true about everything we know. If we actually know another person in this spiritual sense, we can come to know God. We are sent to be revelations to one another.
Lifted Up

The New Testament has always regarded the exodus experience of the Israelites as the outward paradigm or foreshadowing of the true mission of Christ, which is also an exodus—not so much from one geographical place to another, but for another: from one kind of place of living, one quality of life to another. Today Jesus says, “I am from above and you are from below.” Those are two different ways of living—one in union with the Father and one distant from the Father. In the first reading we hear about the saraph serpents and the murmuring of the people. This also is part of our inner journey. Murmuring of course, or as it is translated here complaining, is an inner complaint. It’s a complaint to oneself, a mumbling and a murmuring and a groaning, sometimes expressed outwardly. The point is it’s an objection to life. It is quite remarkable that there is more description of the Israelites objecting to their journey to the promised land than there is any record to their objecting to a life of slavery and bondage. But this rightly does describe human beings.

The story of the journey is meant for us to think about how we ourselves often object to the circumstances of our lives—how we think things would be so much better for ourselves if only outward circumstances, people, situations were to change. Now, the point is that these difficulties are not irreverent to our journey. They’re part of the journey. They’re an important part of the journey. And just as the Israelites had to look at the saraph serpent to be healed, we have to also look at what bites us. All the problems we have in life are all there for a reason. The people that get under our skin get under our skin for a particular reason that is in us! And that is what we have to look at. That’s part
of our journey to a fuller and higher life with the Father. And there is a constant pull backwards, a desire to go back to the mindless comfort of the womb. Even the comfort of addictions—why are so many people addicted? Because it’s comfortable. And there is this pull back toward some sort of easy life that goes nowhere, that is nothing but bondage. And there are days when it doesn’t seem worthwhile to struggle on the journey. And on those days we need to reflect on the saraph serpents—a foreshadowing actually of the cross of Christ. As Jesus says, “When I am lifted up, you will know that I AM,” a reference to Moses lifting up the saraph serpent. We are healed by our wounds, and moreover we are healed by Jesus’ wounds! And we need to see the reason for everything and know that it is all part of our growth toward God and toward freedom. And this was purchased for us at a very great price, and yet at the same time we too have to exert a certain kind of real effort to be able to receive this gift of redemption.

The Pharisees and many people today do not really know who Jesus is. But he assures his listeners, “I AM,” the very words that God spoke to Moses when he beheld the burning bush. We need to be aware of the fact that our lives are really holy ground, and it is God that is fashioning something, but not without our own difficulties, and not without our own will. So each day we can come closer to knowing the Father as Jesus knows him.
This reading from John’s Gospel has a certain sort of puzzle. It says, “Jesus is speaking to the Jews who believed in him”; and it says Jesus says, “You are trying to kill me.” Well, what is the basis of this? Well, the gospels were written long after the resurrection of Christ. In the early days of the Church the gospel was an oral proclamation, and the various possible apostles and missionaries spoke the various teachings in certain little units that were easy to remember. Later on the evangelists, in due course of time, set down various parts of this oral tradition; but, of course, not all of it. And that is why sometimes the very same stories told by two or three different evangelists were with a slightly different slant. That’s due to the fact that they all come from the earlier tradition that was oral.

Now, in the tradition of the Johannine Church, what we do know is that there was a terrible struggle that was inaugurated, of course, by the split that took place between the rabbis and the Christians. Jesus, of course, was Jewish and the apostles were Jewish--and the early Church was Jewish. At a certain point, around 70 AD, the rabbis decided that anyone who professed the name of Jesus had to be expelled from the synagogue. And there were many Jews who believed in Jesus. And now came the test: Will they really follow Jesus or will they, more or less, go back to their old traditions? And that’s the background of this particular section of John’s Gospel--because each gospel has a setting. This setting is this great conflict between people who believe in Jesus, but who don’t really believe in Jesus--who do believe something but not really what Jesus Himself is proclaiming.

Now, I imagine that this is not a unique, historical occurrence—that even in our own day there are many people who believe in Jesus but they don’t really believe what Jesus Himself taught. And there’s the difference. Jesus describes himself here as a son of the Father. He describes himself as coming from God and doing not his own will, but the will of the one who sent him. But he describes the opponents here as children, really, of the devil: “You’re doing your father’s work,” that’s what he is referring to. Now, these are very, very difficult words. But there comes a time when the choices we make are full of all kinds of consequences that we don’t foresee. There are times that by not really accepting God on God’s terms we really do abet the world of darkness; and we really do act as children of the devil, which means children of deceit. The point is always that the devil is the “father of lies,” and everything that is lying or deceitful comes from the deceitful one. So this is a whole teaching on truth—the truth that makes us free.

The truth that makes us free is the truth that comes from God! It is not the truth of our own making! This is very difficult, especially for Americans, to understand. One would think from listening to Americans that everyone has their own truth, that everyone has a right to his or her own truth, that there is nothing really truly objectively true for everyone. And, of course, this is the whole problem: The truth that we fabricate, the truth that is a product of nothing more than our own understanding is just too small to be really

The Truth Will Make You Free
true. It’s too small to make us free, and it isn’t pure enough to be really true either. It’s mixed with falsehood. And when our truth is mixed with falsehood it can’t do anything. It cannot set us free; it cannot produce anything good! Nothing good comes from a lie.

So what the Scripture is really trying to get the believers to do is to search through their own understanding and their own evaluation and their own judgments and discriminations. Are we really so totally dedicated to God and willing to accept God’s work and God’s revelations on God’s terms, or do we demand that we are able to fashion everything to suit ourselves? This seems to be the rage in the modern world, and it has surely invaded the Church—people who think that they have a right, more or less, to fashion everything to suit themselves. But this is not the obedience to something greater than ourselves. When Jesus says, “The truth will make you free,” he means we don’t have the truth. He means the truth has us! We need to be in submission to it. It’s greater than we are; that’s the point. So faith has many facets. One of them is this total acceptance of God on God’s terms. And this is the truth that will set us free.
If we carefully study the Scriptures and the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus, we will see a very important theological reflection taking place; and it has to do with the role of the law in the crucifixion of Christ. Now, as an historical fact Jesus was crucified by the Romans. Crucifixion was a state process, an official execution of the government; and the government was Roman. So it’s a historical fact: Jesus was sentenced to death by the Roman government. But why? That’s where the theological reflection has its beginning. Why did the Romans choose to crucify Jesus? And the only reason can be because of his influence among the people. He must have been some sort of threat. And his threat, the threat that he posed, was all tied up with his mission--with his teaching and with his claims.

Now, in today’s reading we see that the people are accusing him of blasphemy. Incidentally if they had really tried him in a Jewish court and convicted him of blasphemy, they could have stoned him to death and never have involved the Romans in the first place. But that’s not how it happened. Every time they tried to eliminate him, to stone him, which was actually in a sense legal for them to do, they failed. But now they’re accusing him of blasphemy, and the blasphemy, of course, is against one of the commandments. And in a sense it is not simply that the law failed to produce perfection, as St. Paul says. It’s not only that, but the law also created the fury that crucified Jesus. There was a reason why the Romans chose to eliminate him--the fury behind it, the anger, the righteousness; that all was the creation really of the law itself: the law at work in a sinful nature.
Now, the purpose of the law originally was to teach people the difference between right and wrong, to direct their behavior toward pleasing God; and yet it could not do this. It taught them right from wrong in a certain sense, but in another sense it didn’t. It didn’t teach them to perceive God directly! And that’s the meaning of today’s dialogue. “If you don’t believe in me, believe in the works I do. The works I do are from the Father. The least you can do is to believe in them!” But the law did not lead the people to believe in the works of God! And the New Testament is very blatant about this: the utter inability of the law to lead people into a direct contact with God, into perceiving the very action of the Spirit, into coming into contact with God as God is--right in your face-doing his work! And not only does it not bring people into contact, but it in fact aids in their separation from this very action of the Spirit, this very work of the Father. And the Scriptures want us to meditate and to recognize it in ourselves.
A few words of reflection: This week the Church enters into the passion of Christ in a very focused and deep way. Now, we do this every year, and for some of us it’s just a routine; but it need not be just a routine—it could be a life-giving ritual! The difference between a routine and a ritual is the amount of attention that we give to ritual, and that allows it to give us life.

In Jesus we have the gift of the Father and the response of the Father to the human predicament marked by sin, suffering and death. And the biblical affirmation is that sin, suffering and death does not come from the hand of God, but that it is our creation. And because we are all involved in sin and suffering and death, we need to be with and attend to God’s response. We can do that if we move with the liturgy of the Church beginning with Thursday evening’s Holy Eucharist commemorating the institution of the Holy Eucharist and the beginning of Christ’s passion. And that liturgy does not end, but continues into Friday and Saturday—days of prayer and fasting, days of reflection and reconciliation, days of forgiveness, days of peace. And then we celebrate the victory of Christ beginning at the vigil of Easter as sun sets Saturday evening. And each of us is invited to fully participate in this great event in the life of our faith. Simone Weil said, “Attention is the essence of love.” Attention is the essence of prayer.
This morning, boys and girls, we heard a reading. The first reading was from the prophet, Isaiah. And now, what’s a prophet? A saint--well, hopefully, but there is a special job involved. Yes? What’s a prophet’s job? Pardon? To tell the future? Well, in some way maybe, that’s part of it, not really. Pardon? He writes notes--maybe he does that too. What else? More or less. More or less, a prophet tells us what’s wrong, actually. So that’s right; he tells us to be better, to do better. He says, “There’s something wrong here.” Now, is that telling the future? Part of it is. He says, “Look, if things don’t change, things are going to get worse.” So in a sense he’s telling the future. But it’s not primarily telling the future; primarily he’s telling what’s wrong. A prophet tells what’s wrong. And what do they base it on? Where do they get their message? From God. That’s right. So a prophet is a person sent by God to, more or less, call us to a better life.

Now, in a sense all religions--there are all kinds of religions in the world. Are there not? Not only is there the Christian religion, the Catholic religion; you’ve heard of others, right? Buddhism, right? Mormonism, right? Hinduism, what else? Lutherans, they’re kind of Christian, aren’t they? Yea, they are part of the Christian--so. Yes, Lutherans are a different religion from Catholics, but they’re Christians. But other than Christians we have all kinds of others. And you know what one thing they all have in common--every single religion has one thing in common. What do you think it is? No, Jesus--no, a lot of religions don’t know about Jesus. Only Christians know about Jesus. What do the rest have in common? One thing. Anybody want to guess? Yes? That they all believe in God--well, that’s a pretty good answer, but I’m not sure. Do Buddhists believe in God? They’re not sure. But they all believe in that--they believe that--what? That something is wrong! That’s what they all believe. Every single religion believes something is wrong with life on earth, and that it is not what it ought to be! See? If they really didn’t believe that, it wouldn’t be a religion. Religion is an effort to improve, improve the world, improve oneself, improve everything. See? So if you thought everything was just the way it was supposed to be, you wouldn’t have one--right? You wouldn’t need it. So religion is a confession, an admission that there’s something wrong. We need help.

Isaiah the prophet was one of those great spokespersons. Okay, a prophet is a spokesperson for God who says, “Look people, you better change your ways.” But Isaiah adds something. He didn’t just say, “You better change your ways.” He said, “Guess what--God is going to come in a very powerful way. God is going to come in a very powerful way. And that person is going to be called ‘the anointed.’” And the word in Greek for anointing is “Christos” from which we get the word “Christ.” Right? And the word “Messiah.” “Meshika” is Aramaic for “anointed.” Meshika is anointed and where we get the word Me------, Me------what? Me------Messiah! That’s right! Messiah! So now, Isaiah says, “Okay, well, God really has pity on you. God has great mercy on you, and therefore God is going to send a Messiah.” This Messiah is going to be--what? What’s the Messiah going to be like? Fearsome? No? He’s not going to be fearsome?
Well, wouldn't that be better? He'd get more work done. Don't you think? Yea. Yea. But, you’re right. No, the Messiah is not going to be fearsome!

In fact, he is going to be--how is he described in today’s reading? Joey, how is he described? (Kind.) Well, that’s one word; that’s actually how he is described. But he is described--it says, “A smoldering wick he does not quench.” What does that mean? What’s a smoldering wick? What’s a wick? That’s a good question! A candle has it--right? A wick is what burns--right? And the candle wax is removed. Is that right? Right. So a smoldering wick--did you ever blow out a candle? Did you ever see it smolder? It’s still burning--like on a birthday cake you go, “Puff, puff.” And then there is this smoke; it keeps coming. And there is this little like fire on top of the wick. Ever see the fire on top of the wick? A tiny little glow. Ever see the glow on the top of the wick when you blow it out? Never saw this? They did. Next time you are going to blow out candles, turn out the lights. You’ll see this little glow on top of the wick. That’s a smoldering wick. It says in Isaiah that the Messiah will not quench. What does that mean? Right. Quench. Isn’t that what it means? He will not pinch the smoldering wick.

What else will he do? He won’t--what? Well, that’s not what it says here. It says, “A bruised reed he shall not break.” What’s a bruised reed? Have you ever seen a bruised reed? Got any weeds around here? Did you ever see--what’s a bruised reed? You’ve forgotten. Do you live near like a field that nobody mows? Do any of you live near fields? Do you have all lawns, all nice lawns, all mowed and everything? No fields by you? Do you have a field? A field? And nobody mows it? What grows there? Weeds! Which are? Reeds! A reed is a weed. A weed can be anything, but a reed is what actually grows in the fields. All right? They are a little hollow inside. They’re like tall grasses. All right? A little hollow inside. They’re reeds. Well, what’s a bruised reed? Well, just go right through the field; and what are you going to do? You’re going to bruise the reeds. Isn’t that right? So “A bruised reed,” it says, “he shall not break.” A bruised reed. You go through the field, you knock over the grass--they’re all bruised. But the Messiah will not break a bruised reed. Now, this is what is--what’s Isaiah saying? The Messiah is going to be very, very gentle--very gentle. Right? If he doesn’t break a bruised reed, he is not going to break you either. Right? You are a little stronger than a reed--aren’t you? But you may be a little bruised. But he doesn’t break a bruised reed--so he’s very gentle. You see?

Now, that’s what we read yesterday at Mass, which I am sure you were all here, and you heard the passion. That’s where Jesus is the Messiah--he is entering into his Messiahship, and he’s not going to break a bruised reed; he’s not going to quench a smoldering wick. He accepts abuse from others, but he remains always gentle. You know why that is? Because he’s demonstrating something; he’s showing something. The greatest force on earth is what? The greatest strength on earth, the greatest force on earth is what? Yes, the greatest force on earth is Love! And so Jesus is showing the power of love in enduring--enduring suffering and abuse! He was beaten--was he not? Crowned with thorns--right? Led to the cross--always remained gentle. Never angry, furious. You see? He could have. Right? He could have been screaming, but he didn’t. He remained
gentle. Why? The power of love is the greatest power on earth. Nothing is better! Nothing is greater! And that’s the power of God—see? He’s the revelation. Jesus comes to reveal to us the nature of God. The real power of God is not the power of force. The power of God is the power of love, to endure. See? And that’s why we have nothing to fear from God, but rather everything to expect from God because God is gentle with us; and he comes to endure our lives and to show us how to endure.

So if somebody does something bad to you—but the whole thing is don’t pass it on to somebody else. Jesus didn’t—you see? He is our model. He is our way. He is our truth. He is our life. You see? So if you have something bad happen, well don’t pass it on to somebody else—give it to God. Jesus gave all his suffering to God. You see? Now, what is going to be the result of this? What do you think? What is the result if you do that—if you live this way? If you pass on evil what happens? More evil, isn’t that right? You get hurt, so you hurt somebody else, and they hurt somebody else, and more and more and more. But if you don’t, then what? There’s less evil! In fact, Jesus absorbed all the evil in his own life. You see? And he made it possible for us all to do the same thing—in that way the world actually can become more gentle, more civil, more just—you see? More fair. So you have a role to play in the future of the world. Because you’re here the world can get better. It really can! And that’s what faith is all about. But you must believe that you can change the world for the better. But it’s going to hurt sometimes. That’s part of life; you can’t take the cross out of life. But you can—well, you could take the cross out of life by becoming evil, and then you just pass it on. But you can’t take the pain out of life; you can’t take suffering out of it. The cross is the way to keep it and to give it to God and not pass it on to others, and because of that the world will be better. And you have God’s promise, not my promise. Because if God promises you, you all can be part of the solution. You see that? Okay, now, let’s pray.
For the past forty days we have been reflecting on the meaning of our faith in a very specially focused way, recognizing that faith is not only a comfort; it is also a responsibility. In the beginning of our forty day period we heard about Jesus and his many temptations to live by some strategy other than service to the Father, to get caught up in life, in the world, its rewards, its pleasures and even false religion. “Throw yourself off a parapet of the temple,” the devil encouraged him, “because God will not allow his own to dash their foot against a stone.” Perhaps of all Jesus’ temptations, that was the greatest. And perhaps it’s the same with all of us to believe that to be religious is to be specially protected. Jesus knew that was not true. Jesus had been baptized into the will of God. He had accepted everything that life would bring him at that moment. And “Son though he was, Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered”—and he did suffer.

And so will all of us. We all suffer, and that suffering is a meaningful part of our lives. We learn something, or can learn something from what we suffer. If we suffer in faith, if we suffer with hope, if we suffer in love, our suffering is not useless; it’s not wasted, but helps us grow in the spirit of Christ. It helps us become the being that God has invited us to become. So for those who are willing to let be and to let go, for those who are willing to submit themselves to God and to allow God to be the one to care for them, for those who really hope not only for a better life and a better world but for God’s promises to be fulfilled, for those who love with no strings attached as God does in unconditional love manifested in Christ, for those every aspect of life, no matter how seemingly dark and sad, is really a moment of learning and growth toward the goal God has in mind.

None of us really knows the time or the hour of our departure from this life. It’s a truism that we shall all die; we all know that. It’s more or less taken for granted; but it does not play a great role in our emotional life—except in a negative way! It says in the Letter to the Hebrews, “The devil kept the world in bondage by the fear of death.” That’s a negative thing. To be in bondage means to be crippled, to be chained by the fear of death; and fear can cripple people, paralyze people. The fear of death is probably the greatest fear of all. And Jesus came to show us the way to the Father; that there is nothing to fear in death, as Jesus Himself is the way, the truth, the life.

But fear can become positive if it were the reverence and the awe we had for so great a God, who has such a wonderful plan for all of us to set us in life completely unfinished and to allow us to finish ourselves as we choose, to allow us to take ourselves to his heavenly throne at the end of our lives and present ourselves as we have decided to become. Reverence for this God and for his wonderful unfolding love—that can be a positive aspect of our lives. And if we would think of death then as a completion of this work that we are doing, becoming the person we want to be, then death could be our friend reminding us always not to forget how important all our decisions are: how we treat each other, what we do with our time, what we do with our money, how quickly we need to ask forgiveness, how desperately we need never to let the sun set on our anger.
because that
would give a toehold to darkness within our own souls. So death could become a friend that we could consult daily that would help us decide what kind of person we really want to be.

We know through Christ that we have all the love of God on our side. St. Paul says, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Indeed “God so loved the world he did not spare his only Son, but rather became one of us.” St. Paul even says, “He became sin.” He came to suffer with us, to live with us, to embrace our emptiness and our loneliness, our feeling of abandonment—all this so that we would have God in our lives, and we would have all power at our disposal to become a true daughter or son of God. This is our faith. This is the reason for our hope. This is the reason why we can love. And as we reflect on these mysteries of our life in Christ, we need to bring our sister, mother and friend, Lee, to Christ—in our own minds to surrender her, to let her go, to let her be, to rejoice with her in her moment of completion, and to carry on whatever work she left undone.
The most startling thing about today’s gospel is that there is not one mention of the breaking of the bread or the passing of the cup. And there is not in the entire narrative found in the fourth gospel. Instead there is this story about Jesus who wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the feet of his disciples. Now, we may speculate all we want about why the evangelist of the fourth gospel chose to ignore the bread and the wine, the body and the blood and to focus on this act of service; but in all probability the reason is that it reveals the same mystery—the mystery of God’s presence in our midst. And this is not a mystery that is easy for us really to grasp. I’m very delighted to see so many young people here tonight. You are for me a sign of great hope because you have not yet got your heads full of all kinds of wrong ideas—the way the rest of us have. And I speak for our entire tradition going back a thousand years before Christ. Already at that time David, the great King David, had a bright idea: “I shall build the Lord a house of cedar,” a temple, a palace. God responded through his prophet, Samuel, “No thanks! I don’t need one. I don’t like temples. I am very happy in my tent!” Since the very beginning of the covenant the presence of God was mobile, dynamic, moving about with the people, into their battles even, always with them wherever they went--covered by a tent. David’s idea was to put God in a place and to keep him there—the temple.

Now, I believe this is always going on between God and ourselves. God is always trying to be a dynamic, moving presence in our midst; and we are trying to get him to stay put, where we’ll know where he is! Jesus warned us. He said, “The Spirit blows where it will.” That’s the true nature of God, but it’s not a nature we really like to deal with because we cannot control a spirit that moves where it wills. We don’t know what to expect next. We don’t know what to expect next from such a God. And it’s always been a problem for us—even in the Church! At a certain period of time the Church took the word “tent,” in Latin “tabernaculum” and made it into a mini, little palace—elaborate houses put in large churches. The intention is outwardly noble, but the question is, Is this really what God wants?

Tonight John tells us the story of Jesus revealing his intention, revealing in fact the very face and nature of God; and we can see that Peter doesn’t like it any more than David liked it! “You shall not wash my feet.” Well, of course, Peter has a good reason for saying that. What is life about anyway? The disciples were always arguing—the evangelists tell us that—about who was more important. Now, here it is in the eleventh hour of Jesus’ own life, and Peter is catching on to a very sad truth: that the Master doesn’t know what being a master is about! It says in Philippians, “Son though he was, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at.” That’s a powerful statement because the history of the world is all about grasping. It has been since the Garden of Eden, since the serpent tempted Eve with his great strategy: “Look, ignore the wisdom of God, and supplant it with your own; and you will be equal to God, knowing good and evil,” meaning inventing good and evil, determining for yourself what is good and evil! This is what the world is about. It’s about striving to be God, striving to be the
master, striving to be on top, striving to have control and power. And here is the “Master” giving it all away! And Peter is understandably upset. Perhaps everything he’s hoped for and worked for is now disintegrating before his very eyes—a master that doesn’t know how to rule, a master that doesn’t know how to reign.

That’s also what the Eucharist is about. The Council of Trent said, “Ut sumatur institutum.” “It is instituted to be consumed.” The presence of God is not a static presence that is meant to be reserved and adored. It does not say, “Ut adoratur institutum,” but ut sumatur—to be consumed, not to be adored. Not that there is anything wrong with adoration, but it’s not the purpose of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is given to us to be consumed, to be eaten, to become part of ourselves in a dynamic way, in a consuming way—because that’s the way God is. God is a master that doesn’t know how to rule. God is a master who only knows how to love and to serve! And Jesus told his disciples this time and time again, but they didn’t get the message—and we don’t either! It really goes against the grain or the nature we have at this present time. But, of course, Jesus’ whole campaign was about transforming who we are. And now he’s going to enter into death itself in order to accomplish that transformation. And he’s going to predict and prophesy exactly what he is doing by taking bread and saying, “This bread is my body and it’s broken. It is broken for you. Take and eat it; consume it and be consumed by it. This is the cup of my blood. It is poured out for you and for everyone, for all, for the many”—in Aramaic the many meant everybody—“so that sins can be forgiven.” Jesus, in his own human life, is taking on this very lowly role of servant and slave—“did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at, but surrendered it and took the life of a slave,” and washed the feet of his own followers, and “accepted death on a cross” breaking his body and pouring out his blood for us—for you—for me.

Now, Peter’s objections must be taken very seriously because Jesus’ actions challenged everything we have ever been taught to believe about life—unless we were taught by saints. Jesus says, “The most important thing, the very most important thing is to become the servant of all.” We probably like to be waited on, but by people we think are less meritorious than ourselves, who have earned less than we have and who then ought to take care of us. Jesus says, “No, I am among you as one who serves.” God Himself is a serving God; and to be like God, to be like the Master, is to become the servant of all. So the way up is really the way down, and the way down is really the way up. If we are ever to rise to this level of participation in the Godhead, we have to first allow God to wash us clean, to serve our needs, to love us into health.

Tonight we will carry out the “mandatum,” that is the washing of the feet. And we shall set up six chairs here in the sanctuary two on the lower level, and then two over here and two behind me. And although this may seem absurd, I think the only fair thing to do is to invite everyone to come forward and to have your foot washed in the name of Christ. First of all I’d like to invite the staff to come forward, and following them, the rest.
Sometimes our thoughts about Christ focus so much on his being the Son of God that we forget that Jesus is fully human; and in the passion, that we are focusing on on this day--during the passion Jesus’ knowledge of the Father was eclipsed! St. Thomas Aquinas says that Jesus, if he maintained any kind of privileged relationship to the Father during his passion, would not have suffered. And so we need to focus on the humanity of Jesus, and that strange statement in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Son though he was Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered.” This phrase has life for us. Obedience in the Bible does not mean following orders. Obedience means being a faithful creature. Now, this is a rather strange idea. From the biblical viewpoint all forms of life are obedient except one--the human! The human creature doesn’t know how to be a creature. The human being is always trying to play God; in the terms found in the Book of Genesis: “being equal to God.” That was the temptation the serpent gave to the woman: just push God’s wisdom aside, and supplant it with your own; you will be equal to God.

And Jesus as we read tonight “did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at,” because that’s not the kind of thing that can be gained by grasping. Jesus told his disciples time and time again that they had the wrong idea of God. They were grasping at equality with a mirage. They were trying to be like a god they had no clue about. He told them, “God is not a god of power and control the way you think of power and control.” He taught his disciples to pray “Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth.” Now, we say that so often it has no impact; but it’s a radical teaching--for a Jew! For us too, to recognize that God is not in control of this earth, which of course is why it is out of control! And God is not in control of this earth because we don’t know how to be creatures. And so it’s up to us to pray that the will of God will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus, in his human nature, learned obedience, learned how to become a creature through what he suffered, because in his suffering he learned the very nature of God’s power.

God’s power is what St. Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians when he says, “Love endures all things.” The cup that Jesus was given was a cup to allow the love that endures all things to endure all things in himself, in his passion and death--and this is how he learned obedience through what he suffered. It is not the pain that teaches anything. Jesus spent his entire ministry alleviating pain, healing people of distress and disease. Pain is not a teacher; suffering is a teacher. It’s different. Suffering is our awareness of being powerless. It’s when Jesus was aware of and willing to accept his powerlessness that that love that endures all things could manifest through him and bring redemptive love into the world; thus “by his stripes we are healed”; by his cross we are saved--and by that alone! A singular event in history that has altered our nature.

Now in a few moments I shall invite you to come to the cross, but please don’t--just because it’s your turn! To come to the cross means that we accept that Jesus is Lord because he learned obedience from what he suffered, because “he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at, but emptied himself and took the form of a slave

Stations and Veneration of the Cross    Good Friday   1998
and accepted death, even death on a cross.” And this so that we can become human, so that we can leave aside this charade of being in control and having power over others, which has absolutely nothing to do with God and God’s will, and obstructs our capacity to be creature and to really live life. That is why to accept Christ into our hearts really changes everything! That’s what St. Paul was remarking at the last station: “Are you not aware that we who are baptized are baptized into death and buried with Christ so now we can live a new life?” So now we can spend a moment in prayer--if we can decide this night to let that new life have full reign within ourselves, then I invite you to come to the cross.
Last week on CNN there was an announcement that the scientific community was agog with the possibility of life outside of the planet earth. As you probably know, life has never been seen or experienced outside our planet. Scientists are always speculating about its possibility. But what got them so excited last week, and its seems to be a re-run of a same story I heard about a year ago, was the discovery of water on a moon of one of our sister planets. This is, I believe, the second time scientists believe they have discovered water; and both times it led to the same exciting conclusion that perhaps this means there is life. The reason why this is very important for us to note is that the language of science in this particular case is just like the language of myth, which is also just like the language of the Bible, in regard to the relationship between water and life. All the creation stories from around the world all deal with water. It’s a watery abyss. It’s a watery something out of which comes everything else in the various mythic stories told by ancient peoples. In the language of Genesis, which we heard tonight, the same. It is a universal symbol of life and of possibility.

And, of course, Jesus Himself transformed this universal symbol of life and possibility and made it a sign of not simple life as we know it, but of the kind of life we don’t know--the life of God eternal. Thus the waters of baptism become for us the beginning of something we can scarcely imagine! Now as we consider what this is, we have to recognize what is stated so clearly in the Gospel of John: “Flesh begets flesh, Spirit begets spirit.” Now the first part we, of course, understand--”Flesh begets flesh.” That’s how all organisms reproduce. All organisms reproduce their own kind. But what’s “Spirit begets spirit”? We do not see, we cannot study spirit; but we can experience spirit! And Jesus in the dialogue with Nicodemus was assuring him that just as for something to be, it has to be begotten, so do we have to be begotten as children of God. “Unless someone is born again or begotten from above by water and the Spirit, he or she shall not enter the reign of God.”

Now, it’s obvious that these words did not have too much potency until Jesus was raised from the dead. The raising of Jesus from the dead is the beginning of something totally new. It answers the question: What does God do for fun? He re-creates! The creation is his work; and the re-creation is his fun, the re-creation of the world--beginning with Jesus, the first born of the new creation. And then in the experience of the resurrection we see Jesus with a new body, but that’s only the external appearance. It’s a new being totally. And so it is also a promise to us of a complete new being--body, feelings and mind. And it begins for two tonight at the font of baptism. It began for all of us whenever we were brought or came ourselves to the font of baptism. Having given new life, of course, God does not leave us alone, but gives his most precious gift: “the first gift of those who believe,” St. Paul says, “the Holy Spirit.” The gift of the Holy Spirit is given to us in the anointing of holy chrism.
And just as baptism is an end to one thing and the beginning of another, so is confirmation. Our lives are often dominated by anxiety and fear and anger, and this becomes our emotional life. And just as Jesus’ willing acceptance of death pushes aside the survival instinct as the most important and potent force in the life of our body, so the gift of the Spirit pushes aside anxiety and fear and anger as the most potent motivations of our soul. We now are endowed with a higher motivation: compassion and peace and joy! And those of us who have lived a few years know that no one can get compassion. There is nothing we can do to procure compassion for ourselves or others. Nothing we do can procure for anyone, ourselves or others, joy or peace! These are gifts and they’re gifts of the Spirit. And they’re given to us so that we can have a new motivation for the new life that begins in baptism.

And then there is food for our journey. When the priest at the altar says the words of Jesus, that’s called “anamnesis.” It’s a Greek word. It’s a great word. You know the word “amnesia.” Amnesia means loss of mind. Anamnesis means loss of amnesia—because at certain points in our life God does touch us. And there are moments when we do all of a sudden sense and feel and experience who we really are, who God really is. And these peak moments are treasures; but often we let those peak moments slip away, and we fall into amnesia. We forget! We forget who we are. We forget what God has done for us in Christ. We forget the great price that Jesus Himself paid for our freedom and for our salvation so that we could have a new life. And we forget that the new life we have as St. Paul talked about in today’s Letter to the Romans: This new life is a singular life. He doesn’t say, “You have new lives.” The “you” is a plural. The “have” is a plural, but the “life” is a singular. “We have a new life in Christ.” And we forget that, and we need to remember that!

In a sense every sacrament is an anamnesis. It’s a rite by which God has given us for us to lose our amnesia and to come to our senses, and to realize how great God has made us because we’re his beloved. It’s not our own merits, but it’s Jesus’ merits that make us great in the sight of the Father. And the wonderful life, this one singular life that we have together—we have hardly even opened the package. And it’s necessary for us to open that package, to let that life flow through us, that we take full responsibility for all that God has done for us and for all that God gives us—as we hope in that life that we shall now continue.
As I am sure you are probably aware, there are four gospels that we call Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Those, of course, are our names; the gospels themselves have no pen names and no named authors. The gospel read this morning is the one we call the Gospel of John. It is based on the remembrances of what the gospel itself calls the “beloved disciple.” And today’s proclamation is the beloved disciple’s remembrances of that Easter morning. And as the story is presented to us there is a very important contrast between Mary Magdalene and this unnamed beloved disciple. Mary comes to an empty tomb, as any of us might do, and she concludes, when she sees the emptiness, that someone has stolen the body of her Lord. I don’t think that was an unreasonable conclusion to jump to, but it happened to be wrong. The beloved disciple comes, after waiting for his elder brother, Peter, who enters first. The beloved disciple, and only the beloved disciple, entered; and it says, “He believed.” It doesn’t say Mary Magdalene believed. It doesn’t say Peter believed. In fact, Luke, another evangelist, tells us that when the first reports of Jesus’ being raised from the dead got back to the apostles, they thought that it was nonsense. The apostles thought the story of Jesus’ being raised from the dead was utter nonsense! Alone of all of them, the beloved disciple saw and believed!

Now, belief has many different facets to it, but it is always more than merely assenting that something is true. It never means only that; it involves trust, fidelity, loyalty, obedience. And here in the gospel, the fourth gospel, it always means to sense or to perceive the presence of God through signs. There was the miracle at Cana, and his disciples believed in him. There was a man born blind, and Jesus restored this blind man to sight; and his disciples believed in him. Always it’s a matter of seeing God at work through signs. Now, you will probably never find water turned into wine. You will probably never find a man blind from birth seeing. You’ll probably never find a dead man raised to life. But you will find emptiness in your life! And the question is: Will you be, like the beloved disciple, able to perceive in emptiness the work of God? It takes more than simple faith. Mary Magdalene surely believed in Jesus, and so did Peter and the other apostles; but still they were not able really to believe the emptiness was a sign of God at work. There is no one, who will go through life on this planet, who will not experience at some point total darkness and emptiness within!

Now, there are various ways of responding to this. We can feel cheated. We can become anxious. We can become afraid. We may even become angry, and to some extent that would be understandable. But what the gospel is suggesting is that we might also see and believe that our emptiness is for a very good reason: that God has removed something, that wasn’t really living anyway, to give us new life. That behind the facade that our senses are constantly picking up, that our minds are constantly occupied with--the business of life, behind that facade there is something far more real; and that reality beckons us; that reality invites us to new life.
Only last week a reporter on CNN said that scientists all over the world are now agog with excitement over the possibility of life on some other planet. Why? Because they have found water. In the world of science life and water are connected. You may have water without life, but you cannot have life without water—not life as we know it. In the world of myth the same is true. All the creation stories all talk about water. It’s the basis from which everything comes. And also in our Scriptures when God created the earth he spoke over the waters, and life came forth.

Today the Church asks us to renew the vows of our baptism. In baptism we received life also, but not life as we know it—a life of a very different kind. As John explains, rather the fourth gospel: “Flesh begets flesh,” and we know what that means, “Spirit begets spirit.” The eternal life of God can only come from the eternal life of God—can only be given to us as a gift! But once we receive that gift it entails a responsibility that we remain faithful to that gift, that we remember that gift throughout our daily lives. When the priest stands at the altar and remembers the words of Christ that is called the “anamnesis.” The word “amnesia” you’re familiar with; it means loss of mind. Well, anamnesis means loss of amnesia. At some point in every person’s life God speaks to us. I doubt very much you would be here this morning, even if it’s the only day of the year that you come, unless at some point in your life God was very real! The trouble is we forget that! Life almost forces us to forget it. Life tries to drag us rather than allowing us to direct it. We come to the rites of the Church, the sacraments of the Church, for anamnesis—to lose our amnesia, to remember once again how God has touched us, and to keep that memory alive. In a moment I will ask you to renew the vows of your own baptism, which you may not even remember—to renounce everything that is an obstacle to your life and your growth and to put your faith in the living God, who is our Father, who is a brother, and who is also a spirit whose actions we cannot predict. It is this God whose work makes the emptiness of our hearts something pregnant with new possibilities, and it is our responsibility to awaken to what those possibilities are.
It is very interesting to compare the different stories of Christ’s resurrection in the gospels. Today Matthew says, “The women were half-overjoyed.” I’ve never been able to understand what that means—“half-overjoyed”! He’s the only one who says that; the others indicate that the women had no clue what was happening. So anyway in retrospect, we don’t really know what actually happened to whom and when. What is important is that Jesus’ appearance was first of all to women—very interesting because at that time women were not considered, what you might call, legal witnesses. The fact that the early Church remembered and recorded this fact lends great credence to it. It’s not the sort of thing that would advance the Church’s cause among the Jews; therefore it must be true that Jesus first approached the women.

And the response of the women is important. It says, “They were half-overjoyed,” whatever that means; but it says that they were also fearful, “half-fearful,” whatever that means too! I don’t know what “half-fearful” means, but they were fearful because that would be very normal. Even in the midst of the mysterious events of life we are fearful. We are fearful with the unknown. And Jesus when he approaches them says two things: “Peace! Do not be afraid!” “Peace! Do not be afraid!” And this is a very powerful message that we need to take into ourselves, not only in regard to this particular story, but in regard to all matters of life. Jesus has returned from death to say, “Peace! Do not be afraid!”
Death is not a fearful thing. It is nothing to be worried about. There is nothing to be anxious about. There is nothing to fear. It’s true; there is a great deal of unknown in our lives, but the unknown need not cause us trepidation or worry or fear. The only one who has really come back from death reveals to us, “Peace!” Not the peace that we might have from absence of conflict, but a different kind of peace. This was actually a very important term in Judaism: “Shalom!” It refers to a total well-being that is really a gift from God. Jesus’ journey through suffering and death was a journey to bring us Shalom, total well-being--a gift from God.
It’s known really that in the appearances it is often remarked that they [the disciples] do not recognize him. This is said of Mary Magdalene today in John’s Gospel. It’s also said of the disciples on the road to Emmaus and others. The evangelists are trying to tell us that what we are experiencing, what they experienced, what the Church experienced in the resurrection of Christ was not a mere resuscitation of a corpse. The meaning of the resurrection cannot actually be put in so many words, but we are dealing with a dimension that is beyond our comprehension. Now, I imagine that some of you have had the experience of meeting someone after many years. Maybe the person has undergone quite a bit of physical change, may have gained a lot of weight, may have lost a lot of weight, maybe in other ways they were totally changed; and yet you recognize them. And even if you can’t think of their name, there is something that you recognize in their person, even if you knew them twenty, thirty, forty years ago. That is because even though we change physically--our shape, our looks and so on--we remain substantially the same person. And there is something in our mind that we can comprehend this, even if our memory fails in terms of a name. And this can be true even of casual acquaintances. But here where we have Jesus and his very dearest friends, they don’t recognize him; and it’s only been a day, two days, three days, a short period of time!

So what we are dealing with is something very different from what we experience. The resurrection of Christ cannot be put into a category that we are familiar with. We speak of the resurrection into glory, but of course the glory was not physical. All this is getting
around to questioning ourselves in terms of: What do we really see? Every day there is a panorama of sights that addresses our senses, but what do we really see? And if you look back at the Scriptures, especially the fourth gospel, “seeing” itself is always a spiritual event. It involves choice. It involves faith. It’s not just a physical thing. The evangelist is trying to open our minds and open our hearts and open our eyes to the abiding presence of Christ, which we actually do not recognize. We are surely not closer to Christ than Mary Magdalene was! We are not closer to Christ than the disciples on the road to Emmaus! So we are all very much capable of not recognizing Christ, whose resurrected presence is not something that we can understand in our ordinary categories. And the evangelist wants us to ponder this.
Today Luke is trying to teach the community the true meaning of liturgy or ritual. The purpose of liturgy, the purpose of ritual, the purpose of a sacrament is to bring recognition. This is something we sometimes do not recognize: that the purpose of our ritual, the purpose of our sacraments, the purpose of liturgy is to recognize. Recognize what? Recognize that God has been with us as we journeyed on the road. It is unfortunate, but people are basically materialistic. Our thinking process has to do with quantity. So when anyone comes to life or grace or gift from God, we think of it as something quantitative. We think of it as something temporal. We think of it as something given and received as one would receive something material. This is really not the nature of life--not the life given in grace. The life of God given in grace is not in any way quantitative. It really isn’t a temporal thing, and it isn’t given and received as one would give and receive something material. And that’s why the stories are told of how God touches the disciples.

In a similar way we are also touched. But too often people look at sacraments or ritual or liturgy as if it’s supposed to do something for them, and some might even complain that they don’t get anything out of it. Well, what precisely are they expecting? What one can get out of liturgy is a sense of recognition, an awareness of how God has been already in one’s life, how God has been journeying with us along the road and explaining even Scriptures, although we haven’t been really too aware of what that means--at least for ourselves. We use Scriptures all the time, but do we really sense ourselves in the Scriptures? Do we know how they apply to our own personal
situations? That’s what liturgy is for; it’s so we can recognize how God is with us already.

And then secondly, we have to then take that recognition beyond ourselves— as these disciples did not remain in Emmaus! They went to the others to tell them. There simply is no way in which a true recognition of the presence of God can be kept to oneself! And if the Church is not evangelizing, if it’s not sharing this tremendous awareness of God’s presence, it’s because, to some degree, we have never recognized it; but this is why we gather for the breaking of the bread.
This translation we’re using today is too mild. What the Scripture says is, “He rebuked his disciples for their unbelief,” and that is a very strong word. And one might imagine that in a certain sense that Jesus was actually angry at their disbelief, their unbelief. I think the revised translation does say “rebuked.” It should. Now, this issue of unbelief or disbelief is found quite often actually in the New Testament. Everyone has a belief about life. Every culture, every religious system has a certain set of beliefs; but only in the New Testament is having belief itself a central issue, a central decision, a choice. It is not simply a way of looking at things; it’s a choice. It’s an important, in fact, crucial choice; and yet Jesus is constantly running into disbelief. And in this particular case it’s his own followers! However, this particular form of disbelief is not disbelief of him or disbelief of God; it’s disbelief of one another!

Now, what is the basis of disbelief? Well, it’s actually very easy for us to understand. We establish in our minds--whether we consciously do this or not--we establish in our minds, you might say, a certain criterion for judging what is possible, what is impossible, what is real, what is unreal. We’re constantly using this as we make our way through life. But it is a very, very dangerous thing we do. Jesus says, “With God are all possibilities.” But we measure possibility by the way in which we have already experienced life. This is disastrous! Do you mean that our future is really already determined by our past? Does it mean that God will only work from now on the way God has worked in the past? Jesus was constantly saying, “No, that’s not true.” What you have experienced in the past is
past; what you will experience in the future will be different. But this is very difficult for people to accept. This requires a choice, a decision to **discount** one’s own past as a criteria for what will be in the future--very difficult because it requires that we give up control of our lives. This is not what we want to do. The New Testament has many different teachings on faith, on belief. In this one we see that ultimately believing means giving up total control of our lives to a God with whom lies **all** possibility, who can and desires to astound us with his marvelous works! That’s the first point.

And the second is: And who will use whomever he chooses to reveal to us his ways and his will. There is a certain kind of self-centeredness in disbelief. It’s not simply human weakness. It’s not just saying, “Well, I never saw that before.” There is something else there. “Well, **I** never saw that before,” and “**I** didn’t experience that!” And of course, in our society we so focus on what **I** experience, what **I** think, what **I** feel, **my** conscience; we’re in great danger because God doesn’t just work with every single individual in the very same way, but in fact works with us all together through one another. The very idea of Church is we depend on each other. There has to be an openness to what God is doing even though I don’t see it, even though I don’t feel it. The news was just out that Pol Pot died. Pol Pot said, after killing half of Cambodia, “**I** have no regrets. **My** conscience is clear.” So much for the infallibility of personal conscience! True faith is something else. It’s an openness--not a gullibility, not believing everything everybody says--but an openness for what God is doing and how God is speaking through others.
Now today we hear about Thomas. In a sense poor Thomas is a fall guy. He’s gone into history as “Doubting Thomas,” as if all the other apostles and disciples were great believers! But they weren’t! Just review the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection. I will pass over for now the fact that no one recognized him. That could be for reasons beyond their own control. But once Mary Magdalene, the first one to whom Jesus appeared, went back to her brothers telling them of her encounter, they really did not believe her. And this went on. Jesus appeared to a few more and they still didn’t believe. He appeared to ten of them in the upper room; Thomas didn’t believe them.

And in this particular story, Jesus comes a week later and rebukes Thomas. Now, Jesus rarely rebuked his friends. He rebuked the religious leaders. He rebuked evil spirits, but he didn’t rebuke his friends—not very often—very rarely. Once he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me you, Satan,” he said. But ordinarily he did not; he was a very gentle teacher. But today he rebukes Thomas not for his lack of belief; that would be a wrong term, but rather for his disbelief. Disbelief is a refusal to believe. And it is not a refusal to believe God in this case. The refusal was to believe his own friends, and this is what caused a very severe reprimand from Jesus: that Thomas did not believe his own friends.

And this is something we need to think about: God does not deal with each of us individually. We’re not all alone with God in this life. We actually need the witness of other people. And we need to listen. This does not mean that we need to become credulous, believing just anything! We do have to sort things out, but we have to believe what is trustworthy. And Jesus had picked these disciples. For Thomas then to believe they were untrustworthy is a deep flaw in Thomas. The same goes for ourselves. If we don’t believe those who share with us trustworthy testimony, there is a deep flaw in us. And I asked the young, “If you do not believe your friends, why do you have them?” One of the most important things in life is whom we choose to be our friends. And if we choose friends who we really cannot trust or believe, then we should not have those friends. Friendship and trustworthiness is a very essential component to human life as Jesus understood it! It’s a very central component of the Church’s life, which carries out his mission. Without it, we’re dead!

Now, how do we ever form an idea of what is believable? It’s important we think about it. One thing that I’m sure goes on in our minds when we hear something: Well, is that plausible? Did that ever happen before? Is that in accord with my experience? Well, this may seem reasonable, but it’s actually very dangerous because if the future can never be any better than the past, then as a human race we’re sunk! Jesus taught, “With God are all possibilities!” And that means that much is possible that has never happened yet. That means the past is absolutely no guide to the future whether it is my personal past or whether it’s the past of the world. That is no guide to the future. “With God are all possibilities.” God’s vision and God’s purpose and God’s will for us we’ve never
seen before! “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, human imagination has never imagined what God has in store for those who love him,” not only in some distant time and place, but even right now. We don’t imagine what God wants to do, but we have to let God do it and letting God do his will is what faith is all about. That is one of the many facets of faith.

The second point is sometimes instead of saying, “Well, I never saw that before,” with emphasis on the past—never saw, never heard, never experienced—sometimes the emphasis is more on I. I never saw. This is especially a modern problem. Today in our modern times personal experience has been exaggerated in its importance: My personal experience, My personal feelings, My personal conscience as if it’s the greatest and most important of all possible realities. This is a terrible mistake as well! My personal experience is very limited. I’m only so many years old. I’ve only been alive so long; I’ve only met so many experiences. To limit God to stay within the boundaries of what I already know is another terrible thing to do to oneself.

These are two forms of disbelief. They’re putting the criteria of faith or of believeableness in the past or within my small, little experience. One of them destroys God’s ability to change the future; the other imprisons us in a very small, petty, little world. So Jesus comes back one week after the resurrection to scold, really, to rebuke his friend, his chosen disciple, Thomas, because Thomas is set on a course that will really cripple his future and his spiritual life. And, of course, the evangelist tells us this story for our benefit because some day, or maybe right now, we could be in Thomas’ shoes.
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Diocesan Appeal**  Second Sunday of Easter\C  April 19, 1998  10:30 a.m.,
12:00 p.m.,  5:00 p.m.  (Diocesan)

The Catholic Church is a large organism spread throughout the world, and this parish is really just a small part of that. The Roman Catholic Church of Joliet really is a single Church under one shepherd that’s responsible for the welfare, the spiritual welfare, of everyone within its territory--and also with bringing the gospel to others outside of its territory. So we have a great responsibility as a diocesan Church. Now this week the bishop will be writing letters to all of you asking you to support the Diocesan Appeal which finances this diocesan Church. Last year we raised five and a half million dollars; and this went to cover pastoral care, religious education, Catholic schools, youth ministry, seminarian education, social service, pastoral out-reach, and especially one of the bishop’s pet projects--building a clinic in Bolivia. Now what’s happened is that the diocese organized many doctors who volunteered their time to go to Bolivia to care for the poor, who have no medicine, who have no doctors, who have no care. Now what the diocese has done is built a clinic and rented out space to the local doctors on the agreement that they will take care of the poor while the team is back here in the United States. Now, as pastor of St. Joseph, I’d like to thank you for your generosity in the past and ask you to pray about being generous this year. Next week there will be a member of the committee here to speak to you about the appeal; and I would like to also to invite you to watch the video, which is very good actually this year. I haven’t liked them in the past, but this year I can assure you it’s a very good video; and it will be shown in the narthex. We would show it here, but you couldn’t see it because the church is so large and bright. So in closing, then, I’d like to thank you. I don’t like to talk about money. I don’t think anyone really does, but we do need it to get along. And I do believe that we will be able to meet our goal if we all pitch in together. Thank you very much.

---

**Diocesan Appeal**  Second Sunday of Easter\C  April 19, 1998  12:00 p.m. ($1200419)

Firstly, I think you’re all very well aware of the fact that the Catholic Church is a wide communion, a Church throughout the world; and we at St. Joseph are a mere, small speck of that Church--but we are part of it and we support its wider ministries. This week the bishop will be writing a letter asking you to support the Diocesan Appeal. Last year we raised five million dollars; and this helped many services and ministries in education, social service, pastoral outreach, seminarian education, Catholic schools, youth ministry, and many others, especially the bishop’s pet project, which is a clinic in Bolivia. The diocese has collected volunteer doctors from this country, and nurses, who go to Bolivia and who serve the poor there, who have no medical attention. Now, the diocese has actually built a clinic, rented out to local doctors with the promise that they would care for the poor while our doctors are back here in the states. So it’s a pretty good deal, and it’s supported by the money from the Appeal. Next week, of course, will be the time when you are asked to contribute. I want to thank you for everything you’ve done in the past, and ask you to continue. I know that together we can do all things in Christ.
Before reflecting on the Gospel, I would like to make another remark that has to do with the fact that--I’m sure you are all well aware of the fact that the parish of St. Joseph is only one small part of a larger Church; and that this larger Church has a mission to the whole world. So our bishop is going to ask all of us to participate in the Diocesan Annual Appeal to finance this particular diocese, this local Church of Joliet. Last year we collected $5,500,000. And this was used for religious education, pastoral care, Catholic schools, youth ministry, seminarian education, social service, pastoral out-reach and the bishop’s favorite pet project which is a clinic in Bolivia. The diocese has found volunteer doctors and nurses to go to Bolivia and help the poor there who have no medical care of any other kind. When they are not there, of course, the poor have nothing, so the diocese has built a clinic that it rents out to local doctors on the provision that they will take care of the poor while our volunteers are gone. Now as pastor of St. Joseph I am very appreciative of all that you have done in the past, and I ask you to consider making another generous contribution. I myself believe in the Appeal, and I tithe and I give ten percent of my tithe to the Diocesan Appeal. Next weekend we’ll hear from the Appeal committee on precisely how to do this. I just want to close by saying I know it seems like a great deal of money we’re asked to raise, but we can do it in the Lord. Also at the end of Mass, if you want to there is a very good video. It’s available in the narthex.
Now, I would like to address a few words to our 6th graders, and the rest of you will just imagine back when you were in 6th grade. If you’re not that old yet, then imagine when you will be 6th graders; but that’s not possible—I know. Well, today we have a very interesting story and it’s actually a story we often don’t listen to very well, the story of Thomas. Now, in the gospels Jesus rebukes—that’s a strong word—he rebukes very few people. Can you think of any times when Jesus has a word of rebuke? First of all, what does “rebuke” mean? What does it mean to rebuke someone? Have a clue? Anybody have a clue what it means to rebuke someone? Have you ever been rebuked? You don’t know! Maybe that’s better! Have you ever been rebuked? Have you been rebuked? What does it mean? It means to stand against or push against. Verbally it means “to scold.” Have you ever been scolded? Jesus scolded. Can you think of any times when Jesus scolded someone? Bridget? Or something? Well, one thing he does—he rebukes evil spirits. Do you ever remember when he would rebuke an evil spirit? The deaf-mute spirit, and the spirit would come out of a person. Remember that? He stood against that spirit. He pushed against that spirit. Now, he also rebuked other people. For example, who were his big opponents? Who was Jesus always teaching against? Well, some of the Jewish leaders, teachers of the Jewish religion. He rebuked them quite often—did he not? Remember any of those cases? Dave? Right. Someone?

Well, today he is doing something he never did before. He’s rebuking his own, his very own apostle, Thomas. All right? He’s rebuking Thomas. And why is he rebuking Thomas? Why is he rebuking Thomas? Because Thomas failed to what? To believe! Did Thomas fail to believe in God? Did Thomas fail to believe in God? Katie? No, no, Thomas did not fail to believe in God. Thomas failed to believe in whom? No, he didn’t really fail to believe Jesus. Whom was he not believing? He failed to believe his friends, his friends—that’s what the rebuke is about. Thomas did not believe his friends! In what? What did his friends tell him? Jessica? Thomas did not believe his friends who told him that they had seen the Lord. Isn’t that right? That’s right.

Now, do you believe your friends? Mark, do you believe your friends? Okay, are your friends believable?—that’s the second question. Some of them. Well, you know what? Actually, if your friends are not believable, then I’m not sure they should be your friends! Isn’t that true? If you can’t believe your friends, then I don’t know if they are really good friends. That’s Jesus’ point now. Jesus knew that Thomas had very reliable friends, and Jesus helped pick them. You have to think about it—first thing I want you to think about—who are your friends? How do you choose your friends? So how do you choose your friends? That’s a very important thing because whom you choose as a friend will determine very much who you are and how you turn out. And Jesus was very careful to choose his friends. And even Jesus had a bad one. Did he not? Who betrayed him? Judas. So even the best of us will actually make a mistake. Although I don’t know if it was a mistake; it could have been on purpose. Jesus perhaps needed that, but we won’t
go into that today. But it’s very important you think about who are your friends and if you really believe them? If you don’t believe them, if you find them unbelievable, then really perhaps you shouldn’t have them as friends. You need friends you can believe and trust. We all need friends we can believe and trust in our life. That’s the first thing.

The second thing is: What do we believe? Think about this one. What do people believe in life? What is the basis for our decision to believe something? This is another point Jesus is trying to bring up with his followers. Too often we believe things because we’re used to them. That is very bad. It’s very bad. If the only thing you believe is what you’re used to, what you’ve seen before, then you have really tied God’s hands! If the future can be nothing different from the past, we are in very bad trouble. And Jesus whole message is: The future is in the hands of God and our hands, and that we can, in fact, see a future very different from our past, that we actually can let go of the past in our own personal lives and in the life of the world. We can let go of the past. We can let it be, but we won’t let it be if we don’t recognize this: That what we believe cannot be based on just what we are used to, what we’ve seen before. See? So that’s the second reason why Jesus rebukes Thomas. “Thomas, you are trying to tie God’s hands. You are living out of the past. The resurrection of the dead—it’s true; it never happened before. That’s true. But Thomas, your friends are trustworthy men and women”—Mary Magdalene was one of them—“and you can believe them. And they would not lie to you. And don’t think that because something never happened, it can’t happen!” So two things: Trust your friends; if you can’t trust them don’t have them as friends. Number two, don’t think that just because something never happened before it won’t happen in the future. God is full of possibilities. Jesus put it this way, “With God are all possibilities.” And a believer has to be someone who really is open to God, and to all the possibilities that exist in life.

And as you’re growing up you have to be careful who you choose as friends and then you have to also be careful that you don’t become cynical, meaning negative—thinking: Well, that never happened before; I never saw that before; that’s not going to happen. God is offering all kinds of things to us, but God will never push anything onto us. You see? God doesn’t push himself onto us. And so we have to be open, as Thomas wasn’t, to let God come to do the wonderful things God plans.

And there is another little aside to this: Sometimes people say, “Well, I never saw that before.” And they mean, well, the past—I know what that’s all about. But another time they say, “I never saw that before,” meaning that my experience is so important—and that is very common today. People today think their experience is so important; it’s the most important thing—what they’ve experienced. Well, our experience is not that great. We don’t know that much about anything! That’s the truth of it. Nobody’s experience is that great! So if you’re going to say, “Well, since I never experienced that, it can’t be so,” again we are going to be pushing ourselves into a little world; and that is going to do a great deal of damage to ourselves because the world God created is huge. It’s vast. It’s boundless! If that’s going to be part of our lives, we have to be willing to acknowledge our own limits, the limits of our own little experience, and let those limits go. Again Thomas, “I won’t believe that unless”—and that’s another typical thing.
That’s the third thing I’m going to bring up: That we like to be in charge of our own lives whether we are in 6th grade or 60th grade, or whether we’re 12 or 112! We like to be in charge! The whole idea of believing is we let go of being in charge. We surrender to a Father, to a brother, and to a spirit who is greater than we are, who can do infinitely more than we can imagine, who has great plans, and who can take care of all things and all people. And we’re not in charge. And we’re not in control of our lives. And if we insist on being in control of our lives—which we all do; it’s more or less a natural thing—we won’t mess them all up, until finally we give up! Now, the question is, Are you going to be wise and give up soon, or are you going to be foolish and give up later? Sooner or later you have to give up being in charge. And that’s what he was trying to tell Thomas.

So these are some things that I think you can think about. And they are going to change the way you grow up. If you really think about it, they will change the way you grow up. Choose good friends, trustworthy friends, recognizing God works through your friends; God works through everybody—or can. Pick friends God can work through whom you can trust. Recognize that the past is no measure of the future. Recognize that our little experience is just that—a little experience. There’s lots more available in life besides what we know and we feel and what we’ve experienced. As you encounter parents and teachers there are times they are not going to make any sense to you. You’re going to say, “I don’t see that!” That’s what Thomas said, “I don’t see that.” And believe it or not even as we get older, when we’re 50 years old, still there are times when we can’t see something. That doesn’t mean that it isn’t true. So we need to have a certain sort of openness to what we don’t see. Through that little openness God can work, and will! And all this is coming to faith. It’s all letting go of life and letting God be God for ourselves. And that’s a lesson Thomas had to learn, and so do all of us.
This morning we are celebrating, and we’re also calling ourselves to attention. The issue at hand is our home and the fact that our home, that is our planet, is becoming less and less livable each day. And this is really a very difficult issue for all of us. It is not something simple. We don’t have a simple rule book or list of answers to the big questions. We just have the big questions! And this has always been the case! Centuries back there were people among our ancestors, among the Israelites in fact, who believed that farming was immoral! Well, think about this. They believed that farming was immoral. So what did they think they should be doing? Michael? Who were these people? Not farmers, of course. Who were these people who thought farming was evil? What would they be? Plumbers? What is even more primitive than farming? Edward? Tax collecting, not quite, no taxes yet! Kevin? What is more primitive than farming--more simple? Herding--well, yes, more or less, keeping flocks, shepherding. So shepherding is one of the simplest--does that make any sense? Okay. Ah, yes. So there were people that--they kept flocks and they wanted the flocks to roam all over the place, and they thought that if farmers started to plow the field they were invading their territory. You see? You understand it?

Now, the Book of Genesis, which is in the real Old Testament--you ever hear of it? The Book of Genesis--you never heard about it? How about over here? Did you ever hear about the Book of Genesis? No? Okay. Ah, let’s see, Kyle, you’ve heard about the Book of Genesis--haven’t you? Yes. Where is it? In the front of the Bible. That’s right. In the very front--right? Right. It’s the oldest; I should say the first--not the oldest--the first book in the Old Testament. And it talks about our origins; and it talks about the origin of the people who we are, you might say, the descendants of--at least in a religious sense. And in the Book of Genesis it talks about God created Adam and Eve, and what were their two jobs? Adam and Eve had two jobs. What were they, Nancy? Nick, what was one job? Well, that was something else. What were they created to do? Anybody have an idea--Adam--what was Adam supposed to do? Yes. Can’t hear you. True enough, but that’s something else. That’s part of the story, but actually they were created to do something. They were put on earth to. . .Matthew? Start the human race, true enough--can’t say that’s wrong. Not to make sin--true. Tim, what were you going to say? No, actually they weren’t called to spread the word of God. That would be a good idea. This was a little more simple, a little more primitive. They were called to till the earth and keep it. Two things: till the earth and keep it. Tilling the earth means to plow it. Okay. Now, this is in the book of inspiration; this is trying to tell the people, “Look, it is God’s will that you till the earth.” And this was a revelation for a certain people at a certain time. We take it for granted, but at one time it was the big question in their minds: Is it right to disturb the earth? Is it right? Should we actually put a till in the earth and uproot it? Should we cut down trees? Maybe the tree should have a right to live and we shouldn’t cut it down. And the Book of Genesis says, “No, you do. You do have a right to till the earth and cut down trees and plant food, but also you have to keep the earth.
And this is the big problem—it’s the balance between the two: use our earth, but also keep our earth. And very often we have it all out of balance. For example, we have mining companies. They go and they dig out the ores from the earth for use because what do we want out of ores? What are ores used for? Not that kind of ore--o-r-e. What is ore used for--iron ore? What does it make? Iron for like...what? How about cars? Do cars come from the earth? Huh, do you know this? Where do cars come from? They come from the earth! The metals come from the earth. Everything we have comes from the earth in some way or another. Cotton comes from the earth. It grows on plants that come from the earth. Polyester comes from what? What does polyester come from? Josh? Petroleum, right? It’s a product from petroleum, which comes from the earth--and so on. Everything comes from the earth. Everything we have comes from the earth. And it’s all right to use these things, but we also have to keep the earth. And sometimes we find mining companies; they dig out the ore, and then they just leave a big hole. Well, that is actually—the Bible says that is wrong. It’s moral to use the ore, but its immoral just to leave a big mess because we are supposed to keep as well as till. You get the difference? You get the idea? We’re not talking about just laws. We’re talking about morality, about God’s ideas about what is right and wrong. You understand this, Kate? This is a very big issue. It’s not always a simple one. It’s not always a simple one.

There is a big issue today about nuclear power. Is it good or bad? Do you know? Is it good or bad? It is? I don’t know! Some say good; some say bad. I don’t know myself! So you see, there are many problems. And you are going to grow up, and you’re going to deal with them. These are the issues you will deal with as adults. Is nuclear power the best thing that ever happened or the worse thing that ever happened? Or is it in between, or can we control it; or can’t we control it and so on? So there is a lot in the future for us to deal with. But we need to keep in mind the idea of balancing: using the earth, but keeping the earth.

And that can get down to a very practical thing: How are we today in our own personal lives? Do we waste things? Some people think that the object in life is to spend as much money as possible. I know even children like this. The minute they have a dollar in their pocket they have to go spend it on something! Do you ever behave like that? You have to think about this: Every single thing you have comes from the earth. And if you have too many things, that’s out of balance. Do you see this? We need to learn to use only what we need, and to leave other things for other people. You understand this? You understand this? Do you understand that, Anna? Using too much is actually wrong. Spending too much money is wrong. Wasting things is wrong. Wasting food is wrong. And this means we have to be careful and caring about all the things we possess. Now, sometimes when the weather gets nice, you know what we find all over the place? Your jackets! Yeah. We find second grade jackets, fifth grade jackets and eighth grade jackets. You must be rich! You can just leave it behind and go home and I guess you’ll get another one. But you see, this is a bad attitude. This is actually harmful for yourself, for our world, for the other people. We have to be careful about all the things we have. You understand this?
And not only do we have to be careful of all the things we have, we have to be careful about where we live and how we treat the area where we live. This morning, of course as every morning, I go and I pick up all the litter that people have dropped on our property. This morning it was Tootsie Roll wrappers. I hope not from you. Did you have Tootsie Rolls today here at school? Well, you know in our country really it is something we should be worried about--our country is becoming a country of slobs! I travel all over the world, and there is hardly anywhere that is more slobby than the United States, because we American people don’t take care of anything. We have become very careless. Everywhere you go people throw things. They have something from McDonald’s or some other one of those little fast food places and when they are done with it, they just drop it where they are. Walk down Main Street, Downers Grove--you see it just dropped--anything, anywhere--it’s dropped!

So this is not caring for our earth. This is not being a person in balance. So we have to think about these things. We have to think about this. We can take better care of everything. When you have a wrapper, what do you do with it? Put it in your pocket; that’s why you have pockets. Take it home; throw it in the wastepaper basket. Is it a little thing? Yes, but it’s not just a little thing. It’s an attitude! One of the great career choices in your future will probably be garbage! It will be one of the big growth industries--what to do with all the garbage our country produces. Why? Because we use too much, and throw out too much. And it’s going to become a big problem; it is already a big problem. But we’ll solve the problem--not to worry.

But the point is to be aware--all right--to be aware of yourself and your things, and what everything costs; take care of what you have--try to spend as little as possible rather than as much as possible. That is actually conserving; that is keeping the world. Okay? It’ll be just slightly better because you did that. Is it a little thing? Yes, but that’s what life is all about. It’s about lots of little things. So if we can think about it, and each day think about it, the world will be better, and this day will not be a waste. So I hope you will think about this. Do I have your agreement? Will you think about it at least? Will you think about this? You will? You promise? If I ask your teachers later today will they say, “Oh yeah, we can see they are thinking about it”? All right, let’s pray.
Today, in the Acts of the Apostles, we have a story of deliverance. The apostles were delivered from jail. Now, some people are skeptical about these stories, but they are not totally unique in the history of the world. The whole idea of angels is that God activates through some strange, unexplainable agency various forms of rescue and also, you might say, deliverance of messages. Now, the point in today’s reading is that this supernatural event was not perceived. So we have to be very clear about this: that God has many ways of acting, but that doesn’t mean that we will perceive them. You may not have gotten the message of Thomas--doubting Thomas. Thomas did believe in Jesus. Thomas’ doubt was about his brothers and sisters. He didn’t believe Mary Magdalene. He didn’t believe Peter. He didn’t believe the other disciples, and that’s why Jesus rebuked him. But he did believe Jesus. Had he not believed in Jesus, he would not have seen him at all raised from the dead. Therefore there is a difference between a supernatural agency and a miracle. What is meant by a miracle is the perception of a supernatural agency--when God’s work is perceived, than you have a miracle. Here you have God’s work, but it’s not perceived. The apostles are in jail; then they are free, but the opponents don’t perceive this. It’s God’s work. And this is not totally unique.

I don’t think the biblical authors would bother telling us about events that were totally and absolutely unique because they really are trying to tell us a pattern. They are trying to inform us of a pattern of God’s dealings with people. And part of the pattern is God’s actions are often not interpreted! What is the sound of a tree falling in the north woods?
Well, no one’s there. There are no ears to pick up the sound; well then, there is technically no sound. There are sound waves—but no sound. Sound is a phenomenon in the brain of an animal, including a human one. What is the value of God’s actions when there is no human heart to perceive them? St. Paul says, “Faith comes by hearing.” It’s very important to keep that in mind. He does not say, “Faith comes by ‘seeing.’” Seeing itself is nothing; it’s faith that makes the seeing a miracle. Faith has to be there for the perception of a miracle to be there. Faith comes from hearing. I’ve been in Europe; and there are fabulous cathedrals, magnificent edifices in which artists have, more or less, painted the entire mystery of the gospel in stained glass or various other media. And I’ve seen all sorts of tourists come and they gawk at these various mysteries—and see nothing except colors. They say, “Oh, isn’t that very blue.” The meaning behind the story is not there—there’s no faith! Faith is not from seeing; faith comes from hearing. And this we need to keep in mind.
“Unlike your ancestors who ate and died nonetheless, the one who feeds on this bread shall live forever.” When we come to lay to rest a friend, a mother, a sister, there is a very special openness in our own souls that enables us to face a mystery of life as a special grace. It would be a shame if we were to pass over it at this moment without taking advantage of it. In the readings today we hear the term death used. As we look at death, the first thing we should note in reflecting on our Scriptures is that it doesn’t always mean the same thing. What after all do we know about death? I think we imagine we know, but we don’t. So what does death mean for us today? St. Paul says that through one man all died. What is he talking about? He’s referring to Adam--one man. What does it mean all died? Here he is not talking about what we familiarly refer to as death, the cessation of physical existence. He doesn’t mean that. For Paul life is not simply a physical thing, so death is not simply a physical thing. For St. Paul life means union with the source, union with the source of everything, the eternal one, the ground on which everything else depends. To live, for St. Paul, means to be in union with that; to die means not to be in union with that.

Jesus also speaks in this way occasionally; for example, he says, “Let the dead bury the dead.” What does he mean? In the first case the dead does not refer to those who are physically deceased but to those who are not in union with life, reflecting Paul’s view, “Through Adam all died”—that is, all who have ceased to live truly in union with God. Again in the fourth gospel Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life. Anyone who believes in me shall never die.” What does that mean? Does it mean they shall [never] cease to live on a physical level? Of course not! It means that if we believe in Jesus we will never lose communion with God, the ground of all being, the origin of everything—that is, the eternal one, the uncreated.

Now this is an offer! The gospel presents us an offer: You may enter into this kind of life; you are invited. It is sometimes symbolized in our Scriptures, in our liturgy, as a banquet! And partly that is the meaning of the Eucharist, which we shall offer on this altar table. Partly that is meant to be an anticipation of the eternal life that is offered. But we have to be very clear. It’s offered--it isn’t shoved into our souls! We need to receive it, to want it, to desire it, to choose it, to decide that it is for us; and then to allow it to bear fruit in our lives by transforming us into beings that God can truly recognize as his children—not simply call children but recognize as children by the way we live! This is really what the Christian mystery is about--this great offer that God has given. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” “Son” meaning self. God gave his whole and true self to us, to the world, for our salvation so we could have eternal life. And this is an offer; it’s an invitation that we may accept if we choose.

So how will it be when we no longer exist physically? It’s not really a morbid thought. This is a realistic question. Will we continue to live with God? Well, we can if we live with God now. The gospels call us to life now, not to thinking about some future
moment--just delaying, delaying, delaying and someday maybe everything will be okay. No, the gospels call us to attention now! Now is the time to respond to God. Now is the time to receive the invitation and respond to it, to give ourselves to God as God has given himself to us; otherwise in our daily life we are really not alive. We have died with what Paul calls “the world,” where all men appear dead because we’re not in communion with life.

On the other hand, if we accept the invitation, then there’s another kind of a death. And St. Paul refers to that when he says, “Do you not know that all of you who were baptized were baptized into death? We were buried with Christ, and now we live a new life.” This is a question, a question that was posed to believers in the very earliest times, believers who lived in Rome. St. Paul was aware of the fact that although they had accepted faith and baptism, their lives did not reflect it. There was something missing. It was as if they did and they didn’t. Well, of course, life is full of ambiguity; but we have to be aware of the fact that letting God into our life is not something that happens one day and then it’s there forever, but it’s a growing relationship. And St. Paul was trying to awaken in believers that at times our lives, even though we may believe, at times our lives do not reflect that because we don’t live a new life at all. We live an old one--a life rooted in our own, independent, physical, little world--our physical existence where our existence and survival is paramount, where everything depends upon what I want or what I need. Of course this world is actually a foreshadowing of hell. God wants us to live, even now on this planet, in a life that foreshadows heaven, where there is a mutual giving and receiving, where there is a new common life among many. St. Paul’s word is in the singular, “We live a new life”--not we live many new “lives.” There is only one life. It is the life of God! That life we can live together if we recognize that when we were baptized, we were buried with Christ. And in that burial our total independence from everybody else was buried, our isolation from everybody else was buried, our separation from everyone else was buried; and now we can live as one. God has gone to great lengths, in fact, stops at nothing to bring us this new treasure, this new beauty, this truth, which is truth for life; and he presents it to each of us for our response.
It is our belief that the true author of Holy Scripture is the Holy Spirit, and that the human author who puts the words on the page has to choose appropriate terms to express the message the Holy Spirit has inspired. At times this process is a bit difficult to translate from one language to another. And today’s gospel reading is one such case. The dialogue between Jesus and Peter was written by the human author in Greek, a language which makes distinctions English does not make. In the Greek, Jesus asks Peter, “Agapas me?” Now the word “agape” is a word which refers to unconditional love. It is a word used, in the New Testament ordinarily only for God. God loves unconditionally, meaning God does not love the creation, God does not love people because of the lovableness of the creation or of people, but rather because God is of his own nature loving. Therefore God does not withdraw his love from those who are evil or those who reject him. Jesus made this very clear. “The sun shines on the good and the bad; the rain falls on the just and the unjust.” God loves because God is love! If people reject God’s love, that’s their doing and it’s their consequence to suffer.

Now in this dialogue Jesus asks Peter, who actually represents the entire Church, “Do you love me in this way? Do you love me in this unconditional way--the way God loves?” And Peter--again representing the Church, the believers--doesn’t understand the question, and so he answers with a different verb. He says, “Philo se.” Philein is a different kind of love. It’s the love of dear friends. It’s the love of happily married couples. It’s the love that means I am comfortable with you; I am free to be vulnerable in your presence; I don’t have to have my defenses up. It’s a love that says, “I like to be in your company. I am attracted to you, and so on.” And this is the verb Peter uses, which does not answer the question.

So Jesus poses the question a second time, “Agapas me?” And again Peter misses the point. And then Jesus changes his verb. He says, “Phileis me?” And then the evangelist, with a bit of humor--which we miss since we don’t understand it--says that Peter was hurt because Jesus asked a third time. Well, no he didn’t. This is the first time he says, “Phileis me? Are you my friend? Are you my companion? Are we on good terms, etc.?” And Peter says, “You know all things. You know philo se, I love you.”

Now why does this dialogue take place? It is not really an historical reminiscence. It’s a teaching from the Holy Spirit about the nature of love and the nature of our relationship with God. And it’s one that believers often fail to comprehend. It is one thing to love God when we really feel blessed, when we feel the presence of God, when we experience the support of others, when our heart sings; but it’s quite another to love God when there is nothing but emptiness and void within, when it seems as if God has abandoned us, as if God has disappeared, gone away, doesn’t care any more. And this is what the question is about. Not, do you enjoy my company? Do you want to be in my presence when all is well, but are you able to decide and to will to love when all is not
well, when there’s nothing but absence, when there’s nothing but emptiness? This is unconditional love.

Now, when we hear about unconditional love, I think we are tempted to think of some hapless vagrant, or perhaps doing something good for some pathetic soul, or perhaps you think of a lost sheep--every family has lost sheep, every family has somebody who doesn’t get along with anybody, who has burnt her or his bridges, and now does not communicate with the rest of the family. Perhaps you think about such a person as a person who can be loved unconditionally. But the point of this reading is something more because unconditional love has to be unconditional. We can’t love one and not another! And we might easily overlook the foibles of the lost sheep of the family, and we might overlook the troubles, even if they’re self-caused, of some homeless vagrant; but how can we ever overlook a God who has abandoned us? How can we take away responsibility from the very source of all life? So really the most important question to the believer is: “Do you love me unconditionally, even when I’m not going to be supporting you, even when I’m not going to be felt in your life, even when it doesn’t seem as if you’re being blessed?”

Now why should this be? Well, all the saints talk about it. They talk about a dark night of the soul. And every believer, if he or she persists long enough in life, will come to a point like this. And what God is doing--God is making it possible for us to be transformed into his nature. Because God loves unconditionally, he is making it possible for us to love unconditionally. And the only way he can do that, in a sense, is to withdraw and to give us the opportunity to do as he would do. Jesus says, “I no longer call you servants; I call you friends.” And that name and honor goes beyond friendship to becoming, really, just like God--loving for no other reason than we choose to love! This is the point of the dialogue.

And it ends with Jesus remarking to Peter, who does not get it--even at the end he doesn’t get it, again reflective of ourselves--we often don’t get what God is asking of us; but that’s okay, according to this story. Jesus says, “Well, anyway, meanwhile, tend my sheep.” And then he adds, “There will come a time, Peter, when you won’t be in charge anymore of yourself; you won’t be in control, and then we’ll see.”
Because of the feast of St. Mark last Saturday, you did not read the first part of this story. In the first part of the story, the disciples set out at night in a boat headed for Capernaum. Now, this itself should strike us as rather odd. Even today people do not set out at night in boats--at least if they’re wise. They set out at night in a boat, and they’re headed for Capernaum, and a storm blows up. And low, in the midst of the storm, Jesus comes to them and he says, “Do not be afraid.” And all of a sudden they’re where they wanted to be; they’re in Capernaum, they’re aground.

Now, of course, we know that John’s Gospel is very metaphorical; he is not interested simply in telling us little stories from the past. He is really providing us with a map for our own journey. And in that story he is saying the Church must be like this. The Church must set out even in darkness. We can’t have a clear understanding where we are going. We cannot be always operating out of a sense of knowing; there has to be a sense of unknowing! But we have to set out! We must set out; we just can’t stay back. And when we set out, even though we’re in the unknown, God will come to us; and we shall arrive at the end of our journey because God will lead us there. But the disciple must set out, really, not just the individual disciple; the Church must set out in contrast to today’s story about the crowd.

The crowd sleeps though the night--they don’t bother. They wait until daybreak. Then they go looking for Jesus, and they look for Jesus where he was before. Many people do this. They think they are really searching for God. They think they are really looking for Christ, but they’re not being wise about this at all. First of all they are not setting out at the proper time, but delaying; then when they do set out they look in the wrong place--where God was before, not where God is now! You may say, “God is everywhere,” but this is meant in a different sense. After exhausting the possibilities, then they set out for Capernaum, which is where they should have started in the first place! And when they meet Jesus they say, “Well, how did you get here?” Not the point. God’s presence is not something logical. It is not something we can predict. And Jesus rebuffs them. He says, “You’re not looking for the right reason. You didn’t see any signs.”

Now, what does that mean? Seeing signs is a matter of faith. They saw the loaves and they ate their fill, but they didn’t see the sign; they didn’t know what it meant. Seeing signs means perceiving meaning. They didn’t perceive any meaning. They didn’t understand that the feeding of the five thousand was an anticipation of the kingdom of God and the manifestation of the abundance that belongs to the kingdom. They didn’t get it at all. But they were full, and that’s all they cared about; and now they are looking for another meal! Also there is a way in which people see God--for what?--only for their daily bread! They wanted their needs taken care of, and they think that’s what religion is about. It is not. Jesus taught his disciples that if you really want to pray, you have to start by putting the kingdom of God first on your list of priorities that you really want and
desire. You have to put the will of God being done way ahead of your own personal issues--like your daily bread. And so this is really about what it is like to journey, and what it is like to be, you might say, going around in circles.
Today we have the story or the martyrdom of St. Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles; and we see that St. Paul, then called Saul, concurred in the killing--in the murder. Paul, like many of the great ministers of the Scripture, was originally a very great sinner like David, who was a murderer and an adulterer and a few other things, but who became a servant of God--Paul and many others. The Scripture is replete with human nature as it is and with human beings who are very frail, not very virtuous, not heroic in any true sense. Scripture is not myth. It is truly history, and it’s true about human beings; but it’s about human beings who are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit!

Now, in the story, the listeners of Stephen’s gospel presentation--they cover their ears! You see, a gospel presentation really is a terrific threat to our own identity. A gospel presentation tells us we really don’t know who we are. It brings good news; but it is news, and some people don’t like news--even good news because good news, being new, requires change--change at a very deep level of feeling about ourselves. Feeling about ourselves is really one of the great forces that keeps everything the way it is, prevents growth and prevents healing, prevents reconciliation among enemies. And we euphemize or sanctify this great force by calling it conviction. People are proud of their convictions, but this is really not what faith is all about.

Faith is not about our convictions. Faith is not about our identity--the identity we’ve gotten from the world or from our experience. Faith is about something else altogether. It’s about a new identity that is also very old because it somehow began in the mind of God before we were even created. This is the very strong message carried by Jeremiah
and Isaiah, “Before I was begotten in the womb you knew me.” And all the saints talk about the need to find that identity, the need to let go of what has been created in us by life, by the world, by our experiences and find what God has in mind. So faith in this particular sense is quite the opposite of conviction. It’s letting go of conviction. It’s letting go of certainties, and it’s openness to the Holy Spirit.

Don’t think for one moment that only the Jews steel themselves against the Holy Spirit! This is an all too common factor even within the Church that people do not open themselves to the Holy Spirit, that somehow they think that they can get everything all together. Any time anyone thinks everything is all together, they’re not open to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God that blows where he wills like the wind. It is not God’s plan for us to have everything together or to be in control or to know for certain who we are. It is God’s plan for us to be moving toward God in openness, in obedience, in submission, in faith--searching! And the reason why we can live without fear is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides us through all darkness. The reason we can live in love rather than in self love and pride is the Holy Spirit, which is God’s own life entering us from within. To be against the Holy Spirit is to lose everything.
Today we celebrate the feast of St. Catherine of Siena. Catherine had extraordinary force for good in a very troubled world, therefore a wonderful model for ourselves. Today we hear about changing climates. Well, this is actually nothing new. During the thirteenth century Europe had an extraordinarily warm climate. Vineyards grew in modern day Norway and Sweden producing good wine. France was a breadbasket producing abundance of food. It still is a very fine country for farming because its soil is basically resting on limestone, which allows it to drain very well.

Now, all this changed at the turn of the fourteenth century. There was a tremendous climatic change that some geologists call a mini ice age. The results were disastrous. Temperatures plummeted. It rained for three years without stopping from 1315 to 1318, something like that, and crops rotted; nothing could grow--people starved! After people had been weakened by this change in the climate, by cold winters, long winters, short rainy summers, then came the Bubonic Plague. It wiped out entire cities because people were already weak anyway. And it’s at this time that Catherine of Siena started her revelations of divine love.

Now, most people at that time believed that the Bubonic Plague was God’s, you might say, punishment: That it was the beginning of the end; that this was a mark of divine disfavor; that God was basically an angry God, basically punitive, vindictive; and that his patience was at an end, and so on. And therefore, this is the way people responded in terms of their religious or spiritual life: They became exceedingly afraid, began to engage in all kinds of self-flagellation, etc. In the midst of this comes St. Catherine of Siena.

Now, Catherine was a young woman and she started to see visions and hear auditions about the divine love, about God’s love. And this enabled her to work very hard in a city where people were being burned in piles to eliminate contagion. She worked for a long time to alleviate suffering. And then she got involved in what you might call high church politics. She went to the pope, who had removed himself from Rome, which was more or less a dirty and unhealthy city and went to live in Avignon, which is in a very beautiful bucolic area of France called Provence. And she went to him and said that part of the problem was him. Part of the problem with the whole world was the disorder in the hierarchy itself; and that he better straighten things out and take himself back to Rome, which is meant to be the see city of the Church, the papal see. And he eventually complied with her requests. And in a real sense there was a complete reformation in the Church due to her work.

Now, she was a lonely woman in an age where women were not considered to be too significant. She was a lonely voice of compassion in an age where compassion had been forgotten. She was a woman who believed in divine love in an age when everyone thought of divine punishment. And she changed things and brought about a new age for the Church. So we should realize that every era has its problems--some worse than
others--but they are simply opportunities and challenges for true believers to avail themselves of God and of his divine revelation, and to work for something better--and to that we’re all called.
Today we read the momentous story of the conversion of St. Paul. Secular historians claim that it is St. Paul who really made Christianity a universal religion, and without him it would never have been the force it has been in the world. Of course, from the standpoint of faith we can imagine that God would have chosen someone else if St. Paul had not been available. Nonetheless it is true his conversion, as things actually turned out, was very crucial. Now in today’s story we read about his conversion, and it was a rather unusual form of conversion. I have heard people in various times in life say they wish they could have such an experience. I doubt they really have comprehended what it was like. St. Paul was cast down to the ground and blinded for three days. I don’t think most people would really want to experience that!

Now for St. Paul the idea of Christ--he had already been introduced to Christ; he had already heard the gospel presentation. That’s one thing you have to remember already. Jesus is not about casting people down in the road who have no idea who he is. Paul already knew Christ from one angle. He was very well aware of the Christian Church and its message, and was fairly opposed to it. And was opposed to it because he believed that it was contrary to the will of God. So his conversion actually was a rather minor affair because he was already totally convinced and convicted in regard to the will of God--he just didn’t understand it! This is what you might call an intellectual conversion, a revelation conversion, where Paul all of a sudden realized, “Saul, why are you persecuting me?” All of a sudden he realized that the Lord he was serving was also the Lord he was persecuting! It did not require him to actually change his will from one direction to another; it simply clarified for him what direction he had already chosen because he had already chosen to serve God. He just didn’t understand the ways of God.

Furthermore he was already a very enthusiastic person. His conversion experience did not supply him with his enthusiasm. His tireless efforts to spread faith in Christ had already begun long before in this sense: He was already a tireless worker for what he believed in. It’s just that what he believed in happened to be incomplete, so God helped him see better. And to put it in one simple way, that was rather easy.

Now, let’s look at the rest of us. Very often the problem is not that we don’t see what God’s will is--we’re not sure we really want to do it in the first place! Striking us down on the road would not change that. God cannot change the direction of our will because our wills are free--that’s the very nature of them. He can attract us and provide us and encourage us, but cannot change our wills. If we were to suddenly understand in a new way what God really wanted, it probably wouldn’t make a lot of difference for most people because we’re not sure we’re totally and whole-heartedly already moving in that direction--or in any direction. The problem with most of us is we’re so sluggish, or we are not even on the journey to Damascus in the first place. God has a much more difficult time with sluggish people, with people who haven’t yet decided what to do, than he did with St. Paul.
What about enthusiasm? Paul had this tremendous enthusiasm for God, for doing whatever he believed God wanted him to be. He was on fire! And yet he had not received the Holy Spirit. That’s what Ananias told him, “You are to receive your sight and the Holy Spirit.” So it was a very natural human enthusiasm that God took and used for his own way. Well, it’s perhaps not natural for everybody to have that enthusiasm. God works with each person according to his or her own nature--and that’s all right. The Holy Spirit will take our own nature, whatever it is, and bring it to perfection and utilize it for the kingdom of God. So the story of St. Paul’s conversion always goes back to the beginning: Are we really ready and willing to do whatever God wants and are we on the way?
In today’s reading we can see yet another facet of this mysterious quality, virtue and
grace, that we call faith. Now, as I have noted many times, faith has many different
facets to it. It is never simply agreeing that something is true, but it does involve the
willful and deliberate acceptance of truth. We see that even in Jesus’ own ministry there
were disciples, and it says here “who refused to believe him.” Belief is not a mental
exercise alone. It involves thinking; it involves reflection, but it is really a decision of
the will.

Now, in today’s reading we see that some of the disciples said, “This talk is hard to
endure. Who can take it seriously?” In fact, it is referring to the previous section where
Jesus was speaking of the mystery of the Eucharist: “My flesh is real food, my blood real
drink.” And from the very beginning there were so-called disciples who refused to
believe in the mystery of God’s life among us in the Eucharist. “If you do not eat my
flesh and drink my blood, you will have no life.” Of course, this makes us totally
dependent upon Christ. Now, some of his disciples were the kind of person that perhaps
found a great deal in Jesus’ teaching and ministry that was desirable, but did not want to
commit themselves one hundred per cent to a total dependence upon him. And we see
Jesus’ attitude is not one of compromise. He doesn’t say, “Well, let me explain.” He
doesn’t even go in on the obvious, “Well, of course, don’t take this literally; it is meant in
a very deep way.”

When we come to the Lord, it is we who have the burden of coming and accepting. It
is we who are invited to eternal life, and it is we who have to decide to accept life in its
fullness the way God wants to give it to us. And after all who can really comprehend the ways of the Lord? Part of faith is also going along with God’s ways even though at times
they may seem hard to take, or we believe at times absurd. But what is the standard of truth? Ourselves, or the one who is the way and the truth and the life?
Today, as you probably can tell from the banners, we have celebrated First Holy Communion at St. Joseph's, and we shall also do so next Sunday. Celebration of First Holy Communion is a very important time for a parish because it is the entire parish that is initiating the young believers of the parish to the table of the Lord. And it behooves us to consider, perhaps in a very focused way, what is this sacrament of Eucharist? All sacraments have three aspects to them: a past and a present and a future. The Eucharist, of course, is the primary example. It points to a past event: That is the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, which we have recently celebrated in a very solemn way during the Triduum and Easter. This was a time in which Jesus willingly surrendered his life as an act of utter dedication, obedience and love of his Father--but not only of his Father, also of ourselves, his brothers and sisters, his brothers and sisters by choice; for unlike ourselves, the Word of God asked to be born. The Word of God was not simply thrown into existence, but asked to be born--to become one of the human family in a commitment that is almost baffling! It was in the crucifixion of Christ that the utter gift of love was manifested; and through this gift of love, salvation has been extended to all who will accept it. And this remains the historical hinge event to which our Eucharist refers.

But it would be very wrong to think of the Eucharist as something primarily concerned with the past. When we come to the altar we are not receiving a “thing,” nor are we receiving merely a symbol or an image or a token; although it is indeed a symbol, it is symbolic, but it is far more than merely a symbol. We are indeed meeting the person of the risen Christ. Resurrection itself is not an historical event in the sense that it lives in the past; it is a present event that lives in eternity. And therefore as we approach the table of the Lord, we are for a moment invited into, one might call it, a window into eternity. We are invited to enter for a moment into the serenity and timelessness of the all-present God, who has known us from before our own conception according to the testimony of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. We are meeting the risen Christ who entered the holy of holies of heaven with his own blood to pour forth before the mercy seat of God his own blood, as a testimony of his own love and commitment and sacrifice for us. This Christ is our companion in the life that is torn and continues to be torn by all kinds of evil--from the overt evil of violent crime, poverty, homelessness, and starvation to the hidden evils that only we know about, the hidden sufferings: loneliness, disappointment and heartache. This Christ has accepted all of our lives. He has offered all of his life in ransom and then meets us in this mysterious gesture that we perform in his honor.

It is very important that we try to be aware as we approach the table of the Lord of whom we are approaching. Like any ritual, it can be just that--a ritual! Now, I am impressed with the way in which many of you come into church taking time to cross yourselves with the water that recalls your baptism and also the way you cross your children. It seems you are going out of your way to make a point of it. And that is good;
we need to go out of the way to make a point of the truths of our faith. But it can happen that we fall into a rut, and this is very bad! When we are in a rut we are in mental and spiritual neutral, and as such we cannot connect with the transmission that God Himself is providing in this contact. So it is very important that we try to be very aware of whom it is we are approaching, whom it is we are meeting in this great sacrament of the altar.

The third aspect of the sacrament, of any sacrament, is the future. The death and resurrection of Christ was by no means the end of anything. It was really the beginning of something, of a new creation. We still do not know exactly what God is planning. St. Paul says, “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has the imagination of anyone imagined what God has planned for those who love him.” But many of the images that Jesus Himself gave us of God’s plan have to do with banquets—banquets and weddings and celebrations. Those are images, but they reveal something of what God is planning for those who love him. And the Eucharist is already meant to be an anticipation of this heavenly banquet. And the call of this heavenly banquet is a call that really is inviting us to become engaged in the work God is doing to bring it about. It is God’s work not our work, and yet God uses us if we are willing. If we recognize that by ourselves, and all by ourselves, we are nothing, if we recognize that we cannot create for ourselves a happy life, if our minds can reach the wonder of creation and really seek meaning in life, if we are willing to go on a journey with God, we can become God’s servant and instrument in the forming of this kingdom that Jesus talked about—that was in fact, according to Pope Paul VI, “the only absolute” in Jesus’ teaching. This kingdom, this presence of God on earth, this presence of God among people, will bring what we all most deeply desire: justice, love and peace, the peace the world cannot give. And our Eucharist is a promise of that and also an anticipation of it, but it is also a call to us to become more deeply responsible for the world around us. Broken as it is, sinful as it is, ridden with evil as it is, under the power of the principalities as it is, nonetheless we are called to become responsible in a very deep way and bring the will of God into this earth. And this is the meaning of the two phrases in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples that need to come before any of the things we pray for: First of all “Thy kingdom come.” Secondly, “Thy will be done on earth.”
First of all, the words I speak today will be primarily addressed to our young first communicants; but the rest of you may listen in. Now, I will not ask any questions; and that way you can all relax, and you can also look at me. You do not have to advert your eyes for fear that I will call on you—I won’t—I promise. We’re dealing with the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. As in fact with every sacrament in our Church, there are three things we think about: the past, the present and the future.

The past—the past has to do with our Lord Jesus Christ who, when the time came for him to pass from this life, offered himself to the Father. And this offering is the reason why we are all capable of living a new life. We still live on this earth, and we still live with human beings who do not know Christ; but since we are brought into life with Jesus, we have a new life. We can live without fear, especially fear of death; we do not need to fear death. We can live without fearful anxieties. We can indeed live in peace. We have been reconciled to the Father, and Jesus is going to be always with us in our relating to God. It is through his death on the cross that we have this new gift. That’s the past.

The present—the present is today. Today Jesus is going to come to you not as he was two thousand years ago, but as he is now with God in heaven. It is the heavenly Christ who comes to you today. It is the glorified Christ—it is the risen Christ who comes to you in the form of bread and wine. Bread and wine are the external looks of the sacrament we receive, but they are not the inner meaning or truth of the sacrament. What you are receiving today is really the risen Christ, the body and blood, the soul and the divinity of Christ. And that’s the present. It’s very simple—isn’t it?

And now the future. We are not yet fully aware of what God is planning. St. Paul says, “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has human imagination ever imagined what God has planned for those who love him.” But some day—and it’s something great! Only God isn’t doing it all by himself. God is inviting you and me and us believers to help in the establishment of this kingdom of God, this kingdom of peace, this kingdom of justice and fairness, goodness and forgiveness—that’s already started, but isn’t finished yet. And so when you come to the Eucharist, you are really agreeing to help God in this kingdom, which means you are saying, “God, I accept Jesus. I accept Jesus as my Lord. I want Jesus in my heart. I will do all I can to be like Jesus.” Which means—it means to be forgiving when people hurt you, and not to hand on the hurt. It means in every way to work for the best possible person you can be. And you know the difference; you know the difference between being mean, small—and you know that’s not good—versus being big, big-hearted, big-souled. And that is what God is calling you to be. And that is really a big task. And you’re not perfect. I’m not perfect! Nobody’s perfect, but together we do this.

So then the last thing you have to remember is that if you really are going to be successful in following these promises you’re making today to be like Jesus, what do you
have to do? You have to come often to him in prayer and in liturgy and worship to receive his help. Now, when I said it’s not easy, I meant it. There are a lot of people in the world, boys and girls, who really don’t love God. They love themselves; they don’t love God, and they’re not going to be nice to you. So be prepared. But that’s not the end of the story! So there will be trials, but you’ll always have God with you. The only person who can get God out of your life is you. Only you can shut the door; God will never shut the door on you. And this is a beautiful truth you need to let really sink in: God will never abandon you—not ever! It says in the prophet Isaiah, “Even if a mother could abandon her child, I shall never abandon you.” That’s God’s message to you.

And so we continue to live, but with a new sense of presence and real security because God is with us. Not that life is going to be easier today, not that there won’t be bad things and struggles; but you’ll never be all alone. God is with you. He has come to you today, entered your heart and he wants to stay. Now, is that easy? Is that hard to understand? I know I said I wouldn’t ask you any questions, but you could nod. Is that hard to understand? I don’t think it is too hard to understand, and I think you do. And I was very proud of the way you prepared yourself in taking this sacrament so seriously. And I’m very proud of the help you’ve had from home, and from the teachers in your school—religious education and St. Joseph’s School. All have done a wonderful job, and we are here today to celebrate. Amen.
The Message of God

Fourth Week of Easter  Wednesday, May 6, 1998  7:00 a.m.
Acts 12:24-13:5;  Jn 12:44-50

One of the constantly recurring themes, especially in the fourth gospel, is the theme of the “word of God.” If we think about this phrase, we may wonder what it really means. It’s always in the singular; it’s never in the plural. Now, some people, for example, believe that the words of the Bible is what is meant when we use the term the “word of God.” They may honestly believe this because, for example, after we read from the Bible we say, “The word of God”; but we don’t say, “The words of God.” The words in the Bible are not the word of God. The words of the Bible are the words of people, of men, scribes, who have been inspired to put the word of God onto paper. The apostles were sent to preach the word of God in their own words and gestures and signs. One can say that even the works of Christ, such as the healings works of Christ, are part of the word of God--they’re a message. So the word of God is really the message of God. It is the revelation of God being communicated through words, through gestures, through signs—in whatever way.

And the fourth gospel makes the elaborate point that the Word of God, the message of God, actually takes flesh in the person of Jesus, so that whoever looks at Jesus really sees the message of God enfleshed. So that accepting Jesus is not just a personal thing, it is not a human thing; it really is accepting the message of God and the one who spoke the message—the Father. The Father speaks the Word; and Jesus says that in today’s text, “Whoever accepts me accepts not only me, but the one who sent me”—the Father who speaks the Word eternally. Now, it’s also the idea of the evangelists that the Church is to be so touched by the Spirit, also of God. The Spirit of God should so touch the Church, the people, the believers, the apostles, the disciples, that they would become also the word enfleshed—not in the same substantial degree as Christ Himself—but in some sense, so that they become the message as well as the messenger. “He who accepts you, accepts me; he who rejects you rejects me.” That’s not about words; it’s about the message itself embodied in the believers.

Unfortunately we have often not understood this in a very profound way, and we have thought that we could spread the word of God just in words. We’ll say the right words. We’ll use the name of Jesus. We’ll just copy whatever the evangelist said and that’s it. No, that isn’t it; that’s the whole problem. Jesus sent his disciples into the world to proclaim the good news: to “Baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” We have not really accomplished this task because we have never started it! We never really understood that the good news is something that has to live in us and actually take over our identity! But we don’t want it to take over our identity because we have another identity, an identity we’ve gotten from wherever: growing up, from our relationships with people, from our families, from our friends, from our neighbors, from our enemies even! And we hold on to this identity fashioned by the world, and we think it means something. And the call to become real missionaries and apostles is a call to let go of what the world has given us, including the world of our family, and to let the spirit of God give us a new identity, with the belief that God knows
who we are more than we know. And if we let go of that little thing—which is only partly true anyway—which we call ourselves, something much greater is fashioned as we become the message itself—embodied—embodied in our emotions, embodied in our thoughts, embodied in what we say and how we say it. And this then is the message brought into the world.

So many people think they are disciples of Christ, but they never met Christ. They perhaps never actually met a true Christian; that is, someone so touched by the Spirit that they are really identified with the message—the word of God. And likewise many people may think they have rejected, but they’ve never even seen the Word! So we are always in the beginning of this great missionary effort that God has inaugurated. It’s important we have a sense of what the meaning of our daily life really is: That we are really called on to bring the message of God in the way we live to the people we work with, who otherwise will never have a clue what the message of God really is. They won’t get it from words; they won’t get it from those people who think they’re evangelists, or [who are] on television, who have bought their time and who are spreading their business—which is not the word of God. So God evangelizes through those who are willing to become the message. That’s his way; there is no other.
I would like to invite all of those who have already received First Holy Communion to reflect on the day that you received Christ for the first time, and reflect also on the meaning of this great gift, as I address a few words to our young believers. First of all I want to deal with you, I won’t ask you any questions unless they can be answered with a “yes” or a “no”--a nod or a shake. Is that all right? Is that okay? If it’s not, then we will have to have some other kind. How about that? Is that all right? Okay. All right with you? With you too? Is that okay? Where is the other young man? What happened to him? Oh, here he is. Is that all right with you? Okay. Now, if I need more of an answer than you can give me with a nod or a shake, then I’ll ask your parents. Is that all right? Okay? Is that okay? Is that all right with you? All right--good. You rely on your parents--don’t you? Yeah, so I should too, right? I think so. Right?

Now, you know sometimes we over estimate or exaggerate how difficult it is to understand our faith. Our faith is very deep, but it’s not complicated. Now, what is complicated? Well, I’ll tell you what’s complicated. A computer is complicated; a word processor is complicated. You probably even use one--do you? Word processor? No. How about you; do you use a word processor? You don’t know what that is--no, you don’t? Do you? No? How about you? You don’t know. Last night there were two children who said they used a word processor. I don’t know. It’s hard for me to use one--I can hardly use one! So, but I’ll tell you what--our faith is not complicated; it’s just deep. And we have to think about it slowly. Slow. Today we are talking about the Blessed Sacrament. And every sacrament has three points to it. It points to the past; it points to the present, and it points to the future. Past, present, future.

Past--what event--I’m not going to ask you to tell me now, but just think--what event in the past is the Blessed Sacrament, the Holy Eucharist, Holy Communion? What is it referring to? Think about it. What event in the past? We’ll see if you get it right. Okay. The event that the Blessed Eucharist talked about is the crucifixion of Christ on the cross. Did you get it right? No? Did you get it right? You did--okay! You didn’t remember! How about you--did you have it right? Okay--how about you? Yes? Good. So that’s the past event. When Jesus died on the cross, he gave his life for us. He died so that we can live. He died as a sacrifice for us, for our sins, to let us know what love is all about and to bring that love to us. Okay? That’s the past.

Now the present--right now--today. Jesus did not stay on the cross--did he? He was taken down from the cross, and was buried. Is that right? Correct? Now, did he stay in the grave? No he didn’t! Did he? No. Did Jesus stay in the grave? No. All right. He didn’t stay in the grave--did he?. Do you agree with this? You don’t agree with this! All right. So Jesus was raised from the dead, and it is the living Christ that comes to you today--the living Christ: body, blood, soul and divinity. The living, glorified Christ comes into your heart and into your soul and into your body through the means of the Blessed Sacrament that outwardly looks like bread and wine; but inwardly is transformed
by the power of the Spirit to be the body, blood, soul and divinity, the real presence of Christ. And he is coming to you today. That’s the present.

Now, what kind of response could anyone give to such a great gift? Think about that for a moment. What response could anyone give to such a big gift? There’s only one possible response—to give ourselves to God as Jesus did! And that’s the meaning of the Mass. The Mass is we bring ourselves and offer ourselves to the Father with Christ. Okay? So today I’m asking you to make this intention that you are going to offer yourself to the Father with Jesus in the Mass. That’s why we call the Mass the sacrifice of the Mass—when we offer Jesus and ourselves to God. Okay? You understand this? You understand?

Now, what about the future? What’s the future all about? Well, Jesus came to preach the coming kingdom of God: a kingdom of justice, a kingdom of peace, a kingdom of love, a kingdom of harmony. That kingdom is just beginning now—just a little bit. And you are going to have something to do. You are going to have a very important role to play in this kingdom. Each of you, all of us, we all have a role to play in this kingdom; and that is this: That we have to become loving people even if people don’t love us. There are bad people in the world. There are evil people, and they are going to hurt you sometime or another. And Jesus says, “I have taught you how to forgive. I have taught you how to be kind to people when people aren’t kind to you.” You get it? How to forgive—see, forgiveness is part of the kingdom. Without forgiveness our world would never change because hatred keeps going on and on and on You understand? So this is the commitment you are giving to the Lord today—that you’ll help build the kingdom. So sacraments, all sacraments look to the past to what Jesus did, what God did in the past; look to the present, what is happening right now; look to the future, what God will do and what we will do with God in the future.

And I want you to keep this in mind every time you come to the Eucharist. I want you to think about how you are receiving a great guest, and how you need to accept that guest in your heart. Now, if you went to a girl friend’s house, and she just ignored you and played with a computer, would you be happy? No! That’s rude—right? Wouldn’t that be right—if you went to your boy friend’s house and he just went and played outside and he left you alone, wouldn’t you think that was rude? It would be—right? You agree? Well, so don’t be rude to Jesus. When Jesus comes into your heart, spend time and pray. Sing songs of the Church. Follow the prayers up to the last blessing. Okay? This is the way we honor the guest. And then take him home with you in your memory and in your heart. Remember what gift you have been given. Okay? Do we agree? Ready now? Okay, now I would ask you to take out your blue hymnals—blue—page 140. Don’t worry; I’m not going to sing! 140 Every sacrament is a sign of faith, so now we are going to profess our faith according to an ancient creed of the Church called “The Apostles Creed.” Now I invite you all to stand to profess our faith.
Today we have a story about St. Paul and Barnabas who are mistaken for gods. Now, people are not really very sophisticated—not then, not now. What passes for religion, or even faith, is often folly. St. Paul says, “We have come to proclaim the living God to save you from such folly as this.” And that’s one thing we need to think about: how we sense God. As St. Paul says, in this particular reading, “the living God”--the living God who does not hide himself totally. So the living God is revealing himself in certain ways, but not so openly. He is also hiding so that it takes a certain sort of effort, a certain seeking, to find God.

Now, for whatever reason it seems that most people do not really want to do this seeking. It’s as if they expect God to announce himself or find them. And this, of course, is the work of the tell-tale egoism that has spoiled human life since the beginning. The story of the fall in the garden is a story of human egoism. We have to recognize the great danger of false images of God—how misleading they can be, or how even God’s works can be misinterpreted, as they were in today’s story. Indeed Paul and Barnabas really did what is described, but then they were taken to be gods--this is the problem.

How do we interpret, how do we sense, how do we perceive God? And Jesus’ answer in the gospel is “Well, the Father will send a Paraclete, the Holy Spirit.” Now, “paraclete” has many different meanings, but it’s like comforter or companion, someone who accompanies. The Spirit has many different roles; and this is one of them to accompany, to comfort, to be close to. To be aware of the Paraclete as the true teacher, who will lead us to the true God, who will instruct us in everything: This is something we can have great confidence in. But we have to be sure that it’s the Paraclete that is instructing us, that the Paraclete will instruct us in everything, and remind us of all that Jesus told us. It is upon this that the entire Catholic Church’s idea of the Bible is placed: That the Spirit guides us to understand and to remember all that Jesus told us. It is not found by perusing the words of the Bible by yourself. The real teacher is the Holy Spirit who guides us and directs us in a self-consistent and utterly reliable way.

And if we reflect on ourselves and our world—and we need to reflect on the world not in a judgmental way, but in a very aware way—we can see how many people simply do not avail themselves of the Spirit. Even those who believe themselves to be true Christians do not avail themselves of the Paraclete Spirit. They do not let the Spirit teach them. They do not let the Spirit give them life; so much they are taken up with their own personal, you might say, tragedy, or their own personal life story, which is really not about God! St. Teresa of Avila says, “We need to lose a lot of our memories, and find new ones.” What does she mean? She means that our memories are very selective and very warped. If the memory we have of our past is a memory of having been abandoned by God, the memory is faulty. We cannot trust that kind of memory. We lose that one, and get a new one—a memory in which God has always been with us, although we may not have been with God. The Paraclete Spirit never abandoned us in any way.
of Jesus has assured us of this. So we need to be reflective about our lives and see whether even in ourselves we have really swallowed lies about God, whether we have really been attentive to the Paraclete Spirit who has been sent to us.
Trials and Suffering  Fifth Week of Easter  Tuesday, May 12, 1998  7:00 a.m.  Acts 14:19-28;  Jn 14:27-31  (SS. Nereus & Achilleus or St. Pancras)  (Trials&S)

“We must undergo many trials if we are to enter into the reign of God.” In the Acts of the Apostles, in the epistles of the New Testament and in all early Christian literature there’s a clear awareness of the need for struggle, the importance of trials: That the reign of God or the kingdom of God, which Jesus came to establish, will only come to fruition through trials endured by the believers, the disciples; that their suffering is part of the very life-line of this kingdom inaugurated in Jesus, whom St. Paul calls “the first fruits of redemption, the first born of a new creation.”

Now, we are very much influenced by the culture around us. And the culture around us does not see the value in suffering or in trials. And this affects Christians, believers, often in unconscious but very profound ways. In a recent survey seventy to eighty per cent of people who describe themselves as “born again Christians” said that they could see no value in suffering or pain, that it could not help them mature or grow. Now, the people who describe themselves as “born again Christians” are doubtlessly sincere people, and they doubtlessly believe that they are part of this very great and very ancient tradition that we call Christianity; but in this very central area they have no clue! They are really products of modern society--not the gospel. And it’s very easy to see in this particular case because they’re “out there.”

But we have to then look at ourselves too. How are we influenced not by the gospel, not by apostolic teachings, but rather by our culture? Do we actually look at trials; do we look at struggles as a central component to our own maturation in faith? And not only to
our own personal maturation, but to the maturation of the kingdom itself, that is only established in a rather modest and imperfect way in the present time? Do we understand what our sufferings can do for the fulfillment of God’s will and purpose? I would think that many of us--more or less instinctively now because we have been so programmed by our culture that is forever seeking relief from pain--escape from suffering and conflict, into complete anesthesia. I would suspect that many of us follow not the gospel at all, but the programming of our culture, seeking in many ways consciously and unconsciously to avoid various struggles that will deepen the Spirit within us and further the purposes of God in the world.
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Vine and Branches  Fifth Week of Easter    Wednesday, May 13, 1998  7:00 a.m.
Acts 15:1-6; Jn 15:1-8                          (VineBran)

Scripture often talks to us through metaphors. In today’s, of course, we are in the more poetic metaphors found in the gospel: The Vine and the Branches. One of the problems with metaphors, because it’s a poetic figure of speech, is that we tend not to let it work on us. We tend to say, “Well, that’s just a figure of speech. I’m really not a branch.” But you see, it’s the whole figure that’s important, not just a static part of it. A vine is a living thing, a living organism. That’s the first point.

A relation to God is a living thing. Vines are kept for their fruit; they’re actually a lot of trouble. And the purpose for the Church is fruit; it’s actually a lot of trouble. And in this living organism, which is the Church, there is one life that pulses through it--one life that matters. St. Paul also reflected on this in the Letter to the Romans when he quizzes the Roman congregation, “Were you not aware that you who were baptized, died? You were buried together with Christ so that you could live a new life.” This new life is singular--not a plural. It is the life of the vine.

Now, we live in a society that accentuates the individual value of a branch. In fact, the whole meaning of the enlightenment was to shift all importance to the individual. Society itself became nothing more than a social contract among individuals--Edmund Burke’s famous description. And that, of course, places the emphasis in the wrong place. Now, prior to modern society, it was also in the wrong place; it was on the tribe. But the figures of speech in Scripture are trying to raise people beyond their own cultural experience whether that’s tribalism, or identifying with one and only one group whether, as in modern times, where it’s all individual--we’re all individual selves independent of
one another.
This [Scripture] is trying to say that the life that God has given to the world flows in the unity through all believers, and that their real identity and their real life is in clinging to the vine itself. That apart from me [Jesus] you can do nothing; apart from me you have no identity, except for a false one. Apart from me you have no reality, except something you made up. The reality is in the vine; the identity is in the vine. The capacity to accomplish anything that will survive is in the vine. And this militates against everything we are taught in our society; for we are taught to aggrandize and emphasize and promote our individual little branch. And this is saying, “You as an individual little branch can’t even exist.” And the belief that we do itself is an illusion—a dangerous one. Shortly before this Jesus says, “I have been sent into the world as a light.” This is the enlightenment, the true enlightenment from God of who we are—and it takes some thinking about to let it work on us. If we don’t let it work on us, it’ll just be passed off as another nice little poem. But if we let it work on us, it is the power of God; it’s the word of God!
“It is not you who have chosen me, but I have chosen you.” Hardly is there ever anything more diametrically opposed to the very assumptions that we grow up with in our culture as this teaching. The assumptions we grow up with have to do with our own time, our freedom, our right to choose career or lifestyle that is pleasing, fulfilling, whatever. This doctrine taught in the fourth gospel is something quite different. It’s saying that there is a transcendent purpose that permeates everything. And this purpose is really the true source of direction: “I have chosen you,” that is the call of God first of all to faith, but then to everything! It’s not just about faith, but it is about faith—but it’s also about life. It’s about what I do with myself!

It is not about self-fulfillment in the modern sense of that term. There is no sense of that at all in the gospel anyway—self-fulfillment. It’s actually a bizaare idea in contrast to the biblical ideas of fulfilling God’s plan, the over all make of which we call the kingdom of God. Now, think just in terms, for example, of marriage: Do people actually think of marriage as something they are called to? In my experience rarely do young people think of this. And of course, by the time they get older and may start thinking about this, they are already married or not—successfully or not and so on. But young people almost never think in these terms. It seems so alien to the way in which they’re being reared. And after all, culture is our great teacher, whether we like it or not. It influences us in profound ways especially because we never actually look at it! We don’t look at the assumptions of our culture. We just take them in. This gospel is calling us to look at the assumptions of our culture.

We are well aware of the fact that we have a vocation in priestly vocations in our Church today—small wonder, because we have no sense of what a vocation actually is! The same for religious life—it isn’t simply doing something that I feel I would like doing. We see in the Acts of the Apostles when Matthias was chosen, he was chosen by others, not himself. He didn’t volunteer: “Oh, I think I’d like to do this.” Of course, there has to be a volunteer cooperative response, but it’s a response to something else which is prior. There has to be a felt calling that is responded to, and there has to be a sense that there is a purpose behind that, or people won’t even be listening; and that’s really the condition we now have. People don’t know how to listen. There is no sense that there is this purpose, therefore nothing to listen for.

Now the reason for the call, of course, is ultimately “that my joy will be yours.” So if people are not listening, then the result will be a lack of joy. Do we find this in our world? Do we find this in our families? Do we find this in our parish? That itself is a symptom. Joylessness is a symptom of a failure to listen in the first place to the call of God. And it’s not something we can do by ourselves. It’s again not an individualistic thing, but rather it is something done in a community. We need to help each other listen. We need to help the young listen—it is very hard; they don’t really want to. Somehow we have to aid the young in listening to what the purpose of God is inviting them to.

Vocations
this alone will assure them of the joy that is Christ’s: “That my joy may be yours and your joy may be complete.” There is no idea at all in this except that we would be full of joy, and abundant joy, complete joy—that’s the idea. And it is rather perplexing to see how difficult it is for us to accept the joy God has for us.

And St. Thomas Aquinas brought a very interesting thought in his theological ruminations when he opposed the idea of freedom and responsibility. We usually think of them as going hand-in-hand: We’re responsible because we are free, to the degree we are free and so on; but not St. Thomas. He had this amazing idea! He says, that everything is actually directed by the providence of God through grace. When human beings accept the grace, then they are truly free—but they’re not responsible. God’s responsible because it’s God’s providential grace that willed it. It is the true initiation of the plan and the purpose and of the action that produces. On the other hand he says that when a person opposes providential care, the grace of God, then they are really not free. That’s not freedom. They’re in some sort of compulsion. They’re being controlled by something else. They’re being controlled; they’re not being free. God’s grace, God’s providence frees us. Rejecting grace is a rejection of freedom, and therefore leads us in a compulsion of some kind, or obsession—and for that we are responsible. Paradoxical? Yes, but something to reflect upon.
Yesterday I spoke of the priority of God in the giving of vocations, the choosing of a way to be purposeful in life. That’s a reflection of this particular reading. Today we can turn to the idea of bearing fruit. Now, of course, this is all following the readings of the last few days. Yesterday the reading was a little longer than it is today; it included another section which would have been read yesterday anyway. And behind that was the other story of the vine and the branches that we read on Tuesday. These are images that we are intended to reflect upon: the relationship of vine to its fruit.

What is really the fruit of the vine? If you say wine, it’s true to a point—but not exactly right away. The actual fruit of a vine is grape juice. But people don’t keep vines for grape juice. They intend the grape juice to undergo a sort of transformation we call fermentation. Through fermentation the actual nature of the juice itself is transformed and becomes something else. It is a different substance. This is a case of naturally occurring transubstantiation, the transformation of one substance or reality into some other substance or reality. In fact transubstantiation does take place in nature in the cooking process as well, the baking process, when inedible substances through the cooking process become eatable substances.

This is transubstantiation. It gives us a key, a clue, to another kind of work of the Spirit. Each of these is what is called an “analogue,” meaning it is a basis for comparison for transfer of meaning from what we know to what we don’t know. In this way the human mind can plumb the mysteries of divine revelation. So grape juice, which is the fruit of the vine, is transformed through the process of fermentation into wine, a different substance. Now through the power of the Holy Spirit wine is transformed into a different substance from wine—the blood of Christ. Now what is the blood of Christ? The blood of Christ is the--you have to think in biblical terms--the life of Christ, that which Jesus gave up, that which Jesus poured out for salvation for the forgiveness of sins for the salvation of the world. “Take and drink. This is my blood which is poured forth for the salvation of many.”

Now, the point of this metaphor is that we, the branches, bear the fruit that becomes the juice that is transformed into the wine which is transformed into the life blood of Christ, which is poured forth for the salvation of the world. So we are not passive recipients of salvation. This text is inviting us to become participants in the bringing of salvation into the world. Somehow this idea of the role of the believer in bringing his or her life in union with the sacrifice of Christ, offered up with Christ in the Eucharist to advance not only his or her own personal salvation and sanctification, but really the salvation of the entire world--this very basic idea is fundamental to the thinking of the Fathers of the Church. But somehow it seems many people have lost this idea today, and sadly because suffering does not stop just because we don’t find meaning in it.
Life, in its very nature, contains suffering. Indeed you might say it’s the very idea of crushing grapes in order to make juice. The suffering is part of a process that must go on. And yet we miss the point if we don’t see the meaning of it, if we don’t recognize how this is part of something very great under the influence of the Spirit of God Himself, transforming our suffering into something that really can feed others with life, which really isn’t our life, which is really God’s life; that our sufferings can be so transformed to become something that really washes away the sins of the world; that we are not spectators in this great drama of salvation, but we’re invited to be active participants. This is what this reading is inviting us to look at. And if we do, then we can actually gain great joy in life in spite of circumstances that no one would ever choose.

If we fail to look at this, it doesn’t mean that we will necessarily forfeit our salvation; but it probably does mean that we will forfeit a great deal of joy, that we’ll fail to appreciate in the here and the now the happiness that God intends us to have in anticipation of the heavenly banquet whose table we are really preparing. And the ultimate sadness is that it is we who deprive ourselves by our lack of attention to God’s presence among us of the great joy and happiness that Jesus speaks of in his farewell discourse: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives peace.”
In today’s reading Jesus is speaking to the disciples about hating and hatred. Hatred has two forms: a passion and an action. As a passion it is something that happens to us. It is a repulsion. This kind of passion is a negative force in our lives, but it is really not a choice. What Jesus is speaking about today is not the passion of hatred but the action, not repulsion but rejection. It’s a choice. And he makes his remarks as a warning, as he does also in Matthew chapter 10, that a true disciple will not find a welcome in the world; that we need to recognize that loyalty to God will bring enmity with the world. Now there are many of us who really desire to be approved of; probably everyone in some degree wants to be approved of. Some people carry this on to an extreme. The desire for approval, the desire to be liked, a desire to be accepted can become a great obstacle to true faith, loyalty to God.

Now, this idea of hating is also found in some rather unusual texts: “Anyone who does not hate his father and his mother is not worthy of me.” Again, it’s a matter of loyalty. We have to be able to recognize that to be true disciples we have to be loyal in a singular and unique way to God, and we have to care about God’s approval and that old term in Catholic theology--“being pleasing to God.” If we are pleasing to God, we will be unpleasing to others; and that is the price, or one of the prices, we pay for discipleship. And nothing will change it! This is part of the burden that the disciple carries: to experience rejection. And doubtless it’s about this that St. Paul was referring to in Colossians when he said, “I bear in my body and make up in my body, in my suffering, for what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.” Now, a person could puzzle about what
could
possibly lack in the sufferings of Christ; but Paul had this insight that the very drama
inaugurated by Christ in the world, in loving unconditionally, in extending God’s mercy
to all people without limit, and then experiencing rejection would be relived, on a small
scale, in the life of every disciple. “They will respect your words as much as they
respected mine.”
Today Jesus says, “The Father will send the Paraclete Spirit.” The word “paraclete” means one who accompanies, one who comforts; and the emphasis is on the one because the word “paraclete” is a very personal word. In the Hebrew Bible we hear about the Spirit, the Ruah of God, from whence comes all breath, all life. We all depend upon the Spirit and breath of God for life. But in the Greek language the word “spirit” is neuter. In other words it’s an “it”! And the sacred author today wants us to see that the Spirit of God is not an “it,” but a person--someone. Sometimes in our lives our relationship with God is the relationship to an “it.” If we think of God as an “it,” there is something really desperately wrong with our relationship. God is not an “it”; God is a person, and a person who wants to accompany us in all of our life, and the whole of our life, in our travails, in our joys, in everything.

We could compare our relation with God to a marriage; St. Paul does in Ephesians. And we all know that in our society today the dynamism of life pulls marriages apart. So St. Paul reflects on the nature of marriage, and he says that is a sign of our relation with God. And we know that in our dynamic society many marriages are being broken up. The forces of our world pull apart relationships. Well, not only do they pull apart marriages, even long lasting ones; but also they pull at our relationship with God. We’ve also learned that if people really desire a strong marriage, they can have one if they have the desire and take the time to build, to nourish, and to enrich their relationship. The same is true with our relation with God. If we want a good relation with God, we can have one if we desire it and spend the time to nurture and strengthen and enrich our relationship.

So the gospel asks us now to reflect on whether we really have this living personal relation with God, this strong, vital--whether we really recognize the willingness of God and the desire of God to share with us everything in our lives! The first sign of a, you might say, doomed marriage or dying marriage is boredom; the first sign of a dying relation with God is likewise boredom. Boredom is a symptom, not a cause! If we feel a deep boredom with our relation with God, we need to do something about it before that relationship dies. We need to recognize that God wants a deep relationship with every single person--not just with the great saints, not just with Mother Teresa--but with each of us! With each person on earth, God wants a deep, intimate and personal relationship. For those who are married this is not a separate case from a growing and deepening marriage because the whole idea of a sacrament is that God reaches us through others; that in the sacrament of marriage God in fact does enter deeply into our lives, and God does touch us through the intimacy and the caring, the companionship of that sacrament.

So what do we do now? The fact that you are here this morning is already a good sign that you do desire a living relationship with the living God. But do we always take advantage of the Mass itself, the Holy Sacrifice of the Eucharist? This is an opportunity for us to offer our own sufferings, our pains, our trials, in union with Christ to the Father.
In a recent survey, a rather shocking fact was revealed that seventy to eighty percent of people who call themselves “born-again Christians” see absolutely no value in suffering! They do not see that it can increase their maturity or help them grow in a spiritual way. This is very shocking since they believe themselves to be authentic Christians following out the biblical faith--but that is not the biblical faith! The biblical faith is that we all have an invitation to participate in the salvation of the world by making up in our own suffering, in our own bodies, in our own pain, what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Those are the thoughts of St. Paul in his Letter to the Colossians. And Peter in his First Letter encourages the believers to make spiritual sacrifices in their lives to God. And in the Mass we have the opportunity to bring all this together in union with Christ. This does not only aid in our own sanctification, in our growth in holiness, in our maturation in a personal sense; it also aids in the salvation of the world! That’s the whole meaning of St. Paul’s remark in Colossians. So this morning as the Church prays through the words of the priest to the Father offering Christ, we’re all invited. As St. Augustine says that the “whole Christ,” meaning you and me, are invited to offer the “whole Christ,” meaning you and me, to the Father in the Eucharist; thus we add ourselves to Christ whose offering to God is eternal, no longer time-bound. We cooperate in the life-transforming process that gives meaning and dignity to the very trials and sufferings and tribulations that the world seeks to escape.
One of the very noticeable characteristics of both the Old and the New Testament has to do with the emotions ascribed to God. Now, we ordinarily don’t think of God as having emotions because we associate emotions with our physical being. They have a lot to do with our physical being, but they’re not merely physical. There is something behind emotions that is not merely physical and is basic to relationship. A non-emotional relationship is a non-relation. Relations breed emotions both for good and for bad, both for pain and for joy. In the Psalm today it says, “The Lord takes delight in his people.” Now, in many ways I feel that people today do not quite grasp that the Lord takes delight in them. But then on the other hand, it will also say, “The Lord is angry.” And I don’t think people grasp that either!

In some respects we are living in a sort of impersonal relationship with God. And I think the reason for this is safety, or another word might be security; but perhaps the more honest word would be fear. We’re afraid to really relate to God! We don’t want to get too close! And this is really very sad. This gospel reading begins with the mention of the Paraclete, again a personal word not found in the other gospels used in particular by this author because he wants to stress the personal relationship that God wants with his people. The word in Greek for spirit is a neuter word “pneuma,” which sounds impersonal. In Hebrew “Ruah”; it sounds great! It’s life; it’s life-giving, but in Greek it’s neuter. So the author of the Gospel of John gives us this word “parakletos,” a personal word. It means one who accompanies, one who supports, one who comforts, one who challenges--and that’s God in our lives. And that means emotional relationship.
It means that we have to recognize that we are being invited to be delighted in; but also if you delight in someone, then, of course, you’re very disturbed when they start on the wrong path. If you really love someone, then you’re very disturbed when they deface themselves or corrupt themselves. So God is angry and delighting at the same time! He’s delighting in his people because they’re his people, and he created us to delight in us. But on the other hand, he can become angry at the way we act, in the way we deface ourselves, corrupt ourselves, and really miss the point of life.

So is this a little scary? Well, yes it is; but that’s all part of what the gospel’s about. It’s about entering into relationship even though it is very scary to come close to God! In the Old Testament it was thought you can’t see God. If you did, you’d die! The New Testament says, “But you have seen God if you’ve seen me.” That’s what Jesus says. Jesus is a window through which we can see God without dying--in fact not only without dying, but actually coming to life! And that’s the window that the Spirit now is trying to open for us.
In this morning’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we see the story of a man who is baptized with his whole household. Now, this is an important historical event because in our Church we have been a Church of households—not in every case, even in the early Church not always. But it was also a very important thing that not only did individuals come into the Church but whole households came into the Church. Now there were cases, especially with women, where the woman decided to become a Christian and the husband refused to. This is especially true of pagan families, not Jewish ones. But children are always included with their parents, which has led to the practice of infant baptism.

Now, behind this infant baptism is this belief in the power of grace. This does not mean that the children of every household always grew up to be exemplary Christians. They may have grown up and denied Christ, and probably did in some cases. However, this is an area where there are people today who claim that we should delay baptism until a person makes a choice for herself or himself. This is, in fact, the policy of the Baptist Church; and, in general, it seems non-denominational Christians and Evangelical Christians would favor this view if they favor baptism at all. But on the other hand, the tradition of the Church is already exemplified in the Acts of the Apostles—belief in the power of grace and the lavishness with which God pours his grace upon our human family. What is needed is at least one parent to take the initiative to receive the grace for herself or for himself and then to share it with the children. Martin Luther, whom I usually don’t quote,
said that infant baptism is a perfect sign of the gratuity of salvation. By gratuity he means that no one earns it; it cannot be merited.

Now we have one good thing today called the RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation. It’s very good, but it may give us a wrong impression that there are certain hoops we have to go through or certain stages we have to accomplish before we’re ready for baptism. Well, you can see from the Acts of the Apostles, that’s not how the apostles thought. They proclaimed the gospel and they baptized in one night. They believed in the power of the Holy Spirit--once planted--could anyway bring about a great growth. And that we ought to keep in mind even though we do our best to prepare people sacramentally.
“Come to me all you who find life burdensome.” Indeed this text might raise the question: Who does not find life burdensome? The point that the gospel is making is that life is burdensome, to a degree, out of purpose—for a reason. Our modern culture does not quite comprehend the reason for life. It’s as if we were just thrown here by chance, or you might say bad luck from some people’s viewpoint. And here we are: Let’s avoid pain as best we can and seek as much excitement and pleasure and fun as possible. The word of God addresses people who have enough interest in life to raise the questions, to at least suspect that there is meaning and purpose in the creation as a whole and in particular in human existence. As we follow the logic of Scripture from the very beginning, the Book of Genesis through the history of the people of Israel up to Jesus Christ, we see unfolding an idea that God has great plans; but they’re yet to be realized.

God has great plans for his creation. He created human beings in his own image and likeness, and yet history does not reflect the grandeur of the original intention of the creator because human beings have decided to live by their own light rather than the Light of God. And so the Light which enlightens every man came into the world and became man. And this man, Jesus of Nazareth, came to bring us the light which is Light from Light. And he is God from God. And his words and his actions and his entire ministry is a ministry of calling people to a deep awareness of the possibilities that God has already put into them. Part of that is recognizing that there is a task to be done, a battle to be fought, a work to be accomplished. So our lives have this meaning. They are unfinished by design so we can be the ones to finish them.

Louise now has come to the finish of her life. Only one person can win a race, but really many can finish. And the hope of the gospel is for all of us to finish the race—that we will recognize there is a goal. It’s to come to God and to be enveloped in God’s love in God’s purpose; it is to recognize that in the burdens of life there are opportunities to share with God in the remaking of ourselves and of our world. Jesus came not as one seeking equality with God. That’s the way the Bible describes the advent of sin: seeking to be equal to God, seeking to be the center of the world. And we can perceive this as a fundamental force in our world: self-seeking and self-promotion, love of self. And Jesus came not seeking that at all, but pouring himself out in service and love, accepting death—even death on a cross. Thus death itself becomes not the end of anything, but rather the beginning, the beginning of the eternal life that God has offered to us.

And so Jesus comes to each one of us today and he is offering us this life. “Come to me you who are weary.” There are different kinds of weariness. Some are actually worthless; they’re from pursuing goals that are not really worthwhile, that will never bring joy or peace or contentment to our souls. But there is another kind of weariness that comes from working with and for God that brings with it contentment and a peace the world cannot give! And this is what Jesus offers. He says, “Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy, my burden light.” There is a yoke, but it’s easy. There is a burden,
but it’s light because it’s not shouldered alone. In fact, loneliness and being alone and being isolated is the whole heritage of sin. What God wills for each of us is that we live with God and with one another in peace and harmony in community, which is to be imaged in the Church.

And so today as we celebrate the Eucharist--the Eucharist itself is a foretaste of the communal life and the communal celebration of the heavenly banquet. So as we come to the Lord today, we also can be praising God for having hidden from the learned and the clever the powers that will work--what he will reveal to us if we are humble and simple at heart. “Indeed God has graciously willed it so.”

I only met Louise Sunday, in fact, minutes before her death. I did not have a chance to communicate with her because she had already slipped into unconsciousness. And yet from those around her, from those who had met her, from those who had talked with her, I learned something great about her: That she was a delightful woman who radiated something, something beautiful. That was God’s gift to her and her gift to others. In a similar way each of us is called to receive something from God and hand it on to others. In this way we each become a sacrament and a sign of God’s presence in the world, and a hope--a sign of hope for life to come.
Jesus says, “I have much more to tell you, but you can’t bear it now.” Indeed we cannot bear the truth of God all at once. And life is necessarily a long process of learning the nature, the purpose, and the will of God. And one of the greatest problems is that we become very comfortable in some particular stage in this process, and we figure we have it already. Jesus is talking about the Spirit of Truth that is continuously revealing God’s nature, God’s will and God’s purpose to a people who are willing to constantly learn. God is immeasurably beyond our comprehension, and therefore beyond our control. One of the fundamental elements of faith is that we are willing to accept that God is beyond our control; that God ought to be beyond our control; that everything is fine precisely because this is the way it is. We are where we belong today, and we have to allow God to teach us today where we shall be tomorrow so, that there is a gentleness in the growing process in the Spirit fulfilling the prophesy of Isaiah, “A bruised reed he shall not break; a smoldering wick he shall not quench.”

Now if we contrast this viewpoint with the ways of the world, we see something very different. When Paul went to the Areopagus in Athens he found something actually typical of the world: a pantheon where human beings had imagined the divine forces or the powers who created the world--where they had imagined the various facets of this and formed them into various statues and idols and shrines. This is a human tendency we need to resist--to try to locate, even imagine and certainly control, the nature of God. Even a shrine to an Unknown God, which Paul remarked about, is really simply an effort to cover
all the bases--to make sure that all the forces that are affecting us are somehow placated, as if God needs placating, or as if God needs to be praised, or as if God needs to be served--in other words as if God is egotistic like ourselves! The fundamental folly of idolatry is that it pictures God as one who is like ourselves, and really that’s the basis of all mythology: God or gods just like us. And what Revelations says is that God isn’t like this, and the Spirit of Truth will teach us what God is like. And not only teach us what God is like, but help us to become like God. That’s the vision of Jesus in this text which is part of his farewell discourse; it’s part of his last words to his disciples as he prepares to go to the Father.
In the accounts that we have of the early nascent Church, we see that the believers went through different phases following the resurrection of Christ. At first it was devastation and defeat, then there was puzzlement at the empty tomb. Following puzzlement of the empty tomb, there was the stupefaction that came with the first appearances: the mistaken identity, the incredulity, the slowness to catch on. All of this is recorded. Then a kind of familiarity developed where the risen Lord was seen often, where his presence was expected and enjoyed. Not all of these appearances are recorded; in fact, St. Paul says, “There were over five hundred of them.” Nonetheless this was a time of great growth in the faith of this early nascent Church. Then comes another phase.

Now we mustn’t think in terms of the exact number of days. The actual celebration is the mystery of Christ. His resurrection and the gift of the Spirit are framed by the already existing Jewish holidays: Passover and Weeks. Jesus did die around the Passover. So we celebrate the resurrection of Christ at the Passover. Weeks, fifty days later, Shavuot--that’s the time of the completion of the barley harvest; and that’s when the Church celebrates the gift of the Spirit. Forty days after the Passover, the Ascension. Nine days later, Pentecost. But we mustn’t think in terms of exact numbers of days; they are different phases in the faith life of the Church.

And the phase that is now being marked by the feast of the Ascension is the phase of departure and even desperation; although this gospel reading does not reflect that. [In] this particular gospel reading it says, “The apostles went forth with joy.” But there are other examples in Scripture of a sort of desperation, and it is at this time the first novena began. The very idea of a novena is a nine day period of growth, of prayer, of petitioning to God for help. And the great help they need--and Jesus was teaching constantly--is the Holy Spirit. No other help will do. In fact, in the fourth gospel he told his disciples, “It is better if I go because if I don’t go, I cannot send the Paraclete.”

Now this is another transition of faith from desperation to reception of the Holy Spirit; but many adult, Christian believers never quite make the transition. They spend the majority of their lives either in familiarity of God’s presence or in desperation of God’s absence, but not in the power of the Holy Spirit. It was noted by Pope John XXIII back in the late fifties there was something seriously lacking in the institutional Church. And the way he put it is: “We need a new Pentecost.” There are many people who have a simple and authentic feeling, experience, of the presence of God. And there are other people who have a true, understandable sense of desperation; but too few who really experience the power of the Spirit! This is really God’s answer to the desperation of human life. And the feast of the Ascension is the inauguration of a period of intensive prayer that we need to make our own, that not only as individuals but as Church we will experience the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised his followers, his disciples, “Greater things than I have done, you shall do also.” Now that is not a figure of speech; that is a promise! But it is a promise that can only be filled in the Holy Spirit! But we...
will never receive the Holy Spirit unless we are emptied enough, unless we are desperate enough. So perhaps the problem is that we’re not desperate enough or are too filled with something else—blasé, complacent, satisfied! That is really not the description of the believing community we read of in the New Testament. They are not blasé. They are not complacent. They are either full of fear or they’re full of joy. And surely we need to be more open to the real experience of God—whatever it brings—so that in pouring ourselves out we can make room for the Spirit of God to fill in.
“I pray that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.”

Today we have Jesus caught, as it were, in a prayer to the Father—not really teaching—but being overheard before his death, praying for the things that are most important. And it turns out, among the most important needs that he prayed for was the unity of the believers. And he says that he’s praying for the unity of the believers so that the world will know that he comes from the Father. Well, then no wonder the world doesn’t know that he comes from the Father because the believers have not been unified!

Now all people are born with two fundamental needs. First is the need to belong. Even the mammal kingdom reflects this need to belong. But it is not really a physical need; it’s really a mental and an emotional need. Children who do not form a close relationship with their mother or father or family are seriously impaired their entire lives. It is with great difficulty that this wound, it’s called the “mother wound,” can be healed—it can be, but with great difficulty. Belonging is essential to human life. And out of that original bonding to one’s parents, especially mother, comes bonding of all other kinds: the family, the tribe, the club, the business, the union, the society, whatever—is rooted in this very primitive and necessary connection. And to some degree it tells us who we are—at least it is the beginning of our identity.

Now there’s a second need: the need to be different, the need to be distinct, to be set apart, to be unique, as one says today, “to do your own thing”—also important although not all groups and societies emphasize it to the same degree. In simple primitive people the first, the need to belong, is all important; the need to be unique, not so important. In our society it’s the other way around. The need to be unique has so overcome everything else that people are now rootless and lost—so much do they have to be individual! And this is the very human situation that we’re always dealing with, that Christ was dealing with, that God is dealing with: We want to and we have to belong, and yet we want to and have to be different! And these two have to find some balance. This does not come easily.

Jesus believed that in his own life he was creating a new system of identity that should supersede family, mother and father, tribe and nation. He said some very hard words in this regard. He said, for example, “I have not come to bring peace, but the sword to divide father from son and mother from daughter.” He said, “Anyone who does not hate father or mother for my sake cannot be my disciple.” He is speaking about a new kind of identity not rooted in family, in mother, in life as we know it; but rooted in something else—what he would come to call the Spirit. Now we have to see that being identified with the Spirit of Christ, finding our identity in Christ, is something, in a sense, unnatural—and he knew it! And that’s why he used these very strong words. And that’s why before he died he prayed this very urgent prayer because he know that what was needed is somehow unnatural—given human history as we know it.
Now we begin to identify with something else, not flesh and blood, not family and tribe, not club or union or business, but with the Spirit of God. From this point of view the New Testament does not know any distinctions like, for example: Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Buddhist, Hindu. They are not mentioned. There are only two categories: those who belong to God and those who do not belong it God. And somehow everybody has to fit into one of those two groups: belonging to God and identifying with the Spirit, which is almost unnatural; and then the other one, those for whom it’s more important to love mother than to be a disciple--those for whom human bonding, flesh and blood and all the rest is more important than Spirit. They don’t belong to God. It’s a very tough teaching, but it is the teaching of the New Testament; and it is the very subject of today’s prayer.

Now Jesus said, “Greater things than I have done, you shall do also.” Do not dismiss this as a figure of speech. That is not a parable! That is not parabolic, exaggerated talk! That is meant literally! The limits of what we can do are not defined by nature as we know it. The limits of what we can do are only in the Spirit of God, and we have yet to plumb those limits and that potential! Thomas Edison said that the human mind is only used about ten percent of the time, or ten percent of its potential is utilized. And he was even speaking of himself, a very bright man! It’s far worse if you think spiritually; we do not tap the Spirit of God. Of course, it’s not my spirit and it’s not our spirit; it’s God’s Spirit. But we are given this Spirit! That’s the whole meaning of Pentecost, which we shall be celebrating soon. We are given the Spirit of God, and that Spirit is meant to form a new identity and to form new relationships in the world. That is God’s way of developing peace and bringing health and leading us along the path God intends for his kingdom.

Now this is actually very exciting. Jesus prays that his joy may be ours. Why would we not want to experience the joy and the glory that Jesus Himself experiences? It’s his prayer that we shall, but we wait. We postpone whatever it takes to receive this gift because we are so embroiled in life as we’re used to it. And yet because of this we miss out on so much that God has in store for us.

Now the Spirit that Jesus and the Father sends is the basis for a new connection or unity. And it’s a unity that is greater than human sin. Human sin cannot destroy the unity given by the Spirit because it’s of God, but we can simply ignore it. We can’t destroy it, but we can ignore it! We can choose not to use it. It’s like having a car with a big engine in it. If you choose to, you can leave it in your garage and never drive it, or you could take it out and just go at ten miles an hour down Main Street. That would not be utilizing it’s potential, but you can do that. Well, what a shame! So the gospel is inviting us to prepare ourselves for the Spirit of God, and to recognize how much we need it. Now apparently this past weekend, this past week the Protestants and Catholics of Northern Ireland finally come to realize that they need it. They need reconciliation. They need to stop identifying with their tribe and their class and their group and start to recognize the Spirit which comes from God as the source of a new identity. Well, it’s very tiring living in sin. It’s very exhausting living in sin; whereas living in the Spirit of Christ is very enjoyable. It’s life-giving. It’s refreshing! And that’s what God wants for all of us. So in preparation for this feast of Pentecost perhaps we might reflect on our
own feelings. Do we have obstacles in our way to unity? Do we turn away from others for some reason--analyze carefully--there is no reason! All sin has been forgiven. The walls that have been established, “the walls of enmity” as it says in Ephesians, that have been established between people have come down through the cross of Christ. So how willing are we to find the Spirit of Christ in others no matter what their label, no matter what their tribe, no matter what their language, no matter what their culture? The future, the new millennium belongs to those who accept the Spirit of God and who enjoy living in its power, who fulfill the prophesy of Christ that “Greater things than I have done, you shall do also,” and who are willing to thus witness that indeed Jesus does come from the Father.
I suspect that Memorial Day is gradually receding in the minds of most Americans as a day of importance as we gradually forget more and more of our history. The reason why people are forgetting history is that for some reason people today are convinced that it’s irrelevant. And many leaders, political and economic, claim we’re living in a new age where everything is going to be different, where the old truths don’t matter any more, where the connection with the past doesn’t matter any more. Well, in a deep way this is quite unlikely. Human nature does not change; therefore, the basic condition we live in does not change. The only change that is possible, in fact, is change toward salvation and redemption; this is the work of God. This is not what is being hailed today.

So maybe it would be important for us to reflect first of all on the great gift that has been given to us. We live in a free country and many men and women have spent their lives protecting this freedom. But what is meant by freedom? There is indeed something very special about the political arrangement of this republic. One of the primary benefits is that the military is always controlled by the civilian elected officials. This means that it is up to us, the citizens, to make sure that whatever military force is employed it’s for some moral, just cause. That is the responsibility, a moral responsibility, that we have. It is only one aspect of the moral responsibility of citizens, but it is one we need really to reflect upon because today many people have grown cynical about their ability to influence their leaders. And of course, with cynicism comes surrender. We cannot afford to be cynical, and we cannot afford to surrender the political process to forces however powerful they may be! We have to make sure in the name of all those who have died defending freedom—we have to make sure that their deaths were not in vain. We have to make sure that our political system works for justice in the world.

You may be aware of the fact that the early Christians were absolute pacifists, and this existed until the time of St. Augustine. St. Augustine himself was almost a situation ethicist. He almost believed that as times changed, the way we understand moral principles have to change—shocking coming from him, but that’s what he said. One of the areas where he saw change needed was [in Christian defense]. He said that Christian culture and civilization needed to be defended even to the point of death, even to the point of inflicting death on someone else if need be. Early Christians would have never recognized that as the teachings of Christ; Augustine insisted it was a necessary adaptation of the moral law. Thus was born the idea the Church still holds today of the “just war.” A just war is a war fought in defense of oneself and one’s family and one’s homeland. Now, we have to be very careful as Catholic believers that our government only fights just wars, only defensive wars, never using our extraordinary power for other reasons. This is a moral responsibility that we have; and we owe it not only to God, but also to those who died already in defense of our freedom. That freedom now becomes a matter of responsibility.
The second thing is we have to realize that the freedom won for us in the past by many brave people has another price: That we recognize freedom as primarily for potential to do good. And using freedom for evil is a grievous abuse not only of freedom, but also of the lives who have gone before us. I wonder, if we could raise the dead who fell during the Second World War, what they would say about the country they see today, that we see today? Would they be happy about shedding their blood in order to defend people’s right to have an abortion, or the many ways in which rights and freedom are abused to promote evil, selfishness, and injustice--basically because might makes right in a country in which many citizens have surrendered their responsibility to hold accountable their elected officials? I’m not sure that all the dead would be so happy now in retrospect. This is our responsibility to do something about it. So if Memorial Day means anything, it should mean honoring the memory of those who died by a true resolution to make it worth their time and effort and sacrifice by using freedom for good, and insisting that we become responsible as much as possible for the society they left behind.
Today we have another example of Jesus praying out loud so others can hear, a literary device used also in the theater where one of the principal actors needs the audience to know what he or she is thinking without anyone else on the stage knowing. Now in this prayer the author of the gospel has Jesus pray this way: “I pray for these--not for the world but for those you have given me, for they are really yours.” Now, this attitude toward the world is something that is unique to the fourth gospel. It’s a deliberate ambivalence. It says in the beginning “God so loved the world that he did not spare his only begotten Son.” That’s the first attitude.

The second attitude is “I pray for these and not for the world.” Again the revelation, the message, that comes to the evangelist has to be expressed in some human way. And what the evangelist is trying to express is a very important thing that believers, that Christians, have. And that is, on the one hand, a clear understanding of how we are different from the world. Our identity is not given by the world, by experience, by the people around us, even our own families, flesh and blood--they do not give us our identity. They only start us off, but we have to meet with God and become his children--consciously, deliberately, and willfully--wanting this relationship. That is the identity which Jesus is sharing; this identity he has by right. He is sharing it, making us all heirs with him to the life of God. So we are different from the world in this sense: distinct, having our own way of thinking and our own way of feeling, because we have been touched by God.

On the other hand, “God so loved the world”; therefore, our attitude toward the world has to be the same as God’s. “God did not spare his only begotten Son, but sent him,” and so we children of God are all somehow being sent into the world. And we have to have a sense of that too. We are different from the world precisely because we are sent to it, not to become part of it, but to bring it to God! And this is a responsibility of every believer, not just some believers, not just those who have a special habit or a special order or special office; but all believers are sent to the world.

Now today we celebrate the feast of St. Philip Neri, who had a very important mission and who found a very unique way of living it out. He was part of what is called in history the counter-Reformation. It was the Church’s response to various crises that we call the Reformation, which are too numerous to recount. But Philip’s view was that we needed a priesthood that was first of all dedicated to personal holiness, and second of all that was capable of effective preaching. It is a timelessly valid point. And he set about establishing a society for this purpose. And one little anecdote about Philip’s discernment about what is an indication of true holiness: At this time candidates were being gathered and taught, candidates for the priesthood. Some of them came in and said the Blessed Mother had appeared to them. And he said, “Oh, when and where?” And they told him. And he said, “Well, the next time you see this, spit on it!” And they were quite shocked. They said, “Spit on the Blessed Mother!” And he said, “Oh, that’s not
the Blessed Mother.” They said, “Well, how do you know?” He said, “Well number one, you said this apparition took place in church.” And he said, “The last place the Blessed Mother would ever appear is in church. Secondly, you said it was during the study time when you should have been at your books. The Blessed Mother would never lead you away from what you are supposed to be doing.” Well, actually there is profound discernment here. True piety is not being in church when you should be doing something else! There is a time for prayer and there is a time for work, and when you are supposed to be working you are not supposed to be praying--although you may work prayerfully. And that’s what he was trying to teach these young candidates that holiness is a matter of doing what God asks us to do, including preparing ourselves to share the message of Christ. [And we must not make the mistake of] doing something overtly pious, but actually impious because we are not doing what God wants us to do at that time, not preparing ourselves to bring the message of Christ to the world. And so on this feast of St. Philip Neri we need to be reminded that the responsibility of evangelizing the world belongs to the whole Church. It was to the whole Church to which Jesus said, “Go forth and proclaim the good news to all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”
In today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles St. Paul is giving, as it were, a farewell address; and he prays that people will be filled with the word of God, which will “enlarge you,” as he puts it. This idea of being enlarged is important. One of the fundamental problems that people have--that we have as a people, as human beings--is smallness. Smallness is not to be confused with humility. Humility comes from the word “earth.” Earthiness is good; groundedness is good. It’s actually more honesty or truthfulness. It’s an important component in a holy life to be truthful, to be honest and grounded. Smallness is something quite different.

Now smallness is in the first place our natural state; in a sense we are born small. Anyone who deals with children knows that children’s needs are small needs--their concerns small concerns, their problems small problems. And that’s, of course, the way they have to be. There comes a point however, as we grow physically, we can grow also spiritually; but we don’t necessarily. Nothing forces us to grow inwardly. So there are grown-ups who are small. Like children their needs, concerns, problems, issues are all very small. And this is very sad because it’s a confinement. It’s quite unnecessary. And it’s not only unnecessary, but also can cause a great deal of evil. Out of smallness comes a great deal of malice. A small heart--there’s not much room in a small heart for love for those who are different, for those who look at life from a different perspective. So smallness leads to closed-mindedness, narrow-heartedness, exclusivity rather than inclusively, one-sidedness; in general it’s disjunctive.

Paul says, “The word of God will enlarge your hearts.” We do not grow large in heart through any natural process or through any sort of ordinary education. This is really the work of God. And it’s important that we submit to the work of God; that means cooperate with it. Now to become large-hearted actually is a little difficult in the sense that it causes us to be stretched. As women who have borne children know, it’s not always easy to be stretched. Spiritually to become large-hearted is like being pregnant. We are asked to go beyond--where inner organs are displaced. Everything has to change for something else. Our own comfort doesn’t really matter. But it’s for a very important reason. A woman who is a mother has to make many sacrifices to bring life into the world. But likewise we must make many sacrifices, accept a great deal of discomfort and dislocation, in order to bring to maturity the Spirit of Christ. And this begins with the word, the word which was spoken by the apostles, the word which St. Paul brought to Ephesus, the word which is a powerful presence of God Himself. But unlike the cost of physical pregnancy, it can be thwarted at any moment. Well, I suppose even physical pregnancy today can be thwarted as well, but that wasn’t my thought originally. So in the pains of life, in the stretching of life, we have to recognize something important is happening within us. And we can welcome it; we can allow it to continue. And the result is, in the words of the Fathers of the Church--which is a very strange sounding term in our ears--but in the words of the Fathers of the Church the result is “We become God.” We might meditate on what that could mean.
As you may have already realized or heard, in the language of the New Testament there are different words for love; and the distinction is important in today’s reading. There are three different nouns: “eros” referring to sexual love, “philia” friendship, and “agape,” which means unconditioned love. Now there is no verb to correspond to eros, but there is a verb to correspond to friendship: “Philo se, I am your friend.” And that’s what Peter tells Jesus three times. There is also a verb to correspond to “agape,” and the verb is “agapein.” And that’s really the verb Jesus uses in the first two questions: “Agapas me? Do you love me?” And the point of the evangelist is that Jesus is asking Peter to follow him in the unconditional love of the cross. And Peter, who often in the fourth gospel represents the Church and especially the unbelieving Church or the Church that’s slow to respond, the Church that doesn’t quite “get” the message, responds with the wrong word, the inappropriate word. He’s really being asked to take up his cross and follow Jesus in a sacrificial death; and he is saying, “Well, I will always be your friend,” which is really simply not answering the question.

Now the evangelist presents this not so much because it’s about Peter, but because it’s about the Church. The Church really is being invited to follow Christ. We follow Christ when during our daily lives we decide to love God when people are cross, when people are irritating and rude and disrespectful, when people really express no concern for us; we are invited to love them anyway--unconditionally! And that’s what it means--“Agapas me?” Now in this case Jesus is identifying with the unloving; this is something quite often we do not quite “get.” When Jesus says, “Whatever you do to the least of my brothers,” think of the least not as the poorest vagrant you’ve ever met; but think of them as the one who isn’t in anyway pleasing to you. That’s the least--the one who doesn’t understand you or appreciate you or accept you--that is the least, but still a brother or a sister! And that’s the point. So with that person Jesus identifies, and that means that the way we treat that person is the way we treat Christ!

After all if you think about the whole idea of the cross--on the cross Jesus says, “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.” Those who crucified Jesus were not deliberately crucifying the son of man, the Son of God, the Word Incarnate--no one would ever do that! They were crucifying a troublemaker. They were crucifying somebody who was in the way! They were crucifying somebody that didn’t matter! And there will never be any change in the world until we start to see Christ in the least, the least spiritual, the least blessed, the least pleasing--and then love them anyway. And that’s how the mercy of God comes to the earth. And that’s what Jesus meant: “Agapas me? Do you love me in a merciful way?”

And Peter doesn’t get this because Peter is stuck on Jesus, Jesus his friend! And there is a great deal of faith and devotion which focuses on Jesus, and that’s good; but it’s not enough! It doesn’t answer Jesus’ request; it’s really not following him. Praising Jesus and being devoted to Jesus is wonderful, but it’s really a means to an end; and the end is
the ability, the willingness, the empowerment to love the least. That’s really “following me”; that’s really being “my disciple.” Peter twice doesn’t even get the picture, and then Jesus drops it.

And it’s the third question which, strangely, says, “The third time Jesus asks him,” well, really it isn’t—it’s the first time in the Greek: “Phileis me? Are you going to be my friend?” And Peter was hurt. It is, of course, important that we start with devotion so Jesus says, “Well, are you going to be devoted to me as a friend?” Jesus accepts this as all Peter can do at that point. But he says to him, “Your life will not always be in your hands.” This is part of life. You will not always be in control. It’s when we’re not in control, that we can most clearly and devotedly follow Jesus.
“When you become fruitful disciples of mine, my Father will be honored.” Yes, parents are truly honored, mothers and fathers, by their children. And I am sure that, speaking also for Father Ed and myself, we are honored by you graduates, by the over-all good example and hard work that you put into being part of this parish school; and your over-all behavior is admirable. And of course there are occasional lapses, as we all know about, but you have a great deal of quality. What I would like to impress upon you today is how the world needs your quality. There’s another reading I would have chosen for today, where Jesus looks at his disciples and says, “I send you out like sheep among wolves.” Not a pretty sounding text, but a true one because you will be sent out like sheep among wolves. You will be attacked, at least you’ll be attacked in spirit, for living the faith in the world is taxing and depressing and burdensome. But I believe that you have been given the resources, at least set on the right path, put in the right direction, that you’ll be able to cope with life as it is in our own century.

Now we look at a world which has undergone a great revolution recently called “the information revolution.” I’m sure you’re well acquainted with the meaning of this term. Actually it’s not as recent as it might appear at first. We have been undergoing revolutions all along in the last two hundred years starting with the telegraph, for example, and then the telephone and then the television. And one of the characteristics of this development is the word “tele,” which is really the word for “distance.” One of the factors we have to deal with is that we see a great deal at a distance. There’s a great deal of information at our disposal and yet it’s at a distance; it’s not really up-front. It’s not really something we can participate in. And that’s something we have to be aware of.

Another issue, of course, is the development of photography, motion pictures, and videos. Now when we think of these things, we think of perhaps routineness; we think of memories, of photographs--can jog our memories. But another aspect of this whole phenomenon is that we see pictures of things we don’t remember, as we never experienced them. Every picture is frozen, is part of the past. And when we’re focusing on what is distant from us and what is in the past, the less rooted we are in reality. And this is something we need to think about, be aware of. We can actually live in this modern world and never be in contact with anything happening now. Children often sit in front of the television; they are not playing; they are not present to the environment around them; they’re watching something that is past. No matter how many times you see “Titanic” it will always end in one series of sadder frames. Motion is the illusion of reality. Now recent studies have shown that, in fact, children who watch too much television actually have their brains shrink. This is a dark consequence; it’s probably irreversible. Again that says something about our age, the age we live in, the present moment. It is an age that encourages a great deal of passivity, not active engagement, but passive observing of what is going on as we passively receive information out of context. It’s all part of the world we now live in, the world that you live in. The result of this may seem muddled. Without the context of information, without direct experience, we probably are not going to understand it too much.
And one of the fundamental powers of the soul is called the power of intellect. This is what St. Joseph School has been trying to form and direct in you; and I, believe, somewhat successfully. The power of the intellect is the power to understand. Without understanding there is no true freedom because freedom involves choices which involve options. In order to be truly free you have to understand the various options that are available to you. It is not without warrant that there are many science fiction stories that portray a future which is just a vast prison. For to live without understanding is to live without freedom; and if we live without freedom, then we will be in prison--albeit not physical, but real.

Now all this is not just going to happen; the way we are today has been developing over hundreds of years. And there are two chief mistakes that have been made in our culture. I think we could identify them--the fact that they’re mistakes. The first has to do with God. During the Enlightenment—which is the, you might say, watershed of modern culture—the idea was put forth very worthily by people like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison and most of the intellectuals in the past three hundred years--this idea of God: That God created the world and then he just let it be, as if God were the great watchman. And in fact they often used that expression. Now even if you’ve enjoyed a movie, you may not care who made it. And that’s what’s happened to the intellectual life of our modern culture. People don’t care much about who made our world because the view is that the making was in the past, and that’s over now; and now we’re in charge. It’s just a mechanism--so thought Sir Isaac Newton, the founder of modern science, or one of them anyway.

Secondly, we think about us ourselves, our human nature. In our modern culture human nature is regarded as primarily a matter of being an individual. Edmund Burke says that society is nothing but a social contract among individuals who decided to band together for certain reasons that they choose.

Now both of these views you know quite well are false because you’ve been instructed in the tradition of our faith. And you know quite well that according to our faith the universe is really raw material for something else--a new creation that has begun in Christ, continues in yourselves and the life of all those who believe in Christ. In the new creation there is the work of the kingdom of God, which promises justice and peace for all of us who cooperate with God’s plan. You also know that God continues to invite people into partnership, and we’ve talked about this on many occasions. This partnership is something that depends upon ourselves, which is implied by the very word “partnership.” If we are to be partners with God, then we have to do our part. And this, and this alone, will assure peace and justice and concord on our earth.

Thirdly, you have been taught, and you can see it, that human life is mutually interdependent. We’re not just individuals. We depend on one another. Everyone depends on everyone else. And in this very interdependent world we are called to care for those who are least able to care for themselves. As Jesus put it, “What you do for the
least of my brothers or sisters, you do it for me.” Thus, if we try to live self-sufficiently, we’ll be living, really, a lie and we’ll be living, really, a very dangerous illusion.

Now it’s very easy to summarize this faith in the Church by remembering the Sign of the Cross. We say, “In the name of the Father.” The Father is the source of all life, meaning and purpose. When we hear that, we need to think of a God who plans and cares for his creation. This caring and this planning involves yourself, but it goes far beyond yourself. “And the Son”—the great mystery of God become human--of involving himself in our lives! This gives unquestionable dignity to human life. This is a very precious value that many people today do not see at all. Thirdly, “Holy Spirit”—the Spirit blows where it wills; the Spirit is unpredictable. The Spirit has the capacity to enter into everyone. We need to seek alliances with all men and women of good will to affirm goodness wherever we see it, to respect the truth wherever we find it. That is a short synopsis of Catholic Faith. And you have this faith, and you are pretty well prepared now to take the next step in this maturation process that will go on probably for many years. I want you to know that you have tremendous gifts that the world desperately needs. And I pray that you always have the courage and the generosity and the willingness to share them. May God bless all of you!
The Power to Forgive

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

May 31, 1998

Acts 2:1-11; Rom 8:8-17; Jn 14:15-16, 23-26

There are many gifts of the Spirit; there are many ministries, and all are not equal in value. What is meant by the Holy Spirit of God is, as it says in the Creed “the Lord, the giver of life.” Now this does not merely mean life as we may encounter it, what scientists call the biosphere, biological life. It means life that comes from God. Jesus encountered the dead burying the dead, and he said, “Leave them. Those who want to live, live in the Spirit of God.” And there is nothing that is sadder than believers who do not experience or feel the power of life within them. The Spirit is called the Paraclete, meaning the one who consoles and accompanies. We are never alone in life; we are accompanied with the Spirit of God. Now all the gifts of the Spirit are really given not only for our own personal use, but for the building up of the body. This principle is taught by St. Paul in various letters.

Among the most important works of the Holy Spirit, really, is the work of healing. Healing is related to the very idea of salvation. The word in Latin for health is “salus.” That’s where we get the word “salvation.” We are not completely saved unless we are truly healthy. And Jesus in his ministry was always touching people bringing them health, physical health and spiritual health, mental health and emotional health. And there is nothing more important in terms of our total health than the power to forgive. There is no topic Jesus brings up more than the topic of forgiveness. It is not a separate topic, but one that directly relates to his ministry of healing. And even many modern, secular, medical practitioners have said--and I’ve heard them and I’ve read them--that they believe many illnesses and disorders are rooted somehow in lack of forgiveness, in a burden people carry around with them. And I would say, from my pastoral experience, the same.

So of all the various powers and gifts the Spirit gives us, one of them is the power to forgive. This is not a power we have within our human nature. It’s a power that comes from the Spirit of God. And as Christian believers we are not simply living in human nature; we are living in the divine nature, which has made its entrance into our lives at our baptism--but now we need to exercise that power and that life. Now in the Gospel of John, when John tells the story of the resurrection of Jesus, he says that Jesus appeared in the upper room the night of his resurrection. And he appeared to his disciples and he breathed on them; and he said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Now in today’s first reading, we hear about the coming of the Spirit on the feast of Pentecost. Well, the Spirit just didn’t come once! In a sense the Spirit is always descending, always coming! In fact, on the cross Jesus breathed out the Spirit in his death, which is a death given for salvation, for healing.

Now the power to forgive is not simply a matter of saying, “Well, let bygones be bygones.” Nor is it simply a matter of acquitting someone of a charge. The power to forgive is the power really to be free! If we are embittered or if we are angered or enraged because of the way we have been treated, we give ourselves over to the power of
that person who has mistreated us. This is not the way God operates. God does not put himself in other people’s power—even Jesus on the cross, although apparently allowing himself to be crucified, never submitted to the power of bitterness or revenge. Jesus Himself said, “The Father blesses the good and the evil.” He used the example: He says, “You know the rain falls on the good and the bad, and the sun shines on the just and the unjust.” God does not bless only those who are good toward him, but God blesses everyone because God is not bound by our attitudes. And God is not controlled by our behavior. God is free! Jesus even in his humanity was free! On the cross he said, “Father forgive them; they know not what they do.” Now, we don’t know whether those whom he was praying for actually received forgiveness. We don’t know that—maybe they did; maybe they didn’t. But Jesus was free. He was able to love them in spite of how they treated him.

And on the cross as Jesus brought forgiveness, in his resurrection he brought power to forgive. And it is noteworthy the first thing he says to his apostles, to his disciples, to his Church, is “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, they will be forgiven.” Now we, the Church, need to mediate this forgiveness in our families, in our personal relationships, in our Church; even in our society as a whole we are sent to bring this forgiveness. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to pray “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Receiving forgiveness and giving forgiveness must be connected; we cannot have one without the other. And the Latin word for trespass is really a good word: “debita,” better translated “debts.” Very often we hold debts against people. It’s not an “I owe you”; it’s a “you owe me” because we’ve been disappointed, because we’ve been let down, because we’ve been hurt, because someone hasn’t done for us what we believe they should have done. And this “Forgive us our debts as we forgive those” means that God will tear up all our “I owe you’s” to him if we tear up the “you owe me’s” we hold against others. This is the road to freedom, the way of the Spirit.

Now forgiveness does not eliminate the need for reparation, but a person who truly feels forgiven wants to make reparation. And reparation does not depend upon the one who has been offended; it depends upon the offender. The one who has been offended needs only to accept the Spirit of Christ and the power to forgive.

And that brings us to our own personal lives today, our walk in faith, our Church life. And the question is: Are we depriving ourselves of the gift of the Spirit— the power and the freedom that comes from being owed nothing? It may sound very strange: For some people their only sense of identity is their sense of being owed something. Christ is saying, “No, this you must give up as I give you something better—the Holy Spirit.” Do we as a community mediate forgiveness in our families, in our parish, by simply accepting people as they are, by welcoming them and looking for what is good in them. If we look for what is bad in someone, we will find something; but if we look for good, we will also find something. Exercising forgiveness is a matter of an attitude toward people, toward life, and toward God that looks for what is good and affirms that good. Forgiveness is ultimately not about doing something. It’s ultimately a way of being in which God is the center of our being rather than ourselves. Forgiveness is a way of
letting God use us in our lives and our experience for his work. The apostles thought that this was an exciting proposal. What do you think?
Very often in the stories of the New Testament we see a small snippet of a very big issue such as today’s pericope or text. The issue at hand is the idea, not created by Jesus Himself but already introduced into the tradition by the prophets especially Jeremiah for example, that God had the power to raise the dead. Now this was a new idea when it was introduced by the prophets. The Jewish understanding of life is that human life is like the life of animals: when a person dies, they’re dead. There is some residue of a person’s life called the nephesh which descends into the pit of the earth called sheol, and there it remains --period. It is really not what anyone could call eternal life or any kind of real life at all; it’s not life--it’s sleep--it’s a perpetual state of sleep.

Now it is in this context that the prophet introduced the idea that God can raise the dead and an entirely new dimension of life can be created, and that indeed is what God’s intention is. And this became associated with the term “kingdom of God.” Jesus took that term kingdom of God and made it central to his entire message--his preaching of the coming of the kingdom of God. Now it’s not only associated with Christians and Christian believers but the Pharisees also believed in the kingdom of God and the resurrection of the dead. But the Sadducees, who are more conservative, traditionalists, they did not believe it because it wasn’t traditional. It wasn’t what they were brought up to believe so they refused to accept it.

Now the point of today’s reading: Jesus is saying, “Your problem is you’re taking from this condition of life as you know it and you’re projecting it onto the future.” The resurrection of the dead is thought to be not something that happens after you die, but as something that will take place in the history of the world in the future. And actually the images of the Church and of the second coming of Christ, for example, have never shaken this basic point: it’s that we’re looking to the future to the time when time will end, to the time of the general resurrection from the dead, to a time when the new creation will be complete, which is now only incipient, Christ being the first fruit--whose passage through death being the beginning of this new creation.

Now what the Sadducees were doing, of course, is a very natural thing in a sense--I shouldn’t say natural but normal--that is that we think that our experience is somehow normative, that what we see is what human is, or what we feel, that’s the way human beings feel. We do not recognize how the way life is, is the way it has been made by ourselves, by our choices, by our history; and it differs greatly from the will of God! And the whole idea of the kingdom of God is this other idea: that God’s will and God’s purpose for life is very different from what it is already. And we have to shake out of what we’re used to, to dream about and to see what God had planned. And that’s what the prophet Joel talked about when he says, “Old men will dream dreams and young men will see visions.” Perhaps he said that the other way around--but the idea--that a new way
of looking at life is required. The Sadducees are holding onto what they’re used to, and that is a big mistake. He says, “You are very badly mistaken.”

Now this second point which is very closely related is about marriage itself. In the Old Testament it’s very clear that the natural normal state for an adult is the state of marriage because “God created male and female and for this reason a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and the two become one.” This is what constitutes normative adult life: that there is a mandate to multiply and to fill the earth and that people who are responsible will do this. And the failure to do this is to be irresponsible. Now even before the time of Jesus, or around the time of Jesus, there were people questioning this, saying, “Well, is this really the best way or the only way or is this really what God wants,” and so on.

You can see that the apostle Paul prior to his conversion was already a dedicated celibate, which is actually quite unusual. He had already broken away from the tradition that a man ought to get married and have a wife and have children. He was already foreseeing in his pre-Christian days--he was already foreseeing that God was doing something new--that God was not something in the past, that the will of God was not to be identified with what had been. So you see Paul was already disposed toward conversion. He already had the idea of something different and the early Church’s concern for virginity and celibacy as lives of witness to the kingdom come from this, that although marriage may be very good and has its place, it should not be thought of as the way of living. In fact, to think this way is to tie yourself too much to the past, to tradition and to instinct and not to be free in the Spirit to await the kingdom and to serve. And this is why the early Church puts a great value on celibacy and virginity as a life-style, as a commitment, as a vocation. So it is good that we reflect on these issues and think about them and realize that in our own lives we have to be shaken free from what we assume to be a message of current life, which is a necessary predisposition to being open to God’s prophetic word.
In the fall of 1995, I was visiting the city of Istanbul in Turkey and a man called out to me in German; a Turk called out to me in German and said, “Sie sind ein Priester, nicht wahr? You are a priest, is that not true?” Well, the fact that I knew a lot of Turks spoke German—that didn’t surprise me; they are often day laborers or just labors in Germany. But it did surprise me that he knew that I was a priest! I was, of course, not dressed as one. And he said, “Well, you know, that’s very bad.” I said, “How so?” “Well, he said, “Christians believe in three gods; and there is only one God, and he is Allah. So you should give up this Christian belief, and you should believe in Allah.” Well, of course, this was rather awkward and difficult. I don’t preach or teach in German, so I couldn’t very well explain too much to him. But it is a very important point that obviously many people, including Mohammed, misunderstand or misunderstood. Mohammed thought because he heard Father, Son and Holy Spirit there were three different gods.

Probably there are even Christians who think that--probably because the word “person” is used. We say that one God subsists in three divine persons. Well, “person” for us in modern English means an individual with a mind of his own, a will of his own. This is not what the word means in the original Latin “persona” or the Greek “hypostasis.” It does not refer to the individual mind or will—not at all. There is only one divine mind, one divine will, one divine being. But the point of the whole doctrine of the Trinity is a revelation of the inner mystery of God. If we go back into ancient time, we see that in general there is a wisdom that arrives at this conclusion: that creation is a marvelous, awesome marvel, and behind this awesome marvel—that is the creation--there is a deep mystery that we dare not plumb. We dare not enter into the threshold of mystery. And the fundamental emotions that are evoked by ancient religious rites are two: fear and fascination.

Now with the coming of Jesus Christ there is a very great turn because Christ had said, “Fear is useless.” Did it mean that reverence was useless? No. In fact that is one of the great things that the ancient world had: a reverence for the creation, which incidentally modern, technological people do not have because we’re so used to manipulating our world, our environment, finding ways to control it like air conditioning and lights and all the modern things that we have invented. To a great extent this has taken away the ancient feeling of awe. And so people take great treks out into the wilderness. What are they looking for? They are looking for contact with this spirit of awe and majesty that is fundamental to human life and the basic religious impulse. But even this basic impulse is only a natural thing. And what Christ is really about is introducing an entirely different dimension of relationship. Christ reveals the inner working of God, and reveals himself not as a human person, a human individual--but as the human extension of the divine thought.
Now really this is a little bit difficult to think about, but it is after all the basis of our faith. St. Thomas Aquinas says that the Trinity is the necessary mystery of the Catholic faith. When we talk about the “Word of God” we don’t really mean something audible. Those are words in plural, but the Word is something prior. The Word of God is not something we speak. The Word of God is something God speaks. God speaks his own understanding of himself, just as when we speak we are speaking our own understanding of whatever. Only we are very complex beings, and our thoughts are very divided; they come and they go—we forget them. They are incomplete, and we become confused. God, the infinite, has no limit to the power of thought. So there is one single thought--God thinks--which is Himself, understanding and knowledge of Himself. This is the Word. The Word became flesh in Jesus Christ and dwelt among us, and introduced to us the inner life of God. It’s not important that we really understand the inner life of God in so many words--which words are really inaccurate; but it is important that we appreciate the great gift that is being offered to us: the very offer in Christ to live in God, not outside of God in fear and fascination, but within God, knowing the Father as the Son knows the Father--this of course is a manner of speaking--but to know God as God would know himself, and to be loved by God as God loves himself. This is the Holy Spirit.

And it’s quite sad that very often even Christian believers shy away from the intimate relationship with God, that even Christian believers seem to be preoccupied with affairs of life, or simply afraid to plumb the depths of God even though it is God Himself who has come to reveal himself. This is not an act of arrogance trying to enter into the threshold of God. It is an act of reception because God has offered it to us. And we are introduced into the mystery of God at our baptism. In our baptism we are given the promise that we shall eventually know God as Jesus knows God--that the human nature of Jesus is something we shall share; we are baptized into Christ. And the more we grow in that faith, the more our lives will be full of the joy and peace and the love that God wants us to have. And the more we ignore this mystery, the more we cause ourselves to suffer, in this case uselessly, for this kind of suffering is not redemptive! To suffer from ignorance of God is not redemptive suffering. It’s foolish and pointless! So the choice is ours to recognize what God is offering to us: how in our confirmation he has given us the power of the Spirit to live a new life, how in the Eucharist he is giving us the ability to offer ourselves to the Father with himself and become one with him in a sacrifice of praise. Each day we should be making progress toward the vision of God. As we come tonight to the Eucharist we need to be renewed in our willingness to receive what God is offering.
Today it says that Jesus began to teach his disciples. In many ways these beatitudes are new ways of thinking about life. In our instinctive nature we avoid pain and seek pleasure. We flee insecurity; we desire security. In a certain sense Jesus is saying, “Well, to live contrary to your own instincts is actually a blessing.” Now it is not always exactly certain what every single phrase means, but rather there is a cumulative effect of the beatitudes. Take, for example, the first one in Matthew: “Blessed are the poor in spirit; the reign of God is theirs.” This parallels another saying in Luke almost identical but slightly different: “Blessed are you poor; yours is the kingdom of heaven.” What’s the difference? In Luke direct address and no mention of “in spirit.” “Blessed are you poor.” And most scholars believe Luke is probably more original; after all when there’s differences they do wonder, “Well, what did Jesus really say?” Probably he said what is recorded in Luke. It’s a more simple version. However the problem with what is recorded in Luke—it is directed toward a particular group of people. And one of the purposes of Scripture, one of the purposes of preaching, is to bring something general or universal out of the teachings of Christ. Luke’s words, that is Jesus’ words as recorded in Luke, are not exactly universal. One could not say them just to any group at all. It was specifically tailored for a particular group. And Matthew, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the source of inspiration, is trying to teach something that’s universal.

What is exactly meant is not so clear. There are three possibilities. “Poor in spirit”—what does it mean? Number one: it could mean people who while not really poor are nonetheless not really greedy, not really attached to worldly wealth and power. That
could mean that. Number two: very different, but could be “Blessed are those who are poor” in a sense of poor in spirit, in a sense of depressed, dispirited, lacking hope. That could also be a meaning of that term. Or thirdly, it could mean “Blessed are the poor in spirit”—blessed are they who recognize their own inner poverty, and therefore who hunger for God. Perhaps actually it means all three. In the first case “Blessed are those who are detached”—that would actually parallel another one of the beatitudes: “Blessed are the single-hearted for they shall see God.” The second meaning would parallel “Blest too are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled.” The third would parallel “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for holiness.” And perhaps actually the Holy Spirit intended all three meanings.

The point is [that] it’s only upon really reflecting on all of these together, how they interplay, that we get the sense of freedom. That’s the whole idea of the beatitudes—freedom—how we can find freedom and how we recognize that freedom is already the gift of the Spirit, that the things people normally look for in life: for security, for pleasure, for contentment, for happiness—these things do not supply! Ultimately the only way we find what we really are looking for in life, what we are actually destined for, is in the kingdom of God, which is God’s action in human life. And now that’s possible; that kingdom is open; it’s available to all those who wish to enter.
Being faith-filled and being credulous are two very different things. As I’ve mentioned before “faith” has many different facets in Scripture, and it’s never a matter of being credulous. Being credulous means believing things. That’s not the point of faith; it’s not believing things. Faith is always a relation with God, and it always is marked with a quality that we could call trust. Now this trust has to become more than simple trust; it has to mature into obedience. And obedience matures further into surrender, but along the way we are always at a stage--some stage in our life. And sometimes we go in circles; returning to an earlier stage and revisiting an area of growth.

Now today the Book of Kings presents the widow of Zarephath. She is important especially because of the New Testament--Jesus uses her as an example of faith in contrast to the Jews to whom He’s teaching with no success. Now the widow of Zarephath is not a Jewess; she is not part of the community of Israel. We have to understand this; that’s why she is significant. She lives in Sidon. Sidon is a pagan territory. And according to history, according to tradition the Sidonites were often people who practiced rather gross and perverted forms of worship such as burning of infants in worship--that type of thing. So therefore the whole idea of Sidon is unpleasant to a Jewish ear. Now here this woman in Sidon is very poor; in fact, she’s destitute and she has very little to live on. She’s at the end of her little provision of flour and oil. And it’s to her that God sends Elijah.

Elijah, mind you, has been rejected! Elijah is in flight because of his ministry, because he preached the word of God, and people did not want to accept it. And his life was in danger precisely because of his fidelity to God. And so God says, “Well, I will send you to someone and I’ll take care of you through that person”--and here it’s the widow of Zarephath--not a Jewess, not a member of the people of God at all; and yet she is a people of God! This is supposed to be a surprise! She is a people of God? She is more a people
of God than the people of God! And it’s important that we read this with this sort of sense of surprise because our categories are very limited.

And what Scripture is trying to tell us is that God is always working beyond our categories. So the widow of Zarephath now is being challenged to use her few provisions for the sake of the prophet. Remember Jesus says, “Anyone who gives even a glass of water to a prophet because he is a prophet will not lack his reward.” So here the widow of Zarephath is being asked by God to use the few provisions she has not for herself or her son but for the prophet. And she does! And the result of this is she has such abundance she doesn’t even run out of provisions for a year!

And this is really meant as a teaching that we have provisions we don’t even recognize, that when we put our resources at the disposal of God, at the kingdom of God, we discover a source of abundance that is really totally unexplainable, and that faith involves this sort of obedience—it’s not just trusting for myself; it’s committing my resources, committing my provisions, committing what I have to the work. There are people that trust in God in a sort of childish way: they think that God will take care of them, but they don’t think that means now that they have to obey God. And obeying God means giving of yourself! Obey eventually leads to surrender, complete surrender, but it has to be in certain steps where we really put ourselves at God’s disposal. And later on the Pharisees are going to be very insulting when Jesus brings up this story. He says, “There were many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah, and not to one of them did God send the prophet.”
Today we have a reading from the Book of Kings, which is a very important reading as Elijah was a very important prophet. We see this tableau that the author presents of one lone prophet standing against a total populace who have embraced a lie, here presented as the worship of Baal. Now, of course, the word “Baal” simply is the Canaaninic dialect for “Lord,” so it would be equivalent to the Latin word “Dominus” or the Greek word “Kyrios” or the Hebrew “Adonai”; but behind that word is not the same reality. Basically the worship of Baal is the worship of nature itself. And through the entire Elijah cycle we see that this is the basic issue.

The issue is: Is nature divine? And actually primitive people more or less believe it is. If you really look at primitive religious views, more or less that’s the view. Now there are many varieties of religion and various images and myths, and it may seem rather bold to generalize like this; but I believe it’s true that basically it all comes down to a worship of nature and the processes of nature such as reproduction, the cycles of rain and weather, and so on. That is basically thought to be a divine thing, and therefore worthy of worship. And what the prophet Elijah says is this is not divine; it’s not worthy of worship. What is worthy of worship is the source from which all this comes.

Now behind this are some very important points: number one, that the view of everybody is often totally wrong. The truth does not reside necessarily in the general populace, that it has happened and may happen again, probably happens all the time that the truth is really reserved to a few people who are really open to the truth; and very often the general populace is not. Number two, how we worship is very important because it has to do with how we grow. If we worship something small, we will remain small. If our beliefs are untrue, nothing can grow from that.

Now today we find a strange thing, a strange phenomenon, and that is the return of these ideas that were popular in the days of Elijah: that nature is worthy of worship. This is a very popular idea. You go to a book store and you will find all kinds of books that more or less say this. They talk about the “new age” and all kinds of other ideas that are
supposedly new—they’re not new at all—they’re old ideas that more or less we call “paganism”; at least that was the word used among the early Roman Christians. Now you will find this in your own family: people who are somehow confused about the true nature of God and who feel that because this is a very popular thing or because it is well accepted in our culture, it must be valid. And the reason why the sacred author put this story into the Bible is to assure them for all time this is something that we go through from time to time as history progresses. Another way of putting that is [that] history really doesn’t progress too much; it just returns at different points and we have to learn all over again the true nature of the divine which is not to be identified in any way with nature or the way things are—that basically is paganism.

What’s worse than paganism is idolatry which is what was actually in vogue at the time of Christ—the idolatry of the Roman Empire—worshipping the emperor—that’s even worse! But all these things are false paths that we need to be keenly aware of how false they are and why it is important for us to be open to the truth.

Now when you run into these things, I do not recommend that you kill the people that have these views. Elijah was a little carried away with the priests of Baal. But it is important that you become the prophet and speak the truth. You may be the only one in that particular group who listens to God’s word.

And finally a point about revelation. What is meant by revelation is what God reveals, what God discloses about God. As such it must be distinguished from the way in which it’s accepted by the human person. The Bible never says that God, the true God, only reveals himself to the Jewish people or to the Israelites. Some people may believe that, but it is not what it says. But what it does imply is that wherever God, the true God reveals and discloses the true divine nature, it must be self-consistent. So if God has revealed himself among the Aztecs, then that revelation must be very consistent with God’s revelation to Moses, to Elijah, to Christ and in Christ. And that is the basis of the Catholic Church’s view of ecumenism. We seek the truth wherever it is to be found, but we have to know the difference between what is true and what is not.
We see a constant tradition from the time of Elijah to the time of Jesus, a moving inward, the development of the true spirituality. Basically, with primitive people all over the world, whatever is called god is associated with acts of nature: thunder, lightning, earthquakes, volcanoes--all these were taken to be manifestations of the divine: rain, drought, and so on. And so religious devotion, if you want to call it that, is basically a matter of taking favor with the forces of nature to provide a prosperous life: rain at the right time, sun at the right time, crops, flocks, herds, etc., children too, wealth--all that.

Now Israel’s idea of God is substantially different. The Lord is the God who created everything, but who does not control nature because the Lord is transcendent; that is, the Lord is beyond and above all that he creates. Creation, in fact, is nothing but his footstool. Now it is the Lord who intervenes in history. The whole idea of intervention is very significant. The Lord intervenes in the history of Israel and the history of Egypt to form a people for his own purpose; and he promotes their well-being, not for their cause but for his cause. And, of course, they’re trapped and unpopular; and they tend to forget all about what the Lord has done, and they tend to identify the Lord with, again, forces of nature. And Elijah now becomes the prophet that is sent to pry them away from their basic beliefs. Now he goes to Mount Horeb, which is where this all started--that is the covenant--and he is greeted with crashing rocks, earthquakes, storms, and winds; and the Lord is not in any of these things. But then there is a small, still voice; and he hides his face! The still, small voice is of course the presence of God, the Lord who intervenes in the history of his people.

And Jesus speaks this same message. He is telling people that they have to go inside to find God. By Jesus’ time, of course, Israel has developed an extremely elaborate legalistic praxis. Religion is basically a matter of following the law, which they believe comes from God. They call it Torah, meaning “instruction.” Jesus’ point is [that] following the law is
not enough because it is too outside who we are. He says, “If a man looks with lust for a woman, he is already an adulterer.” Why? Because everything that happens on the outside of us, our behavior, is simply a product of our imagination, of our thinking, of our desires. And if we do not find God within us and seek to please God in our thoughts, in our imagination and our desires, then we will never find God! God will be a stranger! Now we can sympathize with the people that Jesus is speaking with as we can sympathize with the people that Elijah is speaking with because these proclamations, these teachings, are saying that their entire way of living is wrong. It’s very hard to hear that!

Today we have a very similar situation. We have insurance companies that call floods an “act of God.” It is not the Lord! That’s a perverse idea! We have people who have no concept at all of the still, inner voice. In fact, modern people seem to be enthralled with primitive religions, probably because our spiritual nature is so undeveloped. So Christ is encouraging us to become more aware of what goes on inside of us. That’s where we have to take the gospel. We have to preach the gospel to our own hearts, to our own emotions, to our own desires, to our own thoughts. That has to become the temple where the Holy Spirit breathes life. If we ever allow the Holy Spirit to take over our thoughts, then what would be produced would be, of course, a life of fruit of the Spirit. We would be full of charity, and we would be full of joy, and we would be at peace, and we would be patient, and kind; and we would be chaste, and we would have accord. It’s very simple. It’s the product of having God inside. And that is our work. And liturgy is, basically, to enable this to take place. It is first and foremost to impregnate. So as we continue, let’s open our hearts to God and ask for the grace to be aware throughout our day of God and seek to please him in all things.
As always Jesus’ teachings are meant to challenge the way we think, the way we act. Today he brings up an issue of the law, what we call the eighth commandment, which does not say, “Do not lie,” as many people believe; but it says, “Do not bear false witness against your neighbor.” There is no commandment that tells people to be truthful in general! The commandments are all about telling the truth about people. This is the first thing we have to recognize. Truth about facts are not relevant to the moral code. Truth about people—just that’s what’s important! That we do not falsify a person’s reputation or speak of them in an untruthful way!

Now toward this end there were oaths that were taken in the law courts in Israel, as there are today in our law courts. Why? Because no one can reach a verdict, which is a decision, without truthful information. So to speak untruthfully about a neighbor is to undermine the very idea of justice; and therefore it’s a grave crime punishable in Israel by death!

Now about this very idea Jesus says, “I say don’t swear at all.” Again Jesus is always taking people beyond the accustomed, usual way of thinking. The accustomed, usual way of thinking is that if I’m not deliberately lying, I’m telling the truth. And that’s what Jesus wants to challenge. How can anyone actually swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? How can anyone really do that? We don’t know the whole truth! In fact from Christ’s point of view, the truth is not something we can have anyway—but it’s something that can have us! So the relation to truth he sees is we can be in submission to the truth, and the truth can make us free; but we cannot contain the truth.
We cannot
hold the truth. Our convictions can never embrace the truth because we’re too small! So he says, “Do not swear at all. Just say, ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’” When we say, “Yes” or “No” we mean “honest” in so far as we can know anything. “But beyond that is from the evil one.” The evil one is the father of lies! Lies in this case don’t mean deliberate deceptions. If there is any deliberate deception it’s in the evil one himself. For our part it could be just assumptions that we know, beliefs that we hold dear. And if they are just our beliefs, they are really nothing--so we need to be aware.
“Every time, then, you eat this bread and you drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes!” St. Paul is reflecting the earliest Christian Faith in the presence of Christ in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. Today the feast is called “Corpus Christi,” literally “Body of Christ.” Now, this word actually is something we use often, perhaps, without thinking. Recently the Navy commissioned a nuclear submarine named “Corpus Christi.” And various Church officials complained that a symbol of our faith would be used to name a nuclear submarine with nuclear warheads on it. What does it mean: “Corpus Christi, Body of Christ”? What is a body? You know the word “body” is a word we use; it’s a common word, but we don’t really think much about what it means. We take our bodies for granted, until we get sick! We think of our bodies as just the outward surface; and we consider ourselves as either good-looking or not good-looking, young or old, or whatever. And these are very superficial thoughts. If you get sick and go to the doctor, to the hospital, and you have an MRI or other tests, you start to realize the complexity of your body—what it really is—how extraordinary all its workings!

Now the very idea of a body involves life itself. The term “dead body” is actually a misnomer. A dead body isn’t a body any longer because it doesn’t “embody.” A body is the home of life. It’s the manifestation of a presence. Each of us is a presence. A presence is a spiritual being manifested in the world. So a human body has this role, this function, of manifesting the sacred in a material world, in a way that the body of a dog—if you want to use that term; it is usually not used—would not, because a dog is not a spiritual presence. So when “body” is used, it’s referring to a human body.

The Body of Christ is three different modes. The first, is the physical body of Jesus that was conceived in the womb of the Blessed Mother. This became the first home in the material world of the Incarnate Word of God. In the death and resurrection of Christ there was a tremendous transformation that took place. The very presence of Christ who had become incarnate in the womb of the Blessed Mother, now became poured out in the body of the believers—who are also called the body of Christ. They too, we, are the body of Christ in a corporate sense! It’s the same presence; it’s a different mode of manifestation or a presentation. And then thirdly, this very same presence, through the power of the Holy Spirit again, descends upon the gifts of bread and wine at the Eucharist.

Now, the idea is not that God is absent, now he’s present, now he’s absent again. That is the wrong idea of Eucharistic presence! The idea correctly is that God is present now in our body, the corporate body of the Church; the Holy Spirit is among us. And the priest is ordained to evoke the Holy Spirit, in the prayer called the “Epiclesis,” so that this Holy Spirit can, in fact, transform the gifts we bring of bread and wine. Why? So that we can be transformed. The presence becomes food. So in the Eucharistic presence, in the form of food, we have the heavenly high priest described in the Letter to the

Corpus Christi
Hebrews, who stands before the mercy seat of God in heaven interceding for his people--because his
sacrifice is both a gift to the Father and it’s a gift to us. The sacrifice of Christ is a gift to the Father, but it’s also a gift to us. To us it becomes food and a means for our own transformation, as food does transform us! We know this. “You are what you eat,” they say. Without food we die. Our material nature needs to be replenished. Our spiritual nature needs to be now replenished, but also transformed into what it’s meant to be—the image of God. And this is God’s work! And this is how God has chosen to do it.

So the presence of Christ is never static; it’s not a thing—it’s a person, as a person who comes to us as one who feeds. He says, “Take and eat; this is my body. This very same gift is given to God; it is given up for you, sacrificed to the Father.” And through this giving and receiving we are transformed by the death and resurrection of Christ. Now we refer to this rite as a celebration. We talk about celebrating Mass. This word, of course, is a little difficult because the Latin word—and after all this is a Latin Rite Church; this is a Roman Church. The Mass is the Roman Liturgy. In Latin the word “celebratio,” which is what celebration translates, doesn’t mean what we mean. It means “to extol” or “to praise” or “to make famous.” The English word “celebrated” sometimes is used in this way, “a celebrated attorney, a celebrated musician,” means a famous person, well-known. When we celebrate Eucharist we are extolling God! That’s what we’re here for: to extol God, to make him known to ourselves and to our world! And usually, in Latin, the word implied “in a large assembly and often.” And so it was picked by the early Fathers of the Roman Church to express exactly what worship is in the biblical sense—it’s remembering what God does and it’s praising God, and reciting the wonderful marvels of God’s work to motivate thanksgiving and gratitude. The word “gratitude,” in Greek, is “Eucharist.” Now, we need to celebrate, which means we need to extol and praise and thus be filled with gratitude. And if we haven’t done this, if we haven’t made God known, we haven’t celebrated. If we don’t end up full of gratitude there’s something missing in our celebration.

So we are personally encountering Christ. We are given a sign of faith, which means that every time we accept this sign of faith we are pledging to God our devotion. And it’s a terrible shame if we ever come to the Eucharist without being aware that we are pledging our devotion; in fact, the word “sacramentum,” from which we get the word “sacrament,” originally meant an oath of loyalty to one’s leader unto death! When the early Church received Eucharist in times of persecution, they knew this may be the last time; and they were saying, “To death for Christ!” That’s where the word “sacramentum” came from. We are also being initiated at every moment into this mystery of Christ. We never age in our relation with Christ; hopefully we grow. We do not age; we’re always beginning anew. We are coming anew into the mystery of God.

And our communion is a sign of unity not only with God, but with one another. That’s why the apostles and disciples of Christ urged the believers to be reconciled to one another because we’re actually receiving one another in the Eucharist—not only Jesus, but the whole Church. And St. Augustine says that the whole Church offers “the whole Christ” to God the Father. And so it’s an opportunity for us to give ourselves to God in praise and gratitude! And everything becomes important! Our money? Yes. Our
success? Yes. But also our suffering and our pain is all subsumed into the suffering and the pain of Christ, and becomes one with his for the salvation of the world!

Now, it’s important that we develop a more conscious sense of God’s gift--given and received. In the Roman Rite it calls on the community to kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer, which in this church is not very possible because there are no kneelers, as you’ve noticed. Well, standing is not irreverent. After all the priests at the altar always stand; the deacons at the altar always stand--that’s not ever considered irreverent. But the priests and deacons at the altar are instructed to bow profoundly. So I would invite you, now and forever, after the Eucharistic consecration to bow with the priest as a sign of devotion. Now I don’t want to tell you that you must do this because the Church doesn’t tell you that you must do this, but I invite you to do this. If you’re not comfortable, then don’t do it; but perhaps in time you will be comfortable because we need to learn how to express ourselves physically in acts of devotion. And whereas in the past perhaps we did a lot of mindless genuflecting, today we do mindless nothing. We don’t do anything. So it’s important that we think about how we can show devotion to the God who feeds us and transforms us into the true image of himself.
In Jesus’ teachings he is deliberately contrasting his own teachings with what the people have already heard, and that’s why these various teachings now are presented the way they are: “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say.” There’s a whole series of teachings in this vein. Now what Jesus is introducing is what St. Paul later will call “a new life.” St. Paul says, “Do you not realize you who were baptized have died with Christ and live now a new life?” That is not a metaphor! It’s really a new life that comes from God, and it’s not to be identified with our ordinary, what we would call, our ordinary human, physical life—our instinctive life. Our instinctive life is, according to biologists, driven by self-preservation. People talk about the law of survival. Every living being is created to survive, to continue to live, to defend itself. That’s the way the biological world works.

Jesus is saying, “Well, now if you really want to be a child of God, you can’t just be part of that; you have to live on a different level.” We hear the expression “born again.” Well, if a person is really born again, they are born on this level of what could be called “non-violence”; that is, they regard their physical life as totally secondary to the spiritual life they have in God, the eternal life that God has given to them through faith and baptism. So it is really a true change in the outlook and behavior that we have in life, and it’s profound! And it’s not something anyone can do. Nobody can do this. This is why what Jesus says contrasts from what people are used to. What people are used to are doable things like the ten commandments. We can keep them all; nobody has to break any of the commandments. They’re all very basic, but what Jesus talks about is not...
basic—not to human life! It’s totally different. It’s radically different. It’s a new life, a life rooted in the power of God’s Spirit. And for us to really want that life is a real conversion.

Now in the early Church there was absolutely no doubt about this. Early Christians believed this totally, and accepted it and lived it totally! That’s why there was a cult of martyrdom. In fact, sometimes it’s embarrassing reading the writings of Ignatius of Antioch who wanted so desperately to die for Christ--and many of the others. They wanted so desperately to die! Why? Well, because they did not value life in this instinctive body; they wanted something else. And they were just very happy with the thought of getting rid of this life. And even St. Paul had talked in a very balanced way, really, about his neutrality: living or dying--he didn’t care because he saw that God could be served either way. So for Paul the whole thing was let God decide.

But coming to that point of really letting God decide is what we’re called to. And if we are really going to let God decide we will become peacemakers because our issues just won’t be at the center of anything. God’s issues will be at the center. And that’s really what the Church is called to do. It’s called to become the peacemaking witness of Christ in the world. And it requires sacrifice. It requires surrender. And of course it’s something unpopular. It always will be unpopular. It was unpopular two thousand years ago, four thousand years ago, ten thousand years ago. It will be next year and in the next millennium and after that; if life survives, it never will be popular. It can’t be popular! It’s based on something different--the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is never going to be popular. But it’s a calling. It’s something we need to allow to challenge us profoundly.
Again, we’re following the theme of the new law. Jesus starts with the old, but then he says, “But I say to you,” and he brings an entirely different perspective. Today it has to do with love of enemies. Now as far as I know, there is no teacher, prophet, or leader in the history of religion that has ever encountered this idea--to love one’s enemies!

Jesus’ ministry was constantly addressing the issue of forgiveness. And love of enemies, of course, is all part of forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn’t start when someone wants to be forgiven; forgiveness begins in an anticipation that people will want to be forgiven, and in fact enables them to want to be forgiven. Why? Because Jesus’ whole point is we need to model ourselves on God. One of the problems, of course, is we often don’t understand God, so Jesus was revealing the true nature of God.

This is what is meant by revelation, a disclosure of the real nature of God as opposed to what we might imagine God to be. And in order to do this, of course, he had to tell the people, the Jewish people, that in many ways they were wrong about God. Today he says, “Look, God isn’t like this; God loves because God is love. The sun shines on the good and the bad. God blesses the good and the bad.” He doesn’t bless the good and curse the bad, which is what the Jews thought. That would make God like us--reacting to people! Jesus is saying, “No, God doesn’t react to people. God is the primary--God is the source of everything, the ground of all being! God doesn’t react to what he created! God blesses everyone, the good and the bad. The rain falls on the just and the unjust.” That’s what God is.
Now, that doesn’t mean that the unjust appreciate the rain or the bad appreciate the sun and give praise to God, or really are able to benefit in a full way. No, it doesn’t say that. But it says regardless of how people benefit from the blessing of God, God blesses them anyway. Ultimately perdition or damnation is a matter of people refusing the gifts God gives them, the gift of love, the gift of forgiveness--and we can do that because we’re free! That doesn’t mean that God doesn’t offer; God is always offering everything to everyone. And if we want to be like God, then we have to be the same way. So if people persecute us--and they will--bless them, pray for them. And the idea isn’t simply pray for them so they will stop; it means pray for them because we cannot condition our acceptance of others by their acceptance of us. That is not God.

Now, is this difficult? No, it’s not difficult; it’s impossible for a mere human being! As long as we’re just going to be part of the world of life, the biological life on earth, no, we can’t do that! Life defends itself! Yesterday we talked about self-preservation and violence. To follow Christ we cannot live any longer as mere living beings. We have to move into the heart of God. That is exactly what Jesus comes to do: it’s to move us into the heart of God to enable us to live a new life. And that requires, of course, dying to the old one--our just plain ordinary physical lives--to be centered in God and living the eternal nature of God, which is love. Now Jesus wants to assure us that we are capable of doing this because it’s God that comes into us and he does this within us. What we have to do is we have to yield to this divine grace.
Jesus often spoke in parables. A parable means a literary form of exaggeration. It’s not a riddle; sometimes it’s a paradox, but it’s a form of exaggeration. Now actually the story of the Good Shepherd is parabolic; it’s an exaggeration. It begins with a question, “Who of you if you had a hundred sheep and lost one would not leave ninety-nine unattended and go and get the other one, the lost one?” The answer to that question is very simply: No one would do that. No shepherd would ever leave ninety-nine unattended in the wilderness or he would end up with no sheep at all. They’d all wander off. Sheep wander; it’s their very nature.

And the point that Jesus is making is that God is so loving that his love is unreasonable! He goes to lengths that you would never go to for your own herd, for your own flock. So his love is greater than self-love! We often think of self love as the greatest power. But Jesus says, “No, God’s love is greater than our own love for ourselves, or for our own kind, or for our own possessions.” So God is this kind of God who would leave ninety-nine--of course, as I said this is parabolic, poetic--who would leave ninety-nine unattended and run after one sheep--so much does he love that one particular sheep. Now he says, “Now when finding it he put it on his shoulder and carried it back and invited his friends in saying, ‘Come and rejoice; I found my sheep.’” Of course again, this is parabolic; this is an exaggeration. A shepherd never puts a sheep on his shoulder and goes back and invites people in. These are exaggerations. We’ve all had the experience of losing something and finding it. Of course, it’s always fun finding it, even if it’s not that valuable. But you never actually call anybody over for a party because you found something. But God does! And this is the idea of the kingdom of God as a great festal gathering of jubilation. And it’s God’s joy that is now shared in the banquet, the heavenly banquet, the banquet of life.

Now for this reason, we really need to realize the over-abundant nature of divine mercy. And that’s really what the Sacred Heart is supposed to symbolize for us--the over-abundant nature of divine mercy. The image of the Good Shepherd--the Sacred Heart and
the Good Shepherd go together. In the Psalm 23 it says, “The Lord is my shepherd; nothing shall I want.” Why? Well, if you really recognize how greatly abundant the blessings of the Lord are, then how could we want anything? “Want” has two meanings. It means “I lack,” or it means “I desire.” And in both ways—if we really recognize the abundance of God’s love—we do not lack, and we do not desire anything else but God!

Now, this great love requires some response! There is nothing sadder than a person who claims to believe in God, believes in Christ, but who is more or less full of all kinds of desires for all kinds of things, or for all kinds of experiences as if God is not enough. In Ezekiel, the first reading, there is this statement, “I shall shepherd my sheep.” Now those are very personal statements—that God really wants to have a personal relationship with his very own and with every little one. And that personal invitation has to be reciprocated. And that reciprocation is so lacking in so many of us, or in all of us sometimes. And we need to recognize this. When we are full of anxiety, we need to think of that Psalm: “There is nothing I shall want.” And when we’re worried about whatever, our problems, our finances, our children, our relatives, our spouses, whatever, our health, someone else’s health—“There is nothing I shall want. The Lord is my shepherd.” When we recognize our society in the dire condition it is in, where we have observed the growing malignancy of juvenile crime, we have to remember: “The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.” When we think about the impending death of each of us, which we can actually keep at a distance until we don’t feel well, and then we take it very seriously, remember “The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.” This great love of God needs to be reciprocated. We need to start counting upon God—we recognizing that his unreasonable love really is for each of us.

And we need to be full of gratitude. The only rightful relationship to God is the relationship of gratitude. We have been given so much, that any lack of gratitude, any lack of praise in our hearts, is really a very serious flaw, which is both spiritual and moral. The Lord is calling us through the Feast of the Sacred Heart to a deeper devotion, and a deeper gratitude, and a deeper joy! “Come rejoice because what was lost, is found.”
10:30 a.m.  Zec 12:10-11, 13:1;  Gal 3:26-29;  Lk 9:18-24  (WhoDoYou)

“Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each
day, and follow in my steps.” As part of the way we do business at St. Joseph, we reflect
on the gospel at various meetings: pastoral council, staff meetings, all kinds of
commissions. And when this reading was brought up this week several people said,
“Gee, it seems unfair that Jesus treats Peter in this manner.” Now the original actually
says that Jesus “rebuked” Peter. That was in the translation we used; it wasn’t in the one
we read this morning. And people said, “Well, why does Jesus rebuke Peter when he
asks him a question, ‘Who do you say that I am?’” Peter responds, “You are the Messiah
of God.” And Jesus says--rebukes him--and says, “You must not tell that to anyone.”

This is a very good reflection and a good question. To answer it we have to get into
the mind of the Scriptures itself, and realize that arguing is really part of relating. If you
want to get really close to someone, you have to have arguments sometime. So Jesus
argued with Peter; the apostles argued with each other. This is part of the way they came
to understand one another. Peter’s response, “You are the Messiah,” Jesus felt was
completely wrong for reasons which we miss because we call Jesus “Messiah.” Even the
early Church came to call Jesus “Messiah.” Jesus never called Jesus “Messiah”! And he
never called himself Messiah for a very good reason: because the word in the colloquial
of its day, “Meshika,” carried a connotation of kingly and royal power and regard--the
type of authority that you could say “Might makes right,” the type of authority
appropriate to, for example, David, who was for all Jews of that time the model
of the coming Messiah. Jesus wanted to disavow totally any connection to that kind of idea--
that he would become the king in a worldly sense, that he would exercise power in a
political sense, that he would gain victory or acclaim in a military sense. He did not want
people to think of him in this way, and therefore he rebuked Peter. And he said, “Look,
the Son of Man must suffer and undergo death.”

Peter did not want to hear that, and we don’t want to hear that. It is very human to
want to escape suffering, and yet suffering is such a very basic component to a
meaningful life--to a meaningful life! Pain is basic to all life--suffering to a meaningful
life. There is a difference between suffering and pain. There’s nothing good about pain
itself. Suffering, on the other hand, is part of achieving anything worthwhile. Now if we
look at anybody in your own mind who has really accomplished something, something
great, be it in athletics or science or art or anything--think of someone if you can--and
most probably this person came from very humble origins. Almost all truly great people
come from humble origins, and then they have children who lead very tragic and broken
lives. And this is very sad, but it’s the way it works. We have just recently observed the
team, the Chicago Bulls--the greatest athletic group that’s ever been known. How many
of them were born into families of means? I believe none! On the other hand think of
those families who have great inherited wealth, and what happens to their children!
Usually disaster. The reason is that when we are born into wealth, when we are born into
ease, we are usually not willing

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”
to suffer to accomplish anything. We become spoiled. But suffering and struggling and sacrificing is of the essence of accomplishment—to make something of oneself.

And this is what Jesus is talking about. If anyone wishes to accomplish anything with his or her life he or she must be willing to struggle, to sacrifice and to suffer. So this is really two questions. First of all: Are you willing to suffer and struggle and sacrifice to make something really worthwhile of your life? Number two: Does that include being a disciple of Jesus Christ? Now this is a very hard question, but this is what Jesus raises. I don’t raise it—he does! “Anyone who wishes to be my disciple,” Jesus says, “must daily pick up his cross and follow in my steps.”

And then he continues that if we want to be his disciples, we have to deny our very selves. Now again this is a term hard to understand. To put it rather simply, perhaps too simply, all of us have been made into something by our life. Our life: the way we’ve lived it, the people we’ve known, the family we’ve come from, the friends we’ve had, the education that we’ve had or haven’t had, the work we do—all of this contributes to who we are as long as we are living on this planet. But that has nothing to do with God. God’s plans for us are different from our plans for ourselves. And our destiny in God is very different from our earthly fate. But if we ever want to come to what God wants for us, we really have to deny what we already are. It sounds rather negative, but it really isn’t. It’s letting go of one thing so another can happen.

Now there have always been people who have felt very close to God, but they’ve been a great minority: the saints, the prophets. And in Hebrew they were called “kadush,” which really means “peculiar.” It’s usually translated “holy,” but it really means “peculiar.” In fact, the Lord himself was called “kadush” meaning “peculiar” because the God who revealed himself to Moses in the actions of the Exodus was not like the gods the people believed in—the gods of the myths, the gods of the stories of the ancient world. The God who took action and led his people out of bondage was different. He was peculiar; he was “kadush!” Now it’s very difficult to live in a world and be thought of as peculiar, but being a disciple of Jesus means that we are going to be different from the people around us. And that is a price to be paid.

And finally Jesus says, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” This introduces us into a basic mystery of our life, of the life actually of the whole universe. The universe itself is a material thing. It’s always becoming something. Invisible matter is formed into a sun or a galaxy and it disappears later into a black hole. There is a rapid and constant exchange of energy throughout the universe, and also within ourselves. The question is: Do we know what is worth gaining and what is worth losing in this great process of exchange and growth? Jesus is coming to us to invite us to let go of everything that we know so that we can receive what God wants to give us. “Nothing ventured; nothing gained”—everything ventured; everything gained!
“Blessed too are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled.” There is a difference between belief and faith. Belief can be some sort of opinion or an assumption or a view of life, and we all have beliefs. Everyone has some belief about something. It may be positive or it may be negative—we all have beliefs, but we all don’t necessarily have faith. Faith is an active relationship with God. It is based on a trust in God, which of course creates a kind of belief about life. Life itself is precious because it’s created by God. That God is the author of everything both visible and invisible, that what you see is not necessarily what you get, that there is a great deal to life that is not what you see, that there is an over-arching purpose and meaning to life that cannot be thwarted by something like death—this is the belief of the Church which is rooted in faith, faith in God, the God who has really worked through and revealed himself in Jesus Christ. This faith is a gift and we acknowledge it as a gift. And if we have this faith, we need to be deeply and profoundly grateful; if we don’t have this faith, we can receive it because God wants to give this gift to everyone. All we have to do is be open to this gracious God.

Now in the gospel reading today, the Beatitudes, Jesus is really talking about the results of faith. Faith bears results in life. People who from an ordinary viewpoint are really bad off, to be pitied, who perhaps believe themselves or others might believe of them to be cursed, Jesus says, “No, they’re blessed; they’re fortunate”—that’s what it really means—“makarios,” fortunate. Fortunate are those who are poor in spirit. Now this is challenging to the beliefs of our modern culture. Our modern culture does not believe that it’s blessed, a blessed thing, a happy thing, a fortunate thing to be poor in any way! We want to be rich; we want to be successful. We want to be accomplished; we want to be healthy. We want to have many children; we want to have many friends. Jesus says, “Fortunate are those who are poor in spirit; the reign of God is theirs.”

Can we think of ourselves as radically and fundamentally nothing? Why? Because everything we have some day will not be ours anymore. No matter how healthy we are today, we won’t always be that. No matter what we have today, we won’t always have. Some day we shall not. And if we can see this as a blessing—the transitory nature of
everything you have--blessed are we; happy are we; fortunate are we--the kingdom of God is ours! What’s more? What could be greater than the kingdom of God?

Fortunate are the sorrowing! That must be difficult for most of us to understand, to accept. But if we really have faith in God, not just belief about God but faith in God as a living, active presence in our life who is really fathering us, siring his own nature in us, creating a new birth of godliness, if we believe in that God, if we have faith in that God, if we trust in that God, we are fortunate even in our sorrowing! St. Paul says, “What can take us away from the love of God? Distress, conflict, death, imprisonment, shipwreck, disease, bankruptcy, divorce”—so fortunate are we. If we have faith in God when we are sorrowing, we shall be consoled.

Now certain points in life these words take on greater meaning than at others. When a friend, a relative, a loved one lies in death, we experience that in parting from this life—that is a very sacred moment, not only for that person departing but for us. Departing is a two-edged process. We are also departing from them. This is a moment sacred and a moment in which we are very vulnerable. Being vulnerable as Christ taught through the cross itself is a very holy thing too. It doesn’t happen to be stated in this text: Blessed are the vulnerable because in moments of vulnerability how close we are to God. So at this very moment many of us are perhaps closer to God than at any other point in our lives—many people right here today. So this is a very important time for us to give praise to the Father, to recognize the great work that God has accomplished through Jesus—really breaking the bonds of death, freeing us from bondage to the fear of death. It says in the Letter to the Hebrews, “The whole world was in bondage through the fear of death.” We might believe that we are all going to die; that doesn’t mean that we really consciously face this reality for ourselves. But today we can! And it can become a moment of becoming fortunate, happy, and blessed if we use this to accept the love of God and just let God love us into health and salvation—not standing any longer in the way.

So we come today to pray for our departed Agnes, but really she’s with the Lord—I have no doubt. We really need to be praying for ourselves that we will have the grace to live each moment of this life in such a way that when we come to our departure, which most certainly will happen, we’ll be very happy and feel very fortunate to have been here.
In some regards, all human beings are alike; and it’s important that we recognize that we have a certain solidarity with one another. In a certain way, all human beings have the same basic challenges and in general the same basic problems, although the specifics of our own circumstances may differ widely. Nonetheless, it’s also true that there are great differences among people. And these differences are due to the quality you might call freedom. How human beings differ depends on how we choose to be different. And this is something very remarkable!

When Jesus uses these images, for example of dogs and swine, it is not meant to flatter; but it is meant to illustrate. Dogs have a canine nature, and what they do is perfectly all right within the basis of that nature. Human beings’ nature is to be free--to be children of God--that’s how we are created. But through the use or abuse of freedom we either do or don’t live out our nature in a holy and dignified way. The abuse of our nature lowers our quality of life and even destroys life! In this way some could be compared to dogs and swine, who cannot by their nature appreciate what is holy or what is fine even in a material sense. “Do not throw your pearls before swine. Do not give what is holy to dogs.” Be discriminating. Exercise your intuition. Be wary of your own kind; they may not really be your own kind. “Try to enter by the narrow gate. Wide and easy is the path that leads to damnation; many there are who choose to follow this.” In one peculiar sense our destiny is in our own hands. This is the meaning of earth.
All of the signs Jesus worked are signs of the abundance of the kingdom and the universality of divine love and the benevolence of divine will, but then comes our freedom to accept it or not--this benevolence, this love, and this will. “How narrow is the gate that leads to life; how winding the path and rough, and how few there are that choose it.” And there again the operative word is choose. These are all about choices--not about circumstances, not about fate, not about accidents, but about choices. So a wise person listens and responds, recognizing in every moment of the day there’s always a divergence in the paths. At every moment of the day, we can take the path through the narrow gate and mount the winding rough road that leads to life--or at any moment of the day, we can choose the wide and easy road that leads to ruin. We can choose to appreciate what is holy and be worthy of it, or we can choose to ignore and find no value in it. So in this sense we need to be aware of ourselves. This is true wisdom.
It is always appropriate to reflect on the meaning of the Eucharist, and I shall do so today especially in regard to the thirteen young adults, or young believers, who will be receiving communion for the first time. So I would ask all of you to enter into the spirit of today’s sacrament of initiation and carry off whatever you will.

Now my dear children, I don’t have intentions of asking you any difficult questions; but if I do and you don’t know the answer, you can ask your parents. Is that a fair deal? All right. Is it all right with you?

Now the first thing I want to talk about is the word I just used, and the word was “initiation.” You know what that word means? Okay, ask Dad. What did he say? It’s about joining. Yes, that’s true; it’s about joining or being introduced to something. This gentleman said, “A group.” Well, that’s part of it because the Church is, after all, a group. We are a group aren’t we? But we’re not supposed to remain just a group. So initiation is joining something, beginning something, a beginning. To initiate is to start. And what you are starting today is the life with Christ--life with Christ. So it’s joining yes, but it’s being joined to the person of the risen Lord. And is it a group? Yes, in a sense because the risen Lord resides in, lives in, the body--the body of the Church. That’s what we are here--the Church. You understand? And the Church’s only identity, its only reason, its only purpose for existence is to give witness to the presence of Christ; and that is actually a very big job--to give witness to the presence of Christ in the world!

Now when we say that the Eucharist is a sacrament of initiation it means that it’s not the end of something; it’s the beginning of something. If there is ever a problem in the history of our people, it’s thinking of the Eucharist as an end--an end, a final thing, now we’re there. We’re never there! We’re just starting. You get this? You understand? You’re beginning a journey to the Father. Christ is taking us. It’s a long journey, and it involves working for the kingdom of Christ on earth. That’s what he did. That’s what Jesus did. You understand? So we’re joining his work. Now actually we were already brought into it in the beginning by our baptism, but we have to continue to be transformed. So the Eucharist is not the end, but it’s another step of beginning. And it’s a step in which Christ becomes more active in our lives. And we need to think of the Eucharist as something Christ is now doing in us, not just in me personally, but in this whole assembly and in the whole Church throughout the world. Christ is forming a body that will reflect his nature.

Now how do you do that? How are we going to reflect Christ’s nature? Do you have any good ideas? Do you? Any good ideas? Yourself, any good ideas? Do you have any ideas on how we could reflect Christ’s nature? What do you think? Pardon? All right--loving others. Loving others. You know loving has a lot to do with how we talk. In the second reading St. Paul said that. He’s talking about our--he’s talking about biting--our biting words. If we’re going to talk about loving, we have to love with our mouths by the
way we speak to others. Now you receive the Eucharist in your mouth. It’s food. And it’s important that you let the mouth be the first part of you to reflect the meaning of the Eucharist, which means you have to think about what you say to people. You see this? You just can’t say whatever you think of—blurt out whatever happens to come to you! You have to think about what people need to hear: that’s what St. Paul said. Say what people need to hear. Now your family—you have to think about this. What do they need to hear—your family? They need to hear of some good word, a word of encouragement. Right? Not complaining all the time. Okay? Not what’s wrong. Okay?

We live in a world where people are very selfish. This is the result of sin. And we live in a country, a culture where self-indulgence—You know what that means? Do you have any idea what self-indulgence—Grandma is going to help you! Well, that’s a good one: too much of something is bad for you. Well, it actually means just always whatever you feel like is good. That’s what our country believes in—what people in our country and our culture seem to believe in. And that’s really actually not what is good for you—we should point out. And it all starts at home where each little person thinks that he or she ought to be the center of the family. See? This is the result of Adam and Eve’s sin. We’re not the center of anything—you’re not; I’m not. Nobody is the center; the only center is God.

And we have to start honoring that; that’s what the Eucharist is about: letting God be the center. And that means that we relate to others in the family; we figure their needs are just as important as ours. See? Everybody is equally valuable. A child in the womb of a mother is just as important as anyone else: Mother Teresa, the president of the United States, the head of China—they’re not more important than any other human being. So we have to recognize the importance each person has in the mind of God. And if we really recognize this, we will speak to them differently.

We will start making a distinction between a need and a want. What is the difference between a need and a want? What’s the difference from a need? What’s a need? You have to have it for what? To live, right? A need is something you have to have to live. We have physical needs and we have emotional needs. We need support—that’s a need. And we need food and we need shelter and we need a bed to sleep in. Isn’t that right? Needs are more important than wants, and we have to learn to give up something we want, which is not something we need, if someone else needs something. You understand? We give up wants that we don’t need for someone else’s need. That’s very hard; that’s a very important lesson. And each of us has to learn it. And that’s what the Eucharist is about.

So today is a day of initiation and feeding, and it should be a day of great joy for all of us; but it’s also a day that I hope will have a great affect on tomorrow and Tuesday and Wednesday and next week because if you just celebrate today and that’s the end of it, you’ve not been initiated. Something went wrong. You see this? You understand? So we hope that you open your heart to the Lord you shall receive today and you let the Lord do the Lord’s work. And the Lord is going to be giving you advice, gentle advice. Little thoughts will pop into your head about other people. Follow those little thoughts; follow
those thoughts. God is always giving us help. God is always giving us grace. We need to start thinking more about others, speaking to others in a way that is helpful. That’s what we want; that’s what we need to give. Okay? All right? Now let us stand. We turn to your red books page 239.
Today we are celebrating the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, which is actually a major holy day in the Church. But in the United States it’s never been observed as a Holy Day of Obligation. It is in most European countries. In Italy it is a major holiday, so no one would think of going to work on the Feast of Peter and Paul. Now it is both Peter and Paul who are the apostles that came to the Church of Rome. And the Acts of the Apostles make it very clear that the locus of activity was moving from Jerusalem to Rome, and this is signified by the arduous transfer of apostolic activity from Jerusalem to Rome. And we see that Paul, for example, suffered--what?--three shipwrecks; but nothing could stop him from getting to Rome because that was God’s will. And that’s what our author, Luke, wants to tell us in the Acts of the Apostles. Now from the earliest days of the Church, Peter and Paul were both two of the most significant apostles: Peter, a companion of Jesus; Paul, called after the resurrection of Christ to ministry and with a special mission to the gentiles.

Now we have to remember that it is Christ who founded the Church, and he founded it on the apostles and the prophets. And the successors of the apostles are the bishops of the Church today. It’s important that we have this sense that we are in good hands--that God is working with his Church; he will abide with the Church. Strangely enough there are people today who are motivated by something other than faith in trying to, as it were, as they say, preserve the Catholic Faith. And this is really an internal contradiction. There are groups, for example, who have appointed themselves to be watchdogs or even vigilantes in looking for error in the Church. Well, actually they’re not needed because God takes care of things--always has, always will. He’s appointed pastors to be the teachers of the Church, to be successors of the apostles, to guard against error. And we can be confident that they will do so. Now there are always possibilities of rogue bishops, and a rogue has two meanings, as you know. It means a dishonest, unreliable person. It also means something mad like a rogue elephant. And in both ways that could exist, but the communion of bishops together is guaranteed by the abiding presence of the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit to maintain unity and truth; and therefore, there is no need for fear. Jesus says, “Fear is useless. What’s needed is faith; what’s needed is trust.” And we need to trust.

Now there are going to be controversies, and that’s not bad. We should not move away from controversy. But we should be very aware of mean-spirited debates. We should be very well aware of disrespectful acts of dissent that do not really seek truth, but are really promoting oneself. There is a big difference. One can only seek the truth in humility. The great danger, of course, at all times is false pride. And in the Book of Genesis it talks about how false pride created a Tower of Babel, where everyone was speaking, but no one could understand anyone else. Well, that is what happens in the Church too when pride takes over and everyone wants to promote their own faith. Well
they’re defending the faith because it’s theirs, not because it’s the truth. There are times when we need to speak the truth. We need to counteract evil; we need to witness to Christ, but that’s different from defending my own personal opinions and convictions—very different. In regard to our own personal views we need to hold them lightly and allow them to be corrected by the abiding Spirit of Truth in the Church. In regard to the revelation and the tradition that holds the revelation, the so-called deposit of faith, we need to be confident that the Holy Spirit will maintain that process in integrity through the appointed leaders of the Church. As I said, that doesn’t mean that there won’t be one here or there who cannot be relied on; but as a whole we can rely on the Church.

And so we celebrate the Feast of Peter and Paul because we acknowledge that their gift to the Church is a gift given for keeps. Their apostolic ministry continues. In Vatican I in the document called “Pastor Aeternus,” which was the definition of the infallibility of the pope, the bishops of Vatican I said something very interesting. They said that St. Peter continues to guide and direct and teach the Church through the Bishop of Rome, who is his successor; and the apostles continue to guide and direct and teach the Church through their successors, the bishops. So we are still benefiting from the ministry of Peter, Paul and the other apostles. It is the same Church Christ founded, and we need to live in a sense of confidence in that the Church will continue and will flourish when we are humble enough and obedient enough to listen to the abiding voice of Christ—who speaks through his Church, through the apostles, and through the prophets and their successors.
Healing the Paralytic

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Healing the Paralytic 13th Week in Ordinary Time Thursday, July 2, 1998 7:00 a.m.
Am 7:10-17; Mt 9:1-8 (Paralyti)

“Why do you harbor such thoughts.” Perhaps we wouldn’t actually call them thoughts. Sometimes what we call a thought is really a feeling, and what we call a feeling is really a thought and so on. What is referred to here is the inner life, what human beings have and other animals do not have, a way of meaning, calling, valuing, judging and deciding. This is more or less what we call reason. And if we look into our world, we see that there’s something fundamentally wrong here, or we should see there is something fundamentally wrong with life, with human life with the way we perceive, value, judge and decide. It isn’t simply individual beings have some problem, but it’s the whole of humanity which labors under delusions and illusions about what is really real and what is really valuable, what is really true. And therefore the decisions are so faulty, so flawed, so destructive.

Jesus had some sort of knowledge or perception of what people thought, and it’s mentioned many times. We also could, if we paid attention. Attention is, of course, the key. Prayer is a matter of attention. Worship is a matter of attention. Spirituality is a matter of attention, paying attention to what we need to pay attention to--learning what that is--focusing over a great enough period that we actually can arrive at correct, valid conclusions! Jesus spent a great deal of time in prayer, and he was very attentive to God and to people around him. And when he spoke he said, “What you need is a new way of thinking.” That is translated into the Greek as “metanoia.” He was constantly telling people they needed metanoia. We translate that into English with words like repentance, conversion, or reform; but we need to realize how radical a call this is to a new way of thinking, a new way of seeing!

Now here Jesus was healing a paralytic; and the Pharisees were saying, “This is blasphemy.” Of course, someone taught them to think this way. We are taught how to perceive, and there is plenty of truth in this--I can’t go into it now--but we are taught this. And Jesus is saying that we have to relearn everything. We have to begin to relearn what
things really are. And if after all we live in a world that doesn’t see any value in the invisible, then the world is in great ignorance; and that is exactly where the world is—in a great ignorance of the importance of what is not visible, what is not audible, what cannot be touched—but what is really real, indeed the ground of all being. Jesus has come to make visible that very reality. And yet as he becomes visible, he is condemned by the wrong thinking of very pious men.

On the other hand, there are some very ordinary people here who bring in a paralytic, and he perceives something in them too. He perceives their faith—not the faith of the paralytic, it doesn’t say that, but the faith of those who bring in the paralytic. What is it that Jesus perceives? Not a belief—not a conviction, something else. Here I think faith means something like “an active, searching heart.” Jesus perceives their sincere, searching desire to help another. And this empowers him, in a sense motivates him, moves him somehow; and he says, “Pick up the mat, and go home.” It’s important that we note that this faith is not in the one who is being helped in this particular case. Sometimes it is; in this case it isn’t. The great importance of faith as a component to healing need not be in the person who is being healed.

And this gives us a clue to the great role we can play in the healing of our world! If we really have a seeking heart, we can be what motivates great healing! So Jesus, in this particular story, is really giving us a great deal of hope for the mending of a very sick world and the restoration of movement to the lame, sight to the blind, and most of all a sense of reality to those who are deluded—which in some way involves all of us. And the people around? They gave praise to God for giving such power to men.
Today we are gathered together to pray for the well being of our country and, of course, of our own families. And these are not two separate issues, because we are all connected whether we see this connection or not. And in the United States we often don’t see this connection; this is one of the great flaws of our culture. If we look back to the foundation of our country, we have to recognize that it was not founded by Christian people. First of all, the first people who came to this country are today called “native Americans,” although that’s not really true—they’re not native. There are no native human beings on this planet. Human beings, by their nature, move around. The so-called “native Americans” came from ancient Asia, and they settled here thousands of years ago. Europeans began coming in the middle of the present millennium, but left very few signs of their visits. The Norsemen, Vikings, were the first. Then in the seventeenth century both Spanish and English settlers came—in the sixteenth already the Spanish had come; even at the end of the fifteenth they had come to the central part of this hemisphere.

Now there are many different elements that went into the formation of the early English speaking colonists on the east coast, but the prevailing philosophy was not that of the gospel. And even where the gospel was believed, it was believed in a very peculiar way due to the influence of dissenters from Europe called the Puritans and the Pilgrims—both the result of the Calvinist Church of Europe.

Now when our country was founded by such people as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison and so on, these men were not men of Christian philosophy. And because of that our country has a certain bias. Now they looked with a certain sort of admiration to Christian moral principles, but they did not use those Christian principles as the basis for the Constitution—neither the Articles of Confederation nor the Confederation of the States—because they regarded morality as a private matter. And this is the first profound flaw that we see in the formation of our country—for morality to be regarded as private.

And related to this is the second. In the story of God’s saving work in each of us, rescuing people from bondage to Pharaoh, the fathers of our country found an image of their being saved from domination by European royalty. However, in the biblical story as God saves his people, he draws them into covenant! And the idea is this: You have been saved by the mercy of God; now you owe God your lives and you owe God to live this way, which means live by a sense of faithful obligation to justice. Now in this our founding fathers did not see a parallel. In this area our founding fathers just, you might say, dropped the second part of the whole idea that God’s saving work is reciprocated by a life of justice. They saw the saving work; they saw the image of liberation, but they did not see the need to take upon themselves a sense of obligation to work for justice. And this is connected to the first idea I mentioned, that morality is a private affair. From a biblical point of view, morality is not a private thing; it’s very public! And it’s very...
objective. And the only true measure of what is truly right or wrong is the will of God. And the will of God is that those who are called into covenant work for justice so that inalienable rights must have a corresponding inalienable obligation. If you will peruse the Declaration of Independence, you’ll never find any mention of any inalienable obligations. So the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness is really seen to be an individual, personal option; and the working for justice and peace is not anyone’s responsibility or obligation. And this is the flaw.

So, as Christian believers, it’s important that we try to balance the benefits of our society and social organization with a more biblical, a more Christian, understanding of first of all, the objective nature of the moral life, and second of all, the basic idea of obligation. Do we all have an obligation to work for justice? Only when we do so, do we have peace. Peace is dependent upon our willingness to work for justice. So, as believers, we have this responsibility.

Now I must say in the history of our Catholic Church in the US, in the history of Christianity in the US, there have been a few, but not too many, great prophets and teachers who have brought this to the fore. It is important that we all understand it is up to each of us to do what we can to promote an objective sense of right and wrong. Right and wrong is not a matter of personal opinion. It doesn’t depend upon whether it suits our feelings. It depends upon God’s will and upon the law of justice, which is in the mind of God. And second of all, if we are to be good citizens, if we really want our country to prosper, we do have to work for justice. That alone will assure us of a future that we can be proud of and will be suitable for our own children and grandchildren. So as we celebrate Independence Day, we need to recognize that this is a great time for festivity--yes--but also a time for sobriety in the sense of the need to reassess a vision of life, and to move toward the vision rendered in response to God’s will and taught in God’s word.
“Be on your way, and remember: I am sending you as lambs in the midst of wolves.”

Most parents eventually get to the point where they know what this means as they see their children grow up and leave home, often being sent like lambs into the midst of wolves. How do we describe or how do we explain to innocent children what the world is really like? In the New Testament and in other religious literature of the ancient world, various animals serve as symbols of human qualities. Lambs, for example, were considered to be symbols of a certain kind of being because lambs, number one, are uncomplaining and they are innocent, meaning nonviolent, non aggressive. Lambs freely give of their wool for others to have clothing and they are also useful as food; therefore, they are a symbol of a being that has a higher purpose than just existing. Wolves, on the other hand, are symbols of aggressive and violent beings--whether they really deserve this or not is another matter; this is their image in literature. Their meat is not useful for food, their fur not desirable for warmth, and so on. Therefore they’re symbols of predators, that is, beings that use other beings.

The Bible, the New Testament anyway, is not romantic in its assessment of human nature, and it recognizes that there are different kinds of people; people are not all the same. Some people are lambs; some people are wolves. Some people recognize that the purpose in life is not simply their own self preservation, doing what they feel like, promoting their own pleasure. They realize that is not the reason they exist. They realize a higher purpose. They realize that there is a great mission or ministry involved in giving warmth to others, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry. And there are other people who are not at all like that; they see no purpose at all in life. For them life is simply an opportunity to advance their own wishes and desires, and they have no conscience to direct those desires or the means to attain them. They’re predators!

Now the meaning of this text is, of course, that the lambs must be aware of the predators. “I am sending you as lambs among wolves.” The disciples of Jesus, of course, are the lambs in this text. Jesus is sending them out two by two on mission. It’s a mission of service, first of all to announce the coming of the kingdom of God--the
intervention in
human life of the work of God and the will of God that brings the purpose of creation to completion that is already the beginning of the end, because it is the fruition of the great harvest looking as a great field of opportunity. In Jesus the harvest is now ready; and the disciples, the lambs, are sent to begin the harvest by announcing the presence of the kingdom. Secondly, to deliver from bondage all those who are enslaved by evil in any form. They themselves are quoted in today’s gospel: “Even the demons are subject to us in your name.” Thirdly, to prepare for the visit of Jesus Himself.

Now the disciples were, of course, the Church in its earliest stage. We carry out their mission. We are also lambs called to a higher purpose than just existence, called to feed the hungry, called to clothe the naked, called to be of service to God. But it’s necessary that we recognize, first of all, the great need for conversion. For unlike animals that are born with certain instincts, human wolves and human lambs have these qualities by choice; and probably no one is one hundred percent one or the other—or few are. The gospel is calling all people—men and women and children—to conversion, to choosing the life of service, a life of cooperation with the mission of Jesus.

Secondly, we need to recognize the dangers that are present, that we are in a very perilous situation; we mustn’t imagine ourselves to be in some sort of very safe place. We are not! And yet at the same time, our recognition of danger must be balanced by our recognition of the power to overcome evil that Jesus gives to his followers to tread on all forces of the enemy—a text taken from today’s gospel reading. Those who are willing to be sent as lambs are empowered: the world is a dangerous place, but those who have the name of Christ are empowered and protected from the powers of the enemy. And therefore we are able to make a great difference in the world. It’s important that we do so, that we use our power to confront evil wherever it’s found, to free those who are bound, to spread the message of hope and confidence in God, in God’s ways, to a world that is in danger of falling into despair and death. So on the one hand, yes, it is a very dangerous mission; but on the other hand, it is a very possible one for us to engage in and to complete safely by concentrating on the mission of Christ, and his power and his Spirit that are given to us. And because this is the way God has chosen to work, in many ways, the future of the world is in our hands!
In this particular story from Scripture we see two examples of Jesus bringing life and wholeness into other people’s lives. And the evangelist wants us to conclude that these are signs of God’s will, that God grants wholeness and health and life to the suffering. We might reach the wrong conclusion that every time Jesus was asked for anything he responded. If you think about your own family you realize this could not be true. For example, there may be issues among your children, among your brothers or sisters, that cry out for help; but can you do anything? With some cases you could do something, but it would not be very good in the long run.

God is in the same position with us. There are stories that circulate in Arabia about genies getting caught in bottles. And there are various stories about how people find them in these bottles and uncork the genie and get three wishes. And the stories are all basically the same. The first wish promises only troubles, and the second wish tries to counteract the effects, and the third wish does away with everything and you’re back where you started. And that’s the way it is. So God’s work in our lives is actually very delicate. What we might wish may not help at all; in fact, it might even make things worse.

We have a story here about two people who go to Jesus with a request: one for someone else--the synagogue leader, one for herself--the woman with a hemorrhage. In both these cases there is, what we might call, expectant faith. Expectant faith is hard to
define, but it has to do not with wishing—it’s not a wish; it’s not certainty, but it is a desiring heart that is open to help. Now if you look at all the different healings that we find in the New Testament, you will not always find this expectant faith—but you do frequently. And it seems to me that expectant faith is usually a necessary component for God to help. I say usually because we cannot define what God can do and cannot do. And there are times when the healings really take place on Jesus’ behest because he really wants to do that—perhaps to teach a crowd or perhaps for some other reason.

But in our own personal lives it’s important that we cultivate this idea of expectant faith. This does not mean that it is the faith itself that does the healing, a sort of mind over matter—that is not what it means. It means that there is an openness to what God can do so that God actually can reach in and touch a life without making things worse. It presupposes that we are going somewhere, that we are on a journey, that we are in process, that we are not static, and that as we head in the right direction God can influence our health or the health of someone else through us in such a way that does not impinge on their freedom or cause greater problems. As I said this is not always possible. So expectant faith acknowledges a wisdom greater than our own and a desire more important than wishing, but it also is open to the power of God. And if we develop this we will find our lives, first in small ways then sometimes in big ways, are changing!
Each of the evangelists has his way of describing Jesus’ ministry. In Matthew we see there are three basic parts to Jesus’ ministry: first of all teaching in the synagogue, secondly proclaiming the good news of God’s reign, and thirdly curing every kind of sickness and disease. Now we have to see these as really all part of the same mission. What Jesus is teaching is about the nature of God as Jesus Himself knows it from his personal experience of the Father. Of course this causes a lot of problems because it’s not going to agree with the opinion of the teachers and their ideas--so it creates conflict. Secondly, the proclamation of the kingdom first in word and then in action; the curing of every disease and illness is really part of the proclamation. The kingdom of God is at hand; therefore diseases and sickness cannot stand, cannot stay here--that’s the idea. So healing is really a form of proclamation; it’s proclamation in action.

Now in today’s story Jesus is almost overwhelmed by the enormity of need. It says he takes pity on the people because they are “like sheep without a shepherd. They’re lying prostrate with exhaustion.” But probably this great need was part of the cure. When it comes to God, when it comes to faith, when it comes to prayer, experiencing need is a very important step in receiving the kind of healing or help one needs. One of the problems of modern people is we do not actually experience that kind of need. We create a certain sort of self-sufficiency, and therefore we really don’t turn to God with that tremendous desire that is described here. Is the Spirit of Christ any less present in the
world today than it was at the time of Christ? Absolutely not--no less present. But is there the same degree of felt need for God? That’s a good question! And there the answer might well be “No.” There isn’t the same felt need.

How do we eventually deal with our problems? How do we deal with illness, disorders, pains, hardships? So often it is our nature today to seek a very easy solution, a quick fix, the elimination of pain rather than really the elimination of cause--in general an avoidance of the true issues that bother us. Even in modern psychiatry, in psychotherapy, the goal is so often simply helping people cope, not bringing healing--that’s seen to be impossible--but just coping, teaching skills in coping!

That’s not what Jesus did; he didn’t teach skills of coping. He brought wholeness. He brought new life on every level; it says, “every disease.” And disease here must be taken in the widest sense of the word to include what we would call, really, handicaps and congenital defects. He cured everything--even spiritual disturbances the Bible called “demons.” These could not stay in his presence, but part of the cure was already that the people turned to him--to him and to God seeking help!
Today both readings speak of the theme of rejection. Now it is true on one hand that
“‘My thoughts are not your thoughts,’ sayeth the Lord.” We cannot ascribe to God the
same kinds of feelings we have, but on the other hand, God reveals himself as a personal
being with personal feelings toward his creation! The prophet Hosea is foremost among
the prophets in a sense complaining about how the people whom God has loved so
tenderly ignore him. Not only do they ignore him, but the more he blesses them, the less
they pay any attention. So while on the one hand we have to be wary of ascribing to God
feelings like our own, especially if those are ever petty or small; on the other hand, we
have to recognize that God is a feeling God—that the very nature of “Being” is to feel!

And thus there is the reality of offending God by ignoring God. And this seems to be
more or less the history of the world. As Hosea says, “The more I bless them, the more
they erect pillars.” Of course this has to do with the form of worship which is idolatrous-
-well, it’s a cross between paganism and idolatry. Paganism is actually worshipping
nature in itself, and idolatry is more worshipping ourselves and our culture—the work of
our own hands, which is another way of saying ourselves. And so Hosea the prophet of
God is complaining in a way to alert people to a condition that is actually very dangerous
for them. In a sense God is helpless to do any more because he constantly blesses people
and the more he blesses them, the more they ignore him. And as the prophet says, “I
shall not destroy them again in my blazing anger,” and yet God cannot force anyone to
love him or to accept him.
And this same thing is carried over into the New Testament where Jesus sends out his disciples and says, “Now if they reject you, it’ll go worse for them than with Sodom and Gomorrah.” If you remember the story of Sodom and Gomorrah—it was an ancient story even at the time of the Book of Genesis—how cities were destroyed by fire and brimstone, cities that had been well known for their lack of hospitality, where in their ignorance of God they actually raped angels sent as messengers of peace. And this is meant to be really symbolic of our entire planet because Sodom and Gomorrah were not Jewish places. They were not really connected to the covenant. So they’re very representative of the way people are: how we reject God, reject God’s evangelists, God’s angels, God’s messengers, God’s prophets, God’s word! And of course this culminates in the crucifixion of God’s Son!

And, of course, this drama is told and retold throughout Scripture; and there are many chapters, but it’s the same story. God’s love is everlasting, but the human capacity to reject also seems without end. Now, of course, the story isn’t over yet; but the point of the gospel is that it will be over some time! And by that time it’s absolutely necessary for us to have accepted God and to have made friends with God’s messengers because to ignore them is to ignore God; and to ignore God is to reject God—and that is to reject everything that is of value!
Today we have a paradox, a paradox in terms of the most basic emotions and instincts in human life—the instinct of fear. And fear is both friend and enemy. It can protect us from danger and it also can paralyze us. And Jesus takes a very paradoxical attitude toward fear. On one hand he says, “Do not fear who can destroy only the body, but fear them only who can destroy the body and the soul in Gehenna.” Now who might that be? Of course the devil cannot destroy anything, nor can the devil create anything. This is a round-about way of saying, “The only thing to fear is God.” But then paradoxically if we really understood God, we wouldn’t fear God either, not if we really knew God, because God’s love is so extended to every detail of creation “that even a sparrow doesn’t fall from the sky without God’s knowledge, and you are far more valuable than a sparrow.”

Now the choice for human beings is either to stay on the outside of a relationship with God and fear the worst, or to enter into a relationship with God and come to know the best. In this way, living in fear is a self-inflicted wound—inflicted ultimately by our own unwillingness to open our hearts to God, or our own willingness to allow our hearts to be touched by God, thus transformed. Elsewhere it says, “Fear is useless; what is needed is trust.” Here he says, “Therefore fear nothing.” Trust and “fear nothing” is the heritage of those who know God—who have accepted the invitation to a personal relationship. And for those who reject the invitation, their sentence is not to know God and to live in fear of him who can destroy body and soul in Gehenna.
“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The first thing we need to recognize about today’s story is that there is a question that Jesus honors. A question—not a question we hear raised too often in contemporary society: “What must I do to inherit everlasting life?” In fact, one of the hallmarks of modern society—it has been for several hundred years—is that it doesn’t ask questions about eternal life; or if it does ask questions about eternal life, it is believed to be something that follows, you might say, naturally or automatically at the end of earthly life. The question: “What must I do?” is simply not asked! Either eternal life is not relevant in the first place, or if it is, it’s thought to be, you might say, the only possible result to living on earth.

The entire biblical tradition has a different point of view. In the Old Testament eternal life is only a distant possibility: that at some future date God may raise the dead that they may enjoy eternal life with God. Now in the New Testament this distant possibility becomes an immediate possibility, an offer, presented by Jesus. It is, in a sense, the very essence of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God involves human beings living with the divine life itself, which is eternal by nature. But this requires that human beings are willing to be transformed in a way that makes them suitable for eternal life, that is taking on qualities of justice, for example, and forgiveness and mercy, which are qualities that belong to God. So Jesus is not a romantic humanist. He does not exaggerate the value or beauty or worth of human life as we know it. He sees it more in terms of a potential for something else, a potential that must be acted upon to be realized.

Now the response that this young lawyer gives to Jesus is the response that comes right out of the Old Testament. The first part is from Deuteronomy, Chapter 6: “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole mind, your whole heart, and your whole soul.” This was a very important idea in Israel, highly regarded; it was call the “Shema,” meaning “watchword.” And in the Book of Deuteronomy it says that this Shema should be kept always before one’s sight, and so the Pharisees literally wrote it on scrolls and hung it on their foreheads in these little boxes called “phylacteries.” There are a few references in the New Testament, more or less references of ridicule, to this practice. To literally hang this Shema in front of one’s eyes is not, of course, what was meant. It meant to keep in mind—to keep in mind this great goal in life which is to harness all one’s energy and direct it toward one goal only: to love God with the totality of one’s being—heart, mind and soul.

Now the second part is from a different book—the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 19: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And in Chapter 19 of Leviticus that commandment is one of many hundreds and it has no particular prominence. But now in the New Testament for the teaching of Jesus, and even in the mind of this lawyer which we read in today’s story, this commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” becomes central. It was always there, but now it becomes of great importance—of equal importance to the first: to love God with your whole heart, mind and soul. It’s important to see the
connection. What it means is to love God with your total being includes loving neighbors, that we are not taking anything away from God by loving our neighbor; but love of God includes the love of neighbor because God loves the neighbor too!

And this is very hard for us to understand. We may think about it and we may grasp it to a point in our thoughts, but to grasp it in our will—that is not an easy task! And it wasn’t for the lawyer either, and he grappled with it. And he said, “Well, then who is my neighbor?” Jesus might have said, “Who isn’t!” Instead he told this story, the famous one you’ve heard of: the Good Samaritan. But we don’t feel the irony in that story because we’re not familiar with how Jews regarded Samaritans. Even Jesus was rejected by the Samaritans if you study the New Testament. When the apostles and Jesus went to a Samaritan town, they weren’t allowed in. So you might say there was no love lost between Jews in general, including Jesus and his apostles, and Samaritans! So when Jesus chooses a Samaritan as an example of what it means to be a neighbor he was really trying to shock. And his point is that the law, which was just enunciated rightly by the lawyer, is sometimes lived out by the most unlikely people.

Now the priest, for example was really fulfilling the law by not going toward that victim because a priest is not allowed to touch a dead body. And if a priest should touch a dead body, he would become disqualified from further priestly service; and that’s where he was going. He was going to the Temple for his duty, same with the Levite. They were fulfilling the law, but there were many laws. And Jesus’ point was: Which ones do you look at? And it was the Samaritan who, not through any sense of law but through an intuitive perception of need, really grasped the moment and did God’s will. And Jesus was able to teach this through the story.

Now ultimately the mystery that we embody is not our love of God; it’s God’s love of us! We can love only because we have been loved. No one is always a good Samaritan. The point is we can be a good Samaritan on any day where we are attuned to the needs of others, and this is an invitation. Jesus had already taught “Blessed are they who show mercy; mercy shall be theirs.” The early Church was convinced that the poor had a very special relationship with God and a privileged place at the eternal banquet. And so they believed—the New Testament authors believed—because the Church and the apostles believed, that by helping the poor, by helping the needy, we are gaining an important ally in our struggle for life.
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Misinterpretation of The Law**  
15th Week in Ordinary Time,  
Friday, July 17, 1998
7:00 a.m.  
Is 38:1-6, 21-22, 7-8;  
Mt 12:1-8  
(MisinLaw)

It’s important that we keep in mind that the stories we hear from the New Testament are not told to us really for our entertainment or that we might know something about the past. The evangelists fashioned these stories because they contain patterns—patterns of human behavior in the time of Jesus, with his disciples, in the church, in the beginning, in the middle ages and now too. Patterns don’t change. In each of these cases Jesus addresses a word of God, a word of both healing and rebuke, to the warped patterns that he finds.

Today’s story is about spying and condemning. Now there were these people called Pharisees. What were they? They were just a party, you might say a group someone might start and belong to. The word literally means “beloved.” And their being in this position of being beloved was something they appointed themselves to. The spirit that they exercised was the “spirit of exclusivity.” They believed that righteousness came from a literal following of the law, and by and large they were very devout people, devout men. There were no women Pharisees; it was a “male-only” society. And in this society they really expected that every holy person would belong to them. If someone was interested in following God, they’d have to find their way to their doorstep.

In one sense Jesus was a Pharisee because he shared many pharisaical views; for example, he believed in the resurrection of the dead, as they did—whereas other Jews did not. Jesus believed in angels, as did the Pharisees—whereas other Jews did not. However, in many other ways he did not count himself among their party because he lived in freedom of the Spirit. And he insisted upon interpreting the law in terms of its original meaning and intention: “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.” The sabbath was given for freedom, for relaxing, and so that we may actually not always rely on ourselves, and so we can have time to remember the works of God, and so we can actually enjoy life. That is the original meaning of the sabbath. If you peruse the Old
Testament you will see that enjoying life is actually a fundamental responsibility of anybody who really believes in God. God had placed the bounty of the earth at our disposal and we were supposed to enjoy it.

Now the Pharisees unfortunately did not enjoy too much. And their idea of devotion to God had a very peculiar bent to it. You might say they could not be satisfied; there would always be something wrong. There would always be something not right, and they went looking for it. And Jesus was constantly battling this element in his own cultural heritage, and continues to battle it today. It’s very important that we all have a very deep sense of what the meaning of the law is. The law is given for our freedom. The law is given so that we can know the will of God. The law is not given to us so that we have a lever with which to control others. The law is not given to us so that we can be superior to others, or feel superior. And law is not given so that there could be an exclusive club of the saved versus everyone else.

Now the particular issue in today’s reading is the sabbath. Now it could be anything--whatever people hold in an inordinate way--that could become an issue. But all these issues that human beings think of are, unfortunately, their issues, not God’s. What Jesus is always trying to do is to bring people to God, and as it says in the Old Testament, “My thoughts are not your thoughts.” We could paraphrase that: “My issues are not your issues,” sayeth the Lord. But if we want to seek holiness, we have to make God’s issues our own.
“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and upset about many things; one thing only is required.” Throughout the Scriptures from the beginning, the Book of Genesis through the gospels, a theme that arises often is a theme of hospitality. And the idea is that in being hospitable a person is implicitly accepting God, that God visits us in the person of strangers or guests. So in today’s story from the Book of Genesis, Abraham unwittingly received God into his home by offering hospitality to messengers sent from God. Contrariwise Sodom and Gomorrah were demolished because the people there treated guests, messengers from God, with contempt and violence. It’s important we notice that the acceptance of God is often, if not usually, implicit. Evangelical Christians talk about an explicit acceptance of Christ as “Lord and Savior,” but this is really not a biblical theme; and you will not find it in the pages of the Bible. The acceptance is almost always implicit. For example Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his home, but did he have any idea that Jesus was indeed the son of God and savior of the world? Of course not. Nor do we have any idea in the many ways in which we receive messengers from God. God is simultaneously revealing himself and hiding himself in the very same moment. And Jesus insisted that we take a very important interest in the stranger. And to receive God into our lives is as easy as offering hospitality to a guest, but to reject God is likewise as easy as refusing hospitality to a guest or to a stranger.

Now hospitality therefore is the very context in which God is welcomed or not into the human soul. And it has various aspects. And the story from the gospel of Martha and Mary is about the many sides of hospitality. Martha for her part is taking a very important part in the work of hospitality—preparing the food. You would not want to be invited to someone’s home and have them sit around enjoying your conversation while you’re getting more and more hungry. Martha’s role is important. There is a story, it is a true story—I probably shouldn’t tell it to you—but there was a time some years ago when there was a pastor and a bishop who could not get along. They’re both passed away now, but they just could not see eye to eye. Well, it came time for the bishop to visit this parish for confirmation. And it is customary to feed a bishop when he comes for confirmation. Well, the bishop arrived at the usual hour expecting dinner, and there wasn’t any. The pastor wanted to impress upon the bishop how angry he was with him, and he got the message! So feeding people is a very important part of hospitality.

On the other hand, Martha was a little too anxious about her particular role in this manifold enterprise. And Jesus scolds her, not for her cooking, not for her busyness, but rather for being anxious and upset about many things. It is possible in our lives that we allow important tasks to take over the whole of our lives. It’s not that what we’re doing is not important; it is—but it’s not all important! And we may sometimes get the feeling that “I’m doing everything! He’s not helping at all,” or “She’s not helping at all.” And this happens in families and it happens in parishes. And it can involve a certain kind of blindness to the many and various forms of hospitality and service that are needed to make
a house a home, to make a parish a family, to make a group a community. And it isn’t all about activity and doing. Martha does not appreciate the great service Mary is giving by sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to him. But again, would you want to be invited to someone’s home and have everyone in the family running around caring for the upcoming meal leaving you all by yourself in the corner? Mary is, in fact, playing what Jesus calls “the better part” because she is paying attention to the guest—listening and sharing herself.

Now the reason the Bible tells stories like the story of Martha and Mary, the story of Abraham, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, is not really to inform us of historical events. It’s to alert us to patterns that still exist in human nature, in the structure of human families, in the nature of a community. Who are they who now need our hospitality? First we should look to our own homes, to our families. Are we strangers to one another? The Fathers of the Church used to call the family the “domestic Church.” And the building of the Church must begin in our own home. We would never think of ignoring the needs of our children in regard to food, for example. We would never let them starve, or think about it! But the question is: Do we ever listen to them? And do we talk to them about the things that really matter, about our deepest values, about the principles that govern our choices, about the experiences that have taught us something in life? In the Catholic Church we refer to matrimony as a sacrament, meaning through matrimony God ministers to a wife through her husband and to a husband through his wife, and that together they constitute the presence of God in the world—that’s what a sacrament is. But we might ask: Do you, married persons, allow the material side of your life, the family material needs to dominate your relationship? Are we willing to share ourselves with other members of our parish by joining small Christian communities or in other ways banding together for the mutual support of the faith?

If we either don’t or can’t learn to listen to others and share our deepest values and beliefs, then probably we don’t or can’t pray! Because prayer is not just talking to God, and it isn’t just saying prayers. Prayer is a dialogue. And dialogue means there’s got to be a listening part. If we are deaf to others, we are most likely deaf to God! Today’s gospel is urging each of us to look at and appreciate the important ministry that both Martha and Mary provide for the existence of family and community in the world. And as we look at both of them, we need to learn how to treasure the better part.
“An evil and unfaithful age is eager for a sign!” What is evil about seeking a sign? Jesus worked signs in the beginning of his public ministry. In a sense, everything he did was a sign. When the disciples of John the Baptizer came to him saying, “Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?” Jesus’ answer was, “Go tell John what you see. The blind see; the deaf hear; the lame walk, and the poor have the good news preached to them.”

So what does it mean to seek a sign? Well, of course, in seeking a sign there is a deliberate form of blindness. In the fourth gospel, in the story of the healing of the man blind from birth, Jesus has a remark about the Pharisees. He says, “If you were blind, there would be no sin in that. But you say, ‘We can see’; therefore your sin remains.” For those who choose to see, the world is full of signs; for those who do not want to see, there can be no sign. God is not part of the furniture, not one being among others, not even the greatest being, or the biggest being, or the oldest being! God cannot be measured in any such way. God is not a being anyway, as St. Thomas tells us. He is being itself!—The ground of being, the act of existence, subsisting.

Now those are a little abstract I admit, but they point to something important: There could be nothing without God! And what this is really doing, this request is really saying, “Well, let you prove to us that you are from God,” or “Prove to us that God really loves
us,” or something like that. What is this? This is rooted in human egoism. God doesn’t prove anything. And when we seek a sign in this sense, we are really offending God because we are denying the signs all around us. For example, some people say, “How can you look at the world with all the evil in it--the wars, racism, crime--and believe in God?” Well, God is not the author of wars or racism or crime. There’s also a great deal of life, beauty and truth in the world! And where would that come from if there were not a source of life, truth and beauty? So the obligation remains with ourselves and God. We have to want to see, and then all will be revealed.
The death of a loved one is a sacred time in the life of a family. It both permits and encourages us to be reconciled to death, to life, to one another “for we do not know the time or the hour.” And the point of the gospel is not to remain virgins--alone, pure, and undefiled--but to be prepared. There is something about life that works against being prepared for the kingdom, for God, for the purpose for which we have been created. Something about life tries to steal away our time, our “oil,” and leaves us wanting. For there is something that cannot be borrowed that we need to take for ourselves to be ready for the day when we shall be invited to the eternal banquet.

Now I believe Catherine was a woman who was ready. She had acquired the “oil.” She was attentive to the Lord in her life; and she spent her time not in drowsiness, but in alert concern for the welfare of others. I chatted with her on various occasions and always about someone other than herself. She did reveal to me once very recently that she wasn’t feeling quite well. That’s the only thing she ever said about herself; all her other discussions were about her family. She was a woman who lived for others. And I believe she lived for others because she saw God!

Seeing God is a matter of choice! In the fourth gospel Jesus healed the man born blind. Jesus says to the Pharisees, “If you were blind, there would be no sin in that; but you say, ‘We see,’ so your sin remains.” There’s something about blindness to God that is voluntary; contrariwise there’s something about seeing God that is also voluntary. We
see
God because we want to; we find what we seek. The door is opened because we knock. That’s the way life is made—truly and in a deep way for our benefit.

In the second reading it says, “What we shall become has not yet been revealed, but we shall become like God because we shall see him as he is.” So we become what we seek; we seek what we want; we choose what we shall become. Human beings are born very incomplete—all potential. And life is an opportunity to bring that potential to whatever end we choose. God proposes that we use our potential to become a true image of himself, for we are fully capable of that—given God’s intentions and grace! But we need to yield to the grace so that we can see the vision and become what we see. This I believe Catherine did, and she is a model of faith for the rest of us. When any man or woman of God, when any child of God, passes on to the next stage of life, it’s important that those who survive incorporate some virtue, some gift that they, he or she, has given to us, and exercise that gift for her sake, for his sake—for the sake of the kingdom. Let’s take a moment now for reflection on what that gift or what that virtue that we would take from Catherine and exercise for the sake to the kingdom could be.
In Jewish life at the time of Christ the central factor determining a person’s identity was the family one came from. This is still the truth in places like China where the family is, more or less, one’s total social milieu. Now Jesus—you study very carefully what Jesus says about the family—you’ll be constantly challenged to rethink the importance of flesh and blood because Jesus never supports the importance of family in terms of flesh and blood. Quite the opposite. We go through and pile up many statements: “I’ve not come to bring peace, but the sword to divide father from son, mother from daughter, mother-in-law from daughter-in-law, father-in-law from son-in-law. I have come to make man’s enemies those of his own household. If you do not hate father and mother for my sake, you cannot be my disciple.”

Today he challenges his listeners with the question “Who is my mother?” Now of course there’s no doubt about the physical decent that Jesus possessed, at least on his maternal side. There was some doubt about the paternal line, which the Pharisees would draw on saying, “We are no illegitimate breed.” But there’s never any doubt who Jesus’ mother was, but here he creates a doubt because he is trying to get people to rethink relationships. When he called certain disciples, some said, “Well, let me say ‘Good-bye’ to my father,” or “Let me bury my father,” or “Let me take leave of the household.” He says, “Anyone who takes to the plow and turns back is not worthy of me.” So he’s really wanting people to think in a new and deep way about human relationships. In the fourth gospel we see that in the Nicodemus story “Flesh begets flesh, Spirit begets spirit.” Jesus is about begetting a new kind of family born in the Spirit.

Now this question “Who is my mother?” is not really meant as an insult to his physical mother, but he meant to show her in a new light. The honor that mother held in the ancient world was, again, very common. Bathsheba, for example, became queen when her son, Solomon, became king, not when her husband, David, was king. Partly
this is
because a man of importance could have many wives, but only one mother. Partly it had to do with their understanding of the origins of life. Nonetheless Jesus is trying to look to a different life, and therefore to a different origin. On the cross Jesus was accompanied only by the beloved disciple and his mother, who then was his mother in a second sense—in more profound sense—not simply the woman who bore him in her womb, but now a woman who is doing the will of the Father. And so she becomes the Queen of Saints and the Queen of the Apostles precisely because of that, not because of the physical—and the evangelists are very clear about this.

Now in the physical order Mary did bear the Word of God in her own physical body, in her womb. And when Jesus looks at his disciples and says, “There are my brothers and sisters and mother,” what he means is that all disciples are called to bear the word of God in our own being—not only bearing in our own being, but giving birth to it—that the whole role of the Church is to mother God just as it is the role of God to father the Church. So that God is really elevating human life to a new level of, you might say, collaboration, cooperation, interdependence. As a new creation is beginning, God is supplying what God supplies: the source, the spirit, the seed for a new creation; and the disciple supplies the place where it’ll be fertilized and grow and be protected and born into the world. Mary and the other apostles serve this purpose and they are rightly honored in our devotion. But honoring them primarily must be following their way, continuing the work they began so that we also may be mother and brother and sister to God.
Not every book written about Scripture is written in a truthful way. Once I read a book about the parables and it said, “The parables are very simple little stories meant for uneducated peasants.” This is not really true. Parables, which we can see from today’s reading, are intended to be challenges to those who really want to see and hear, and actually they’re meant to “turn-off” people who have an insufficient desire. There is something in the New Testament, a process by which people are being sifted. Jesus used the image of a dragnet. He said, “The kingdom of God is like a dragnet; it pulls in everything.” He’s referring, of course, to his own ministry. And then he says, “You have to throw out the stuff that’s no good.” There’s at every moment in life a selecting process going on, and partly we’re the ones doing the selecting. We’re selecting what to see and what to hear, what to respond to and what to ignore.

The point of every parable is that from what we know we can get to some idea of what we don’t know. For example, we understand how crops grow, and out of that understanding we can understand something about the kingdom. Or, as in the parable of the talents, we understand something about money and investments, so we can understand something about the kingdom. If we now pile them up, everything we know is actually a reflection of what we don’t know. In this way, everything we meet in life and every experience we have can become a teaching or a lesson. Jesus says, “To the man who has, more will be given until he grows rich.” Well, they say, “The rich grow richer and the poor get poorer.” And we know why this is because if you’re rich, you have to have something to invest. The more you have to invest the more you can make. Now this tells us something about the kingdom that we don’t know--it’s like that. Of course, what Jesus is wanting to talk about is not money, but it’s simply using the idea of money and investing it, and the growth of wealth to describe the growth of something else.
Faith is a gift. Now faith can be invested or it can be saved—just like money. But if you think about it, even in the secular world investing is an act of faith. You invest in a company, for example, because you believe in it—you believe and hope in it too! You hope in a company’s prospects. Well, now God has asked you to invest in his kingdom. God gives us gifts to invest. Some people take those gifts and put them in a safe because their orientation to God is all one of safety. They’re looking for security. God isn’t giving us gifts for our security; he’s giving us gifts for our growth! That’s why all the parables talk about growth, and the terrible fate suffered by those who don’t grow like the poor little slob with the talent that he returned. People take faith and put it away and save it for a rainy day. They may do the same for love itself, but these are gifts to be invested. And invest faith means to let it work for us. To put your money in, let’s say, Ford Motor Company means to let your money be used by Ford Motor Company. To invest faith means to let our gifts and our energies be used by the kingdom. Of course, we have to believe in the kingdom, and we have to have hope that the promises of God will be fulfilled. It’s very similar to everything else we do, but it’s different because it has to do with what we expect. It is not in any way physical and audible to our senses. And that’s why Jesus refers to Isaiah who prophesied—and that always means actually “condemned” the people for “having eyes but not seeing, having ears but not hearing.” Now the question is: Do we sense the kingdom as a reality to invest in, and how are we going to do that? How are we going to spend our hopes in such a way that bears interest, pays dividends in the kingdom? How are we going to invest our trust, our hope, our love?
The Sower and The Seeds--Us

There are different ways of interpreting the story of the sower and the seed. You could be forgiven for believing at first hearing that the sower and the seed is about the gospel--the seed is the message. This section of Matthew’s Gospel describes, what you might say, the esoteric or hidden teaching that Jesus shares with the disciples--so it’s not so obvious. And it reflects, you might say, the wisdom or the spirituality of the early Church, at least the inner circle that is maintaining the apostolic tradition. And in that wisdom the seed is an image of people; it’s not the message. It’s those who hear it. It’s comparing human beings to a seed--if you think about yourself as a seed. A seed has really no purpose except to be planted. In the fourth gospel it says, “If a seed does not fall to the earth and die, it remains all alone.” The English says, “just a seed,” but the Greek says, “It remains all alone.” Seeds are made to be planted, and they’re made to die; that is, the casing has to soften and the potential in the seed released in the earth.

Now the little life of self-preservation and self-aggrandizement, self-promotion, trying to get ahead, trying to move beyond is all totally pointless from the viewpoint that we are seeds! This only makes the casing tougher and the potential within more hidden. This teaching is encouraging people to think of themselves as something totally different from what they appear, just as a seed looks totally different from a plant; and yet it contains the entire potential to become a plant. An acorn, for example, is very different from an oak tree. And we are in our present state very different from what we’re called to be. And the
The only way we can actually become what we’re called to be is to go through dying. What is meant is not simply physical dying, but death in all its forms—every loss is a kind of death. All of this actually is meant to help the potential in us grow, but this need not happen. And that’s the point of the parable: it need not happen! It only happens if the seed is planted. And human beings, seeds though we may be, are different from other seeds in that we can choose to be planted or not!

It has been said that the Holy Spirit is the forgotten person of the Blessed Trinity. And in time I have come to realize that that is actually a very perceptive insight. What do we mean by the Holy Spirit? Now when we talk about God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, if we talk--well, what do we mean by Father? Well, I think we have an idea of Father because we have fathers whether we like them or not--sometimes we have fathers that are not good images of fatherhood, but nonetheless we have an idea of what a father is. And we talk about Jesus; well, Jesus is one like us--he’s human but without sin. So we have something to grasp. The very nature of the Holy Spirit is that we don’t really grasp the Holy Spirit in such an image. Now don’t think for one minute that you can image the Holy Spirit as a dove! If you read the text, what it says is “The Holy Spirit descended like a dove.” What is means is that the descent is like the descent of a dove. The comparison is the descent--as a dove descends. Well, how do doves descend? Well, very gently--so it’s an image of gentleness, but it has nothing to do with a dove.

And there are pictures in Christian art, unfortunately, where they have this old man. Now the Father is not an old man--the Father’s not a man at all! So picturing the Father, God the Father, as an old man is really offensive to Christian theology--but it’s been done in Christian art; in fact, you see old man, young man and dove being some artist’s rendition of the Trinity. Well, this has nothing to do with the Trinity. Jesus is the only human form of God.

The Holy Spirit--what is meant by the Holy Spirit? Well, that’s what we have to really look at. It’s going to be the most unexplainable side, if you want to put it that way, of God. First of all we have to start off with the affirmation that there is only one God. There are not three gods. So when we talk about the three persons in God there aren’t three different individuals in this sense of the word “person”--that would not be correct. There’s one God, one divine will; there are not three divine wills. So in so far as we think of person as someone with a will of his or her own, a mind of his or her own, there is one will and one mind in God; there are not three minds in God. Okay? So what do we mean by this? It’s very mysterious. It can’t be explained in words, and yet we deal with it because it’s the revelation of God. God has revealed himself to us as a God with an inner relationship to himself, a three-fold relationship.

Now again, we can’t explain it, but one way of thinking about it is by reflecting on ourselves. If I think something, if I think about something, I have a thought. Okay? My thought will change and I can modify it; I can forget about it. But God, now let’s think of God, God--is God like us? No! When God thinks a thought can he forget about it? No. Can he change his mind about his thought? No. So when God thinks about God that thought is itself an infinite thought and it’s an eternal thought. Okay? And that’s getting close to the idea of the Word of God. The Word of God is the eternal uncreated thought God has about God. And when God speaks about God, which we call revelation, he gives us Himself. He doesn’t give us something else, but Himself. That’s what we mean by revelation: God is giving us Himself. So the Word he speaks to us is Himself. “Now in varied forms God spoke about Himself in the past,” so says the Letter to the Hebrews,
“but now in our time God has come with the complete message.” The complete message is Jesus: the Word of God, the divine, uncreated Word of God, now--two thousand years ago now--assuming a human nature, and through the human nature expressing the nature of God. The will of God, the life of God, the mind of God, everything about God Jesus expresses!

What’s the Spirit? God loves God. God is not only a lover, but God is also a beloved. So one might think of the Spirit as the beloved of God. And God loves us so much, made in his own image and likeness, that He enables us, He created us in such a way as we can become beloved as God loves Himself--God loving us with his very own love He has for Himself. This is the Holy Spirit.

Now of course we wouldn’t know a thing about God if it weren’t revealed to us. A human mind may be able to figure some stuff out, but you know I’m not so sure about that as I look around. But anyway, what we do know is that through revelation we know about God. Now when Jesus uses--well, even before Jesus in the Old Testament, when the word “spirit” was used the word was in Hebrew “Ruah,” which is a word used also for wind and for breath. Why would those words be used? Well breath, for example, was believed to be the source of life. In other words when a person died it was said, “Well, they died because they stopped breathing.” We might say, “We stop breathing because we’re dead.” They didn’t say it that way. They thought the breath itself was the life. Okay? And they thought the breath itself came from God. It was God’s life. This is the idea in the Old Testament that all life belongs to God, is God’s—which is the basis for the respect for life, and not only human life! In the Old Testament it was all life is really divine in origin. By life I don’t mean the living being itself as much as I mean the life in the living being--what makes it live--that’s God’s, belongs to God, comes from God and it returns to God.

And that’s the very idea of the sacrificial system in the temple. Why did the Hebrew priests slit the throats of animals? Because by killing an animal they were giving the life back to God. See, the offering was not the corpse. See? The corpse is no offering; that wasn’t what was offered. See? The blood was used symbolically to purify people and was poured onto the horns of the altar--it was poured in various places: in front of the kipparet, the mercy seat, symbolizing the cleansing, which is again a funny image for us--blood cleaning, I mean you know--blood doesn’t clean anything in my house, but you know that’s the mentality--okay we’re dealing with the image system. But what was offered to God was the invisible life itself, and upon that life was placed the petition of the people. See? It’s almost as if well, if we really want to get close to God, we have to get inside God. You know like well, if we want to get close to someone else we have to get in touch with them. Hopefully they have a phone. Okay, what if they don’t have a phone? Well, we’ll use a carrier pigeon. We have to get to them. Well, this is the idea of getting to God. Sacrifice was getting to God because the life was his, so we want to get to him; well, put a petition on an animal and immolate the animal and the petition would get to God. And hopefully He’d listen, but there was never any assurance He would. The hope was He would. Okay? So that’s the idea of Ruah, of breath, life. Okay?
But also wind! Okay? Now Jesus captures that idea, the idea of a wind. Why? Well, he says, “You know, you don’t really know when the wind is going to all of a sudden pick up or fall off.” There’s this unpredictable, spontaneous element; and he said, “With God too.” Now that’s something again all organized religion is always in danger of losing, because when we organize religion what we’re really doing is organizing people, and I guess we have to organize people. But when we organize religion we run the risk of trying to get everything kind of set down. And of course there is need for creed; there is need for doctrine and so on, but there is a tendency to think, “Now we have God figured out. Now we have God in our little box.” But what Jesus was trying to say, “Well, God is also Spirit and you don’t know when the Spirit is going to, the wind is going to blow, when it’s not going to blow, when it’s going to disappear altogether or come in like a gale.” And so there is that element of God; we have to remember this and keep reminding ourselves of this.

Now Jesus was always stimulating his listeners, trying to get them to think in new ways about things through the parables; well, there were certain people in his time who hated that. They just hated it! You could say they were Spirit-blind! A person who never wants to hear anything new about God is Spirit-blind. That’s a part of them; they don’t want to know the unpredictable, the unexplainable part. You know? “If God says, ‘Do this,’ well then I’ll do it. If he reveals law, fine I’ll follow it. But don’t tell me that God is going to work in unpredictable ways. I don’t want that.” See? So it ends up as a great control issue in people’s lives. I think it always will be. I think control is one of the big issues in people’s lives. And Jesus was trying to tell people, as we’ve talked about already with the ideas of the kingdom, the issue of the kingdom, that to live the full life of the kingdom we have to yield control to God! Yield to the control of God is now opening ourselves to the Spirit. Now as it turns out the openness to spirit in general can be dangerous because there is not only the Holy Spirit, but there are also other spirits; therefore there’s need for discernment. But we don’t have to go into that right now. Nonetheless openness to the Holy Spirit is necessary.

Now if we look into the New Testament there are two different traditions about the Spirit. One is the synoptic tradition: Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts. In the synoptic tradition there’s a great continuity between the idea of the Spirit in the Old Testament and the idea of the Spirit in the New Testament. The emphasis remains on spontaneity, spontaneity of divine action and the unpredictable character of divine action. We see it, as I read to you, I don’t remember when, but I remember I said at one point we read from the Gospel of Mark about the baptism of Jesus. The baptism of Jesus is the beginning of his ministry. The Spirit is there. The Spirit is initiating Jesus into his ministry. And the ministry is the purpose of his life, so it’s initiating him into the purpose of his life. Then as I also mentioned it drives him into the desert where he will confront evil in it’s various forms.

Now in Matthew the Spirit is present even in the infancy of Jesus as the author writes, “For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.” Matthew 1:20. And then again also in the baptism of Jesus in Matthew Chapter 3; “The Spirit of
God descended on him like a dove.” Now John the Baptist says in Chapter 3, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Here’s another image--fire! Now fire was a very important image in John the Baptist’s time. It was believed to be one of the primary elements making up the creation: fire, water, earth, air. Okay? Now when it came to fire that was like God’s activity and God’s judgment too. So judgment is associated with fire: that God would come and consume with fire those who had opposed his work. And that same fire would consume the blessed, but they would have a totally different experience of the fire. For them it would be this ecstatic experience of joy and energy--same fire as I understand it. Now at the end of Matthew’s Gospel again the Holy Spirit is at work. Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

In Luke and Acts, which is written by the single author, there are fifty-seven references to the Spirit--more than in Matthew or Mark. So Luke becomes very much interested in the work of the Spirit. And Luke’s basic idea is this: Look here the Spirit has been working in Jesus. Now Jesus has been delivered unto death, which he accepted; he’s been murdered, but he did not oppose this. Now he’s been raised up in the Spirit, and now that very same Spirit is going to continue his work in the believers so that the Church will continue to do what Jesus did; and that is clearly the teaching of the Acts of the Apostles. What we see is that the Church does what Jesus did in every way! The apostles raised the dead; they healed the sick--they did everything! And that same idea is also found in the fourth gospel where it says, “Greater things than I have done you shall do also.” Now I do think there is a danger that we think of those as exaggerations. I don’t think those are exaggerations! There are exaggerations used for various affects, but those aren’t. Those are not parabolic! I believe those are meant quite literally that we shall be empowered with the same Spirit Jesus was empowered with and we will continue his work!

This has not been a belief well kept in the Church! Even going back to St. Augustine--I’m getting a little ahead of myself, but even going back to St. Augustine’s time--there was already the recognition that there is something that has been lost here--the ardor. Well even in the Book of Revelations, let’s face it, what is one of the points of the Book of Revelations? “Well, I know you are still good people, but you have lost your original fervor! And I hold that against you.” Does not the Book of Revelations say that to the Churches? “I hold that against you: you do not have your original ardor.” That’s fire! But by the time of St. Augustine it was kind of obvious. See? And Augustine unfortunately invented a way of thinking about this: he talked about different ages. “Well,” he said, “back in those times they needed all these miracles and so on, and now we don’t need them any more.” Augustine was not a pro-miracle person. He didn’t like the use of relics for healing which was popular at that time. And he spoke against it until one day when the people were processing with the relics of St. Stephen, in spite of the fact that he didn’t approve of this and he was the bishop--nonetheless they did it anyway. And right in front of his face he saw the bone of Stephen or the relic of Stephen touch someone and heal them--right in front of his face! And Augustine said, “From now on I shall not speak on this topic.”
So later on in this country a man named Darby developed a whole idea of dispensations, different dispensations roughly based on Augustine. This led to an idea found in Protestant thinking called “dispensationalism.” And that idea is we cannot in any way expect to live the same life as the Apostolic Church. This I think is false. I believe that the Apostolic Church as witnessed in the Acts of the Apostles is meant to be the image for us of normal Christian life—normal Christian life! Okay? So rather than thinking of miracles as exceptional—they’re only exceptional in the sense that they don’t happen through the mechanistic manipulations that we do everything else with. Okay? They’re exceptional in that way, but they should not be exceptional among the believers. They should be normal among the believers. We should expect them in this sense—okay?—in a proper sense. I’m claiming this is really what Luke wants us to believe: that’s how he wrote the Acts of the Apostles!

Now again in Luke, in the infancy narratives, he doesn’t actually use the word there “Holy Spirit.” He says, “Power of the Most High,” but it means the same thing. The Power of the Most High overshadows Mary; she conceives Jesus in her womb. Again in the baptism and in the temptation there’s the descent like a dove; and filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert. Again this is reflecting the Gospel of Matthew. Later on in the Acts of the Apostles we see something else very extraordinary about the Holy Spirit. It alights on gentiles who have not even been baptized! Again the unpredictable work of God. See?

Now today we have the RCIA, right? You all have RCIA? That’s wonderful; we like that, but think about it for a minute. You know, if someone is really ready to receive God do they have to go through the RCIA? See, but that’s a typical Church thing; churches do this. We set up standards. See? Well now, you have to do this first. Why? Well, because a lot of people are not really sincere and they really are not ready and they just want to go with the crowd, “Oh, I want to do that too.” You know it’s like well, do they know what they are doing? No. So therefore we set up processes to let them know what it’s about. Okay?

But in the early RCIA that the Church originally set up it had nothing to do with actually what we believe. The Creed was only presented shortly before the baptism! Nothing about baptism was stated at all. They walked into baptism completely blind. They didn’t have any idea what it’s going to be. The Creed had just been given to them in words, but not explained. It was only explained after they were baptized. The theory was if you don’t have the grace of baptism, how are you going to know anything? So it wasn’t a matter of people searching for little bits and pieces of what they can accept and understand. The idea was: No, you have to understand if you become a Christian, this is what’s required of you. So what they would do is they would go to the various places where martyrs had been killed, at least in Rome. These become stations as they were called in Rome. And usually they were houses; it wasn’t necessarily where they were killed, sometimes where they were buried. Christians would claim the dead bodies of the martyrs and bury them in their basements. Now this is not something we would necessarily go for, but they did. And then those became domestic churches. They became gathering places for the faithful, and they are to this day. Later on they became
the churches of the early Roman Church. And now they are excavating down to many levels and it’s fascinating if you go there and look at it. The point is what they would do is they would take candidates for baptism and they would say, “Now this is where St. Cecilia is buried and here’s her story.” And they’d tell about the martyrdom of St. Cecilia. The idea is “Look, if you really want to be a Christian, you have to be ready to die! If you’re not ready to die, you’re not ready to be baptized!” That was when RCIA was really a good program! So it wasn’t a matter of information. See? It was a matter of preparation. See?

Then after the baptism took place, then the bishop would teach them the meaning of the mysteries that they had celebrated: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist. They didn’t know what they were getting into that way. And then the bishop would take--week after week they would come to Eucharist and he would teach them the meaning--and that was called the catechesis. And it came after the baptism and the mystagogia. The mystagogia is of course, I should say it’s really called mystagogia, catechesis was something else—that was repeating things, learning things in a repetitious way. But the mystagogia was learning how the personal life of a believer relates directly to sacramental celebration.

Again, where is mystagogia for those who are baptized as infants? Where do people who are more of less brought up Catholic where do they ever learn how to connect the sacramental celebrations of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist to their own personal faith experience? Now the Sunday homily should help do that, but in some cases the Sunday homilist does not know how to do that; so there is a void in the life of many people in the Church! They have not really been connected! See? They’ve received the gifts, but they don’t know what the gifts are! So in a sense it’s almost like if you went to someone’s house—and it would be rather strange if you saw this--okay, there in the corner the Christmas tree from last year and underneath all these nice packages unopened. That is in many ways the Christian life today: gifts given, but unopened!

So now the Holy Spirit is seen in the Acts of the Apostles Chapter 10 alighting on the gentiles, and the disciples said, “Hey wait a minute. This cannot be! How can this be!” But they said, “Well, wait a minute. Who are we to tell the Holy Spirit what to do?” And they said, “When you were baptized,” and they said, “We weren’t baptized. Oh yeah, we were in the Jordan with John, but you know we weren’t baptized in the name of Christ. We don’t know anything about Christ’s baptism.” But they were receiving the gift of the Spirit. See? Now this is a very important thing from the ecumenical viewpoint that we have to recognize. The Holy Spirit can alight on anyone at any time. And it’s up to the Church to learn what the Spirit’s doing, not tell the Spirit what to do! It’s very hard for the institutional Church to do that--any church. See? All these controversies and actually they’re worse outside of the Catholic Church--the controversies about how to worship or what to believe. You know, they’re terrible! But what the parties who are, you know, fighting about, what they can’t believe is that it really isn’t up to them!

Now in the synoptic gospels and the Acts of the Apostles the Holy Spirit leads, overshadows and establishes the action that effects God’s will. So it has to do with Jesus’ conception, the inauguration of his ministry and in the inauguration of the Church.
In John and Paul however there is a different point of view! In John and Paul the Spirit is even more pervasive! In other words not only do they see the Spirit at these very special events: conception of Jesus, inauguration of ministry, inauguration of Church, but in John and Paul the Spirit is all the time, everywhere! There is no explanation of anything without the Spirit. The Spirit imbues everything, fills everything; and it’s because of the Spirit that this new life we get from Christ actually perdures.

So St. Paul says, “If we are baptized with Christ, we have died with him and we live a new life.” What has died? Well, what has died is of course not the physical body, but what has died is a certain attitude toward the physical body that it must be preserved at all costs, that its comfort is a great value. Okay? So that’s the death and now there’s a new life. And the new life envelops the body, but is not centered in the body. It’s centered actually in the risen Christ. And in this way every body who is a believer is part of a greater body which is the risen Christ. And this risen Christ, of course, then is the Church; it’s the body of the Church so there is an identity between the body of the believers, the body of the Church and the body of Christ. These are all one now in the Spirit.

In John there is a very important idea that spirit begets spirit. “Flesh begets flesh; spirit begets spirit.” Now we talked earlier about what it means flesh begets flesh: all the ways in which not only does one generation lead to the next generation, but all the stuff of our lives that are passed on from generation to generation. That’s the flesh. Now sin has made the flesh displeasing to God. It wasn’t originally, but it’s displeasing to God in particular because of its violence. Refer to the story of the flood in the Book of Genesis: “God was displeased because of the violence of the flesh,” not because of any other reason; and therefore decided to destroy it. But then decided to save a small portion. But even get this--the ark--you know, on one side Noah’s ark is a peculiar image, you know, a bunch of animals living together--but think of the power of that symbol! Two by two they entered, but all of these animals had to live in harmony on this ark. Now that already is something very unnatural in our world. Animals do not live in harmony--species with other species--they don’t--they prey on each other! So the ark is already a symbol of some transformation that God is wanting in the very nature of the earthly life including the life of the animal. And Isaiah picks up that theme later on when he says, “The lamb will lie down with the lion.” See the depth of peace and harmony that is the work of the Spirit--transcends even human life. In a similar way it was the ancient belief that human sin also transcended human life and created disorders throughout all of creation.

So now John talks about being begotten from above. Now what does that mean? Well, first of all there is a pun here. When Jesus is talking to Nicodemus Jesus says, “Unless someone is begotten from above by water and the Spirit, this person can never enter the kingdom of God. And Nicodemus misunderstands because of a pun in Greek between “born” and “begotten” and the word from above is “another,” and another also means again. So he misunderstands and says, “What do you mean ‘born again’?” How can a man be born again?” Now some people have made a big issue about this term “born again.” It’s peculiar because that’s not what it originally meant. It means begotten
from above--that the life of God does not arise naturally from human generation, but is a gift that needs to be received willfully. And the sign of it is water and Spirit. Now that’s what baptism is all about--water and Spirit, literally air and water. See, the word for Spirit is air so it’s by the power of air and water, but of course he doesn’t mean normal air and normal water. He’s referring to this life of God, the breath that comes from God--all life comes from God--and the water--that goes back to the waters of the Book of Genesis, the water, the primeval waters from whence God draws forth life on earth.

Now this experience however of being born again, what people call being born again, it is something we should focus on for a moment. First of all what it is saying is “Someone has finally experienced God,” and that’s something good. Actually we should experience God. It should not just be an idea in our head or something someone told us about. It should be something we know through our own experience. And this experience should change our lives! It should empower us to live the life Christ lived. [Of course--are you getting cold?--I was just getting warm. Don’t you think it’s warm in here? No? Okay, must be the Holy Spirit! Okay.] So this new life comes from God, and it needs to be experienced. Okay? And some people--again it’s not experienced! Now this is not normal, not what we want to call normal Christian life! So we believe that the initiation, the full initiation, into Christian life involves this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, this experience of God and the gifts! So that’s something we want to expect. We want to expect it for ourselves, and we want to expect it for others.

The life of the risen Christ is shared life. Okay? So there are not many lives of Christ; there’s one life of Christ--we all share in it, this one life. And it’s mediated by the Church. So we need each other. We need the body. We need the body of Christ. We need this dimension that goes beyond our own individuality. That’s the way God works. It’s not our choice. It’s God’s way. It is through the mediation of the body that the signs are imposed or celebrated: baptism, confirmation, Holy Eucharist, matrimony, reconciliation, holy orders, holy anointing of the sick. But there is no necessary connection between those signs and their celebration on the one hand, and the experience of the Spirit on another. So people can receive all the signs and never experience any of the experience! Now in my personal experience, it seems to me that very often Catholics experience God in the sacrament of reconciliation more than any other time.

Now in a few moments I’m going to talk about prayer for the baptism in the Holy Spirit. As we talk about it here it is the fullness of initiation. Now maybe you have never heard of the term quite in that sense “baptism in the Holy Spirit,” but the original term is “baptism by water and Spirit.” The Spirit being the experience, so if we have the sign only, we don’t have the fullness yet of what is meant. So by baptism in the Holy Spirit means the fullness of the event, the fullness of the experience. And it’s clear in the early Church that this was considered part and parcel of being initiated into the Church. If you hadn’t experienced this yet, there was still something lacking, something missing.

But anyway this woman was telling me, “Well, I received the baptism in the Holy spirit three times.” I said, “What do you mean three times?” I said, “Normally we don’t talk that way.” I said, “A believer receives the Holy Spirit, the baptism in the Holy

Baptism in the Holy Spirit 8
spirit, once—not three times. You may have many experiences of God, but the baptism in the Holy spirit is the initiation into the experience of God.” She said, “Gee, I got it three times.” I said, “Well what do you mean? What do you mean by that?” “Well, I went to Life in the Spirit seminar three times, and I was prayed over three times.” And I said, “Well, tell me what happened.” “Nothing.” The first time nothing happened; the second time nothing happened; the third time nothing happened. Okay. And so then she was talking a little more and she said, “But, you know, long before I ever went to Life in the Spirit seminar, I really felt I needed to go and confess my sins. And I went to confession. And you know when I went to confession I was so filled with some power that came through me I felt warmed all over.” I don’t know if you’re ever heard of the expression “heart-strangely warmed”? That’s Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church—heart-strangely warmed. He’s talking about this experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit; that’s what it is. She said, “I felt myself warm,” and she said, “I just felt so full of joy and I felt so forgiven!” I said, “Karen, that was your baptism in the Holy Spirit.”

And you may have received this some time. I’ve heard of people receiving this driving their car. Sometimes it comes spontaneously out of the blue. Well, why not if it’s the Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit can do whatever the Holy Spirit wants to do! Other people pray fervently and wait and maybe wait a while, and they receive it. Now it comes in different ways—I do admit it. There is no one way to receive this gift of the Holy Spirit, this initiatory experience of God; but it should arrive at some point if we are being sacramentally initiated.

Now Pope Paul VI in his wonderful Apostolic Exhortation called Evangelii Nuntiandi says that one of the worst problems in the Catholic Church is that we have all kinds of people who have been, he used the word, “sacramentalized.” He meant they’ve been baptized, they’ve received Holy Communion, but he said, “They’ve never been evangelized! They’ve never heard the gospel!” Well, if they’ve never heard the gospel, how are they ever going to experience the fullness of Christian life? Even in the Acts of the Apostles when the Holy Spirit alighted on those who had not yet been baptized, they had still heard the gospel. So we might say that hearing the gospel is more important to experiencing God than the sacraments. The sacraments should be thought of as celebrating what has been heard and received, and in some cases we have the cart before the horse. And that’s what he is saying—Pope Paul—I really recommend this to everybody—everyone should get this little booklet On Evangelization in the Modern World, “Evangelii Nuntiandi.” I can say it. Okay.

Did I send this to you?

No, I sent you a smaller little book by Father Sala. Okay.

Now what are the effects of this Spirit? The outpouring of gifts is of course for the building up of the body.

- Number one, adoration. Do we think of adoration as a gift? Adoration is not something we do, but adoration is a gift we are given that elevates us. I mean when you go back even to the primitive people they experience reverence and awe and fear sometimes too—fear of the sacred, awe of the sacred. That’s a gift! Adoration is a gift. Praise is a gift. Prayer! Prayer is a gift—to be able to pray. I don’t know if
you’ve ever been in a state where you can’t pray? Prayer is a gift! Prayer is lifting up the mind and heart to God, but we can’t lift our own mind and heart up to God; God has to lift our mind and heart up to God. It’s a gift! And it increases the contemplative dimension of Christian life which means our capacity to be aware of God in daily things. Contemplation is the awareness of God in all things, in all events, in all people.

- Number two, gifts of service animates a life of holiness that is committed to justice. Gifts of service animate a life of holiness. So holiness is a life that has been given to us and in which we are being inspired or animated by the Spirit of God and it’s committed to justice. And we need to find ways to effect this justice or to work toward this justice.
- Three, docility to the Spirit. Docility to the Spirit means a willingness and an openness to be taught and an expectant faith. We talked earlier about faith and different facets of it: obedience and trust, those are basic, but now comes an expectant faith in God’s desire and willingness to intervene in his world to effect or bring about the kingdom.
- Four, zeal for the gospel and respect for others. Respect is a very important thing—for those over us and for those under us. A Spirit-filled person must be respectful of people who are socially, economically inferior. Anybody can respect a boss; but a truly anointed, Spirit-filled Christian must respect someone lower, someone more humble than himself or herself.

Now St. Paul says, “In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, and we were all given to drink of the one Spirit. So the idea is that it’s Christ Himself who is baptized by the Spirit, so we are baptized by the Spirit.

⇒ Number one, this leads to sanctification. As St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians Chapter 6, “That is what you used to be.” He’s referring to life as we know it can be, and he says that’s what you used to be, but now you’re not anymore. You have been sanctified.”


⇒ Three, the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, fear of the Lord. This is not the result of our own personal life; it’s not the result of anything we can do! You cannot become joyful because you want to be joyful. You cannot become peaceful because you want to be peaceful. You cannot become patient because you want to become patient. My father used to criticize me. He said, “You’re so impatient; why don’t you just be patient.” I said, “Because I’m not patient!” You can’t become patient. See? There’s no mind over matter here; these are gifts—actually these are fruits of the Spirit. St. Paul lists several of them.

⇒ Now next one, courageous boldness to witness to the Spirit. That’s again a necessary component to a disciple: that we are courageous and bold in witnessing to Christ and to the Spirit. And in the United States, as I mentioned before, a lot of people think that’s undemocratic to assail people with the truth, to speak strongly; but actually that’s part of Christian ministry.
Then prayer, prophesy, healing and other gifts. Prophesy means being enabled to speak for God. Again we cannot make ourselves prophets. There are people who do this, of course. They want you to think they are prophets. Those are very dangerous! Self-appointed prophets--stay way away from them!

All right, word of knowledge. What’s a word of knowledge? Well, it means that God lets you know something about someone else for their benefit, for the upbuilding of the body. I’ve worked with people with the word of knowledge; it’s helped in healing prayers if you know what to pray for. Again, you can’t appoint yourself to this, but God distributes these gifts according to what is good for everybody.

Healing and other gifts. All of this enables the Church to do its job of proclaiming God’s message of love, justice, peace to the world.

And the Spirit must be constantly sought. It’s inexhaustible, but needs to be sought constantly. So we search for the Spirit; we discern the Spirit. And even in the Acts of the Apostles it shows that the fire can be diminished. If you want to consult Acts, Chapter 4:23-31 and 2 Timothy, Chapter 1:6-7. This fire can tend to go out—in the Book of Revelation. So this is, you might say, we shouldn’t be surprised that the fire, the ardor, that comes from the Spirit dies out or never gets lit in the first place.

Now the early Fathers all attested to baptism in the Holy Spirit as a normative pattern of initiation. And I could quote from Origen, Justin Martyr, Didymus the Blind, Cyril of Jerusalem, Tertullian, Hilary of Poitiers, John Chrysostom, John of Apamea. I would like to read from this, from Tertullian: “Therefore, you blessed ones, for whom the grace of God is waiting, when you come up from the most sacred bath of the new birth, when you spread out your hands for the first time in your mother’s house [the Church] with your brethren, ask your Father, ask your Lord, for the special gift of his inheritance, the distribution of charisms, which form an additional, underlying feature [of baptism]. ‘Ask,’ he says, ‘and you shall receive.’ In fact, you have sought and it has been added to you.” So it’s to be expected that all those who have received baptism of water will receive the experience of the Spirit. And yet in our own day I think we can say that some of us have not. That many of the people in our parish have not. In the second baptism one takes possession perfectly of the power of the Holy Spirit. Now what is the second baptism? It means the experience of what baptism is about. Again, even in the early Church there was a distance between the sign and the experience. So this is not abnormal. What’s abnormal and unhealthy is that the experience never comes at all. Now St. John Chrysostom says that in his day the Church has become like an old lady bereft of her jewels! Now if you think of what he’s talking about, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen this, but sometimes you might have some beautiful woman, maybe she’s rich and young and she falls onto hard times—you see her many years later just a faint shadow of what she was in terms of physical beauty. Well, that’s what he’s saying about the Church. What’s he talking about? He’s talking about the absence of the gifts, the fact that people aren’t using the gifts! They are not laying hands on each other; they’re not effecting healing; they’re not prophesying. So he’s complaining and this is like--what?--fourth century--something like that! So it’s a long time ago. So it’s not a recent problem.
But we do have in our own day a recognition that we need a new Pentecost. In 1958 Pope John the XXIII said, “What the Catholic Church needs is a new Pentecost.” What he meant was that people can experience the Spirit. He didn’t mean a dove would come down from the sky. He meant that people would experience the Spirit, and that the gifts would once again be utilized in the Church, that people would once again really know themselves to be children of God, that they would have a sense of being in the presence of God, that they would be able to experience awe and reverence, that they would have the gifts of wisdom and understanding.

◊ Understanding means that they could actually talk about faith in their own words, and it would make sense because they’d lived it!

◊ Wisdom means an overall vision of how everything fits together. They wouldn’t just be living in a confused mass of whatever, information all over the place; but they’d have a sense of how it all works--how everything is worked out by God, our creator, for his glory and really for the glory of his people.

◊ Counsel--it would mean that we would have the ability to actually share with other people sound advise. It would come from our own experience of God being present and directing us.

So these are the gifts of the Spirit; the fruit of the Spirit I already mentioned--these should be what we experience, yet we know that as we go into our daily life we’re often bereft of these gifts or these fruits.

Now just more or less in closing there’s a prayer here which I think is very beautiful.

Without the Holy Spirit, God is far away
Christ stays in the past,
the Gospel is a dead letter,
the church is simply an organization,
authority a matter of domination,
mission a matter of propaganda,
the liturgy no more than an evocation,
Christian living a slave morality.

But in the Holy Spirit:

the cosmos is resurrected and groans with
the birth-pangs of the kingdom,
the risen Christ is there,
the Gospel is the power of life,
the church shows forth life of the Trinity,
authority is a liberating service,
mission is a Pentecost,
the liturgy is both memorial and anticipation,
human action is deified.
Strong words! I think it was one of the Greek Fathers said this--well, not one of the Greek Fathers--Metropolitan Ignatios of Latakia\textsuperscript{ii}--that was recently--bishop of a see in Turkey.

Now this is the very essence of what we mean by Charismatic Renewal: that people experience the baptism in the Holy Spirit, that people become equipped with the gifts and they exercise them in the body for the upbuilding of the Church. Now I would like to invite any of those of you who feel you would like to be prayed with for either inner healing, forgiveness, or release of the Holy Spirit, because you’ve all--if you’ve received the sacraments you’ve received the Holy Spirit. The question is whether the power has been released. Okay? So if you want to pray, I’d ask those of you who don’t want to stay, you’re free to leave. Those of you who do want to stay we have a member of our prayer group from--where do you live? Is it Bourbonnais or Bradley? Rural Kankakee. Would you like to introduce yourself to the group? Okay. Darwin has been in the Charismatic Renewal for many years --he accepted my invitation to come today.

\textbf{Endnotes}

\textit{On Baptism 20;Sources Chretiennes 35:96.}

\textit{Metropolitan Ignatios of Latakia, “Main Theme Address,” The Uppsala Report 1968 (Geneva: WCC, 1969) 298}

\textbf{Bibliography}

“For whoever asks, receives; whoever seeks, finds; whoever knocks, is admitted.” It would be a shame if we were to think that this gospel reading is simply a lesson in what to say when we pray. Someone might interpret this reading as simply expressing some good words to use in prayer--indeed, it’s much more! Jesus was interested in teaching his disciples not what to say, but how to pray. And how to pray is not primarily a matter of words. How to pray is related to how to live. And in order to pray we have to know something about the underlying reality that we address in prayer. What or whom are we talking to when we pray? This is far from obvious. And the history of the world is replete with many conflicting images of God or gods or goddesses or divine beings and whatever. And most of this, from Jesus’ viewpoint, was completely irrelevant to the real nature of reality--to God as Jesus knows God.

From Jesus’ personal viewpoint--and that’s what he’s sharing--the ground of our being, the source of everything that is, is a personal, benevolent (meaning good-willed) and beneficent (meaning good-doing) person whom we can call “Daddy,” which is actually the word he used, “Abba, Daddy.” This Abba, according to Jesus, is unreasonably generous almost to the point of being wastefully generous to his creation, giving from an inexhaustible abundance for the very pleasure of giving. And the parables often reflect this idea of God, which we cannot really deduce from reason or come to by any kind of logic. For example, you will remember the story of the vineyard and the workers and how God pays a full day’s wage to those who work but an hour. This is not an idea of justice! This is an idea of mercy, meaning treating people much better than they deserve. And mind you, this way of treating people has many critics today and in Jesus’ day, people thinking that God is really too good, too generous, too merciful, over-joyful--that’s really not fair! It’s not fair for God to be generous to others, but that’s God’s nature. And Jesus revels in this mercy, this generosity, this unreasonable desire to give!

Now to be ignorant of the true nature of God might render a person uselessly anxious, irrationally fearful, perhaps angry, aggressive or even violent--or on the other hand, perhaps dispirited and depressed. These various emotions are responses to a misunderstanding of the nature of our world and our creator--in many cases.

Now if we do comprehend the very nature of God and God’s desire to help us, then we need to pray with what we can call expectant faith. Faith has many facets: trust is one, obedience another, submission, surrender; but one very important facet of faith is expectation--that when we address God with our needs, we expect that they will be met! This is not selfishness to believe and to expect that God will hear our need and respond to it--not if we are talking about real need as opposed to perhaps vague desires; but real need God wants to fill in us. Now when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he wants us to understand that God is not only the one who appreciates and creates our world, but that actually God is sympathetic to and cooperative with us, that as we are unfinished beings
God has given us a tremendous latitude in working our way toward fulfillment and completion of the life he has inaugurated. This is the way God wants it, and this gives us a true sense of power over ourselves dependent, of course, upon expectant faith.

Now one word you will not find Jesus using in the gospels, which many Christians and Catholics like to use all the time, is the word “almighty.” Now this is for a very good reason. The reason is that “almighty” conjures up in most human beings’ imagination ideas that are completely inappropriate for God. For example, someone might say, “Well, if God wanted to, God could make this building disappear.” That is not true. God is at this very moment creating this world. God is at this very moment, through the laws God has created, sustaining this world in being; and God cannot move against his own will, so we have to be very careful about the word “almighty.” St. Augustine in discussing the idea of miracles says, “A miracle is not the suspension of the laws of nature. It’s the application of a law we don’t understand.” St. Thomas Aquinas says that creation is not something that happened long ago, and now we have the result. Creation is something on-going, happening right now. So we are now being created, and we are now creating what we shall become--with God--God initiating and cooperating with us in a true partnership.

With this in mind we have to recognize that problems that have been cooking for forty or fifty years will not be solved in two minutes. Change for the better, change for the worse, change of any kind is slow. And so the workings of God’s providential care take time, thus the need for persistence in prayer. If we give up because we don’t see any results, then we never will because there won’t be any. The continuing creation of ourselves is an on-going process that will not be completed as long as we’re walking on this planet.

So this leads then to the idea of the prayer itself as held in today’s text. Jesus intends, I believe, for us to have a certain set of priorities. The first is hallowing the name of God, blessing the name of God. Now the way we use the word “God” and the name of God which is “Jesus”--the way we use these words, and the word “Lord,” and other such words referring to God--sets a tone and creates an atmosphere that either nurtures the world around us or poisons it. We cannot expect the blessings to come to us if we poison the world around us with a disrespectful use of the terms referring to God. “Your kingdom come” is the second priority. For believers we have to recognize that the coming of God’s kingdom is far more important than our own individual needs. In fact, our own individual needs and our fulfillment somehow is interdependent with the needs of all our brothers and sisters in the world. And our own individual needs ought not to obscure the need of all. As we progress in our faith, we will see God fulfilling our needs and bringing about the kingdom Jesus came to begin.
Today we hear from the Old Testament the history of the people of God forgetting God, forgetting who it is who is helping them, feeding them, guiding them, leading them. And the reason why the Church kept the Old Testament is that without the Old Testament we get lost because the New Testament is the oasis; the New Testament is the fulfillment of what the Old Testament is talking about. Now when we hear about the various laws of the Old Testament sometimes we might get a little bit misled by thinking too much in the terms which are historically conditioned, by which I mean, for example, worshipping the golden calf. Well, people today of course don’t worship golden calves; but we have other ways in which we do the same thing--so we have to try to get to the nub of the problem.

The nub of the problem, of course, really has to do with human pride! And human pride is actually a very hidden thing. If you want to get people to talk about what’s wrong with the world, well they’ll bring up all kinds of things. They’ll talk about violence and they’ll talk about greed; they’ll talk about lust; they’ll talk about all kinds of broken families. They’ll go on and on, but no one will ever mention pride!--I’d rather think. And if they do, they don’t know what it means anyway! Pride is something that is so much part of us that we don’t actually recognize it as causing any trouble.

Now in a lot of ways we can sympathize with the people wandering in the desert. They felt lost! They felt abandoned! And when people feel lost or abandoned they more or less grasp at whatever--straws, you might say. This is a typical human experience, and we might come to the conclusion maybe a necessary human experience. The lesson I think the Scriptures are trying to tell us is although the people felt abandoned and felt lost, they weren’t lost at all because God knew where they were. God knew where they were! God was capable of finding them! That’s the point. And so much throughout Scripture, Old and New Testament both, there’s this idea of God being the shepherd. He sends the shepherds; then he is displeased with the shepherds, and so then he says he’ll shepherd--first of all he says, “Well, I’ll send new shepherds.” And then they don’t work out either, so then he says, “I’ll shepherd the people myself.” We get this progressive movement toward the idea of this personal relationship between God and a people that is so intimate that actually we can know from within ourselves where God is leading us.

But we in our own personal lives have to recapitulate the whole story. We have to go through the experience of wandering. We have to go through the experience of being lost. We have to go through the experience of feeling abandoned. We have to go through the experience of following the shepherds, the various shepherds--leaders of our lives--and we do; we cling to people. We think, “Well, this guy has got the answer, or this one is the one I should follow.” And that’s actually all part of our experience--we do this. And gradually one after the other God removes these things. It’s not that they are necessarily all bad all the time, it’s just that we can’t keep them. We have to keep moving. And eventually we come to the point of recognizing that God is our shepherd, and that many
people might aid in the task--and God can use anybody he wants to shepherd us; but really it’s God who is doing the shepherding. And then we come to understand really what the Church is all about. The Church is really God’s work, and there are various human persons doing God’s work in the Church; but it’s really God doing it. Whenever it’s really God’s work being done, it’s God doing it. And then, of course, they’re not always doing it; sometimes they do their own thing just the way people did their own thing in the desert. And there are ways of justifying all of this--people always justify--they think that’s right. That’s really because they’re lost.

So we always come back to God. The trouble is human pride, of its nature, is something that pulls us away from God, pulls us into ourselves. It’s the result of sin or it’s the cause of sin--maybe both. St. John of the Cross says that it’s the capital of all capital sins. I’m not quoting him exactly; more or less that is what he says, and that every sin contains pride. It’s the root of every sin. And it has many different forms. Sometimes it comes across as arrogance; that’s the one we see perhaps most clearly. But sometimes it comes across as obsequious obedience--that’s pride too because it’s a false idea of self; it’s a false feeling of self! The only true feeling of self and true idea of self we can have is one connected to God. St. Paul uses the expression, “members of one body.” If we understand ourselves and feel ourselves a member of a body bigger than ourselves, that is a true understanding of who we are. And so in this sense we really do belong to each other, but there is some force in us trying to say, “No, we don’t belong to each other; we’re all independent! We’re all separate!” And that’s pride.

Now there is a good form of pride which, of course, only makes things worse in a sense to understand it. There is a good sense of pride--a sense of good self-esteem that is the result of doing well and following God’s direction and utilizing our talents and our abilities in achieving through God’s grace what it is God has given us to do. There is a lawful, legitimate and virtuous pride, but there’s also something false that can even enter into that! When we imagine, for example, that our accomplishments were really because of ourselves! Well, we have to, of course, cooperate with God--this whole idea is a matter of cooperation. It’s not because of ourselves that we accomplish what we do. If it’s a true accomplishment, it’s because God has initiated and cooperated with the whole procedure, the whole enterprise. So for whatever reason it’s very hard for people to stay with this sense of God, and they may drift in and drift out; and that’s part of what we see in life. And what’s important is we realize that we’re never really lost because God knows where we are, and when we really get desperate enough God will find us--and perhaps we have to let God find us.
Today we have the story of the weeds and the wheat--as interpreted! Now the interpretation, which is the inspired word of God, comes after the original parable--quite a few verses after--there are quite a few verses intervening. When we first hear the story of the wheat and weeds, at least I think of ourselves: that we are basically good, that we are created by God; but there’s also something false in us--there is something--some of the devil; there is sinfulness in every person--I think of that. But in this particular interpretation, that’s what Matthew gives us--and you know the inspired authors sometimes wrote their own explanations; in other words Matthew sometimes writes what only Matthew writes--not Mark or Luke; sometimes they share common stories. So this, as I see it, is the inspired author Matthew’s gift to us--the story being probably common property of other evangelists. As it is presented today there is this idea that although we all may be good and evil, nevertheless there are those of us who are really saints of God and there are others who are not, who are really agents of evil.

Now it would be a wrong use of this story to use it to point fingers; however, it is very interesting that when it comes to remarking about noticing what is profoundly evil, what is it that’s mentioned? It’s not those who are violent; that’s not mentioned by name. It’s not robbery. It’s not any of the things for which we put people away in Stateville. It’s something else. It’s called “all those who draw others to apostasy.” Now that is not a
crime; this is what we have to note. And when Jesus mentions one thing that is most evil, it’s not a crime: “drawing others to apostasy.”

Who are those who draw others to apostasy? Well, not the people in Stateville; those people are losers. And we have to understand that Jesus’ idea of evil is not the same thing as our idea of losers or criminals--something very different. Who are those who draw others to apostasy? Well, many people involved in Hollywood--and the entire Hollywood scene really is drawing others to apostasy. Many of the great publications are drawing people to apostasy. And I think we as believers need to be aware of this: That when it comes to what is really evil in the sight of God, this is it! Jesus had other remarks in a similar vein: “Woe to him who scandalizes a little one”--the same idea--causing others to sin, causing others to fall--again not a crime! Right? But it’s really grave evil. So gradually we have to try to see good and evil through God’s eyes, so to speak--through Jesus’ eyes. And it will be very different from looking at it from a social viewpoint or a political viewpoint or a legal viewpoint--very different!
Every time we experience the death of a loved one we ourselves die in some small way; and therefore there is a great difference between knowing—as we know many facts—that one day we shall die and actually experiencing death, which is something else again. And from the standpoint of our faith this is not something morbid or macabre. It is not something we should rue; rather it is something we should meditate upon and become very familiar with, so that we can indeed even develop an anticipation of death and recognize it to be what it is intended to be: a homecoming, a welcome return to the place of our origin—the presence of God!

Now as I mentioned this is the message of faith; it’s not the message of reason; it’s not the result of personal experience. It rests on faith. And as St. Paul said, “Our faith rests on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” The way he put it, “If Christ were not raised from the dead, our faith is in vain.” Now it is this very victory of life over death that the Christian Church celebrates especially every Sunday. This is what makes Sunday the Lord’s day. It is the celebration of victory, the victory of God’s life over everything that tries to obstruct God’s life: every kind of death, every kind of evil, every kind of sickness, every kind of short-coming. For in Christ we see revealed the will of God which is that we have life, and life in abundance; and that even as we remain on this earth we are already incorporated into a new family, the family of God. And you are really called children of God, which we are not by virtue of our birth on earth, but we are by virtue of our baptism.
into Christ. We’re invited to take his place in the family. He is the only begotten son, and thus we all become children of God. And one day we shall see God face to face, that is if we accept the invitation. And when we see God face to face we shall become like God!

Now it says in the Letter to the Hebrews “The devil kept the world in bondage at the fear of death.” Fear of death then is in a sense the total opposite of faith. Faith, at least the faith offered to us in Christ, is an anticipation of the fulfillment of our very purpose, our meeting with the Father who started us first of all in the order of nature through the creation and secondly in the order of Spirit at our baptism. Fear of death, of course, is just the opposite. It looks at death as an end. Well, this is partially true; it’s an end of something, but it’s not the end of what really counts. It’s not the end of life. And life in the sense it’s used in Scripture is the eternal existence of God, the origin of everything visible and invisible, and a gift given to us for no reason but the love of God.

So as we come today to commit Caroline to the Lord, it’s important that we pray also for ourselves, that we be prepared by a life of giving, by a life of love, by a life of virtue, by a life of integrity, that we be prepared one day to be near God. And that in some way we have the right or the privilege of celebrating, anticipating even now, this great gift of God’s own life given to each of us. This is the faith of the Church; this is the faith we celebrate in every sacrament; this is the faith that Caroline has died in. It is our hope and our belief that it is also the cause of her resurrection in Christ.
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

The Potter and The Clay 17th Week of Ordinary Time Thursday, July 30, 1998
7:00 a.m.  Jer 18:1-6;  Mt 13:47-53  (St. Peter Chrysologus)  (PottClay)

Today in the scroll of Jeremiah we have this beautiful image of the potter and the wheel. God sends Jeremiah to the potter’s shop so that he can receive this image--so that God uses images around us to teach us something. And he says, “Jeremiah, this is the way it is with Israel. Can I not do what this potter is doing--fashioning Israel as I want?” And that’s very important that we have a sense that we are on the move towards something. Yes, God has begun something among us, in us; but it is not finished! It’s a very important idea to get across. There is absolutely no possibility of any spirituality if we have this idea that we are already finished. We are being fashioned. We as individuals are being fashioned, and we as a Church are being fashioned!

Now, of course, every image comes to a point of limping; sooner or later something won’t quite fit. Of course, what limps about this image is that clay does not have a will of its own. A potter may have various problems; but it [the clay] can’t resist, so to speak, the work of the potter. We, on the other hand, do have wills of our own. But those wills will only find true happiness and joy in submitting to the potter, allowing the potter to do the work he’s doing. Resisting the potter will ruin the project.
Today we have two very beautiful and powerful readings, one from Jeremiah and one from Matthew; and they really are intertwined because they’re both about the rejection of the prophet. Jeremiah was rejected; Jesus was rejected; in fact, in retrospect all the prophets were rejected—who were true prophets. Now it took a long time to realize that this was the case; but it was only after 587, which was the time of the historical exile, that the leaders of the people started to realize that the people they had been following had been the false prophets. And what was the basic message of the false prophets? “Everything’s fine. Everything’s great. God loves you. You’re pleasing the Lord; keep doing what you’re doing.” That was the message of the false prophets. And the true prophet like Jeremiah was saying, “The Lord is not pleased. This house will become like Shiloh. This house will be destroyed. You’re not really following my ways.” And of course they hated that! And they hated Jeremiah! They hated Isaiah and Micah and Nahum and Obadiah and Amos and Hosea! See? All of them! But they, the rejected prophets, later became the ones the Church called the prophets—and later Judaism—Jesus follows in that line. He comes preaching; they say, “Where did he get all this? Who is he? Who does he think he is? He’s telling us that we’re not right.”

So there’s great need—and today is the feast of St. Ignatius of Loyola. What better day to talk about the need for the discernment of spirits! The Christian community and the Jewish community need to discern the spirit behind whatever is going on; the spirit that is prophesying, the spirit that is speaking, the spirit of every movement needs to be discerned. And in general we—meaning all of us all the way back to the time of Jeremiah, Isaiah and as far back as you can go—we don’t do a very good job of this. Somehow we have never gotten the idea that the truth of God has many competitors. And people make decisions on what is true on the basis of very flimsy criteria. This was true then; it’s true now. It was true at the time of Jesus—flimsy criteria. So this is something we all have to learn; so rather than be concerned about how we’ve done badly in the past, now we have to say that from now on we are going to learn how to discern spirits.

What criteria do we use? Now in Jesus’ day what criteria did he recommend? When John the Baptist’s disciples came and said, “Well, are you the one who is to come or is there another,” what did he say? He said, “Well, what do you see? The blind see and the lame walk.” That’s one criteria—healing! It’s only one, mind you. It’s not in itself all inclusive however because there is such a thing as people who do have the gift of healing, but who are also off on some other way. In other words they don’t have the gift of prophesy, so they’re not teachers. We have given to us in the apostolic college—see Jesus knew all of this was going to happen—he gave to us in the apostolic college teachers to guide us on our ways.

And the faith of the Church is a living faith, and it’s always growing. There is a Roman, Latin saying, “Ecclesia semper reformanda, the Church must always be being...
reformed.” It’s a passive voice. “The Church must always be being reformed.” And thus the living faith needs a living, teaching office which is what the teaching office of the magisterium is. Now there are people today in the Church, for example, who do not follow the pope. They say he’s too liberal or he’s too conservative. But what are they judging by? Their own criteria and what they feel! What’s that worth? See if everyone judges by “our own criteria,” where do we end up? The Tower of Babel! That’s why we have the Church. That’s why we have the living magisterium. But there’re all kinds of people and they’re sincere. See? Catholics United for the Faith. Do they accept the pope? No, not really! Nor the bishops? No! Why? Because in their opinion the bishops are not orthodox. But what is their criterion? Or the Roman Catholic Remnant--another one. Oh, they think the pope’s terrible! Well, by what criteria? Their own personal, subjective criteria. That is not valid!

Now if I step on some toes? Too bad! Because that’s what a prophet does! For example, there are people who have flocked to Medjugorje because they are just absolutely certain that the Blessed Mother’s appearing there. By what criterion do they make that judgment? They say, “Well, rosaries turn gold.” Where have you ever heard of that! Did Jesus turn anything into gold? Is it ever mentioned in the Bible? Is there any story of any canonized saint that could turn anything into gold? As far as I know that has never been a sign of anything--unless you’re talking about Midas--not Mary. But people do not think about these things. They do not discern them. They just flock to one place, then another place. And then they think God is going to bless them! Well, that doesn’t work. There’s no discernment going on here! More is needed than simply being good-willed. The world’s full of good-willed people, but who are really going in the wrong direction.

So this is what is meant here by discernment of spirits. We have to really find objective criteria and always in connection with the living voice of the Church. That’s why we have a living Church. That’s why we have a living voice. It’s not all dead letter; it’s not all something in the past. That was the problem in the reformation. The reformers were well-intentioned to some degree. They wanted to clean up abuses in the Church, but then they distrusted the living authority within the Church; therefore they had to set some other rival authority. Well, what did they find? Well, they said it would be Scripture; the trouble was they were a little naive about that. They thought that well, they could just open the book and they would know exactly what was meant. They found out that all of a sudden the reformation itself became a Tower of Babel, each one having a different opinion about what it said.

That’s why we have, again, the living magisterium of the Church discerning--the whole Church together discerning--under the guidance of the Holy Spirit what the word of God means. See, the word of God is not a dead thing in the past, and the Creed is not a dead letter that was formed long ago and now we have to go back there and find it. No, it’s a living truth within us that has as its basis the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. So this is really what the prophets are leading people to.
If you really want to know another criterion for their prophet, every single prophet believed in orthopraxis—orthopraxis like orthodoxy—but orthodoxy usually has to do with ideas. Orthopraxis has to do with religious practice and morality. Not only were they always concerned with the covenant, that is God’s agreement with human life, with the life of Israel, the federation of the tribes of Israel; but also they were constantly concerned about justice for the poor, justice for widows, justice for people who didn’t have others to help them. All of them have this concern! So if you ever have any group that tells you they’re more Catholic than the pope, or that they’re more orthodox, say, “Well, now what’s your position on the poor, helping the widows and the orphans? What do you think about that?” And if they say, “Well, that doesn’t bother me,” well, you notice right there it’s not the criteria of God.

So it is our responsibility then to be not only formed once, but to be constantly reformed in our conscience by the presence of the Spirit of Truth in the Church. And if you study the Church, you’ll see a tremendous consistency that is all abiding throughout time. Yes, individual members of the Church—including even popes, cardinals, bishops and so on—have been scoundrels, but the teaching of the Church remains consistent with itself and with the word of God as it has always been interpreted in the Church. And this is because of the all abiding presence of the Spirit of Prophesy, who originally spoke in olden times through such people as Jeremiah, and which spoke at the time of the reformation through Ignatius of Loyola, and who speaks today in the person of John Paul II—and will always be with us until the end of time.
“Avoid greed in all its forms. A man may be wealthy, but his possessions do not guarantee him life.” Today all three readings focus on wealth and invite us to examine our attitudes toward wealth, money and material possessions. The reason why all three readings focus on this is that they are issues—these are issues that are very important in following a godly life. Now the gospel divides the idea above into two categories. The first is passing or temporary wealth. Passing, temporary wealth is by its nature measurable. It’s quantifiable; and we measure it in various units like dollars, pounds, yen, Deutsch Mark. The second kind of wealth brought up is being rich in the sight of God, and this kind of wealth is by its nature not measurable by any measure we know because it isn’t quantifiable; it’s rather a matter of quality, a quality attained in this life however belonging to our being, and therefore it perdures; it continues past this life into life eternal.

Considering the first kind of wealth, the first book—the Book of Ecclesiastes—says, “Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity!” And the idea is that we labor many years and put out a great deal of effort for something that does not affect us in terms of our actual being. It’s merely a matter of what we have! And there are many people in our society that have substituted who they are or what they are for what they have. We live in a culture of having, a culture of possessing; and this is a very serious misjudgment because what we have does not affect what we are, and what we have is very temporal, i.e. temporary—that is passing. Behind this is a doctrine that human nature has two sides to it: a material side and a spiritual side.

Now many people are in fact spirit blind? All the data they’ve collected from life all comes from one side of their nature—the material side. What they see is only what appears to their eyes. What they hear is only what falls upon their eardrums. What they feel is only what comes in contact with their nervous system. Half of reality is completely missing from their perception. What would it be like if you tried to assemble a puzzle with fifty percent of the pieces missing? Would you even have a fair guess of what the picture in the puzzle looked like? Most likely, not. But that’s exactly the way it is with many people who try to understand the meaning of life with fifty percent of their perception blocked because the communication coming from God, from the spiritual side of life, is completely absent. They do not hear the word of God. They do not feel the presence of God. They know nothing of the guidance and direction that God is constantly addressing to them. Consequently they seek security in, for example, possessions or money; but the gospel says, “You fool! This very night your life will be required of you.” This can be said to everyone who builds a sense of security based upon a merely material perception of life. It may be valid, but it’s only valid until the day of our death; and we never know when that will come, but it surely will!
From the Scriptural viewpoint a much more preferable form of security is found in investment in the work of God. And the prophets from ancient times up until Christ himself always told the people of God exactly where God’s interests really lay. And they encouraged people to invest in God’s concerns such as feeding the hungry, helping widows, orphans, the poor in general. From biblical logic the idea is that the poor are God’s special creatures. Helping them is gaining allies among those who are God’s favorites, and this is wisdom and a wise investment.

Now these thoughts basically come under the category of what is called stewardship. And there are certain basic teachings the Scriptures give us concerning the nature of wealth and our existence here on earth. The first is—which is rather obvious, but we need to be reminded--earth is only a temporary home. Earthly things, money and possessions, are only lent to us by God for our use--and he does want us to use them; however, we must render an account to God for our use of the gifts we have received. Those who cling to earthly power and wealth act foolishly for those who have not will lose the little they think they have. This teaching comes from the parable of the talents. It is worth our contemplation. Responsible stewardship requires a concrete application of the belief that God is the true owner of everything; and it requires us to give of ourselves to help the poor, feed the hungry and share the good news of the kingdom. St. Paul in today’s second reading advises the Colossians, “So put to death those parts of you that belong to the earth: fornication, indecency, lust, evil desires, and the ruthless greed which is nothing less than idolatry.” As St. Paul explains, “What you have done is put aside your old self with its past deeds and put on a new man, one who grows in knowledge as he is formed anew in the image of the Creator.”
There are in the New Testament several stories of Jesus feeding the multitude. This may not be a one unique occasion--but like the healings that Jesus performed many times, a sign of the abundance of the kingdom of God that is now available. In a similar way the Eucharist we celebrate is also a sign of the abundance of the kingdom. And some biblical scholars suggest that Matthew’s own addition here about the gathering of the fragments, not in other stories necessarily, may be an allusion to the early Eucharists of the Church since gathering fragments is a sign of reverence. Be that as it may, it’s important that we look to something that’s very specific in today’s story, not in other stories told by Mark or Luke for example; and that is that in this particular story found in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says, “Give them something to eat yourself.” And the disciples say, “We don’t have anything, except five loaves, two fish.”

This is very important because there is a principle: Grace builds on nature. When it comes to redemption, when it comes to salvation, we’re not starting at ground zero. After all God has already created and is creating right now the world, and therefore the redemption is the transformation of what already is; and there already is something for us to work with. In addition to that, we need to be very open with the gifts that we have been given; and it’s when we’re open that they become charisms for the building up of the Church. Some people have a very poor understanding of the charisms. They think, for example, that they are, as it were, “out of the blue”--that God just, you might say, alights on someone and gives them a charism that is totally unrelated to their own personal nature and upbringing and so on. This is not true. Take, for example, the charism of teaching. God does not take someone who can’t put a sentence together and give them the charism of teaching in the Church. It doesn’t work that way; grace builds on nature. For example, today in the Church we have Pope John Paul II, a great teacher. But this charism of teaching didn’t come out of the blue! Karol Wojtyla in his humanity is a very intelligent man who from a very young age has used his natural talents to learn and to express himself in prose and poetry and learning philosophy and theology and history and law and many other subjects. And therefore his nature is disposed for the charism.

Now we all have some nature. We all have some natural talents and inclinations. The question is: Do we dispose ourselves to the Spirit to use them for the upbuilding of the body? Jesus said, “Give them something to eat yourself.” The disciples said, “We don’t have anything.” That’s really what we’re always saying, “We don’t have anything,” or “I can’t do that! That’s not for me!” You’d be amazed how often I hear this! But you do have something, and if you are willing to use it, God will bless that and it will become abundance through the grace of God! This is the miracle at work, and this miracle will be repeated over and over again.
Now another point: this particular reading has also become controversial or rather an interpretation of it has become controversial especially in relation to my friend, Fr. Lauer, who writes One Bread One Body. You may have his books; I recommend them very much. Well, someone suggested that there weren’t only five loaves; that actually a lot of people had food under their cloaks unwilling to share them, and then when the feeding started they decided to share. So it wasn’t just simply a matter of five loaves being multiplied, but actually many were contributing. And Fr. Lauer said, “Well, that’s not what the story says and that’s taking away from God.” But I myself am not so sure—although I respect Fr. Lauer—and this is why, again, we need to go back to human nature. If a parish needs a church, you start talking to people about a church. What you usually hear is, “Oh Father, we don’t have any money. There’s no way; we can never do it.” Then one person might say, “Well, I’ll contribute five thousand dollars, and another one says, “Well, I’ll contribute three thousand dollars.” And pretty soon you have a little core and that grows and grows, and pretty soon people who didn’t have a penny all of a sudden are contributing three thousand dollars! Where did it come from? They already had it, but they weren’t willing before—now they are. Is that a miracle? In my mind it is! Is that God’s work? In my mind it is God’s work because that money was not disposed to the work of the Church before—now it is. That’s a change. Nature has been transformed. Isn’t that the work of grace? Of course it is! So I say, “Praise the Lord!”

So when we observe the work of the kingdom, you know we can not always, let’s say, draw lines. And is it actually more marvelous if God were to fabricate out of the thin air food to feed the poor? Would that be more marvelous than if we were really to give a share of what we already have to do the same task? Would it be a greater miracle or would it be a greater miracle if we were to become more generous? So while I do not propose this as the definitive interpretation, I do propose it as food for thought!
Today’s story about Jesus walking on the water, calming the storm, and restoring people to health is a story that manifests or discloses his messianic mission. Now it’s good to remember what St. Augustine said about miracles: that they are not the suspension of natural laws. They are the exercise of laws we don’t understand. For a moment we might take the one walking on the water. Now, of course, no one understands this; however, we have observed a phenomenon called levitation found not only in Christian circles among those who practice austerity and intensive prayer, but even in other religious cultures and settings--levitation, meaning that the physical body seems to float. Now this seems to be contrary to the natural law which we call gravity, but gravity itself is also relative as we noticed how men on the moon can in fact float there. And that, of course, we can explain because of the relative smallness of the mass of the moon.

However there’s another observation we can make from our own lives. You’ve all had the experience, probably, anyway, at least you’ve heard of it, of “dead weight.” A person who is unconscious seems by all measure to weigh more than if he or she were awake. Now I don’t know if a scale would pick up the difference or not, but if you’ve ever tried to carry a person who is asleep or unconscious you know there is something to this phrase “dead weight.” What this means is that there is something very relative about weight, and that the relation goes this way: the more conscious, the less we weigh. And consciousness is not just on or off because there’s various degrees of it. And Jesus had just been on the
mountain alone with the Father in prayer, and therefore was in a state of extreme consciousness!

Now we have other metaphors in our language which actually point to something important. We talk about what “weighs us down.” We talk about the “heaviness” of our thoughts or feelings. And these metaphors we should pay attention to because they have to do with our consciousness. We are, in fact, weighed down by, for example, anxiety, worry. We are “puffed up, inflated,” by such things as self importance. All of these negative emotions affect our consciousness and weigh us down, make us bigger in a gross sense; whereas prayer, true prayer, lightens us, lifts us, makes it more possible for us to walk above the turbulence that exists in the world--which makes walking on water not only a story but also a symbol of what prayer should and can do for us, and what faith should and can do for us. It gives us a lightness of being.

Now doubtless, in the mind of the evangelists, the apostles are representative of the Church. After all, these stories were written quite a few years after they occurred. And the evangelists--it is well known now--are also referring to the Church, and the boat is the Church, doubtlessly. And the apostles are the believers, only they’re not that believing--they are, but they’re not. Their belief is incipient, but it’s not very profound. The Church, unlike Jesus, is caught up in the travails and the turmoil of the world, the storms of life. Jesus, who is never to abandon his beloved, is present; only even this is a surprise--so little faith they have. And when he called to them to lighten up, to live in faith, Peter is able to for a short time do that, but then, again, through fright, through looking at himself not at Jesus, he falters and falls. This pattern is repeated again and again in the life of faith.
A Change In Ourselves

There are different ways we could look at the story of the transfiguration. One of the ways we could think of Peter and James and John as falling into deep physical slumber, as you might do on any particular occasion—a good night’s sleep—awakened from this finding Jesus in a physically altered state. Or we could think of it differently. We could think of slumber as the ordinary consciousness that we call “being awake.” And out of this, through the grace of God, for a moment, these chosen disciples were given the grace to see Jesus as he really is, as he always is, as he always was since God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. They had a glimpse into the glory which is light from light which cannot be perceived by the naked eye, but only by the soul enlightened by grace.

The reason why this second interpretation is helpful is that it shows or points to the work of God as awakening ourselves. Do we understand that what God is doing in the world is not simply changing things outside of ourselves, but changing ourselves—and changing ourselves involves the way we look at, the way we perceive, the way we think about God and life and one another. I have occasionally been shocked by people who attest to the fact that they never thought about how, for example, the gospel teachings affect their daily life, perhaps their work, whatever it be! All work involves other people, and therefore the gospel has to be addressed to every relation we have. And this means a change in ourselves.
Now this change is inaugurated by grace--true, but grace always has to be cooperated with, carried through, so to speak. I am convinced that daily God touches us! Daily, if we are willing to observe, God touches us, shows us something, discloses his presence in various ways that could not be counted! But the question is: Are we really awake enough from our slumber to notice? It seems to me that if we are focused on what God wants to show us in any particular day, any particular day becomes a day of revelation. And this would gradually make each one of us a very faithful disciple, and it would show each one of us exactly where God wants us to witness to his love, or to his justice, to his peace, to his power of reconciling, to his forgiveness, to his glory! Peter had a bad idea. He said, “Lord, let us erect some tents here.” That is more or less a typical reaction to religious experience: Let’s stay put; let’s stay here; let’s enjoy this! But the gospel won’t let us stay put! It will always send us forward.
Today we have an example of a teaching that has been often misunderstood in the history of our Christian faith. “If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and come after me.” Now what does it mean to deny one’s very self? That’s the key question. We’ve had many examples in the history of what we call spirituality of people who tried to practice this without actually figuring out before hand what one’s very self is. Several mistakes come to mind right away: number one, is your very self your body? Now to deny one’s body may or may not be virtuous, but it will not get to the very self because you’re not a body! What about feelings? Are we our feelings or our desires? Again, it may be very virtuous to deny one’s desires, it may even be necessary; but that won’t get to one’s very self. We’re not just feelings or desires! What about the mind? Are we mind? Again, we have mind; but we are not mind! Every human being is created in the image and the likeness of God. And the image of God in the human person is the feeling of “I.” It’s what every human being has; it’s what no other animal has--feeling of “I.” This is one’s very self.

Now this is not the object of our attention, if you realize what I’m speaking about. It’s not something we work on. It is our attention. It is our awareness--the whole of it--that’s our very self! And when Jesus says, “One must deny one’s very self,” this is rooted in the truth that apart from God we’re nothing. We are only the image of God; we are not God! But if God is not the center of our life, then we become God. When God revealed himself...
to Moses he simply said, “I am who am.” It’s very simple. And if we really want to follow Jesus, we have to seek that “I am,” which is the origin of our own feeling of “I”--but also is the origin and the creator of it, the ground of our being, the origin of everything, without which there would be nothing. And only when we live as a reflection of that, can we really gain what Jesus is offering. And if we pursue ourselves as the center of everything, we stand to lose!
“If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you would be able to say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it would move.” It is very easy for us to take biblical quotations out of context. We have to remember that the faith that moves mountains is an expression found within the context of the story about the confrontation with evil. And the apostles come to Jesus expressing powerlessness: “Why couldn’t we do anything?” “This is because you don’t have enough trust.” Trust here, or faith it’s also called, is a living relationship with God, a living connection with God, a living dependence on God. Everyone since the beginning of time probably has had some sense that things in this world aren’t what they could be. We have been confronting evil, and there are various ways to approach evil--most of them useless! The only right way to approach evil is with a sense that God has power which he gives to us to confront and defeat all that ought not be in our lives; that we are truly made in the image and likeness of God; and if we have a right relation with God, which is called righteousness, we are victorious.

Now this victory is not an egotistical thing; in fact, to be egotistical is not to be righteous. It would be a false self-righteousness centered on the self. And the first reading ends “The just man because of his faith shall live.” The just man is the righteous man; the righteous man is the one who is not living in himself but in God. God gives us the power to overcome everything that stands in the way of God’s will. And, of course, this life of faith is not a life without pain or suffering. It involves pain and suffering as we can see exemplified in the life in Jesus Himself. But it is a life of victory! But too often people who imagine themselves to be believers--they may be believers in a certain sense, that is, they may believe in Christ; or they may believe in the Creed, or they may believe in many things: teachings and ideas--but they don’t actually have a living relation with God that empowers them to move mountains! So like the disciples they say, “Well, we can’t do anything. We’re too small. We’re too weak. We are helpless.” That’s, of course, all true in a self-centered way, but in God we are not weak and we’re not
helpless. Then Jesus is always trying to get people connected to the source of power, which is God!
Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Dominic. Dominic was connected. Dominic had a very powerful, positive view of life. And he lived in a period when many people had become, I would say, despairing. They’d given up on the goodness of life. They created, well actually, a rival church called the Albigensian Church centered in Albi, southern France. I was there last fall. The Albigensians promoted suicide. Why? Well, life was terrible; end it as soon as possible! Euthanasia, abortion—they opposed life; they opposed reproduction. Why bring people into this terrible world? This Dominic saw as a total distortion of the truth—the truth that makes us free and brings joy into life, the truth that empowers us to move all the mountains that stand in the way of the life of abundance that God intends for us. And Dominic preached tirelessly and gathered others around him to preach against this foul and festering idea that life is really not worth living.

Now if you look at the history of the world actually that idea is relatively popular! Many cultures have it. It’s the root of Yoga; it’s the root of many Hindu ideas, Buddhist ideas. There is this idea that life as we know it is a terrible mistake. Now life as we know it is not what God intends—true. It has been distorted by our own lack of responsibility, which we call sin. But it’s very redeemable, and it remains very good because it’s God’s creation. And that’s why Jesus came to bring redemption and salvation, restoration to what is fundamentally good—but distorted.

And the ideas which are life denying, which don’t see goodness in life or don’t see life as a blessing, these are really evil lies whether you call it Albigensianism or whatever else you want to call it, whether it’s ancient or modern, whether it comes from your neighbor or whoever it comes from, or yourself—it’s wrong! We need to have a sense of how great God’s plan for us really is, and how nothing can stand in the way of it except our lack of faith and trust. If we don’t get connected, if we don’t utilize the gifts God gives us, then we create a self-fulfilling promise that is negative and life-denying. But if we get connected and really trust in God, as Jesus says, “Nothing would be impossible for you.”
Today as we celebrate the memorial of St. Augustine, by coincidence we’re reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians. And it is St. Paul who speaks so eloquently of the absurdity of the cross, the folly of the cross, the stumbling block of the cross. In many ways Augustine in his own life exemplifies what the absurdity and what the folly is all about. Paul says that the Jews look for signs; in fact, he says, “They demand ‘signs.’” This theme comes up quite often in the New Testament. What it is really is a demand that God come down to our level and prove his love, prove his existence, prove his goodness. Augustine, although he did not think of himself as trying to get God to prove anything, did in fact lose himself in the world of his senses, as he says, “looking for God in created things”—not perhaps expecting God to prove something, but perhaps trying to prove to himself that life really was worthwhile and life really had meaning.

And this great enterprise failed miserably because ultimately meaning is not something that can exist on the level of our senses. Paul says that the Greeks demand “wisdom,” again appealing to reason and logic to find meaning and truth. The meaning and the truth comes to us from God in Christ. It’s far beyond our own reason and logic. It is indeed a grace. And this is what Augustine discovered because, as he said, “God pursued” him and drew Augustine into himself, that is, into Augustine’s self where God was. Augustine’s phrase: “Late have I loved thee, Author ever ancient ever new. Late have I loved thee for I sought you outside of myself, and you were within me.”
It is indeed the human problem—if you want to call it that, or the human dilemma—that we have been seeking God outside of ourselves trying to find God in the workings of the world, trying to find God in the security afforded us by money or success, trying to find God in the meaning that we can attain by our own study of science. But all this fails because ultimately we are subjecting God to our judgment and our logic. And St. Paul’s point is that faith is a matter of giving up, surrendering to God’s logic, to God’s judgments, to God’s wisdom, recognizing our own inner bankruptcy. And the world is full of great despair today, and yet precisely because of that there’s great hope. The sooner we recognize our great need for God and God’s presence already within us, the quicker we can come to the meaning that will bring hope and peace to the human heart and salvation and joy to the world.
In today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark the evangelist presents us with the anatomy of a murder. Some people foolishly believe that the only thing that matters is breaking the commandments. But as the New Testament points out so often what really matters is the motivations that we give a home to within our hearts because sooner or later all evil motivations, all negative emotions, will gradually find their way into human actions. But the point is the trail that leads to truly evil actions, crimes, and regrettable decisions starts from little seeds that grow often unobserved.

⇒ In the case of Herod, Herod was a man who was proud. He arrested John really because John told him he was wrong. Now, the force in us that cannot stand to be told we are wrong is called the force of pride; and pride is a very powerful stimulation. Herod made a rather rash offer to Herodias’ daughter. A realistic person would admit, “I was rash. I misspoke. I shouldn’t have offered you half my kingdom.” But Herod was, again, proud. He could not admit that he had done wrong—even with his mouth!

⇒ Then there’s Herodias. Herodias was full of a sense of being wronged and she wanted revenge. Again, it is very natural within our fallen condition for people who feel that they have been wronged to want revenge. Scripture assures us, “‘Vengeance is mine,’ saith the Lord.” If we believe we can bring justice to the world through our own actions, that we can set right what is wrong, we will only create a worse wrong.
And then there is Herodias’ daughter whose primary motivation was pleasing her mother.

⇒ And last thing there is the executioner whose motivation was following orders.

Now these are four qualities that each of us have tasted in our lives:

• We’ve all known the force of pride. We’ve all felt the sting of someone else’s rebuke or criticism. We’ve all been in a position where at least we’ve ought to admit that we misspoke.

• We’ve all been in a position to feel offended by others and want to get back.

• We’ve all looked up to others, especially our parents, and wanted to please them.

• We’ve all been in a position when we feel we have no choice but to follow orders.

But in each one of these cases if even one of the individuals in this long chain of command had actually stopped to consider what did God want or what was really right in itself, then this murder would not have taken place. Evil exists in our world the way it does precisely because there’s a great conspiracy to avoid the issue of “What is God asking of me?” It seems that we’re very willing to wait for the other person especially the person above us who is older than we are--our parents, our rulers, our president, our whatever--to change things for the better. But this story is given to us by Mark to show us that any one of us could change things for the better if we simply ask the question: “What does God ask of us?”
The fourth reading today is a letter from our bishop: [Encouragement to participate in a Renew 2000 small group.]

Now as we reflect on the bishop’s words, the need we have for reflecting on our faith, we are presented in today’s gospel with a story whose importance may easily illude us. I quote: “What you should do when you have been invited is go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host approaches you he will say, ‘My friend, come up higher.’” The moral and spiritual importance of this statement is hard to find. In a world that is full of crime and hunger, disasters all around us, it is amazing that we find the gospel constantly referring to this issue of self-seeking and self importance. The reason is twofold. There is actually a great deal of harm caused by constant competition for a higher place, for personal aggrandizement, which can only be achieved at the expense of others. And much of this harm is actually self-inflicted pain; being humiliated and disappointed and disillusioned by life is partly or largely due to our own illusions of ourselves and our illusions about God and our illusions about life, which we have formed--we have not been given.

Now Jesus makes a great, important contrast, a distinction, between exalting oneself and being exalted. He is not against being exalted, being honored and admired; but he is against exalting oneself. There is such a thing as rightful pride that should belong to every human being because we are all made in the image and likeness of God. In fact, it would be sinful to deny rightful pride to ourselves or to anyone, to feel that we are worthless or of no consequence, when, in fact, we are the beloved of God! But we must remember that this pride and dignity belongs to all God’s creatures and most especially the human creatures made in his image and likeness and capable of self-consciousness and feeling.
There is also a legitimate pride that we earn or merit by our own accomplishments. Who is not really proud of a man like Michael Jordan or Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, or anyone who does a wonderful job? But accomplishments, no matter how great they are, do not make anyone superior to anyone else. Jesus is simply in this particular case observing a fact of our nature: people admire those who are perceived as contributing to the common good, to the general welfare of humanity. In the long run those who are self-seeking and selfish are not admired and not even really liked. Now this is true, and this is what Jesus observed.

How do the values of the gospel actually influence our own personal choices? Why are so many people locked into a humiliating, self-destructive search for success or for others’ approval? Why do people allow their need to be liked or appreciated or accepted to determine how they act, the friends they keep, the choices they make? The reason for this is not far from our powers of observation. It’s inner emptiness. The way God has created us we can only be filled by God Himself! We have an infinite capacity built into us; only the infinite God can fill it. True security, true contentment, comes only with the peace of the Holy Spirit, “the first fruits given to those who believe.” And when we turn away from God, we create a vacuum that nothing and no one can fill. And we condemn ourselves to a life of unhappiness. Jesus was noting and often noted how even very religious people were really very empty! God talk can be just that--talk!

Being exalted requires that we first of all accept our own condition; that is, we are creatures. We are not created to be the center of our own lives; we are created to serve God, to praise God, to work for God’s will and purpose in this world and be happy with him forever in eternity. In the long run those who serve God and the needs of others will be exalted in eternity.
Today Luke is giving us a study in ambivalence. The people of Nazareth are ambivalent toward Jesus: they liked him and they didn’t like him. They were attracted to him and they were repelled by him. This parallels the ambivalence that existed between Herod and John the Baptist. Each of them was attracted and repelled, drawn and yet fearful.

Now it’s very important that we understand the gospel of Christ must find a place in us that is far deeper than simply our likes and dislikes, our attractions and repulsions. By their very nature our emotions simply go from one to the other. If the seed of the gospel is planted only in our emotional part, it will not grow. Emotions are important; they are part of us--but they are only part of us!

The people of Nazareth allowed their emotions to determine their behavior. From the very beginning it says, “They spoke favorably,” and “They marveled.” Now this word “marvel,” it means that something’s beyond them; they don’t get it! Whenever there’s a miracle, then people marvel. It means they can’t understand how it could happen. When Jesus meets with unbelief, he marvels; he doesn’t understand how it can be. So whenever people are marveling, it means they’re being invited into a very deep mystery. But some people cannot, or do not want to, live in mystery. They insist on identifying with their likes and their dislikes, their feelings. They only go along with what attracts them. They go away from what repels them. They are really machines in the human flesh--they are really not full, conscious, spiritual beings--and of these the world is full!
Now Jesus was **not** like this. In this sense, he was not Joseph’s son. He was not only not Joseph’s son because Joseph did not sire him; he was not Joseph’s son because he was not mere flesh, but he was rather the Word of God: conscious, deliberate, aware. And he came to bring that same consciousness and awareness to others. And in Nazareth it didn’t work, and it didn’t work a lot of times, and it didn’t work in a lot of places! In fact, when it worked, it shouldn’t have! And that’s always the way it’s been, and that’s the point of the lesson.

Religion contains many strange ideas. One of them is that some places are holier than others. Some people think we can get closer to God by flying, for example, to Croatia. The Hebrew people and the Jewish people felt they could get closer to God by going to Jerusalem. Now Nazareth is far from Jerusalem. Galilee itself is quasi-heathen. The Jews only make up a small minority. Even today it is primarily Arab. Sidon is in what was at that time Phoenicia. The widow of Zarephath lived in this pagan, God-forsaken land--Sidon. Naaman came from the east, Syria--another God-forsaken land. But the widow of Zarephath and Naaman accepted the gift of the Holy Spirit; whereas those who thought they were close, did not.
St. Paul says, “If anyone considers himself or herself to be wise in a worldly way, he or she should become a fool.” And the gospel indicates a contrast between the ways of the world and the ways of the kingdom. In the story of the great draft of fish we have yet another sign of the abundance that characterizes the kingdom. Under the guidance of the wisdom of God there is abundance in the creation. This abundance is both material for the needs of all God’s creatures, and also it is symbolic of the spiritual abundance, love and compassion which is the greatest need of our spirit.

Now the wisdom of the world is very different. It’s based on the principle of scarcity: there is just so much; we all have to be very worried. And I’m not against conservation and I’m not against recycling. I promote these things, but there is the wisdom behind it that is faulty—not really recycling; that’s not faulty—but there is a false wisdom behind worries today: the idea of scarcity; we have to worry about too many people; we have to worry about too few resources. All the while people are stockpiling enormous reserves and wealth which they can’t possibly ever use—corporations, private individuals. It’s a different philosophy; it’s not the abundance of the kingdom where there is enough. And this is, according to St. Paul, foolishness!

And I do think the gospel is trying to challenge all of us in our society to really question the assumptions that lie behind many of our decisions and policies—including especially those which lead to population control! Are the worries raised by certain so-called “experts” truly realistic? Are we really serving the needs of the people that are
already created? Are we serving the needs of the purpose of the Creator in the first place? These are very important issues.

Secondly, the great draft of fish also is a sign, even in the evangelist’s mind, not only in the minds of the interpreters; it’s already a sign of the great work of evangelizing. “I will make you fishers of men.” Already there’s the idea that Christ Himself meant “fishing,” the work of the disciples in the ordinary secular world, to become transferred and transformed. They’re to become “fishers of men.”

Now in regard to this, this is of course the great work of the Church; however it must be directed by Christ! And, sadly, there are so many different methods being proposed all over the place, which you know in a worldly way are probably intelligent, but they’re not necessarily Christ’s way! When we really go where Christ directs us to, there’s an enormous return. So we have to really ask ourselves what is the motivation behind this gospel work, this evangelizing? It is not to fill up our Church. It surely is not to get new members, especially daily communicants--this is often the way evangelizing is understood. It is not! It is to spread the good news of God’s abundance and love, which manifests itself even in the material side of creation, and to bring that good news to those who need it most. In this sense we need to all be fishermen!
Today we have one of the many controversies recorded in the New Testament. The problem with today’s controversy is it’s so subtly framed that most people miss it. First of all, the figure of speech--this is actually very challenging. Jesus says, “No one takes a new coat to patch an old one.” He is of course referring metaphorically to the kingdom. The kingdom is something totally new; the gospel is something totally new. Thus we call it the “good news.” The point is it’s news! It’s not what we are accustomed to think or feel.

And many of us really do not recognize what we’re doing. What we do is, when we have a tear in our life, we have a problem, we look to God, to the gospel, to the Bible, for some solution for that problem. It doesn’t work that way. The whole garment is old and we need a new one. The gospel is inviting us to something totally new; it’s not offering us to fix what’s old. The difference between these two must be seen.

Secondly, Jesus is recognizing that people really don’t want this. He says, “No one after drinking old wine wants new wine.” The gospel will not appeal to our likes. When it comes to our emotional reactions, when it comes to pleasing us--the gospel won’t! The gospel won’t please us; we won’t like it! It’s not meant to be liked! It’s not the source of pleasure. It has to appeal to something far deeper in us than that. And if we live on the surface of our own lives, we will never receive the gospel! And more or less, Jesus is saying that maybe most people never will receive it! If they simply react to what they like and don’t like, they won’t like this. This is new wine! That’s a very important point for us to consider.
And the third point is that even those who live in a deeper place, those who have made the decision to receive what is new, even though it may involve suffering, nonetheless, even they are not well-disposed to contain the new wine of the gospel because their lives are old skins. The old skins burst! The new wine is lost! What does this mean? The old skins are our habitual ways of thinking, feeling, reacting--our habitual moods. We have to question whether they are appropriate. We take ourselves as we are. I believe we assume that the way we feel is just the way we feel, and the way we think--that’s just the way we think! Jesus is saying, “No, you need to think in a different way.”

That’s what metanoia is all about. Conversion, repentance, actually means a new way of living inside. It’s a new kind of mood. It’s a new kind of feeling. It’s a new way of thinking. And in any way our traditional ways obstruct the new way, they have to go! But we cling to them; we cling to the old. We cling to what we think is ourselves. That’s probably bad grammar, but you get the idea. We cling to what’s habitual; we don’t let go of it. That makes it impossible to hold and contain the new wine which is being poured into us by the Spirit. So Christian spirituality now is a matter of methodically and deliberately and willingly examining how we live. And is every issue that exits really appropriate to the kingdom? Will this help me hold the new wine of the gospel? And if it doesn’t, let go of it. New wine needs new skins!
Sometimes the gospel is simple and straightforward, and sometimes it is not at all simple and straightforward. Today it is not a all! First of all we have to keep in mind that religious language tends to be parabolic, meaning it uses exaggerations. But for this very reason many people tend simply to deflect the message believing it to be exaggerated, but we ought to actually listen to the message within the exaggeration—see what it is about.

“If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, indeed his very self, he cannot be my follower.” At first listening this may seem very harsh, but it is a call and a challenge to a very mature form of discipleship—truly impossible for children, but possible for the truly adult. What this is dealing with is the illusion that we develop concerning possessions—including people, people we belong to or belong to us—or so we think! And at the root of a great problem human beings have about who are we, there lies a tendency for us to measure who we are or define who we are by what we own for one thing—by another, who our family is or who we belong to or who belongs to us.

This is an illusion which is very dangerous for in fact everything we have is really on loan. God lends us for a time—only for a time, we don’t know how long—everyone who is family and everything that we own. We are merely the stewards of these very precious blessings—and they are blessings! And it is appropriate to enjoy them, but we needn’t think and mustn’t think that we own them. Because if we imagine that we own, for example, our family, they belong to us, the next thing is to reason that they ought to be doing what we want, that they are sent here on earth to serve us, to take care of us—this is not true! Every human being is sent on this earth with the purpose in the mind of the Creator, and part of that purpose of course is serving others, but nobody is placed on this earth just for me or just for you. And you are not placed on this earth just for someone else, but primarily to serve God. And that has to come first, and the same with our possessions. They are really so we can serve God; they’re not just for our own pleasure or comfort or security. In fact we don’t even have a right to, what the gospel calls, “one’s very self.” This is a great problem today with the growing tendency to believe people have the right to take their own lives. One’s very self does not belong to oneself. Our very selves belong to God!

Now the task at hand, what Jesus is introducing in his teaching is that we need to gain freedom, that we need to serve God, to be the person God has meant us to be. Now at the heart of every human being there is a question: Who am I? And too easily we might answer this question—too hastily—with a reference, for example, to our ancestry. Well, that might have something to do with the kind of person I am right now, but that’s no answer for “who am I?” Or we might answer the question with my position in society or my place in my environment, but that doesn’t answer the question: Who am I? Every human being is unique in the sight of God, and we have distinct qualities and a distinct
purpose and vocation. Every single human being has a distinct vocation! Everyone has a vocation! A vocation is not for a select few. Vocation goes along with the creation, and this is unique to each person. And yet our uniqueness and our individuality is frequently wasted, unobserved, undiscovered, undeveloped. And in this sense our families can become a prison where their expectations dictate how we act and what we do.

Now this prison can be very comfortable. Jesus says, “Well, it may be very comfortable, but you must turn your back on this prison. You must turn your back on this father and mother, this wife, these children who tell you who you are--your siblings, brothers and sisters--and your position in the world.” You have to turn your back on all this, if you are to discover God’s will for you! The “cost of discipleship” is what it’s about--what it costs to follow Christ. Salvation is for free. The kingdom of God is for free! But if we’re entangled in a web of relationships that control us, or if we’re busy about controlling others, we’re not free to receive the gift. So the cost of discipleship is the cost of freeing ourselves from being dominated by inferior duties and loyalties. They may be good, but they are not the highest. The highest is doing what God calls us to do--being the person God has created us to be.

This must be seen as a long-term goal rarely completely accomplished this side of death; but the great saints, like St. Francis of Assisi for example, show us the way. Mother Teresa of Calcutta shows us the way. This is freedom! This is doing what God calls one to do! Now perhaps today as we proceed to participate in the sacrifice of the Eucharist, in which we are enabled through our Baptism to offer ourselves to the Father with and through Christ becoming part of his sacrifice, we need to consider renouncing possessing--the right to possess, the right to control others, the right to demand from others, the right to expect from others--as a step toward gaining freedom for ourselves and then learning how to live as truly children of God.
Today’s gospel reading is a very challenging one, and some might think a negative one. “If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father and mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters, indeed his very self, he cannot be my follower.”

The first thing we need to note is that religious language is of its nature parabolic, meaning it employs exaggeration. This, of course, is no excuse for us to ignore it--which we usually do! We hear exaggerations, and then we discount the whole thing. But there is a very important message in this exaggeration, and it’s not one easy for us to see--probably impossible for the very young; but it is an important message for those who are trying to mature as disciples. It has to do with the illusion that we have that we possess anything.

Possession may be a right of law, but in fact we don’t really own, possess, anything or anyone. Part of the human problem is that we try to measure who we are or what we’re worth. We count our money, or we try to identify with certain persons who are ours: our family, our parents, our children, our siblings. And we believe to some great extent that these people give us an identity--and they can--but not our true identity. It is very good that we enjoy the good things God has given us, including the good people God has given us to live with, but it is very wrong for us to imagine that we have a right to them. We don’t even have a right, according to the gospel, to our very self! Everything is on loan; everything is lent to us.

If we were to imagine that people and things belonged to us, we would then imagine that they should serve our needs. No one is placed on this planet to serve our needs, nor are we placed to serve their needs, really; but each of us is given a purpose by our Creator, and serving the needs of others is part of that purpose. It’s important that we struggle to attain freedom for ourselves and for others--freedom from the demands that so easily we
place on one another; perhaps freedom to be who God created us to be will be the greatest achievement, or a very good achievement, for all of us.

Perhaps we don’t usually think about the issue of “Who am I?” But it is a question that really lies in the heart of every human being, and we might answer too hastily by looking at our ancestors, our family, or our surroundings. Well indeed, our environment and our families have something to do with the kind of person we are, but they don’t determine our identity; they don’t really tell us who we are. Every human being is a unique creation of God with qualities distinct and a purpose chosen by the Creator. And our own individuality and uniqueness can often go undiscovered and undeveloped. In this way our family can become a very comfortable prison. This is what Jesus is getting at: we can be imprisoned by the expectations of others!

Now to follow Christ is to turn our back on this, even though it’s comfortable, even though it’s reassuring, even though it’s all we know, and to seek the will of God that we don’t know. This is a risky business and it’s a costly one, but Jesus wants to make very clear that discipleship requires it. Salvation and the kingdom of God itself are really free gifts; we don’t earn them. But in our present state of entanglement with life, with the world, with others, it’s often difficult for us to receive what God wants to give us. We’re too busy like the would-be disciple who said, “Well, let me go bury my father first”--one of millions of excuses why we can’t follow God’s will. The cost of discipleship is nothing less than the cost of freeing ourselves from all domination by inferior duties and loyalties. And this is a very long-term goal; it’s rarely completed this side of the grave--although great saints, like St. Francis of Assisi for example, showed us the way, the way of freedom, the way of being disentangled. And so as we come to the sacrifice of the Mass and our opportunity to offer ourselves together with Christ to the Father, we are invited to simply renounce all possessing, to renounce the illusion that we own anybody or anything, to recognize that everything is gift and that we are invited to live in the freedom of the children of God.
“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you.”

One would think that if people paid attention to the gospel read this morning, and the epistle from St. Paul, that Christianity would never have become a popular religion. There is at the root, of course, the great demand for a completely new way of living, turning from a self-centered life to a life which is really almost reckless, a recklessness into God, a recklessness for God’s sake! Some imitation of God is true as well, of course, there is a certain amount of exaggeration here, religious language tends to be parabolic, but nonetheless the underlying force of this is love your enemy. This goes beyond all logic; it goes beyond all reason, and is based on nothing but the imitation of God. God is good to the wicked as well as the just, and what Jesus is preaching is our ability to mature into his way of thinking, the invitation to imitate God. And the result, of course, of imitating God is indescribable recompense. Now this is another idea or meaning of faith—faith has many different meanings. One is that we rely totally on God to reward us for our choices and decisions. This is really one of Jesus’ central teachings. He is very big on the idea of reward. He wants us to think about being rewarded, but he wants us to rely totally on God for our reward. And he warns us about the great dangers of seeking a reward too soon, such as for example, the approval of others, such as for example, fame, such as for example, thanks, such as for example, a feeling within ourselves that we are meritorious and worthwhile because of what we’ve done or decided. All of this is actually premature. He says, “Your Father knows what is important. So he really does encourage people. It’s not a matter of threatening punishment; it is rather a matter of offering great rewards. “The measure you measure with will be measured back to you.”
Today’s teaching is a very difficult one to comprehend, and it has to be thought about in a balanced way; connected with it must be the idea that Jesus promoted fraternal correction. This means Jesus promoted the communal way of life in which, because we are responsible to others and accountable to others, we call people to accountability. We encourage that. So when you have a disagreement with someone, when you are upset with someone, when you are angry with someone, go tell them about it. Don’t tell everyone else; tell that person. If you don’t get anywhere, then go get somebody else to help you. Why? Community is concerned about the relationship of each person--all persons. Communities are made up of relationships.

So Jesus promoted reconciliation and personal accountability of each person to the community and each person to each person within the community--and fraternal correction. And it is within the context of this that then he advises, “But be careful.” Be careful when you go to your brother or your sister or your child or your parent or whomever. You do have to do this, but be careful; look first at yourself: “Remove the plank from your own eye.” And this, of course, is very difficult for us to do because in order to remove the plank in one’s eye--one doesn’t see the plank in one’s own eye! So we have to be very concerned about our own moral and spiritual growth and maturity. If we’re not then we are going to be very lopsided, blinded; and we’ll be blind guides to others--even to the young!
Sadly I think this is one of the problems in our society right now: the young have very few mature guides, even among many of their parents. And I speak primarily for my generation; many people in my generation have never grown up. They’re not mature. So what sort of parental guidance do they give to their children? They can’t! They just can’t! They are not able to be guides because they’re not mature themselves. This is a serious problem.

So Jesus said that we have to really become self-reflective and be able to own that a plank of egoism watches in every eye. Egoism is the author of self-love and self-will whereby we believe ourselves to be always right, because we believe that our thoughts are correct, our desires pure. And these feelings and thoughts need to be challenged by something more objective. That’s what Jesus is encouraging. No one can be perfect; but if in a sincere way we are trying to attain holiness and we are admitting our faults, then we can become a true guide to others because we are looking to Christ and we’re open to the Holy Spirit who is the true teacher and guide. And then the Holy Spirit will guide us. We have to be guided before we can guide others. There are no exceptions.
Today Jesus is talking about a very important theme: putting his words into practice. And he says, “The one who puts what I say into practice is like a man who builds a house on a solid foundation. Floods come; the house remains.” Now he means this as symbolic of, indicative of, the life of faith. And putting Jesus’ words into practice is not something that the Church can do for the believer, nor can anyone do this for the believer. The Church invites us to the gospel. The Church administers the sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist; but it is the believer who must actually put the words of Christ into practice.

And looking back on the past thirty, forty years--and I can do that because I’m over forty--we can see that many people who were surely baptized, and who even came to Mass and sat in the pews, were washed away by the flood of controversy, confusion, discord, disobedience, rebellion--whatever you want to call it--that disrupted the Church, that reached the world, that has it’s origin in what Jesus called “diabolus,” meaning literally “the one who divides,” translated usually the “devil.” The word “devil” actually means “the one who divides.” If you ever think we are going to get to a point where there is no work of division you are quite foolish. There will always be someone trying to divide the Church, the faithful, always someone to confuse them. It is quite wrong to blame anyone for the temptations that exist.

Jesus says very clearly that the fault lies within the believer who does not put his words into practice. He is teaching about the way of living, a way of thinking, a way of feeling.
really, that is very different from just going with natural impulses--just more or less reacting to people around you: the environment, television, conforming to what people say and what people think and so on. That’s not what Jesus teaches. He teaches a distinct way of living, a distinct set of principles, a distinct way of looking at God the Father, relating to the Father, relating to the Spirit, of being filled with the Spirit, of allowing the Spirit to be the teacher, the one who teaches us all things. And believers who don’t put this into practice, no matter how many times they receive the sacraments, are ill equipped to deal with life. There shall surely come a challenge, an attempt, to try to destroy them.

So we have to realize the great challenge Jesus is talking about now. How it is incumbent upon everyone. You cannot do this for your wife or husband. You cannot do it for your children; your children can’t do it for you. No one can do it for anybody else; each person must put the words of Christ into practice in his or her own life! Without that failure to live the Christian life is assured! Simple, forthright truth! Is this a cause for despair? No, it isn’t. It is possible with some effort, with some prayer, especially openness to the Holy Spirit, to put Christ’s words into practice. It does take time. It does take effort. It does take attention--paying attention to what Jesus is saying.
“I tell you, there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent.”

Today the gospel reading calls our attention to focus on the quality of joy as a quality belonging to heaven and to heavenly life and to God and godly people. And we might ask ourselves when is the last time we felt really overjoyed? In Christ it is our birthright. Now the occasions for joy that are listed in today’s gospel reading happen to be something we can all understand: the recovery of something lost. We have all experienced joy in a very small way in the recovery of something that we misplaced or lost such as our car keys or a wallet or glasses or a purse. And the point is that there is no particular relationship between the joy we experience and the value of what we lost. It’s not the intrinsic value of what was lost that really measures our joy. It’s the fact that we miss something, something that belonged to us that’s gone, and then is restored; and this is a relief.

And this kind of joy Jesus is saying is properly ascribed to God when someone who belongs to him is lost and then is recovered. And this is not related to the value of that person, but to the fact that that person belongs to God! Thus in a very true way God misses and is pained by the absence of everyone who turns away. And do we really realize this? We know we are pained by the loss of our driver’s license or our glasses, although we can get our driver’s license restored, even though we can get a new pair of glasses; but what bothers us is the inconvenience—it’s such a pain to misplace these! The joy is no measure of their intrinsic worth.

Now what follows from this is—and that’s the point of the gospel—that joylessness is really a sign of our distance from God, that we need to be able to share in what God actually feels and experiences—and in this context especially in regard to the restoration of those who have turned away. If you recall the story there are various figures, actors, characters, in this story who, in fact, protest Jesus’ attention to those who are unworthy, even though those who are really unworthy are the ones who have been rude to him, and they protest this attention, as it were, to their enemies. And the elder brother toward the prodigal son is really envious of the attention and the love and concern that the father heaps upon the son who was lost and was found.

This we have to note: the gospel is really talking about the real nature of holiness. Holiness has to do with primarily God and being like God, as opposed to being simply virtuous—which is a big difference! It is very good to be virtuous. It is good to do good things. And when we’re virtuous, we feel good about ourselves; and this is to be recommended, but being virtuous alone is not truly holiness. Holiness includes an inner disposition of sharing with God God’s own attitudes which involve true anxiety for those who are straying from God and true joy for those who return. And this is what compassion is: it’s a feeling with; in this case it’s really compassion for God and
compassion with God. And that’s what Jesus is trying to show his disciples is so important. A compassionate disciple feels real anxiety for sinners, for those who are straying, for those who are harming themselves by a self-destructive life. At the same time a compassionate disciple shares the joy in the restoration of sinners to friendship between themselves and God. Now the Pharisees, religious leaders of Jesus’ time, and the scribes, the theologians so to speak, and the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, all were virtuous. As people say today, “They did good.” They behaved very well. Their lives were exemplary. Their behavior was honorable, but they lacked compassion!

So this brings us to the next and last point: What is true repentance all about? Well, according to the gospel today, repentance is not simply remorse because I did something wrong or because I failed or because I’m flawed. That may be part of repentance to recognize that we need to change; but really repentance or metanoia, as it says in the Greek New Testament, really is a new attitude in which we share God’s vision, God’s joy, and God’s compassion. In a sense Luke, in this narrative, is actually poking fun a little bit at people--perhaps we didn’t notice. You see there really are no ninety-nine who have no need of repentance. These ninety-nine don’t exit and never did. That’s a little jibe. St. Paul puts it this way: “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Sinning is about falling short of glory, and in this we are all in solidarity. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. And we’re all called not simply to change our old ways, but to become a new being, to draw closer to God and to share God’s joy--and the payoff is unbelievable! It is the glory of God Himself--to share in that; that’s what Jesus is offering to his disciples!

From this point of view we’d have to say we have all been prodigal, which really means wasteful. We have been wasteful sons, wasteful daughters, believing--as we all try--believing we can find happiness somewhere through our own means, that we can find happiness apart from God, that we can find happiness by pleasing ourselves, that we can find happiness by doing what we want to do. This is a waste! This is prodigality! And since all of us try this some way or another, we are all prodigal children. If only we had enough money, if only we had enough time, if only we could do what we want, we would find happiness. This is a lie. We cannot find happiness except where we began--in God! We are created for God, and our happiness requires that we deliberately, willfully, and voluntarily return to God. So God is waiting for us to stop running and moving away and finding happiness apart from God. God is indeed waiting for all of us to run out of money and run out of time and come to our senses.
“See what love the Father has bestowed upon us for letting us be called children of God.” Everyone has their favorite authors; one of mine has always been Charles Dickens. Dickens chose to write many short stories and novels, and a common theme runs through many of them: the theme of children who are pauperized, caught in a web of crime because they really don’t know who their father is. In each case, of course, since Dickens’ novels are all happy novels, they end up finding out and their life is totally changed. They move into the highest echelons of Victorian society. In a sense there is a great similarity between Dickens and the evangelist we call “John.”

John’s theme is like this: that we are pauperized, impoverished; we are caught in a web of sin and darkness because we don’t know our Father, don’t know who we are, and really we’re living an illegitimate life. And that’s why God sent his very own Son, his Son who was begotten but not made, into the world to reveal to us that we are all children of God. This is our true identity, our true origin, where we come from and where we are properly destined to go. And then faith involves--in this particular context, faith involves among many other things accepting our true parentage, becoming legitimized through recognition of our true Father. And this and this alone can change our condition. It will raise us up to the highest echelons of the creation itself; it will enable us to live a holy, meaningful life.

However the evangelist, unlike the novelist, is very well aware of the fact that this discovery of our true Father is not simply a happy coincidence that can be fitted to the
plot of a happy novel. It really is the work of the Spirit who needs to be recognized and accepted. It’s the Spirit’s testimony that is the source of our hope. So John writes, “See what love the Father has bestowed upon us in letting us be called children of God! Again, that in fact is what we are now. The reason “the world does not recognize us is that it never recognized the Son.”

Now the question is whether we will identify with the Son or with the world. That is a choice and that is a decision. If we identify with the world, then we will not recognize the Son. If we don’t recognize the Son, we won’t recognize ourselves either; and we will remain in darkness. If we recognize the Son, then we can also recognize ourselves as co-heirs with him to the eternal glory of God. He goes on to say, “Dearly beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall later be has not yet come to light.” Indeed not for us, but it has been for Yolanda. The eternal life of a full plenary revelation is now Yolanda’s privileged possession. However we still have more to do here, and we also have light although not plenary revelation. As we burn the candle, which is the Easter candle which we lit the vigil night we celebrated the resurrection of Christ, we know we do have some light to work by; and we have work to do while the light lasts--work brings the truth of our parentage, of our inheritance, of our destiny, to others. Wasted is a life that rejects God, and wasted too is a life that does not bring God to others. So as we’ve all been called to be children of God, we need to accept that first and then help others to see the light.
Wisdom in Powerlessness

Is 25:6-9; Rev 21:1-7; Mt:11:25-30

September 14, 1998

“Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you.”

Today we listened to the gospel; and perhaps today the gospel has a special meaning for us as we come to bury a dear friend, an acquaintance or a family member. Death has a way of calling us to attention to “What is life about?”

Jesus is thanking God for having given him a wisdom that we reserve for children, a wisdom that is not shared by the learned and the clever. This is something you might call a reversal of values. The way of the world is to acquire greater and greater knowledge, greater and greater power, greater and greater control. Children don’t have any one of those: no power, no knowledge, no control. And yet Jesus says that they have wisdom. What wisdom does not actually come from experience? What wisdom is not a product of trial and error? What wisdom is not really the result of living? The answer is the wisdom that comes as a gift from above, and it can be the possession of merest children. And all of us can be mere children; in fact, we need to become mere children. As Jesus said in another text, “Lest you become a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

So we have to think about being a child as being distinct from mere physical youth. Being a child in this sense has to do with admitting that we are not in control, and we have no real power; we have no real knowledge about the mystery of life. We are all called to acknowledge that we are all debtors to the great benefactor who is God, the source of all life. We cannot ask to be born; and we do not determine many of the most important factors of our lives, mainly our essential qualities, who are parents are. We are
not in control of all kinds of conditions in our lives--good and bad ones. We benefit from some; we suffer from others. But we cannot control any of them. We may gain a certain kind of power maybe in the business world or political world, but not over life.

Essentially we’re powerless! We may have gained degrees through much education, schooling; but we have no real knowledge of life, where it comes from, why it is, why we are here--all this is a mystery and so it’s meant to be. And children have a certain facility to live powerlessly, without knowledge, without control, and yet enjoy life. Now it is true not all children can do this because not all children have the sort of parental care or protection that makes that possible.

Jesus’ point is we get to know the Father; it’s all we need! And “No one actually knows the Father but the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.” If we get to know the Son who is Jesus, then we can know the Father; and then we can live this life of true joyfulness, true joy, and in a true and valid sense carefree, because not only are we without care, but we rely on God, whom we now acknowledge through Jesus to be a God of compassion, love, support, and concern. We acknowledge that although we cannot control the circumstances of our lives--except in a few minor areas--nonetheless, our lives are in God’s hands. We acknowledge that although we don’t know the time of our coming or the time of our going from this world, nonetheless, we’re in God’s hands. And in faith this becomes something to celebrate, not rue, not fear, but to celebrate--to celebrate the goodness of a God who can reveal himself to merest children and who can give children the facility of really loving life and enjoying just being. We can find that in ourselves and we can also find the kingdom.
“It will go well with those servants whom the master finds wide-awake on his return.”

It is very clear from historical studies, biblical studies, that the early Church in its first years anticipated an early end to the world. And this is for two basic reasons. The first is the resurrection of Christ Himself. Any basic anticipation of the Jewish people resurrection was, you might say, the beginning of the end. And since Jesus’ disciples believed he had been raised from the dead, that meant that the end was near. Secondly, of course, the persecutions which made life so difficult and precarious for early believers, again, were taken by them to be signs of the coming end of the world. However if we look at the parable, we can see that Jesus was preparing his disciples for a long wait. He Himself in his human nature, in his human intelligence, disclaimed any knowledge of the time or the hour of the end of the world. He says, “The Son does not know, only the Father knows.” Jesus is speaking through his human intelligence; he did not know the time it will end. And Jesus here is telling us a parable about a wedding party, mainly groups of bridesmaids. He says, “It will go well with those servants whom the master finds wide-awake.”

Now there are various times in a person’s life when there is some sort of an experience of awakening. It could be a retreat or Cursillo, or it could be perhaps even an ordinary event like the birth of a child or maybe the death of a loved one; or some other event might create some sort of higher awareness of who we are, of the dimension of the eternal, our relation with God or something along these lines. This is called an “awakening.” The point of the parable is we need to work to stay awake. It’s not just good enough to have some sort of peak experience at some point in our lives. What is really needed is to labor daily to remember, to keep it in mind, because it’s only in these moments--and it may be moments of intense sorrow or some other intense emotion.
or some sort of deep and profound peace, which is actually also emotional--in these moments we are actually close to reality. We’re not close to reality when we simply follow routines at work, in life, habitual ways of talking, habitual ways of reacting. In these cases we are more distant from reality--so what Jesus said, “Be on guard and stay awake.”

Now Delilia lived a ripe number of years. Her birthday is coming up; she’d be about 85. In this sense, from this point of view, from this teaching, she waited a long time. The longer we live the more we are challenged to stay awake, not to give up the hope born in us to the Spirit, the Spirit that has been given us as first fruits to those who believe. As the body of Delilia was brought into church, I blessed it with holy water that recalls her baptism. Here we have the Easter Candle recalling the lighting of the Pascal Candle during the Easter Vigil announcing the resurrection of Christ. These are deep mysteries we carry around with us; and the more we can live them, pay attention to them, and allow them to influence us, the closer we will live in eternity even now. We will be present in the world, but at the same time we will be present to God uniting a life of action with the Spirit of contemplation.

And this is ultimately the proper fruit of the sacrament of the Eucharist that we shall celebrate in a moment. We come to the Eucharist to gather together as a community, to join ourselves in our service to the sufferings and service of Christ in the sacrifice of the Mass. Then we receive the body, the blood, the soul, and the divinity of Christ whose proper fruit is the Spirit of contemplation. The Spirit addresses the abiding inward knowledge that God is in all things. And it is in that abiding knowledge we wait for the coming of the day when God’s plans and purposes for the world will be brought to culmination--then, according to the first reading, God will be all in all.
Surprises within the Church  24th Week in Ordinary Time  Wednesday,
September 16, 1998  7:00 p.m.  Mass for Renew 2000 Mission  1 Cor 12:31—13:13;
Lk 7:31-35  (Sts. Cornelius & Cyprian)

Since the very beginning of the Christian Church there have been many surprises for the members of the body of Christ. And if we read the Acts of the Apostles in its entirety, we see this demonstrated on every page. And it is really the Holy Spirit who is calling the shots—not men, not women—the Holy Spirit is the true actor, the soul of the Church. But human beings have very poor memories, and so we keep forgetting about the Holy Spirit. We keep thinking, “Well, that’s something very nice; but let’s now get along with what we want, about what we think should be.” And as we make our journey through life, Christ is present but unseen; and we have often very little sense of his presence. This is true of us as individuals and as a Church.

And the Holy Spirit is always calling us to renewal. And yet at the same time the Holy Spirit is a very gentle Spirit who does not force us to do things against our will, conscience, or judgment. What we can be sure of is when we cooperate with the Holy Spirit and when we go along with what we believe the Holy Spirit is asking us to do, he will cooperate with our spirit, and then he’ll bring up another surprise. And at every bend in the road through life there will be surprises for us as individuals and for the universal Church.

In the last thirty years in the Catholic Church there have been a lot of surprises, some of them rather unsettling. Surprises aren’t necessarily good, you know; some people don’t like surprises if it is an unsettling surprise. First of all we had the Ecumenical Council in the early 60’s. And that Council was called to re-unite, invigorate the whole Christian people. That was the plan—I believe inspired by the Holy Spirit—but I think the men involved thought it was going to be much easier than it really was. I think they really believed that as soon as the Council was over things would start moving toward gradual re-unification of all the disparate churches. Much to their surprise the opposite happened! The Catholic Church itself became beset with divisions, with fissures. But I think, again, the Holy Spirit is in all of this.

I’m not saying the Holy Spirit is necessarily creating the divisions actually, but the Holy Spirit is in all of this. Why? Well, for example, the Council inaugurated a dialogue with the very rigid, tradition-bound Eastern Orthodox Church of Greece and Russia, the Balkans, and elsewhere East. Now that’s a very fine thing! It’s a very fine thing to inaugurate a dialogue. But what we discovered is that right within our Church among our own believers we have many rigid, tradition-bound people. And I think the Holy Spirit is saying, “Wait! You have to learn how to get along among yourselves before you really can have dialogue with people who are outsiders. Likewise the Council inaugurated a very carefully worded document, encouraged ecumenism, inaugurated, you might say, rapprochement with Protestant Churches. And what the result of this was—I shouldn’t say the result—along the way comes what? Protesting, dissent, within our own
Church! Again, we have to learn how to deal with all these issues within our house before our house can become ecumenical, meaning one house, the gathering place of all the Christian communities.

Now today we celebrate the feast of Sts. Cyprian and Cornelius, both of whom labored for the unity of the Catholic Church. It’s not a simple thing; it’s not just a matter of going along with some body of doctrines— it’s much more complicated! It’s uniting all peoples and bringing about harmony within the disparate desires, wishes, of the human family, which is after all God’s family. And this involves knowing how to endure pain. St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, which is actually the one assigned for today, says, “Love endures everything. Love never fails.” If anyone thought that unity in the Church or achieving unity in the Church was easy, they were, of course, really naive. It cannot be easy. And the way to unity in the Church is the unity within ourselves, unity within our parish, learning how to understand people who are different, exercising the love of which St. Paul writes—the love that never fails. It’s not our love; it’s not our affection. It’s the love which is God.

And small Christian communities are a way, they are a means that we can use to exercise this love and to learn how to live in harmony with people who are very different from ourselves. Now differences come in many different ways and forms. And, of course, we might think we are very good with people who are different from ourselves until we meet a difference we can’t handle! And that’s why we need small communities so we can meet things we can’t handle—as it were pushing us beyond our limits. This puts us into the sphere where only God can deal with us, where we give up being in control; we let God be God, and we let the Spirit be the teacher.

Last year our parish Adult Education Group went through the Confessions of St. Augustine. And St. Augustine labored with great suffering for such things as unity among his people—“doctrinal orthodoxy,” you might call it that—where people really understand the truth and appreciate the truth which is a difficult thing—it has to be done with gentleness. So we are really privileged to live in this particular time of life. Of course, that could be said of any moment in the history of the world. We have to see the peculiar nature of today and its peculiar problems as actual challenges for us, so we can exercise this love that never fails, and always acknowledge our own poverty asking God to fill us with God’s strength.

We look back to the very beginning of the Church. We can see something unlikely to succeed. We don’t know what happened, but we know what the apostles believed happened. We know they believed Jesus was raised from the dead. And we cannot be forced to believe that, but we can believe that. We can make their belief our belief. That is the gift of faith, and that is the cornerstone of everything in the Christian gospel: that Jesus was raised from the dead. I’m sure it seemed to the apostles in the early days that this little movement was hardly ever going to go anywhere, but little did they know what the Spirit intended—and little do we!
Today is the memorial of Saint Robert Bellarmine. Robert Bellarmine was a very brilliant theologian, very influential during the Reformation. He developed a line of thought called apologetics, which is unfortunately falling into disuse. Apologetics means we use our own reason to defend or to support the truths of our faith. It’s important to explain what is meant here. The truths of our faith are, of course, not discoverable through reason or through research, and yet it has been the Catholic belief all through time that what we believe is not unreasonable. This is an important point. It is not a big issue with the Protestants. The Protestants never have said that their faith is reasonable. It is a particularly Catholic view that nothing we believe can be contrary to reason! In other words we value reason and faith--both--not just faith--and therefore the science and the art of apologetics.

Now Robert Bellarmine made a very big mistake. He opposed Galileo, who, of course, had discovered that the earth was orbiting the sun. This was first theorized by Copernicus, the Polish priest; but Copernicus had no proof. Galileo invented the telescope and taught that the earth orbited the sun. Robert Bellarmine opposed this because he said that would mean the earth moved and the psalm says, “The Lord has established the earth firmly; it shall not be moved.” So it was an overly literal interpretation of the psalm that caused him to oppose Galileo. But nonetheless he was dedicated to reconciling reason and faith. In time, of course, with dedication, reason and faith proved Galileo correct.

Now in our day we also need to become apologists for our faith because many people believe that Christianity is unreasonable, that it rests upon completely unfounded beliefs.
we are to spread the gospel, we have to spread it in a reasonable way to show how agreeable our faith is with our human reason. And also we need to take as an example St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, that we read this morning. St. Paul is talking about all the witnesses who saw Christ raised from the dead; now we have not seen Christ raised from the dead, and we don’t know what actually happened after the resurrection of Christ or after the death of Christ. We don’t know what happened, but we do know one thing: we know that St. Paul and the other apostles, and he says five hundred other people, witnessed the resurrection. We know they believed it! That’s a fact. The fact is they believed—including Paul himself who was an opponent of the Christian gospel, an enemy of the gospel—he came to believe! That’s a fact. It’s not an opinion. It’s a fact. He believed.

And I think that if we look at these facts—the conversion of Paul, the witness of the apostles who gave their lives in witness to this belief—I think we have a very powerful form of evidence. And I think the only reasonable conclusion is that they did in fact witness the resurrection of Christ. Now that, of course, lies beyond proof, but it is not unreasonable. And that’s the very nature of apologetics. You don’t prove anything, but you show how reasonable it is, how agreeable it is, how unlikely the opposite would be: that all the apostles actually gave their lives for something they didn’t believe, or that their belief is rooted in some sort of complete illusion, or chimera! So the reasonableness of our faith really rests upon the witness of Paul and the apostles. I think we need to reflect on these sorts of things so that we really can be ready and poised to discuss reasonably what we believe and promote, as St. Paul did, the gospel of Jesus Christ.
“Because if the dead are not raised, then Christ was not raised; and if Christ was not raised, your faith is worthless. You are still in your sins, and those who have fallen asleep in Christ are the deadest of the dead.”

Today St. Paul is reflecting on the mystery of the resurrection. His point is that he has experienced the resurrection and so have five hundred apostles--meaning five hundred witnesses--the people who first experienced the resurrection; and then believers are invited also to believe, and then they must make a decision as to whether it’s true or not because if it’s true, then the entire history of the world has changed. And if it’s not true, then the entire gospel is a lie; and the missionaries and apostles are the false witnesses. The resurrection remains the cornerstone of the Christian faith; without it the entire building collapses.

Now, in particular, today he is focusing on forgiveness of sins. Now when Jesus spoke about the forgiveness of sins so often--I wonder how often you think about it--it’s not one simple thing. It’s a process involving various steps. One of the problems with the very idea of the forgiveness of sin is the word. “Sin” is a word used in our culture only in a religious or theological context, which means most people don’t understand it; they don’t know what the word really means.

Now in the New Testament it has different synonyms. A good one is “debt.” Jesus often is talking about someone who has a debt. In the Latin language “debitum” is a word used for sin, as in the Lord’s Prayer: “debita nostra.” It’s a good word because we can understand what a debt is in the pure, simple, secular sense and then apply it to our life with God and our life with one another. This is how theology works. So the many parables of debts and debtors are all referring to the admission whereby human beings are over their heads in debt. And I think you can imagine, you may even be there yourself, that it is easy for people to get over their heads in debt. Owing a great deal of money they try to borrow more money to cover the debt, to get rid of the debt. This is a very familiar picture with many people.

For Jesus it was the figure of the human race. Human beings had abused and misused their credit. They’d taken what they hadn’t restored; they’d taken what hadn’t been really their right to take, upsetting the balance that naturally is supposed to exist in relationships; and there’s no way they can pay back. Now the idea of forgiveness is that God offers cancellation--cancellation of debt! But that’s not the whole picture. The whole existence of sin has ruptured relations, and these relations need to be repaired. The cancellation of debt is only one aspect of the reparation or the restoration needed. The debtor also has to make some basic changes.
Now in Jesus’ life, he is constantly declaring acts of mercy and forgiveness: “Get up and walk. Your sins are forgiven. Go home”--basic security. “Your faith is your salvation. Go home. Avoid this sin.” But it’s not clear from the standpoint of all the stories that are told about Jesus to what extent any of the individuals who hear this actually know how to respond. How does one respond to the cancellation of debt? Of course, we have one parable about the man who doesn’t know how to respond at all; in fact, he turns around and requires of someone who owes him much less than he owed, full payment! So he never got the picture. So for forgiveness to be actually accepted, it requires that it be handed on--that’s step one. Step two: but there’s more than that; there also has to be some sense of reparation. In this, human beings are actually helpless. So Jesus Himself, as human, steps into the gap and offers to repair the damage that exits between the human race as a whole and God, the Creator, the Father of all life. And in so doing he surrenders himself; his entire life becomes an offering to the Father.

Now in this way it’s very important to read this Letter to the Corinthians because the real restoration only comes from Christ’s resurrection. Christ’s resurrection was really a reconciliation of God’s justice and mercy with the human condition. And therefore in the resurrection we have now the beginning of a new age, a new world, a new creation--as he puts it this way: “The first fruits of those who have fallen asleep is Christ.”

Now the believer, the Christian, is invited--and I would say also required--to live in the resurrection and allow the resurrection to determine all his or her dealings with others. And it’s impossible to detail exactly what that means, but we need to think about it. How do we deal with people who owe us? How do we deal with people who disappoint us? How do we deal with people who offend us? How do we go about bringing healing and reparation to those we hurt? These are questions, and in some sense living in faith means living with questions.
Before I begin I would like to encourage the Crusaders for their football game that they remain whole and healthy. You notice they’re all dressed in their liturgical colors—that’s very good, boys!

“The owner then gave his devious employee credit for being enterprising! Why? Because the worldly take more initiative than the other-worldly in dealing with their own kind.”

Now we would all be excused if we are a little bit surprised by the turn of this parable. It actually gives credit to this devious, dishonest employee; but, of course, the point is not that we should also be devious and dishonest, but rather that the other-worldly should become enterprising and take initiative. If you think about this, it’s so very true. Part of being a believer is trusting in God—that’s a “part.” We need to have a sense of reliance on God and not total reliance on ourselves. And some people almost rely too much on God—think about that! The devil tempted Jesus, if you remember, to jump off the parapet of the temple. That would be relying too much on God. Some people call that faith; Jesus called that “tempting the Lord.” So there’s need for balance in our walk with God.

Now the point is we need to make friends. There is a fundamental biblical idea that the poor and children have a special claim on the kingdom. “It is to just such as these that the kingdom of God belongs,” Jesus said about the children. Children in the Bible are considered as one of the, you might say, subgroups of the poor. They have no power. They have no control of their lives. They’re like the poor. God has a special love for them. Nor is this merely in the New Testament; it’s in the Old Testament. It’s in the Psalms; it’s in the prophets.

Today we hear from the prophet Amos, where he condemns the wealthy for their neglect, their disregard, and their abuse of the poor. We see in Jesus’ ministry the hungry, the homeless, and the sick, receive the lion’s share of his attention. The compassion of God is especially meant for them. It stands to reason, then, that those who have means to do so ought to spend their resources in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, healing the sick, for this will make them friends of the privileged class in the kingdom of heaven.

Now this type of thinking is not exactly common, in fact, quite the opposite! We call it the “reversal of values.” Jesus, the evangelists, the prophets, were always preaching the reversal of values. In the world power is considered an advantage, powerlessness a disadvantage. In the world wealth is something to strive after; poverty is something to avoid. In the kingdom there is a reversal. At first it seems very odd, but we need to look
at it. God has created everything, and he has bestowed everything upon everyone. This is not a remark about any particular form of social organization, economics, or political systems. It’s a biblical belief that God has created all things for all people.

However it’s obvious some people have more brains, more talent, more health, than others. It is not the fault of those who are not so smart, not so healthy, or not so able. It’s just the way they are. Now there is a biblical principle that flows from this. It’s stated this way: “From those who have much, much will be required.” We’re not created equal in this sense. Some are given more; some are given less. But those who are given more are given also more responsibility to care for those who have less; therefore amassing wealth and concentrating power only increases one’s moral obligations.

For this reason many of the prophets and saints actually gave away all their money. St. Francis of Assisi, for example, got rid of his family’s wealth--his share of his family’s wealth--as a means to free himself from the moral obligations they would entail, that wealth would entail. Now there’s an irony here. The Italians are very well aware of it. They say, “Francis because he was poor, made Assisi very rich.” Assisi would have never become the rich, famous little town it is, if it hadn’t been for St. Francis’ poverty. However this irony actually reflects a biblical view of the world that justice does create prosperity, and when people start being concerned about the poor, prosperity is supposed to follow.

Now as Catholic Christians at the end of the Twentieth Century we need to consider, then, the power of this parable, recognizing our need to take initiative in making friends of the poor and needy, by using our brains, our talent and our money to work for justice; for if we cannot be trusted with illusive wealth, who will trust us with lasting?
Today we celebrate the feast of St. Matthew, who was both an evangelist and an apostle, or at least we use the name “Matthew” to cover two different ministries, one the ministry of apostle. There was an apostle by that name, also an evangelist--may not actually be the same person. Nonetheless, we focus today on the apostle and the role of apostle in the life of the Church.

Vatican I, the ecumenical council that met in 1870, issued a decree called “Pastor Aeternus,” Eternal Pastor, Eternal Shepherd. And in that document it said something very interesting about apostles. It said that the apostles continue in their ministry through time. Now we know that Christ abides within his Church; and the Holy Spirit has been given to the Church to guide and direct it, to inspire and teach. Yet the fathers of that Council said not only is Christ living in his Church protecting it from error, not only is the Holy Spirit the soul of his Church breathing into it the life of God, but the apostles themselves chosen by Jesus in his earthly life continue in a ministry in an irreplaceable way; they continue to guide and direct the affairs of the earthly Church.

And I think that the point they’re trying to make is a very important point for us to meditate on: the Church is not just what exists today. In fact when we talk about the unity of the Church, the unity of the Church first and foremost is the unity between the earthly Church, ourselves, and heavenly saints. There’s one Church. And of course there’s the third part, those who are suffering because they are not yet ready to join in heavenly glory. The unity of the Church is in all these three so-called “parts” that are really one body. So the Church is still learning and growing on earth; the Church is still suffering; the Church is still, according to St. Paul, triumphant—not three separate, confined areas, but one single Church. When we gather for the Eucharist we are gathering in the presence of the saints. In the Oriental Church this is expressed by the use of an icon screen where the saints are seen visibly as being present in the sanctuary. We don’t have icons screens, but the same truth needs to be affirmed.

Now in the basic apology of the Church we have to understand that Christ is always the teacher, the Spirit is always the teacher--there’s one God, of course--and through the apostles Jesus gave a mission to the Church to spread. So the mission of the Church is to spread; the apostolic mission is to spread. And that must be accomplished. We are nothing if we are not spread. Now Pope John Paul has reiterated this many times. Pope Paul VI wrote one of the greatest documents on this topic, “Evangelii Nuntiandi.” And we are really called to bring good news; that’s what it means to be an apostle. It’s through the apostles Jesus called that the Church today continues its apostolic work. And if we fail to spread, if we fail to preach, if we fail to teach, if we fail to bring Baptism to the world, then woe to us! We need to recognize our calling.
And one final thought: in Jesus’ ministry, it was that people constantly complained about what he was doing. This is part of persecution already. Every time there has ever been a prophet, a true prophet, a true apostle from God, that person has been attacked and persecuted. This attack and persecution is often only verbal, but it’s very real. And it is lodged often in the form of complaint. Two things this leads us to realize: number one, be wary of people who are always complaining. Be aware of a tendency in ourselves to want to complain. You may be simply joining in the persecution of God’s apostles in their apostolic work.

Number two, we cannot trust the opinion of people. The Pharisees actually were the best of people at their time. But their arguments and their views about God, about God’s will, were very flawed. Today we are constantly hearing about the poll taken about this issue or that issue as if people are somehow supposed to know. How do people know? Why do we give credence to the polls? We say because we’re living in a democratic society. Maybe that’s one of our problems, that living in a democratic society we listen too much to each other. We don’t listen to something else: the voice of the Transcendent.

So we need to be very well aware that the teacher among us is the Spirit, and the apostles continue their mission through us. We need to be their spokespersons, taking the good news to others. We cannot allow ourselves to be thwarted because of popular opinion or the views of our culture. These are just forms of persecution that must be overcome among the faithful. Ultimately we will all eventually join the Lord in God’s kingdom, which we already anticipate in today’s Eucharist.
Some people believe that Jesus’ attitude toward his mother and brothers—whoever the brothers are, it isn’t known, but family anyway—was rather harsh.

Now to understand what it is to seek holiness we have to distinguish among three different paths. Pleasing oneself is the first. I think we could all be in agreement that pleasing oneself is not the way to holiness. The second path is pleasing others. Many people believe this is indeed what holiness is about: being pleasing, being helpful, being of service, being kind; but, in fact, this is not the way to holiness! It may be that saints do, in fact, serve others, but they do not serve others to be pleasing; that’s not their motivation.

The real motivation of a saint is the third, which is pleasing God. Pleasing God can call for all different kinds of behavior in all different kinds of circumstances. Sometimes pleasing God means giving of oneself in service like Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa’s mission was not to please the dying or the poor. It was to please God, and in order to please God she cared for those no one else cared about. This was her gift to God. But when a person is really bent on pleasing God, they may be actually very difficult to live with if we’re not able or desirous to please God!

Now as far as Mary goes, Mary is, of course, the first disciple. So her life is spent always serving God. So doubtless she and Jesus got along quite well, although at times I’m sure she didn’t understand him!

But as far as the rest of the family—and in the ancient world people did not live in little units of three. They lived in larger units. So there was no doubt others in the larger
extended family they lived with--as far as these went, I’m sure they found Jesus quite difficult. In fact Mark says, “They pleaded with him to leave.” When we live with someone who is really bent on doing God’s will and we are not, they are going to be not only not pleasing to us, but actually a thorn in our side! And if you read the gospels carefully you’ll see all kinds of references that Jesus makes to what we call “flesh and blood,” family members, kin; and they are very negative. I suspect he had very poor conduct in his extended family. But, of course, Jesus was not about pleasing that family or being a good member of that family.

He was about the work of God. And the work of God as he saw it was creating an entirely new kind of family, a family that acknowledged God as Father, a family where all other relationships fell by the wayside. Thus he said such things as, “I’ve not come to bring peace but the sword to divide father from son and mother from daughter. Unless you hate your father and mother, you cannot be my disciple. My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and keep it.”
“There is nothing new under the sun.”

This is a famous saying from the Book of Qoheleth or Ecclesiastes. The biblical books of wisdom do not raise anything unique, but are in fact sharing in the universal wisdom of human culture. The fact that they are included in our Holy Scripture is itself indicative of an inclusive, secular, and one might say evangelistic, intent of the early Church and of ancient Israel. Fortunately for us the wisdom books and the wisdom of the world is not the last word.

What Qoheleth is expressing is, of course, a kind of fatalism. Nothing ever changes. Everything that has ever happened already did. There is nothing new that is ever going to come. Now there is a certain truth to this. The world is governed by certain fundamental principles, biological, and psychological laws. The first two we have figured out pretty well; the third we don't know much about. But even human behavior, human societies, work according to certain fundamental laws. There are cycles. Just like there are seasons of the year, there are cycles to human society; but they are a little longer than just one year. Another way of talking about cycles is to think of a pendulum swinging from one extreme to another very slowly. This reflects not only human styles but actually human values, behaviors, movements, actions and reactions. And all together they create a world that we see all around us, a world that has been the same for thousands of years.

What has changed in the last century, millennium and beyond, is the human knowledge. But here is the great insight that Qoheleth would relish to share with us: human knowledge does not change us an inkling. Yes, our knowledge has grown. Yes, we’re more informed about our world; and we have much greater technology than we had years ago, but people are just the same--haven’t changed one iota! Why? We are governed by laws we do not understand. Now this should actually be very bad news, if it
were not for
the fact that wisdom is not the last word. And, incidentally, this is more or less the last
word we hear in eastern mysticism--more or less this is where they end their view of life.

But the word of God is not exhausted in this sort of wisdom. The word of God now
has to effect intervention. The prophetic word of God addresses us from, you might say,
a perpendicular angle to the cycles that keep everything going and insists that we are
inwardly free. We have a free will. And we can respond to God and to God’s initiatives.
And that alone can change us. And this is the great potential that Jesus was constantly
exploiting and talking about: the possibility that the kingdom of God, which is really a
response to God within the human spirit, that that could actually grow like the mustard
seed and become something of a home, just as a mustard bush is a home for birds. It
could become a home for those with no nest, for the weary and the burdened in life, for
people who don’t know what life is for or where they’re going or where they want to go.

So Jesus’ work and the work of the prophets and the saints in the history of the world
is the same. It’s developing something within which is capable of corresponding to the
divine will. This takes discipline, intelligence, sacrifice, learning, surrender. This is the
work of the kingdom. Because of the work of the kingdom we don’t have to be fatal--
caught up in the cycles of life. And the pendulum will continue to swing and sway
people to control thoughts and the actions of people who do not strive to be free, who do
not know the truth that makes one free, who are not drawn to the kingdom.

So at every step of our life we have this choice either to go along with the flow of the
world and more or less be controlled by the cycles, by the pendulum which seems to have
the majority of the people in its grasp, or we can be free to the word of truth which is
always addressing us. And if we seek the word of truth and we allow it to make us free,
then we also will become like a little bit of leaven in a lump of dough.
Today we’re reading again from the Book of Qoheleth or Ecclesiastes, the Latin name for this book. And it’s part of the body of literature called “Writings” in the Old Testament, also sometimes called books of “Wisdom.” Now in this particular book the author is reflecting on the events of life, and that all the events of life constitute what the author calls “time.” And as he sees it, the events of life are arranged in a sort of circular pattern so that within the traversing of time all events eventually take place over and over again.

Now he contrasts this to the timeless that he says God puts in men’s hearts. Timelessness might be thought of as something like the center of the soul, where all the events are on the circumference. Now the point he is trying to make is that our attention is always on the circumference. We are taken up with the various events that transpire in our lives, but that isn’t really where the attention should be, since what goes on in the circumference is constantly changing and constantly moving and isn’t really where the importance lies.

There is a time for everything, and we can’t move on to anything. And when there’s moments of sorrow or sadness we’re very happy with the thought that this too shall pass even though there are deep wounds that take a long time to heal. Nonetheless this is a time that will pass and fade. And it should. Likewise joy also passes and fades. This is the very nature of life itself insofar as life is a passage of time.

But now he says that God puts the timeless in the heart. Heart here means the center, the core, of human life. There is where God dwells! It’s not that God is ever absent from

A Time To . . .
any part of life, except that as things constantly move and change, we can’t hold onto anything anyway--good or bad. And so we have to take each day as it is whatever it brings! It’s there, but it shall go. So our sorrows are real, but they pass. Our joys are real, but they pass. But the timeless remains always at the center.

And if we are to grow in wisdom, we have to move to the center. Which does not mean we can’t enjoy life. We should enjoy life and we should again feel the passion of life and the sadness of life, in fact even more intently as we recognize it will be here only for a moment. But at the same time we have to be very well aware of the timeless within us. This is the anchor of, you might say, the center of gravity, that when we become aware of it, in a sense it softens the blows of life--as it also accents the joys by giving them all a perspective in a relationship to the source.
Today we are following the ruminations of the author Qoheleth. Those of you who are fans of Henry James probably picked out the expression “golden bowl”--one of his novels--comes from this text. And it ends with “the life breath returns to God who gave it.” And this is a meditation on the circle of life. Yesterday the meditation was on the circle of time. Time and life are circular and repetitive.

Life and death is a rhythm that flows through creation. Even stars in the galaxies come to birth and then die away. And so does every thing end and we will end. The earth itself had a birth some many billions of years ago and will some day die. This is the nature of the creation as opposed to the Creator who is eternal. And as the text said yesterday, God has placed the timeless, the eternal, within the heart of man to be our center of gravity, to be our center of meaning; and we need to discover that.

Now in regard to the events of life, for example sickness in life, sickness is actually part of living. And incidentally today is the optional memorial of Saints Cosmas and Damian; they were two deacons in the early Church who were martyred somewhere in Syria. And as deacons they were also physicians. Deaconate ministry means service; and one of the chief services always was to the sick, and that included what at that time was called a “physician.” Now today we think of a physician as someone who is a professional, who is highly skilled, who is very knowledgeable, who operates and functions as a distinct, you might say, well, professional functionary. In the early Church this was not true. A physician was someone who might have been closer to the earth, you might say. However there were some basic ideas in the early Church that we should perhaps look at.

The first is this--and you’ll notice how this differs from the modern view. The first is that death is really part of life. Our desire to heal people is absolutely right because Christ healed. Christ went about healing the sick. But the real motivation for healing people is love of life, not fear of death! And we have to think about this. Many people today are in the grip of a fear of death. And the Letter to the Hebrews describes that as a bondage. It is very different from a love of life. So that’s the first thing. The healing ministry belongs to the Church. And the desire for long life has always been a fundamental, holy desire found in the Scriptures. But that is not the same thing as a fear of death. The fear of death is evil; it is destructive, and holds us in bondage. And many people today are in the grip of the fear of death. And their entire dependence upon doctors and treatment and medicine is really rooted in a fear of death, not love of life. It may even be true--I don’t know--that some doctors are motivated by a fear of death rather than a love of life--it’s possible. That’s the first point we have to keep in mind. A true Christian love of life leads to every desire for health and the utilization of every means possible.
Number two, in the ancient world, in the time of Cosmas and Damian, the time of Christ, all times, there have been certain plants that are medicinal. What modern
pharmacology has done is tested these various products, purified them, concentrated
them, even replicated them in the laboratory; but still where do medicines come from?
They come from the earth. They are part of the creation. Chemotherapy ultimately
comes from the earth. Modern medicines--they all eventually come from the earth--not
vaccinations.

Vaccinations are actually a small portion of the disease. But even there, vaccination,
what do you see? The body has a natural power to create immunity. That’s what
vaccination does; it stimulates the body to create an immunity. Where does the immunity
come from? The body itself, nature itself. Nature is created to be healthy. Nature is
created to heal. And if you really study the history of disease, you will see something
very interesting, that the virulence of all great epidemics had already waned before the
vaccination was discovered. The reason why there aren’t people today with polio is not
simply the Salk vaccine; it’s also that polio had already lost its virulence by the time the
vaccination was discovered. And that’s true of whooping cough, diphtheria, and many
other scourges, you might say. Again, what is at work here? Well, there is, you might
say, a battle between health on the one hand, sickness on the other, fought not only in the
individual but in nature as a whole, in life as a whole. And life is already created to heal
and restore balance. It just takes a long time for more virulent problems. So again our
great ally is life itself, is nature itself--always was, always will be. That’s the second
point. Early Christians knew this.

The third point. As we think about ourselves, think about our problems, we have to
remember we are created for a purpose and a reason. God is the source of our life, and
we need to rely on God for help. It’s wonderful that we have developed arts and
sciences. These are all meant--what are they meant for? They are meant to help the
purposes of God--not to do our own thing, not to live our own life, not to assert into this
beautiful creation our own individual self-will. That’s not the purpose of any art or
science. That’s not the purpose of our intelligence. That’s an abuse of our intelligence,
and our intelligence can be abused. Medicine can be abused. Medical knowledge can be
abused when we forget the real purpose of our life.

The fourth point is that, of course, there are reasons we don’t know the origin of
virulent sicknesses, malignancies. The reason for virulent viruses--we don’t know this;
they are just part of the happenings of life, but even these shall pass. And ultimately all
life shall return to God who gave it.
“Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the everlasting life to which you were called when, in the presence of many witnesses, you made your noble profession of faith.”

Rightly so, during the Reformation the reformers stressed the fact that faith is a gift; and indeed it is. However, they seemed often blind to the fact that faith needs to be received and exercised. And faith is received and exercised in three basic ways: through learning, through struggle, and through sacrifice. Now in response to the ecumenical movement and the desire for unity among Christian churches, even in our own Catholic theology, there has been an emphasis on the giftedness of faith almost to the exclusion of struggle and sacrifice. But struggle and sacrifice are essential to holding on to the everlasting life that we have been given. And this is what Paul is saying to Timothy.

Further, in our society there is a prejudice against the very idea of fighting. “Good girls don’t fight. Good boys don’t bite.” Good Christians don’t fight, as if the ideal person is very passive and pacific. But Christ Himself was a fighter. He fought without violence. He fought without rancor. He fought without hatred. He fought without deceit—but he did fight, and not without anger, because anger is a holy energy given to us to overturn the tables of injustice and inhumanity! Jesus was propelled and motivated by holy anger.

Now in our spirituality this is called--this topic is called “spiritual warfare.” One hears very little about spiritual warfare today. It seems as if the modern taste is for a spirituality that stresses feeling good, being at peace, and finding contentment. Well, it is true that peace is a fruit of the Spirit; but spiritual peace is not like the peace the world gives, as Jesus Himself said: “The peace I leave with you is not like the peace the world gives.” The peace the world gives is the opposite of conflict. The peace that comes from the Spirit lives within the midst of conflict because it is of the Spirit, and it cannot be destroyed or pushed aside by the conflicts of life.

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians said, “Our contention is not against flesh and blood.” That’s a very important point. The fight that is indicated in spiritual warfare is
not against people, but it’s rather against the powers, the principalities, that dominate the phychic and social life of human culture of the world that produces the “dog eat dog” mentality. Now Adolf Hitler may be dead, but the spirits that obsessed him are not dead. Evil is not dead, and darkness still attempts to overcome the earth.

Now spiritual warfare in a person’s life has three basic elements. The first is the universal struggle against selfishness and self-love. Selfishness and self-love exist in all people due to original sin, the one exception being the Blessed Mother, born without sin, and Jesus, the Word of God. Every other person must struggle against self-love, if we are to be engaged in the spiritual battle.

Secondly, some of us have especially particular struggles, for example, against depression or against suicide or against self-contempt. These particular battles are often created by sin, by our being victimized by sin, by our being assaulted by sin.

Thirdly, we need to struggle in our world, in our society, in our town, against the darkness that causes inhumanity and injustice.

Now the opposite of spiritual warfare is complacency. The prophet Amos in the first reading railed against the complacency of the people of Zion--it means the people of Judah. He says, “Woe to the complacent in Zion. They are not upset about the fall of Joseph.” Joseph means the northern kingdom that had been utterly destroyed and the people deported, and their brothers and sisters and cousins in the south couldn’t care less. That’s complacency. The rich man in today’s gospel is another sign and symbol of complacency. He indulged his own desires and feasted daily, but the poor beggar Lazarus was right under his nose--and he did not lift a finger to help him, did not even notice him! He did not notice him until he himself was suffering in torment. Then he notices Lazarus, and he says, “Ask Lazarus to dip his finger in water that I may quench my thirst”--but the rich man never lifted his little finger to help Lazarus himself! Now the teaching of the gospel is very clear. We fail to join the battle of faith at our own peril!
Today and the next few days we are reading from the Book of Job. The Book of Job is a book of the Old Testament; it is in the class called books of “Wisdom.” Now as such, Job has a lot in common with the religious literature of other cultures--books of wisdom do. They are, you might say, a part of the Bible that has an open door to the wisdom, to the thinking, of other cultures. Some believe that there is actually an original book smaller than this in Babylonia, although it has never been found.

It’s purpose within the canon of Jewish people however is very clear. The Book of Deuteronomy promises that if you follow God, all will be well. And the problem with this is in the short term it’s not true; all is not well with people who follow God. That’s why the Book of Job was written. It’s dealing with this issue of--as it’s put by one rabbi: “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People”--why bad things happen to people who follow the law of God, the will of God.

And it is a theological problem for people who believe in the power and justice of God. It’s no problem for people who don’t believe in God. It’s not any problem for people who don’t believe that God is powerful. It’s not any problem for people who don’t believe that God is good. But for people who believe God is good and powerful, then why is there so much misery among the just? And the Book of Deuteronomy more or less implies that all hardship is a punishment. And of course, you have to remember that in the Jewish religion, the Jewish way of life, there was no clear idea of some sort of life after death. At best it was a vague hint that possibly at some point God may act in such a way as to
resurrect the dead. But life after death was considered basically nothing but a long sleep like a coma, not necessarily enjoyable by anybody--good or bad. So therefore here is the question of God who is just, God who is good, must vindicate his justice now. That’s the basic point established by the Book of Deuteronomy and the philosophy and the theology of the basic Jewish way of life.

And again, it runs into problems with experience. People who are very good experience terrible reverses in their lives. This is what the Book of Job is talking about; it’s a question at this point. But the fact that it is put into the canon means that the Holy Spirit inspired first of all the author, and then also inspired the community to receive this message--inspiration is not just one thing. Someone has to be inspired to write or think or to create, and then the community has to be inspired to receive the teaching. And the community was inspired to receive this teaching because of its great meaning that we need to think through ourselves.

Now actually the book doesn’t give an answer! The answer will really come later in Christ. But it at least raises the question. Sometimes in our way of life, in our way of faith, we really have to live with the question. Faith doesn’t suddenly bring us an answer right away; it helps us face the question. In the next few days we need to listen to it to let this word enter into our spirit and help us confront the real situation that we are not--through our faith, through our means to God--we are not privileged people, and we will not escape the evils that befall everyone at some point. That is point number one, and there is more to the problem.
Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Therese of Lisieux, and St. Therese was a very frail woman who died at a very early age of tuberculosis. Although very frail physically, she had a great spirit and she desired to be a missionary; in fact, I believe she desired to be a priest. And she wanted to go into the foreign missions; I believe it was Africa. She was not allowed to go because of her health and other reasons. But she was a person who did not allow this to anyway thwart her basic desires. Pope Pius XI said of her, “She is the greatest missionary in the 20th century.” Now is this an exaggeration? Maybe, maybe not.

But we often underestimate our own potential for good. Unlike St. Therese, most of us allow the various circumstances in life to thwart our best intentions. We imagine because of some handicap or some weakness or some circumstance which is adverse that we cannot do or fulfill the deepest desires we have. But if our deepest desires are really from God, nothing can stop them except ourselves, our own personal failure to continue. And that is why Therese is a very important saint for our time. She also lived in a time when the Church was, you might say, out of favor, when many people were in fact rejecting the gospel just like in today’s gospel reading. And although she longed to physically go two by two into some foreign land and was not allowed to, she, through her prayers, did spread the gospel and was a powerful force for good. There is no one, no matter how weak, who cannot also be a powerful force for the gospel. And St. Therese reminds us of that.
“We are God’s children now; what we shall later be has not yet come to light.” We need to be reminded from time to time that we don’t really know what we are, what we are called to. Life is a mystery; it’s meant to be--and no one has ever figured out what it’s about. The author of the second reading says, “We are called children of God, and in fact we are. But what we shall be, we do not know.” In a similar way, in the Gospel of John there is talk of seed, a seed that falls to the earth and dies and becomes something else other than what it was. If it doesn’t, it remains just what it was. But a seed in itself has no purpose in remaining a seed. It’s value is in losing. That is what we are. There is no value in remaining what we are. Our total value is in losing what we are so that the potential can be unleashed and we can become what we shall be.

Now in this very delicate area of what life is about, there are no geniuses. In fact the great geniuses of the world, who have won the Nobel prizes, only had insights into the peripheral issues like, for example, how matter operates--but not what life’s about. And I may say that it’s beyond our ken to even plumb these questions. They are really matters for revelation. They are matters for what God reveals to us, as he does through his Son. Jesus compared himself to bread. He said, “I am the Bread of Life.” This is the revelation. If we want to know what life is about, we have to look to Christ. Christ calls himself “bread.”

The geniuses of this world have never figured out the meaning of life, but the saints have. But they didn’t figure it out on their own; they were recipients of a revelation. And the saints reveal in their own lives what they have learned about the mystery of life in their being generous, in their being bread, in their giving life, in their nurturing of life, in their support of life. What the saints have learned is that the greatest possible ministry or function that anybody could possibly take upon himself or herself is being like God. God is the one who gives life. And the saints then show their godliness in their life-giving
qualities. And every single one of us is capable of this type of sanctity. We all can give life in different ways. The gospel makes it very clear that every single person is invited into a relationship with God, a relationship that is marked by generosity, by the giving of life, by the openness to revelation.

And Marcella was a woman who gave a great deal of life to many people. You are witnesses of that in being here today. In her own way, she spoke to you and encouraged you to be like herself: generous and life-giving. One day we should all be where she is at the end of our earthly journey. And as we look back at our lives, nobody will ever regret giving life, supporting life, being generous, because those are the moments in which God entered into our lives, making them like his own. So this is really not something we do at all; it is something that God does in us, through us, and in his grace. The greatest privilege we have is to be graced with this mission that we share with Jesus, to bring God’s life to the world. There is no one way to do it. And we all have to find the way we can use to bring this life to the world because we are God’s children already.

As I mentioned last night to the congregation at the wake service, we often don’t reflect on who we really are. The English author, Charles Dickens, used to write novels in which there was a common theme in many of them, the theme of some illegitimate child who didn’t know who his parents were, who lived in the slums, who practiced crime because he didn’t know any better. And then one day he finds out that he’s really a child of a very wealthy family, and he goes off to live happily ever after, so to speak. That’s really the story that John is trying to tell us in the fourth gospel. We are children already in this epistle, but we don’t actually act like it. We don’t really seem to know our Father. We don’t recognize how really fortunate we are. We haven’t yet discovered the great inheritance that is ours. And so we get caught up in a world of darkness and doubt, sometimes despair and sometimes crime, and always poverty--poverty being a lack of the riches of God. Sooner or later we really ought to find out where we come from and claim our inheritance. It is never too early.
This morning we’re continuing the reading from the Book of Job. And really it is an interesting poem delving into one of the great mysteries of life: the question of suffering and why would a good, merciful, compassionate and just God create a world where suffering is completely unrelated to moral fault? That’s the question.

Now Job is supposed to be a sympathetic figure, and we’re really supposed to identify with Job ourselves, or know someone who we can identify with Job. There are certain people who have received an inordinate amount of suffering in life. Everyone has some problems, but some people just seem to have far too many of them--that’s the figure of Job: it may be myself; it may be yourself; it may be somebody we know.

Now Job responds by, basically, complaining. And this we’re all familiar with; we all come to complain about life: “It’s not fair,” and so on. In fact, as I observe children’s reactions: “Life is not fair,” they say--true enough. And at this point God is answering Job. This really isn’t answered in a very compassionate way at all. He doesn’t say, “Well Job, I really understand your problems. Job, really, I realize this is more than you can take,” or anything like that. What God really says to Job is, “What do you know?”

And this is very important that we let God ask us this question. Because it is true; there is a sort of haphazard way in which disorder visits people--that’s true. But it’s also true that we tend to make matters worse. And one of the reasons we make matters worse is that people, we all, think we know. I have met this very often in situations. Indeed people are suffering and indeed are very burdened, and yet they make everything worse because they insist on needing to know everything. They refuse to listen to anybody. Not only do they not listen, not only do they not seek counsel, but they don’t pray either--not true prayer, which is seeking the wisdom of God. That’s what Job was really not doing; he wasn’t seeking anything--he was telling God what was wrong!
And this book is important in that we identify with what is wrong here. What befell Job had nothing to do with Job. But then in a certain way he started to become very angry because he thought that interfered with his idea of justice because he thought that God was really changing the rules in the middle of the game. And God says “What do you know about the game? What do you know about anything?”

And it’s very important, as we live life, if we are ever going to find the meaning and purpose of our own lives and fulfill the plan God has for us, that we have the sense of true humility. Humility does not mean being down on ourselves. It does not mean being self deprecating. It does not mean being negative about oneself. It does not mean denying one’s talent. It does not mean in any way having low self-esteem. It means being truthful. And truthfulness means we do not know the meaning of life, and no one does; no one ever has figured it out. Not one human genius in the history of the world ever figured out the meaning of life. In fact the greatest geniuses only had insights into peripheral issues, like major physics or something like that. But the meaning of life? Never, no one--ever! And no one ever will because we cannot from our position ascertain and perceive the whole of life.

That’s what God is telling Job. But we are not a drift because God addresses us through his angels, through his prophets, through his Son. So we are a drift if we do not listen to his angels, we do not listen to his prophets, we do not listen to his Son, then we are a drift. When we listen, we are not a drift. We are guarded. We are guided. We are taught and we are upheld. We are challenged and we are comforted. So there needs to be a true sympathy for those who do not believe, and in this case, belief means “who are not open” to God’s guidance. Jesus says of children, “Do not despise these little ones, for their angels behold the face of God.” We are never cut off from the face of God. We are guided and guarded at every moment; but we do have to listen, or we will be a drift.
Today Jesus’ words are very deep, and he praises the Father for revelation, for revealing himself. He says that the Father has revealed himself to mere children. This need not be taken to mean merely children in age, but to the child that is within all people. In regard to God we never grow up; we always remain children in this sense.

And children know their parents in a very personal way. We are not “acquainted” with our parents, unless they’ve left home when we were very young; other than that, we know our parents in a very deep way and a complete way. And Jesus uses this example of our knowledge of our parents, and he says that’s the knowledge the Son has of the Father. That’s not a knowledge we can acquire in any way whatsoever on our own. It is not the result of research. It is not the result of reflection. It is not the result of prayer. We cannot penetrate the mystery of God and discover what God is like; but God knows himself, and offers this knowledge to us, which is revelation. And in revelation we come to know God the way we know our parents. We come to know God as a son would know a father, a daughter would know her mother, a son would know a mother, a daughter would know her father--it’s that intimate sort of relationship which is unique!

This speaks on one hand of the mystery of the Trinity where one God subsists in really distinct relations, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and secondly, it speaks of the revelation of this inner life and the invitation to us to enter into it, to become one with God. And if we are to become one with God, it can only be through the Son, who assumes human nature in Jesus; and only Jesus reveals what God is like. And the part of us that can receive that
revelation is not the educated part; it is not the clever part. In this area of life, those who are educated, those who have expertise, those who are gifted, have no advantage over those who have no expertise, no education, and no gifts, because the revelation goes to the child. By the “child” it means that which God has made, not that which life has made, not the product of our environment, not the result of our education, but something private, something more simple, more pure, more natural--a child. It is through that God reveals his own nature, inviting us into his own intimate knowledge and love for himself.

Now as we celebrate the Mass, we are invited to enter into the life of the Son, to offer our lives with the Son to the Father, making everything we are, everything we do, everything we suffer, a spiritual sacrifice. This is truly sanctifying, meaning it is making holy. It is making holy by putting everything into God, for only God is holy. So only what is God’s is holy. And by giving ourselves to God we become holy. And we are enabled to do this by our Baptism, where God invites us into his own inner life. Every Catholic is blessed indeed to have this opportunity to enter into the mystery of Christ’s own sacrifice and death, to enter into the redemptive suffering of Jesus and become one with it. That’s what we do when we offer ourselves, and then come to receive the body and the blood, the soul and the divinity of Christ. And from this sacred action we should be enabled like Jesus’ disciples to have power over all forces of darkness, to find meaning and blessing in every kind of life--even those which are outwardly unsavory, or difficult, or adverse--and to bring others to Christ.
Exercise Your Faith

“When you have done all you have been commanded to do, say, ‘We are useless servants. We have done no more than our duty.’”

Today Jesus presents a great challenge to his followers. It would seem the apostles have a very legitimate request. They say, “Lord increase our faith.” Now parabolic teaching employs both paradox and exaggeration on the one hand, and subtleness on the other. And this is very subtle. What he’s saying is, “You really don’t need more faith. That’s not really a legitimate prayer, because if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, which means very, very little faith, that has the enormous power that could uproot a sycamore.”

Now in our culture, or rather in our climate, sycamores don’t grow that big; but in milder climates sycamores are very large trees, larger than even typical elms. And so the image of uprooting a sycamore is the image of a great, powerful force. And Jesus says, “Well, you really have a great, powerful force, if you have even the tiniest faith. Your problem isn’t that you lack faith. That’s not your problem.”

And we have to be very clear about this, because many people are waiting in life for something to happen, for them to get more of something, more faith, more love, more something. “If only I had this, I would be able to: live, love, whatever.” And Jesus says, “Stop waiting. What you have to do is exercise your faith.” Faith is something like muscles, we’re all born with muscles. We don’t all exercise muscles—if you do, they get bigger; if you don’t, then they don’t get bigger. Faith will grow as used. This is very important for us to focus on and personalize. Each of us is born with a certain amount of intelligence, a certain amount of talent. And we are given the supernatural gift of faith, but how much of any of it do we use?

What is often lacking is motivation. Now motivation is not a gift. Motivation is not something we receive. It is quite wrong to think this, that someone can motivate somebody else. In fact, if it were possible, it would be very unhealthy. Sometimes parents think that they can motivate their children—well, it wouldn’t be good if you could. Or spouses think they can motivate one another—it wouldn’t be healthy if you could. But you can’t anyway. Motivation is very similar to understanding; it’s a personal something. It comes from ourselves from within each person. I cannot give you my understanding; you can’t give me yours. I can’t give you my motivation; you can’t give me yours. These are very personal. We are thrown into life without any instructions. And for us to do anything at all, whether it’s become a millionaire or become a saint, or anything else, we have to understand something. And out of that understanding will come a motivation. If we have no understanding at all what life is for or what life could be, we’ll end up doing nothing and being nothing.
Now the gospel calls us to sainthood. There are many other possible goals in life, but the gospel calls us to sainthood. And that does not exclude many other goals because sainthood is a universal call. So we can become saintly bankers; we can become saintly carpenters, saintly bricklayers, saintly shop clerks. There is no role in life that is excluded from sainthood. It’s a universal call, but it requires that we have some sense of what the meaning of life is and we’ve asked the question: “What is life for? How can my work, how can my play, contribute to the purpose of life?”

And Jesus is calling everyone into a partnership. The New Testament presents Jesus Himself as the revelation of the Father. And what’s being revealed? Well, not only the nature of God, but actually also the nature of ourselves because Jesus is God and man, God and human. And he is revealing the true nature of God and the true nature of the creation. Creation is created to be a partner with God.

And if we understand this, then everything we do and everything we are we can all work together. And we’ll see that we’re called to service; partnership with God is service to life. The Holy Spirit is the Lord and the Giver of life. Service to life according to Christ is not an option for those who have nothing else to do. It is the fundamental meaning, and everything else has to fit into it: being a teacher, being a doctor, being a bricklayer, or whatever else. That all has to fit into this primary goal of vocation which is to serve life.

Now this, of course, is very countercultural. That’s not what we gather from the TV; this is not what we gather from the magazines or the newspapers or from anything in our culture, or from any other culture! Cultures are influenced by sin, and they’ve always substituted something for God’s purpose in varying degrees. In ancient times it was the tribe that became the god, for all intents and purposes. For our modern culture it’s the individual self. And we are all conditioned to focus on ourselves: on our own personal needs and desires and wishes, and think that we have to be about satisfying these. And this very focus leads to the madness, the violence, and the disintegration that we all can observe if we open our eyes. And Jesus is trying to open the eyes of all leaders or potential leaders.

Now in regard to the many facets of life, one of them that I need to focus on today is sexuality, because our culture tells us that sexuality is something that is given for our own personal enjoyment, recreation—it’s something commonplace. Having children is a choice: if you want to have children, you have children; if you don’t, you don’t. It’s all a matter of convenience and preference. Well, that is not in accord with God’s divine purpose. Sexuality and every other aspect of life is meant to serve God and life. People are not supposed to have children because it suits them or because they want them for their own values, for their own sake. Children are a gift from God, and parents are called to have children in service to God—to serve life.

As we see that sexuality itself has become so commonplace and so personal, something that is all meant for one’s own personal enjoyment, we should not be surprised by the
mounting rate of crimes of a sexual nature and a violent nature. Sex in every aspect of our lives is meant to serve God. And everyone has to find his or her own vocation in this service, whether it’s married life, or single life, or celibate life— all of it is meant for one purpose—serving God! True happiness depends upon a profound conversion in each of us of our minds and wills and our desires, to the mind and will and the heart of God.

Now this is possible; conversion to God is really possible for the same reason that if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could uproot a sycamore. Some people are waiting for some great intervention from God. They think, “Well, God must do something now to straighten out this world.” It is highly unlikely that God will do anything to straighten out the world because God already did send his Son. God already has given his Spirit; and the Son is God and the Spirit is God! So what more can God do? Rather it seems that we will continue to live with the consequences of our choices, and the wrong choices of our society will continue to eat away the fabric of what we call our civilization. And there is no escape from this, except conversion. So the gospel is alerting all of us to the need that we have, not only for our own personal conversion, but to bring conversion to the world by proclaiming God’s word, again, a vocation for each of us in our own way.

In conclusion, I would like to read a quotation from Pope John Paul: “To all members of the Church, the people of life and more life: I make this most urgent appeal that together we may offer this world of ours new signs of hope, and work to ensure that justice and solidarity will increase, and that a new culture of human life will be affirmed for the building of an authentic civilization of truth and love.”
Today, Saint Paul is instructing his disciples in the Church of Galatia. He is warning them about accepting another gospel. We see that from the very beginning there were disputes about what is really the gospel, what is really the truth in Christ. And this letter gives witness to the fact that there were people from the very beginning who disputed the authentic teaching of the apostles and tried to replace the gospel with something else.

Now Paul here says that the Gospel is no human invention, but it is rather a revelation from Jesus Christ. Now during the Enlightenment the view of the so-called “enlightened” people, the enlightened philosophers, was that religion was a human invention--including Christianity. This granted the rise to agnosticism and atheism as a very respectable, intellectual belief.

In recent years another approach has come which is actually more devious, and that is to say that all religions are inspired of God. Associated with this point of view is, of course, the very popular figure of Joseph Campbell, himself for most of his life a fallen-away Catholic. Campbell’s work, of course, is not highly respected by many scholars because he really interpreted the religions and the myths of the world in a very Christian way. And you might say, “What’s wrong with that?” Well, it’s not authentic. By interpreting almost all myths in a Christian way, he came to the conclusion that all myths are the same; there is a sort of universal religion; it is all the same and therefore many of the distinctive characteristics of the Christian faith or the Catholic faith can be discounted.
Now the attitude that Joseph Campbell had has been accepted by many people: basically that all religions are inspired by God--this is not necessarily true! What is true is what’s always been acknowledged: that there is a natural desire we have for God, a natural desire to seek God and to have God. When one honestly looks at the attempts to find God, we see many blind alleys, many sad and tragic approaches, many self-destructive tendencies. And so we have to be very wary of religion because many forms of religion are false and destructive, while others are true and constructive.

But what Paul was already meeting in Galatia were false, destructive forms of the gospel. Now Paul affirmed the fact that the gospel we have came from Jesus Christ, and the Church affirms that, that the very same gospel is protected by the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit. And the same God who inspired the beginning, inspires the development of the gospel, the growth of doctrine under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As each age needs its own special, you might say, interpretation, this is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Now during the Protestant Reformation, the reformers believed the beginning was divine, but not the development. If you think about this, you see this is also rather self-defeating; if God works to begin something and then not guide it, that would be rather pointless. So Paul really is calling us to awareness of God’s work and the message of truth that is the gospel, how it is developed and protected throughout time, and how we are called on to remain faithful to the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ.
Saint Paul today is sharing with the Galatians something of his own personal life. And he expresses a conviction that God had chosen him from the beginning from the moment of his conception. This is a conviction he shares with Isaiah and with Jeremiah and with many others who take the time to reflect on their lives. This is actually true of every human being. Every human being is chosen by God for a vocation of love and service in some manner fitting to our own nature. St. Thomas Aquinas used to say, “Grace builds on nature.”

Now St. Paul had a very particular nature; it was, what you might call, ardent. He never did something in a half-hearted way. When he was convinced that Judaism was the way, he was the greatest Jew the world had ever seen. And then when the Lord revealed to him the truth of Christ, then he became the greatest missionary of Christianity.

Now the conversion experience did not supply him with his ardor; it was already there. His nature was already intact. Grace builds on nature. So we ought not to wait for God’s grace to change us, to change our nature, to make us different from what we are; that is not the way it works. Grace builds on nature and redirects our goals and energies so that they are more fitting, and they can reach the goal which God has predestined them for.

So this is the idea of predestination. We are all predestined. But not all of us listen to God or cooperate with God. And that is our undoing. Prayerful discernment should help us each day to find what God wants us to do with that particular day remaining. And if we are sincerely trying to follow God’s direction, then we can also look back and find
that
indeed God has been directing us all along. But God’s direction cannot take away our fear. We are always fearing. But God’s love and care and wisdom is so great that God is able to work around our folly, our mistakes, our poor choices--provided that we basically try to listen to God and follow his way.

So St. Paul, even though he was persecuting the church, was actually doing what he thought God wanted him to do. That’s the way God was able to use him. But people who are indifferent to God’s way--those people--will not be touched because grace builds on nature. So each day God is touching us the way we are and using what he finds for his work in building the kingdom.
St. Paul asks of the foolish Galatians, “Has what was started in the spirit ended in the flesh?” Now this terminology, we need to be familiar with it: “the spirit and the flesh”—very common in the writings of St. Paul.

Well, the term “flesh” is used often in the Old Testament. It means, basically, the physical life of human beings or animals. It has either a neutral meaning, or it has a more or less negative meaning. It’s neutral if you simply talk about “the flesh” as a creation of God. Well, it’s not actually neutral; it’s actually good—it’s a creation of God, but then there’s something negative about it.

In the Book of Genesis, it says that God decided to send the flood at the time of Noah “because he repented of the creation, because of the violence of the flesh.” So here we see the word “flesh” associated with the idea of violence. And we know how many times there are wars, violent upheavals. And sometimes these are associated with even religious feelings or religious identity or national identity. So all this belongs to the flesh.

Then thirdly, it’s also associated with the idea of mortality. “The flesh will pass away like grass.” So there’s no clear idea in the Old Testament of the immortality that is possible for human beings. Human beings were simply considered mortal and that was it!

Now the New Testament has new teachings: God is offering eternal life. And if God is our future life, then already we are to be, as it were, reborn, experiencing this eternal life. This life of God should be the life of the community. St. Paul is saying that many people, who although they ought to belong to the community, although they are baptized, although they’ve been initiated into the community and should be living in the Spirit, are not! And he associates this with the practice of the law! Now that had never been done in the Old Testament; in fact, the concerns of the Old Testament are almost exclusively what we would call “physical life”: living, prospering on this earth.

Paul is saying, “Well, in a sense, if we don’t live in the Spirit, then we are living death; we’re not living life.” If our motivation even in service of God is the fear of death,
then we’re not living in the Spirit of Christ. If what we call our “religious faith” or “devotion”
leaves us prone to violence, then we’re living in the flesh; we’re not living in the Spirit. He says, “What began in the Spirit,” because he acknowledges that the preaching the gospel itself is the work of the Spirit. The acceptance of the gospel in faith is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit must be at work in the sacrament of Baptism, which is the font of new life; and St. Paul is very clear about all this. So it isn’t as if someone hasn’t gotten yet to the Spirit; it’s that the Spirit has been given and yet now pushed away in favor of the flesh—in favor of a culture, and a mentality devoid of this Spirit that comes from God through Christ, which is the distinctive characteristic of a Christian believer—which means that Christian believers can, in fact, lose what is distinctive, and as he says here, “end up in the flesh”: end up living on a purely physical level, end up living in a mind that is devoid of any transcendent reference to God. Even though the following of the law seems to save, the law does not bring us a transcendent reference.

He has a well-known theology on the impotence of the law to bring us to God, to bring God to us. And he associates all this with the flesh because one of the primary requirements of the law was circumcision, which takes place within the flesh; therefore, this is simply an exercise in something physical. And on this physical level, on the level of observance of laws, even though they may be perfectly compliant, in perfect conformity with what is—and he acknowledges the word of God the law comes from God—nonetheless, he says that this is pointless and fruitless, and it will go nowhere. It does not bring salvation. It does not bring freedom from the fear of death. It does not bring freedom from bonds. It does not bring peace. It does not bring hope. It does not bring anything that God wants people to have. And it is true that many people, who have begun in the Spirit because they were baptized, do end up in the flesh—not only the foolish Galatians . . . for the history of the church is peopled by foolish believers who have not been pursuing the Spirit!

This is reflected also in the Gospel. Jesus talks about the need for prayer. He says, “How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.” We only have to ask ourselves what the Holy Spirit is asking.
Yesterday I was talking to the 7th graders about the Bible, and I actually amazed myself at an illustration. I said, “If we add 700 years to the present time, we would have the distance between Christ and Abraham in reverse.” Seven hundred years from now would be as far from Christ in time as Abraham was from Christ, before Christ. That’s a long time. Moses, on the other hand, was quite different. Moses lived 1200 years before Christ; so if we think about the 13th century AD, the time of St. Francis, for example, that’s as far distant from Christ as Moses was. Moses and St. Francis are equally distant from Christ. We wouldn’t get to Abraham for another 700 years. So it’s the enormous scale of time that the Bible is talking about!

St. Paul, now, is discussing in his Letter to the Galatians, the vast difference between God’s dealings with Abraham and his dealings with Moses. Of course, it isn’t just Abraham that’s the question, it’s Abraham’s clan, and it’s Moses’ people, Moses’ host. But they’re entirely different; that’s what Paul is talking about. And Paul is stressing that the beginning of God’s working with people comes as a completely unconditioned blessing. If somebody comes and says, “I am going to bless you, and I’m going to bless all people through you”—and this basic blessing which is unconditioned antedates by a very long period the covenant of Moses; it’s a huge difference in time—he is saying that the promises given to Abraham are really more fundamental than anything we have in the time of Moses.

Now basically the whole religion of Israel, the religion of Jesus Christ, was all based upon the Mosaic law. Paul says that law and all the practices in the temple, the sacrifices, everything, none of that is really salvific. Salvation comes through Christ who is the blessing promised to Abraham. And the blessing is promised to everyone; it’s an inclusive—totally inclusive—promise, unconditioned, to Abraham. And it’s fulfilled through Christ Jesus. He is the fulfillment of the promise. And now all people, everyone
included, is now blessed unconditioned in Christ. And it goes way back to the original promise to Abraham.

Now St. Paul, of course, was a Jew. But what he is saying was very hard for Jews to take! He is saying that all those things that made Jewish life specific and particular and exclusive and unique were of actually no salvific value whatsoever, and incidentally also of recent origin in comparison to the true promise! Not that he says it didn’t come from God; he said that it did have a purpose, but the purpose was not really to bring salvation. And it couldn’t! Part of the reason it couldn’t is that it was too exclusive! Salvation isn’t exclusive. The second reason is it was conditioned. It was exclusive—the law—and conditioned! The promise is neither! It is inclusive and unconditioned. So salvation in Christ is this universal, unconditioned and inclusive promise and gift. It does not depend upon anything we do. It does not depend upon our response. “And that is the foundation,” Paul says, “of the gospel.”

Now as we look at our Christian faith, our Christian practice, are we focusing on that sort of universal promise, the universal, inclusive, unconditioned offer of gift? Or do we fall into the sort of exclusive, conditional, to some degree, self-centered idea of our relationship with God and salvation and justification and grace, and so on? That’s the question Paul is raising. They’re very different perspectives. And it’s not that there isn’t some value to the law; he never said there was no value. He just said there is no salvific value.

And this we have to keep in mind, because Jesus brings up a similar issue in the gospel. He came to despoil the power of sin, to divide the kingdom of Satan. But is it not really true that we have allowed God’s kingdom to be divided? Have we not allowed God’s kingdom to be divided by our exclusive ideas, our conditioned responses, our narrow, little identities which divide us from one another?
The beatitudes read from the Gospel according to Matthew have always been a pillar of evangelical piety and tradition. Some scholars believe that the “Sermon on the Mount,” as it’s called, was framed by the evangelist Matthew specifically to contrast with the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. Of course this is trying to get into the mind of the evangelist, which is sometimes a bit difficult.

Nonetheless, the capital purpose of the beatitudes is not exaggerated. As we look at them, we see that they do not reflect partisan, sectarian, or even a worthy religious sense based on the traditional sense. They’re dealing with human life, human experience, and in a way, dealing with human experience. One put it this way: finding the blessings in those circumstances that people instinctively try to avoid. Poverty--or how you want to deal with it--is a place of “not happy.” You don’t have to really dig deeply into what is meant by the poor in spirit, but poverty is a place of emptiness. It’s not a place of power; it’s not a place of control. Sorrowing is just emptiness, and lowliness, and hunger for wholeness. Jesus is trying to bring out how we can find in the undulations of human experience--the ebb and flow you might say of life--that everything is really blessed. We need to thank God not only for our riches but also for our poverty, not only for our joys but also for our sorrows, not only for our successes but also for our humiliation, not only for our satisfaction but also for what we yet hunger for--provided that all of this is done in the Spirit of the Lord.
The first reading was a completely simple proclamation of salvation in Christ that you might say is given for the asking. There are no requirements. There are no criteria. Jesus Christ has died; Jesus Christ is risen, and now we are offered salvation—and we may accept it. It is a privilege to accept it. But do we understand what is being offered? And do we sense power that if accepted, will really change us? And we’ll be transformed not necessarily at our death, but way before as our values, as our perspective, as our perception of life itself is transformed by the gospel.

Now we look to the life of the saints where we see they’re not people who are trying to gain merit in the sight of God, trying to win approval; but rather we see people who are so totally convinced and even overwhelmed by the love of God, the graciousness of God, that they can’t find anything to do with their lives except to serve, to give, and to love as God has given and served and loved them. That’s the life of the saints. And for them—and they all say so in one way or another—this itself is the life so full.

So the question then we might ask ourselves is do we want to wait any longer before we plumb the depths of the love of God? Do we want to wait any longer before we accept for ourselves this gift that God is offering us? Do we want to wait any longer before we discover how God can erase every hurt in our lives?
It’s important that in our efforts to bring the gospel to others--which is our work, which is our mission, not only in the homes we live in, but in the workplace, wherever we are--we need to be a leaven and take that seriously.

But on the other hand, today’s gospel focuses on another side to the issue, and that is the willingness of people to receive the truth. There is a saying in the East: “The ants always find the sugar.” When we speak of an age that is marked by great apostasy, we cannot simply say, “Well, it’s because the gospel hasn’t been preached.” Indeed, there may be some failure of believers to share the faith, but that’s not the whole problem.

The age in which Jesus Himself ministered was an age that he called the “evil age.” It was an age that did not want to receive the truth. That is part of the experience we have in the present. We have very intelligent people who do not really want the truth. And you might say, “Well, what could possibly be the reason?” One of the things we have to become more aware of is the work of evil itself, and how being under the influence of the spirit of pride enables us to turn away from truth. Pride has a very strange effect. It can never be seen as such; that’s the nature of the spiritual world: it cannot be seen.

Now Jesus’ generation sought a sign. People who seek a sign are always looking to their senses and they are not aware of the work of the spiritual world. The work of pride, for example, actually makes people divorced from reality. Now, for example, I know some lawyers who work with convicted criminals, and they told me that they never had one admit that they had done anything wrong! Now is this just bravado? I don’t think so. I think they are probably convinced. How could that be? Pride is at work here. It
divorces people from reality. It creates a separate reality. It creates an awareness that is
detached from truth: truth of myself, truth of God, truth of anything.

And it’s irrespective of the intelligence of the individual. People who are very
intelligent can be very detached from reality. And as well, when I work with people who
have various problems, where they need psychiatric help, one of the great problems is
convincing them that what they perceive is not really real. Now modern psychiatry has
no way of dealing with this really, but they simply treat the symptoms, for example, a
person who has a panic attack, “Well, we’ll give them tranquilizers”—tranquilizing the
nervous system. What is causing the panic? It’s not the sign; it’s not something
physical; it’s not something material. It’s not something that is real in the material sense,
but it is real in the spiritual sense.

Fear itself—fear is actually a reality! So is pride in us, and it works to distort the
human mind. The end result is, of course, a lack of truthfulness, an inability to even
receive the truth. And this is a desperate situation. This is the situation in which Jesus
found himself. At least half of his healing work was deliverance from evil impulses,
“evil spirits” as they called it. Much of the sickness of our society is exactly from this
cause. The result of it is mass disbelief—mass disbelief! Nonetheless, we are called,
then, to bring healing, deliverance, peace, and security—which comes from the truth of
Christ.

Today we celebrate Columbus Day, and Columbus was guilty of many things; but he
was also responsible for some good intentions: bringing missionaries to the New World.
I would hope that we sense this work must continue. We are all missionaries in some
way. God can really work. We need to stand by the truth humbly.
“When the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on the earth?”

Again, the Scripture focuses on the word “faith,” which has many different meanings in the New Testament; and this is a new one. If we have been following the readings this year, this one hasn’t come up yet. Here faith does not mean belief, and it does not mean trust, and it does not mean obedience, but it means something else. It means seeking justice persistently—seeking justice persistently! Another way of putting it perhaps would be praying faithfully for God’s justice.

Now that brings up the issue, well, what, after all, is justice? And the parables very often ask us to focus on this question: What do we think justice is? Ordinarily, we have a very poor idea of justice. We confuse it with another idea we call “fairness.” Justice and fairness are very different. Fairness has to do with what I feel I deserve, but what I feel I deserve is, after all, subjective. Justice is not subjective. It has nothing to do with what we feel. Justice has to do with God’s will for the creation, his plan of life; and God’s justice involves mercy!

Mercy is not something else besides justice, but is part of God’s will for life. And the way the Scriptures speak of God’s mercy, we could say that God is wastefully generous—wastefully generous. God gives to people what they don’t deserve! So in some respects, mercy is the opposite of fairness; in fairness people get what they deserve—at least what they feel they deserve—whereas with mercy they get what they don’t deserve. And God is merciful, not fair. And justice is connected to mercy, not to fairness.

Now this comes up in many parables. One of the more important ones is the parable of the vine dressers: their work—one group works all day long and is paid a normal daily wage. Another group works only half the day, and they receive the same wage. Another group works only an hour, they receive the same wage. And, of course, the response is, “Well, that’s not fair!” True enough, it isn’t fair. Paying a person who works all day long an agreed-upon wage, that’s fair. Paying a whole day’s wage to a person who works half a day is not fairness—it’s mercy. It’s giving to someone what they don’t deserve, what they haven’t earned. That is the nature of God’s justice; he gives to people what they don’t earn, what they haven’t merited.

But the parable puts us in a very awkward position. We have to decide whether we want fairness or mercy. In fairness those who have worked all day cannot demand more than a day’s wage—not in fairness. But they could demand that the others don’t get a full day’s wage. You see the problem? So which do we want? Well, often we really want fairness for everyone else, mercy for ourselves! And this, of course, is not a tenable decision. We cannot want one thing for ourselves and another for others. That doesn’t work, and any prayers, any praying, that emerges out of this disposition is totally invalid,
faulty, and worthless! That’s what Jesus was trying to teach. So we have to look at how we feel about things and to recognize that very often we feel cheated if we are treated fairly, but others are treated with mercy.

And our feelings, which are so much a part of who we are, are often disconnected from any kind of objective reasoning. Last week Pope John Paul issued an encyclical on Faith and Reason. And in this encyclical he points out that in the modern world, even in the academic world, in the political world, reason has been surrendered. People have taken the position that everyone’s position is equal. This, of course, giving up on reason; and it renders reason useless. We have a tendency to follow even in our spiritual life and in our so-called “prayer life” a sort of wishful thinking, wishing things could be better, wishing things might improve. But do we really confront what is really wrong with ourselves first, with our dispositions toward others, with the way that we want to pray? And this brings us face to face with what Christ is constantly teaching us: that our nature as it is needs some work, some conversion, some transformation, some healing. We have to become impartial observers of ourselves. We need to accept ourselves as we are but then move on to what God might want us to become. It says in the Old Testament even, “It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice.” We need to desire that mercy for ourselves, but also for everyone. And that would be the first stage of becoming really effective prayers.

The second one is persistence. The whole story is about praying for justice persistently. Not only are our feelings often disconnected from anything reasonable or objective, an impartial view of what I should be, but also at times we find that our feelings are constantly changing. We believe, for example, that some thing or someone will make us happy. And then we may have the misfortune of getting whatever it is, and we find out it does not make us happy. This is because life has moved on, and we have changed, and that is no longer what we desire.

Now Christ says that the world is unjust. It’s unjust not because God has made it unjust. God is more just than this unjust judge in the story. And God cannot be intimidated, and God cannot be worn out; and yet God would give swift justice to his chosen if only they would ask persistently and objectively for what is just. And this is the problem--our lack of persistence! And so the question is raised once again, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on the earth?”
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Find Ways to Pray Always**  29th Week in Ordinary Time  Tuesday, **October 20, 1998**
7:00 a.m.  Eph 2:12-22;  Lk 12:35-38  (St. Paul of the Cross)  (FindWays)

In this morning’s gospel we see the theme of staying awake. Of course, this does not refer to physical wakefulness, but rather it refers to a condition of being alert and aware to the presence of God, which is the object of all spiritual exercises. Now the key to living in a sense of God’s presence, of course, is being able to both pray and work at the same time. St. Paul says, “Pray always”; and normally devotes of the Scriptures try to look for ways to do that: to maintain a prayerful sense of God while doing work! And this was the very idea behind the Benedictine Monasticism. It was the very idea behind almost all the religious orders that sprung up in the early Church. It was the idea behind the desert fathers and mothers; it was how to live with a total sense of the presence of God.

Now most of the recommendations of these various practitioners have to do with beginning the day with a prayer focus, and then carrying that into daily tasks!

Unfortunately, all the tasks they speak of are manual and rather simple, for example, craft work, or farm work, or gardening. But today many people’s work requires such attention and such focus of a mental nature, it’s hard to see how anyone can maintain both an awareness of God and do a task such as in front of a computer, for example.

So the great challenge of leaders today is to find a way of structuring our lives so that we can return throughout the day, in some way, to some sense of God’s presence, that we will find ways of reminding ourselves who we are, first of all, because that’s the door to the presence of God. It is recognizing that God has come to us, that we’ve been baptized and consecrated by God and we are chosen, the elect. That has to become a deep part of
us, something that is so embued in our spirit that we act out of it, that colors our relationships with people, that colors our speech, that colors, in fact, all our choices.

But this is not something that happens immediately. It is not the automatic result of Baptism, because there is a gap between our fallen human nature and the life in the kingdom of God as Christ describes it and in fact, embodies it; and that gap has to be bridged. Bridging that gap is the work of prayer; it is the work of spiritual exercises. So we do have to find a way. And in one way, one of the problems is that we don’t have much to go on, in the sense that our forebearers lived in a very different culture, in terms of what they considered or what work was required of them. So in a sense we have to blaze a new trail finding ways to be contemplative in our daily tasks even though those tasks are very mental and require a great deal of our attention, which might serve to rob us of the peace and the serenity that is the fruit of contemplation. So in this sense we have to see that something new is required; and we believe that wherever something is required, that the Spirit will guide us in this path.

And today we celebrate the memorial of Paul of the Cross, who was an Italian who gave up a promising career in business to teach and to build schools, and so on. Well, this is the way we need others today to blaze the trail—not to give up careers necessarily, but to find a way through careers to bring Christ and the presence of Christ to every task.
The Gospel this morning invites us to look at conflict as a necessary factor in our lives. Most people do not like conflict. People who do like conflict tend to be unlikable, difficult, unsociable, perhaps even sick or even mean. But Jesus assures us that he has not come for peace but for conflict, and we need to look at really the reason behind this conflict.

Of course, ultimately, the kingdom of God is about harmony. It’s about peace; it was evoked by the prophet Isaiah: the lamb and the lion lying together. But this sort of harmony and this sort of peace is not undifferentiated. It does not come from indifference. Recently, Pope John Paul issued an encyclical on faith and reason. And in this encyclical he says that Western democracies have really sold themselves short because in order to be tolerant, they’ve assumed that they have to accept every position as equally valid. This is the only way to tolerance. This is the only way to peace. And Christ says, “No, it isn’t,” and the Pope does as well! Not every position is equally valid. And as the Pope points out, God gave us reason and we are supposed to use it.

And it’s strange to say, but in this very highly scientific, technological age, we don’t even reason much--except in a very narrow way. In some very narrow fields we give reason free reign, but in our actual daily lives and in the life of our society we don’t use reason at all! We allow ourselves to be dictated to by pressure groups. We allow ourselves to be forced into political correctness. We don’t really think about what it means. And the pope is saying we have to start thinking about what everything means. And we have to learn the art of argument, not argument for the sake of arguing, but argument for the sake of truth, which of course requires true humility in each person, recognizing that as we try to find truth, we all have to be open to the truth whenever it shows up.
Now that would be the new day in our political system for people to really be humble, searching for the truth. “But it’s necessary for the health of our political system of our society,” the Pope says. It’s not just a religious issue; it’s a social issue. It’s a political issue; it’s a fundamental human issue! So we have to look at searching for truth, the need for humility and the need for reason and argument. And even in the area of faith and what faith means, reason is very important. The Catholic Church has always held this. This is one of the distinguishing theological differences between Protestantism and Catholicism: the value the Church has always placed on reason. Faith must seek understanding. We are human beings created with reason; that’s part of who we are. Part of what pleases God is our trying to bring faith to that area of reason in our own personal understanding of what God is trying to teach us. It is not indifferent. Everyone is not equal in this. There are ways that are more adequate than others in expressing the faith of the Church. We all need to learn the most adequate ways enshrined in our tradition, articulated by the great saints and teachers.

So Jesus has come for division to divide what is false from what is true, not to accept indifferently everyone’s position as if it were all the same. It isn’t all the same. And if this causes deep division even within families, then so be it. The truth is that important. In fact, the unity that comes from truth is the most important unity and the only true one. St. Paul says, “There is one Faith, one Baptism, one Lord.” Plato the philosopher said truth and beauty and goodness are one. Unity in the truth, the unity in faith, and the unity in our Lord--that’s the only true unity! All other forms are artificial and actually superficial. “So I did not come for unity, but for division.” Ultimately, it is the truth that makes us free.
When children are young, it’s natural for them to be a little scrappy, to be contesting with each other. And this is part of the maturation process; children who are small physically are also small mentally. And their totality of the world is very small. Growing has a purpose; it is to prepare for one’s place in life. And when children are young to some extent the entire universe revolves around them. And, of course, this is the very basic foundation for struggle and conflict. If there is only one child in the family, that child usually becomes spoiled; if there are two, they fight--three, four, five and six and so on, the same. But that actual struggle results in the natural, normal maturation process. Unfortunately, some people don’t always learn as they grow up. And sometimes they remain with this illusion that they are the center of the universe, and their world can be very small.

Both readings today are trying to alert us to something that is very true, that may not always appear to our senses, namely, the unity that we have with each other not only in the family of flesh and blood, but also in the family created by Baptism. Saint Paul says, “There is one faith, one Lord, one baptism, there is one God”; and his conclusion is, therefore, there is only one true family.

Now living in peace is actually a great work. It’s a great aim; it’s a great goal. And St. Paul is very clear about this. We need to work at it. We need to work at living in harmony within the body of Christ. He talks about perfect humility which needs perfect realism about ourselves, our feet planted on the earth, (humus), not with our minds inflated with the air of our imagination about our own self-importance, about our
centrality in the plan of God, but rather in perfect humility, rooted on the earth--and meekness which means a willingness to live non-violently. It means a strong sense of non-aggression. It’s a strength used not for the self but for a greater wholeness and unity, in patience, bearing with one another lovingly.

Now everyone has limitations and flaws; and bearing with those is actually, again, a form of service, an exercise in virtue. That’s what he’s saying. To bear with the flaws of others, to bear with the limitations of others, this is actually a great work, which we willingly give to God in response to the great work that God’s has given to us in our redemption through Christ.

Now the base of our unity is really the unity of God Himself. That’s really why Jesus criticizes the people of his own time for, for example, suing each other. It’s pretty bad when brothers have to sue brothers, members of one family suing another. That’s a true breakdown in the order that God intends, and this is what Jesus is criticizing. We really can solve our own problems if we have the will to. And this is the great struggle which is the suffering that St. Paul is referring to--I believe anyway--when he says, “I make up in my own body what is lacking in the suffering of Christ.” We bear with one another, and we seek the good in the whole at our own expense. This is living out through our own choice the reality, the unity, revealed in Christ. And this is the way of life, the way of intentional suffering, the way of redemptive love.
Both readings today are talking about right thinking. In the Letter to the Ephesians, the author says, “Do not be tossed about by human trickery.” In the gospel, Jesus is questioning his disciples about how they think and warning them about the dangers of wrong thinking.

Now this is something that is very non-modern. In modern times, the Church has focused mostly on right action. And this, of course, is very important, that we must be concerned with right action; but right action is the fruit of other things, especially right being and right thinking and good will.

Now here, Jesus is really focusing on a personal relationship with God. And he is quizzing his disciples about how they think about God. It’s very important to have a personal relationship with God, and how you think about God is very important! The points at issue are some untoward events. One of them, Pilate massacring people and mixing their blood with the sacrifice of the Jews, a desecration, as well as murder! Another, an accident--the falling of a tower. In regard to these things Jesus says, “Now do you think that these men, these victims, were the great sinners? Is that why this happened? Do you think these people were more guilty than anyone else?”

What is he doing? He’s questioning how people find reasons, and how people ascribe to God what happens in their daily lives. And he’s pointing out the very serious fallacy. We’re not puppets. God has created a world in which we human beings have free will, and our decisions affect others. And the decisions of the more powerful affect a greater number of people. And we live in a material world that is governed by certain physical laws that control many events. Now maybe this tower fell because of an earthquake. That would be a physical event governed by many physical laws. Maybe this tower fell because of very poor workmanship, or maybe because the contractor cheated on the quality of the materials--we don’t know.

But human events are a mixture--by human events I mean the events we are involved in--are a mixture of human choices and also natural phenomena. It is very seriously wrong to read the will of God into what happens to us. And we hear even religious people do this. In fact, religious people do this all the time, including Mother Angelica, who last week was speaking about the hurricane and was trying to find this as a sign of God’s displeasure. Of course, the question would be, “Well, if God was so displeased to send a hurricane, how come only one little part of the world got it?” It couldn’t possibly be that was the only part God was displeased with!

Jesus’ point was--he believed in the punishment of God--but he said, “When the punishment of God comes, you won’t be standing around talking about it, because it will be effective and it will be final.” That is what he called the “judgment.” Meanwhile, what
happens in life is the result of many things, but only the “permissive will of God,” to use the Jesuit expression.

What God wants we learn through revelation, and that is what Jesus is all about; he’s about revealing God’s will. Now when Jesus acts, what does he do? Does he create illness or does he heal it? Does he create handicaps, or does he restore people to full use of their physical bodies? It is what Jesus does and what Jesus says that is the revelation of the will of God and nothing else!

And if we start to deduce from what happens to us in life, what God means for us, we will fall into the very serious trap. If what happens to us is negative, then we will deduce that God doesn’t love us; and that will spoil our relationship with God. Or, if events turn out good for us, then we will deduce that we’re privileged; God loves us more than others, and we’ll live in this inflated, unrealistic and imaginary world—again, not properly connected at all to God.

So these things are very serious. When we think wrongly, we don’t reform—and the word in Greek actually has to do with a change in your mind. If we don’t think of God in a new way, “you will likewise perish.” Now again, we think of perishing as perhaps the result of a great evil: only people who are very evil and are very wicked—those people are lost, those people perish. But Jesus’ view is very different. For Jesus, evil also involved sins of omission. And one of the great sins of omission was not nurturing our relationship with God. People who don’t nourish a positive relationship with God perish, according to Jesus. If we are wise, we will listen to his warning.
“For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Today’s gospel reading is a story about what the Bible calls “righteousness.” Now righteousness means being pleasing to God, or being favorable in the sight of God. Jesus’ point in this reading and in many other stories is that no one becomes favorable to God through one’s own efforts or accomplishments; even though good efforts and good accomplishments are very desirable, they are not the reason why God finds a person acceptable.

The reason for this is that God looks into our hearts and sees what is there. And the reason we are not able to judge others is that we cannot look into one another’s hearts. Now in the case of sin, for example, Jesus said, “The law says, ‘Do not murder,’ but I say anyone who is angry with his brother is guilty of murder. The law says, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ but I say anyone who lusts after a woman in his heart has already committed adultery.” This only makes sense if we understand the power of motivation and realize that the soul is really a laboratory creating action in the world, and that the action is already there when the motive is planted and nurtured and chosen. There is no sin without a decision, but there can be sin without action. It has already begun in the soul, in the heart.

Now today’s reading is really a complimentary idea; “good works” are the issue now, not sin. But in a similar way, good works are only really good when they are motivated by faith and charity or love of God. If they’re not motivated by faith or love of God, they are really not that good. Many people may do what appears to be good works for reasons that are not so good, for example, perhaps one-upmanship or perhaps to be thanked or
approval from others. In this case these good works simply form some advertisement--they are self-serving.

Now this challenges our ordinary, simple ideas about good and bad. We often think that good and bad is like black and white--good people do good things, and bad people do bad things. Jesus’ viewpoint is not so simple. There are ones who are a mixture of good and bad. And yes, good people do bad things, and bad people even do good things or what appears to be good. Evil can lurk in the heart and never be expressed in action. And evil can lurk in the heart and be dressed up to look like good. So good is in everyone, but sometimes it is limited or distorted or short-sighted. In fact, St. Thomas Aquinas says that no one ever chooses evil for the sake of evil; that includes Adolf Hitler; that includes Joseph Stalin; that includes serial killers. There is some good that is perceived, however wrongly or distortedly, by the perpetrators of every evil act. But it’s Christ who is saying that a trace of good is not good enough, and even works of mercy may be really done for applause or approval or to improve one’s reputation. They are really carefully calculated acts of self-promotion.

But the good news is that God is pleased with someone very simple. What God is pleased with is a very basic grounding and honest self-awareness called “humility.” Humility means being aware of oneself in a realistic and honest way. Humility cannot be generic. Sometimes people say, “Well, everyone has flaws; everyone isn’t perfect.” Well, it’s true; that’s not humility. Humility is to see one’s own flaws and to accept them, and to open oneself to God’s healing grace that will bring transformation to our flaws. This is the first step toward salvation in Christ: to admit one’s mistakes and to move toward God in repentance.

Now the publican in today’s story is exactly such a person. His heart was purified by his confession and retribution. And since his prayer was a prayer for mercy—which means something we are not really deserving of, rather than a prayer for reward, which is something we really are deserving of—the prospects for blessings for him are endless.
“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”

This is a very beautiful image that John gives to us, the image of our Father’s house.

Now a constant problem that people have is that we imagine God to be someone like ourselves. We place limitations on God and God’s presence because we experience limitation; we’re at one place and not another, at one time and not another. And we tend to think of this as very basic to all reality— but it isn’t! It’s only basic to created reality. God is not created. God is uncreated, the foundation and ground of all that is. And this Eternal One always is. With God there’s no “was,” and with God there’s really no “will be”; it’s just “is.” God is from all eternity, and God is at all places and no where. And as God creates the universe of space and time, God fills that universe. And I believe there’s only one place where God does not dwell, and that is within the heart of a person who does not want God. The heart of a person who does not want God is already the foretaste of what we in our tradition call “hell.” It’s a place of forced absence. But even there, theologians of the Church say that God even exists in some sense insofar as God sustains everything that is— but there’s no indwelling!

What God desires is to dwell in us. St. Paul says that eventually “God will be all in all.” Now this will not be a change for the planets. This will not be a change for the rocks. And this will not be a change for the zebras. But this will be a change for us! As God becomes all in all, then our minds will be filled with the presence of God. And that is what we are created for, to be a dwelling place for God. So the dwelling of God is not somewhere else. It does not refer to some future time. It refers to right now. Right now God is, and right now God’s dwelling place extends itself through all creation, except where it’s forced out by our choice.
It is for us to receive God into our hearts; we are the dwelling place of God; we are his mansion. Now this image is carried on further by St. Theresa of Avila who says that she discovered, very sadly, that she had been living in the dwelling of God in the basement most of her life. And she said one day in an ecstatic prayer, she rose out of the basement, the cellar, into the upper rooms of her “interior castle” as she calls it. And she found that in the upper rooms of her own interior castle, there were absolutely gorgeous, beautiful salons with beautiful furniture, and there were elegant views of life. And she realized in this prayer that all along this house was within her, and she stayed in the basement where it was dark and dingy and damp and very uncomfortable.

Now our God is a very gentle God. He does not force his way into our hearts, but comes very gently. And Jesus tells his apostles, “Do you know the way that leads where I go?” And Thomas, either feigning ignorance or being ignorant says, “Well, Lord, we don’t even know where you’re going.” Jesus responds: “I am the place. I am the way. I am the truth.” Jesus has come then to make us aware of the gracious mercy of God and to invite us to be a dwelling place, even right now, of the Father’s love. And it would be a shame if we were to ignore this invitation and remain, even one more day, in the dark, dingy, damp basement of ourselves.

And so as we encounter life and death, as we think of Maria and others who have passed on from this life, we need to be very well aware of the fact that we really haven’t seen anything yet, that at best we’ve had intimations of the life that God intends for us. And it is very important that we actually make the decision to welcome God into our hearts, with his peace, with his love, and with his salvific will; that we may be reborn and remade and reshaped into the image which God intended in the beginning; that we can live a godly life, and know the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus Christ, for as he says, “No one comes to the Father but through me.”
Today’s story from the New Testament is very significant and unique. It is a healing story, but it’s a unique one. There are two kinds of healings recorded in the New Testament. One of them is called deliverance. Now to understand deliverance is a little bit difficult—no one really does—but it has to do with the fact that we are not merely physical beings. Human beings are also spiritual beings; we live in two worlds: the physical world and the spiritual world. The spiritual world can have, and does have, effects upon human life. And these two worlds interact within the human beings. And the effects can either be good or evil. The spiritual world is not necessarily good; the spiritual world, in fact, is the place where good and evil battle. And it’s not physical, but it’s spiritual.

Now in today’s reading what is unusual is that the woman who is afflicted with the spirit has physical symptoms, so the worlds cannot stay apart; they actually intertwine. The spirit causes the woman to be drained of her strength and stooped. So what is meant in the Scripture by the spirit is not necessarily something that only affects, you might say, the mental side of our nature, as some people believe. In this case it is very physical in its results. This raises the question: To what degree is our whole being, being affected by the spiritual world—good and evil? And men and women who desire to live a spiritual life need to be very aware of this interaction, the first point.

The second point is that the healing takes place without any prayer or faith. Usually, if you bother reading the New Testament, you’ll see that Jesus is asked to heal someone,
usually by the victim, the one who suffers--but sometimes by someone else. But here no one asked; there’s no prayer. And there’s no faith expressed at all. Jesus takes it upon himself to bring healing to this person. Now that’s significant, and I think the reason why the evangelist includes this story is that it is very clearly the will of God to heal. And the will of God encompasses all parts of us. God wants us to be whole and healthy---totally!

It is not merely in response to our prayer that God acts. It is not only if we believe that God acts, but God, in God’s own solemn will, takes initiative in restoring what is corrupted and what is burdened. And this is meant to be a very important sign to the community of God at work. And I believe that that is the reason why the emphasis on the Sabbath is here. In the Book of Genesis God created the world in six days, and then rested. Here Jesus is saying, “No more rest! Back to work! The world isn’t finished.” As long as people suffer the attacks of evil, be they spiritual or physical evils, God cannot rest.
Today, in the sixth chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians the author says, “Our battle ultimately is not against human forces, but against the principalities and powers and rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above.”

Now to understand what the author is talking about, we have to understand something about what is intelligence. It is a presumption of many modern people--and a very unconscious presumption in many people’s minds--that intelligence is the result of the brain. That’s the way many scientists speak. The brain, they believe, evolves from lower, less complex organisms; and now because of it, there’s intelligence, namely ourselves, so that intelligence is something thought of as a human trait or characteristic.

Of course, the Bible begins with the Book of Genesis, which comes from a very different point of view that intelligence is the origin of everything. It’s not the result of evolution, but the foundation of everything that is. Everything that exists emanates from the intelligence of God. Secondly, in the world as it is, there is intelligence at work even now; it isn’t simply something that happened long ago, but even now.

Now some of the things that go on in nature, how nature itself is always constantly repairing itself, some of these things might be explained in some way or another. But on a whole, I don’t think there is much explanation except to say that there’s an intelligence at work fashioning and even correcting the course of events so that life can exist. For example, yesterday I saw a tree from a distance which is a very nice looking tree. When I got closer, I could see that the trunk was diagonal, that it formed a hypotenuse with the earth, but the rest of the tree was quite normal. Now how can you explain something like this, except that when this tree was very young, it had been pushed over, and then the rest of the branches corrected it? The ones on the side that were close to the earth simply didn’t grow and the upper ones grew more, so the overall look of the tree was more or less normal. Now this is sort of a balancing act. How do we explain this? Well, we can’t; nor can we explain all the things that go on in nature.
Now recently, human beings are blamed for everything: all the pollution, all the disorders. This is probably also an exaggeration. We praise ourselves for everything and then blame ourselves for everything. We are the only intelligence--this is false.

In the last issue of “Scientific American” there’s an article about a fissure in the Gulf of Mexico that emits more petroleum into the Gulf of Mexico every year than was spilled in the Exxon Valdez. And furthermore, it has been discovered that there are various creatures in the Gulf of Mexico that eat this oil, which is a hydrocarbon. So how do you explain all this? There is a balance within nature, and no matter how things grow and develop or evolve--if that’s the correct view of things--there’s nonetheless an intelligence at work.

Well, what the author is saying is that it’s also true on the other side that this work is also from intelligence; it is not just that people fumble along, or that people have flaws, or that people fail.” What this author is saying is that there is an organized, intelligent, counterdesign, an enemy of purpose at work in the creation, trying to frustrate the designs of the Creator. Now this, of course, must also be part of the creation. This author even called it a rebellion among the spirits--whatever that means, we don’t know exactly what a spirit is--but some form of intelligence, doubtlessly created to aid and to abet the work of the creation, but now working against the purposes of the creation.

According to the author to the Ephesians, we are really beset with battle; we need to be aware of it and not to think that we’re simply living in a neutral world. We’re living in the midst of a battle between forces of good and evil. We should not make the terrible mistake of thinking that our real enemy is the person near us, or the person with whom we happen to be angry with this very moment, or the person that doesn’t get along with us, or a political party, or a group, or an organization. Our real battle is not against flesh and blood, not in our families, not out of our families. The real battle is against the spirit of disorder and malice and deceit, which seeks to lead us astray. And believers will be well advised to remember this each day.
This is one of many references in Luke’s Gospel to Jesus and the sabbath. And similar quotes I also found in the Gospel of Matthew and Mark too because it was very basic to Jesus’ own life and teaching to focus on the sabbath. The sabbath represents both the good and the bad in the Jewish religious way of life. First of all, the idea of the sabbath is a day of rest decreed by God, the third stipulation that comes from Mount Sinai—one of two commandments. The rest are prohibitions. “Honor your father and your mother” and “Keep holy the sabbath” are the only two true commandments. The rest are all what people should refrain from. But even the sabbath is a kind of prohibition because it is an idea of refraining from ordinary life and work.

Now first of all, it is rooted in the understanding that God created the earth and then rested. Therefore resting is, you might say, God’s natural state. And to enter into God’s rest is a matter of approaching God in intimacy. So it is most appropriate that at least once a week people approach God in a prayerful, restful, relaxed spirit.

Secondly, the rest of God is also a matter of reliance upon God, recognizing that all things do not depend on ourselves. So therefore resting on the seventh day is an act of faith. It’s saying, “Yes, everything will be done in due time. Everything does not depend upon ourselves.”

However, these ideas became corrupted. The idea of God resting on the seventh day became twisted to mean that the world is now the way God wants it, that he is finished; there’s no more creating. And therefore there was a need to rationalize everything that we observe. If someone has a handicap, well, that’s because they should have one. God being moral and righteous and finished with creation wants that person to have a handicap; therefore, that person must have a moral fault, or that person’s parents must have had some grave, moral evil in them to warrant this kind of result. And so it is with all ills, with poverty, with everything. It’s all the way God wants it; the world is just the way it is.
The second corruption came with the idea of resting and reliance on God, and that is that it was twisted from relying on God to simply being inactive. And the Rabbis used to speak, “Well, how many paces could you walk on the sabbath? How many ounces could you carry in your pocket?” Etc. And this was not the point. And then to make bad matters worse, this became the primary significant law that distinguished Judaism from every other religion—this and circumcision.

And so Jesus comes to the house of the Pharisee on the sabbath, which is already entering into an intimate relationship because to enter and have a meal with a family in a Jewish setting is a very intimate thing, it’s an intimate affair. And he now attacks the very ideas that they have about God, about life, about why things are the way they are. He works on the sabbath because he wants to first of all promote the idea that God is not finished with creation. People are sick, people are suffering, because God hasn’t finished yet with the creation; it’s incomplete. It’s very good to enter into a rest with God; and Jesus said this often, but not because of the idea that God is finished with creation. So Jesus works on the sabbath.

Secondly, relying on God is wonderful. It’s an act of faith, but that does not mean that we are inert or inactive. Inactivity isn’t reliance on God. Some people think they are very pious and faithful by doing nothing and waiting for God. Jesus says, “This is not true piety; it’s not faithfulness. This is a perversion of piety.” So once again, what a perfect occasion to point out all this on the sabbath itself! So again, he heals on the sabbath.

Now in these areas, Jesus is really attacking the sum total of the philosophy and culture and theology of the people he is living with. It is not merely accidental. It’s a very deliberate attack. The fact that they found him too much to take is understandable because his challenge is very radical: to completely rethink all about God! And in some way we all have to go through this process. We have to rethink what we think about God, about life. And if we’re confused, that’s all right for a while, as we get our bearings and allow Christ to reteach us and lead us into the heart of the Father, which is the true rest.
Today we celebrate the feast of All Saints. Perhaps a few reflections on the meaning of what it is to be a saint would be in order.

First of all, the Church has established what is called a process of canonization. This process really is not to create saints or to make saints, but to discern authentic saints from inauthentic ones, to protect, really, the Church from false piety. Canonization doesn’t make saints; saints are the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who follow Christ. And we should get used to the idea of ordinary saints. That’s the feast we celebrate today, the feast of ordinary saints. Hopefully our fathers and mothers, hopefully ourselves and our children are ordinary saints, if indeed we are living the life of Christ.

Now we need to distinguish, in our own minds, the difference between sanctity and perfection. Christ said, “Be perfect as your Father is perfect.” But this is an ideal that we strive for, without ever really and truly achieving because we can never be as perfect as God is. God’s creation cannot equal God in perfection, of its own very nature; but striving for perfection is part of what it means to be a saint. It is to strive to be as perfect as God is, so it’s an imitation of God.

Now sanctity or holiness is a quality that marks us out. The very word “church”—“ecclesia”—means “those called forth.” To be Church is to be called forth, and to be marked, not in some external way as in the Old Covenant like circumcision, for example, but in an internal, qualitative difference. That is why the work of Christ is a work of grace, that is, the work of God’s power changing our very beings.

Now these may sound like words to you, but we need to think of what they mean. What does it mean for God to change our being? There are two sides to it. Objectively, the gospel assures us that God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son. In Jesus, we have the disclosure of the nature of God, but also the disclosure of our own nature, because Jesus is both divine and human. God’s intention for human life at the very beginning of time is revealed to us in Jesus and the way he lived it, in the quality of his life. That includes the way he thought, the way he acted, the way he spoke, the way he felt. All of this is a human response to union with God—in him a perfect union, in us an imperfect one. We are brought into this union through Baptism because in Baptism we are consecrated by the blood of Christ shed for us, and we are brought into the body of Christ.

Now in the ancient world when a nation or a state wanted to bring war against another one, they would cut down all their trees, especially their olive trees. Olive trees were a source of a great deal of wealth, especially for Mediterranean peoples. An olive tree takes a long time to grow. Now what the ancient people discovered, however, is that after the olive tree had been cut down, a branch could be grafted into the trunk remaining.
in the
soil; and that branch could grow rather quickly into a new tree. And St. Paul uses this as
an explanation of how a saint is. Christ, in his death, was cut down; and we are like
branches grafted into the trunk—that’s what Baptism does for us—so that we then live the
same life that the tree originally lived. We have the same juices in us, and we can grow
with the same fruit and produce the same nourishment and the same salve and the same
wealth that the original tree did. That’s the life of a Christian. That’s the life of a saint,
an ordinary saint, an ordinary believer—that’s what we’re called to. And this is possible
only because of the gift of salvation in Christ.

Now this gift given in Christ has to be, of course, received. So there’s an objective
side—that’s the giving of the gift. Then there’s the subjective side—the receiving of the
gift. That’s where our own personal effort comes in—if you want to call it that—our
trying to understand and will what God wills for us, to receive what God gives to us, to
be attentive to the presence of God in our daily lives. This is a matter of training. This is
a matter of attention, and this is what prayer is. Prayer is a heart seeking to please God,
at least within the Christian context.

Now as a person, a believer, responds to the gift that God gives in Baptism, his or her
own nature changes. This is something we’re all not aware of. This really is what the
Church believes and what we can actually see. As we focus not on ourselves and our
own personal needs but on Christ, our nature changes; our consciousness changes. We
can see this in the living saints of our own time, like Mother Teresa. How can we explain
Mother Teresa’s heroic and almost unbelievable sacrifice for the poor? Very simply—
very simply! For her, her own personal self-interest had grown so large it included
everyone else. We’re born with self-interest as a natural attribute of human nature. But
as it is naturally, it’s very narrow and very small and very limited. But in a saint, due to
the grace of God, it grows to include more and more people until it includes all people.
The greatest saints are the saints who have the greatest inclusion of people within their
own self-interest, so that they truly love others as they love themselves because they are
themselves! And this is the fulfillment of Christ’s command: “Love one another as I
have loved you,” and even the command from the Book of Leviticus: “Love your
neighbor as yourself.” This can only really be done by a person who has been influenced
by the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit.

Now this transformation that takes place changes not only our consciousness, but it
changes also our unconsciousness, the various forces at work underneath the threshold of
our awareness. A perfect area to see this at work is by reflecting on the drug culture.
Today, people blame drugs for many things that drugs are not responsible for. A very
erudite doctor, who spent many years in studying narcotics and other forms of drugs, said
it this way, “Human beings can do anything. Under the influence of drugs, they do do
anything.” Are the drugs the cause of the abhorrent and horrific behavior we see? Not
really. What drugs really do is lower inhibitions. That’s all they do; they lower
inhibitions. A drug cannot make a peaceful person violent. Drugs cannot make a
charitable person mean. Drugs cannot put evil into the heart of a person who is good.
The evils we see resulting as a matter of course in the use of drugs and the drug culture
are already in unredeemed human nature—and in every unredeemed human nature! It is
completely impossible for any unredeemed soul not to have inclinations toward sin--it’s impossible! It is the nature that human beings inherit from the beginning from the sin of Adam.

Now persons who have been transformed by the grace of Christ, no matter what drug you gave them, would never do evil if they’ve truly been transformed by grace. They would never become violent. They would never hurt anyone. They would never act in a destructive way. Those evil designs are from the human heart; and that’s what Christ said, “Evil designs come from within, not from without.” A drug comes from outside. A drug does not make people unclean or evil any more than non-kosher food makes someone evil or unclean. And what every human being needs to understand is that the cause of violence and the cause of evil in the world is within themselves and their unredeemed and unregenerate nature.

The only solution to this is faith and Baptism into Christ, objectively through the sacrament of the Church, subjectively through our own participation in a life of faith, in the spiritual growth, expanding our self-interest to include others and ultimately all God’s creatures. Ultimately, the emotional life of a saint is described by St. Paul when he lists the fruits of the Holy Spirit. How does a saint feel, or what feelings does a saint have? He lists them: charity--which is unconditioned love--joy, peace, patience, benignity--which means kindness--generosity, self control, fear of the Lord. Now as we have been born in Christ by Baptism, these qualities--these emotions and these feelings--are really our birthright. And through faith and prayer they will become our possession. And the more this is true for us, the more this day itself is already our own feast.
Today we celebrate the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed, popularly known as All Souls Day.

Now there is an ancient practice in the Church of praying for the dead. Some people believe that this is wrong. In fact, there are many Christian people who believe that there is no point in praying for the dead. But in the Catholic Church we have always prayed for the dead. Some people believe that the reason why Catholics pray for the dead is due to our belief in purgatory. It would be much more correct to say the opposite is true. We believe in purgatory because we have always prayed for the dead.

Of course, even understanding purgatory is a little bit difficult. The official teaching of the Church is this: that those who have been justified by the grace of Christ through faith and Baptism but who have not been freed from all the affects of sin need purgation. Now comes the problem of time. We believe that time is part of the totality of reality of creation itself, but that’s not quite right. Time as we know it exists only in space, in the physical order, dimensionless; it is actually physical in nature. God is eternal--in no way subject to time. Spirits are not eternal, but they are not subject to time. Even the human soul itself does not actually exist in time, except insofar as it informs a body which exists. So within every human being there’s both time and timeless. We rather think in terms of discreet “nows” and “laters.” That’s not actually correct.

“We know right now that we are the children of God; what we shall later be has not yet been revealed.” There is a distance within our own quality between what we are and what we shall be. We should not think of this as a distance of time; it’s a distance of quality. We pray to grow in the Spirit of Christ. We pray for ourselves. We pray for others. We pray for the living. We pray for the dead. God is eternal. God helps the living and the dead because God is outside of time. And although it may be difficult for
you to imagine this, but a prayer today for your parents, for example, could well help
them fifty years ago. God is in no way bound by time. Fifty years ago in our imagining,
our reckoning, God already knew that you now are praying for your parents! So we have
to realize that time is something more of our imagination and our measurement rather
than something that really belongs to reality in the total sense.

What is purgatory? It’s a process. Is it a place where people go? That’s probably just
a spatial metaphor because we are so spatially inclined in our imagination and thinking.
It’s a process we need to undergo, a process of growing into a Christ-like image. And
there’s nothing to stop us right now from using every issue, conflict, burden, problem,
and challenge of our life as purgatorial, cleansing us from our egoism and helping us on
toward that perfect image of Christ that God wants to give us.

So for us to really understand what is meant by praying for the dead, we have to forget
about time. We have to think about eternity. We pray for ourselves; we pray for our
loved ones. We pray for the forgotten; and God, who knows all things, will distribute his
manifold graces according to his will. Why did God ask for our help? Because we are
all one; the Church is one. The Church on earth is one body. The Church on earth is
united to the Church in heaven, and by Christ. The Church in heaven and the Church on
earth is united to the Church which is neither. It is in process, in via. We are one
Church; we need to help one another with our prayers. And as St. Thomas pointed out,
when we pray for someone else, it does much more good for us than praying for
ourselves. Because when we pray for someone else, we are praying out of charity or
unconditioned love--and that brings us the greatest benefit.
Today, it says the scribes and Pharisees were murmuring. Now murmuring is very important. To murmur means to talk underneath one’s breath in a critical way, and in the Bible it usually has to do with criticizing God. So in a sense, the Pharisees and the scribes were honoring Jesus by murmuring against him because their forefathers murmured against God in the wandering in the desert.

The basic idea of murmuring is that God doesn’t really know what he is doing. We do! Or we do know what he should be doing! Now put in that context, we see that the scribes and the Pharisees are very upset because once again they find themselves being led where they don’t want to go. Or they’re being led where they are not willing to go. And, of course, it’s really not in this case to the physical Promised Land, but now to the promised land of the kingdom of God.

Now this idea of the Promised Land, of course, theoretically--that’s the right word--the people always wanted to get to the Promised Land. That was the whole object of the exodus to leave Egypt and go to the Promised Land. The problem was they really didn’t want to listen, and they did not want to respond to God; and therefore God allowed them to wander on their own. It’s really not that far even on foot from Egypt to Israel. The Bible says that they wandered and wandered, doubtlessly in circles, because they didn’t learn to listen because they were stiff-necked.

Now here it’s similar. Jesus is trying to lead them to a new place, but this is not a geographical or physical place. The idea of the kingdom of God is associated with the area around Jerusalem since the time of David, and was also associated with the idea of peace and prosperity and justice on this earth, and then something that every Jew wanted restored--the kingdom of God, the rule of God, prosperity for the people, plenty for everyone, justice for all, and so on. Only they had it all tied to life as they knew it or had known it! They were not really looking to the future. They were not really looking to life as it could be. In a sense, they too wanted to go back as did the wandering tribes in the desert; they wanted to go back, not forward. And so they ended up in circles. Why didn’t
they want to go forward? Because it’s such a radical shift, such a radical change from what they were used to. Jesus was saying, “Well, yes, there is a rule of God, indeed; and it is about peace, and it is about justice. Yes, it is.” And it is even about prosperity in a sense, but not so much in the external order of measurable phenomenon: how much money we have? how many possessions do we have? and so on. It’s more simply internal; it’s a quality of life. It’s somewhere in a sense, but not a physical where any more. It’s not a space, but it’s a place within ourselves where God can dwell. And of course, this is a radical departure from the idea that God can live in the Temple and only the Temple. You understand it is difficult to make this shift. For centuries you are believing one thing, and now you’re told something else is possible! It doesn’t really deny the presence of God in the Temple, but it expands this idea to make every human person a temple. This, of course, is the belief of the Church, that we are all temples of God, temples of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Trinity dwells in the soul of a human being in the state of grace. And that’s, of course, the whole issue: it’s that everything now depends on grace!

It isn’t law any more! You see the whole rule of the will of God was going to be established by the law which God gave to Moses. Now on one hand, you can call the law a gift; but really it was also a burden and a challenge. “Okay, here it is; now you must do this. Whenever you get around to really doing it, well, then the reign of God will be here. And Jesus says, “No, that’s not really the way it is.” The reign of God comes as an interior place within us. It’s very real, but it’s of a quality that can’t be measured externally. And it comes as a gift! And it comes to those who want it, including tax collectors. If they want it, they have it. And sinners--if they want it, they have it. And of course, this violates all the rules the Pharisees and scribes have been taught.

So we can understand why they murmur. We can understand why they were very hesitant and resistant to what Jesus was doing. A few days ago, I mentioned how a meal was an intimate affair. And Jesus now is sharing it--his intimate self, at a meal with these people, indicating their inclusion in the work of God! And that in the world of gesture and sign and symbol is a revolution, saying that the old criteria of law and righteousness as it had been taught, handed down for centuries, really isn’t right. So they murmured.
Today we hear St. Paul say that he is in tears writing to his dear, beloved Philippians. He’s in tears because he sees that some of the flock made themselves enemies of the cross of Christ.

Now in studying the various kinds of religions and spirituality that exist in the world, one thing comes to immediate awareness, and that is the striking similarities between various teachings of a religious and spiritual nature, especially in the area of morality. But on the other hand, there are also striking differences; and in the Christian teaching one of the striking differences--if not the very central striking difference--is the emphasis put on what we call “grace.”

Now the idea of grace does exist in all spiritual beings--as far as I can tell--but it tends to be something in a sense unreliable, as it is unpredictable. It’s something that appears in the darkest hour of a person’s life that brings light, that is, if listened to. But in the Christian gospel, it is really the foundation of everything. Everything is grace! Everything is blessed! Everything is gift! But because of this, there is a great possibility that we Christian leaders might become rather insensitive and ungrateful, and well, to be unaware of what the gift is all about. In other words, we just take it for granted. What St. Paul is saying is that the gift--yes, it is a gift, but it needs to be received!

Now most spiritualities of the world put great emphasis on the work that someone must do in order to gain salvation--however they see salvation. Christianity does not put this great emphasis on the work that someone must do, because we believe in a sense that
Christ did all the work, the good work, that Christ achieved for us, for those who believe in him, all that needs to be achieved and this is given as a gift. However Paul’s view is--his point today is--well, that’s all very true, but there has to be a certain kind of consequence in a person’s life, if one really does accept this gift. There has to be a change in focus; there has to be a change in the way in which a person lives and the values a person lives by. One cannot receive the gift and then continue living as if nothing happened, which unfortunately does occur in the Christian Church. Christian people believe that because they have said, “I believe,” or because they have been baptized or because they have received the sacraments, or because they have responded to an altar call or because they have done some little thing, that now they can continue living merrily as if they were just like anyone else. This is really a matter of intense ingratitude--first of all--but it’s also a matter of intense insensitivity to what the gift is.

St. Paul is now writing in tears because he sees people who are really living a totally world-valued life. And this is, in his view, ending in disaster and in ignominy.

So what we emphasize is what a great gift we have been given, and it is not something we have earned in any way; nonetheless, if we really receive this gift, it will profoundly change us. And insofar as we haven’t been profoundly changed, we haven’t received the gift!
“God is not the God of the dead but the God of the living. All are alive for him.”

Today’s episode could be called, “Jesus meets the ‘Religious Right.’” That is one way of understanding the Sadducees. They were the ones who were very traditional, and incidentally, very comfortably fixed--largely because they had a monopoly on the profits coming from the temple.

Now the point at issue in today’s reading is the idea of resurrection, which is not a traditional idea in Judaism. It was a novel idea promoted by the Pharisee party. Now the Sadducees come to Jesus not really to learn or even really to debate. They really come to argue. They do not really want to be challenged. They believe they already know. They do not want to think in a new way.

Luke includes this story, as do other evangelists, in the gospel doubtlessly because of our need to find the Sadducee in ourselves--just as Jesus’ disputes with the Pharisees are necessary for us so that we can find the Pharisee in ourselves. The attitude focused upon is the attitude of self-satisfaction and self-assuredness.

Now Jesus appeals to these men, these theologians so to speak. He accepts them as they are, but he does not accept their ignorance. He does not really argue with them, but you could say, he presents an argument; that is, he tries to reason with them, showing them that their assumptions about what life is all about happen to be wrong. They’re projecting into the eternal life of God and our eternal destiny with God factors which simply don’t apply. And don’t we all do this when and if we ever think about what eternity must be, how we drag into eternity all kinds of factors which really do not belong to it, but belong rather to ourselves now?

Now Jesus, a teacher, is interested in teaching his students; and he tries to lead his listeners to the truth. In our own day, we have a teacher, Pope John Paul II, who also is trying to lead, not only Catholics but people who listen to the truth--anyone! In a recent encyclical, he mentions that western democracies have in a sense given up on reason. They have given up on reason by accepting the premise that all forms of truth are equal, or all opinions are equal. “This,” he says, “is done out of a desire for tolerance.” We can see his reasoning, and it is very good. We do want to live in a tolerant society. We don’t want to have wars and conflicts over ideas! But we make the mistake, the Pope points out, of thinking therefore that truth is a subjective point of view, and all points of view are equal. Jesus and the Pope want to point out that all points of view are not equal, and that we have an inborn faculty, a reason, that will lead us to the truth, objective truth, truth beyond my point of view. And this is very important if we really want to build a truly tolerant and just society.
Recently in the “Catholic Explorer,” there was another article by a priest who has studied rather extensively people's values and ideas. And he says that basically American people, including American Catholics, are very tolerant of people who are different from themselves: socially, culturally, racially, and religiously. However, they have given up a belief that they can find the common good. This is very alarming! If we give up the search for the common good, then how will we ever have a just public policy or a just society?

Now these attitudes betray, actually, not so much a lack of faith in God, but a lack of faith in God’s gift to us which is reason. This is stated in the encyclical the Pope has recently issued. Reason requires a commitment from all of us and each of us, a commitment that acknowledges that we all have something to contribute, but we all also have something to learn in the process of seeking the objective truth.

Today there are many social, political, and even church groups who are taking very rigid positions. They seek to influence others, but they don’t want to be influenced themselves. This is not exercising reason. If we have a value or a point of view and want to share it with others and influence public policy and public opinion, that’s fine; but we have to be willing also to be influenced by other people—carrying on a dialogue. This is virtually lacking in modern society on a whole, even in Washington, DC.

False pride is the great obstacle to learning and communication. It produces rigidity, narrow-mindedness, and an argumentative spirit. Jesus Himself and our Church is dedicated to what we must call the “whole truth”—just as if we go to court, we are asked to swear that we will tell the whole truth, not part of it.

In today’s episode, Jesus uses a part of the Bible to correct another part. This is the basis of typical Catholic exegesis, or interpretation of the Bible. And in the Catholic Church we believe the Bible as a whole is inspired, not individual phrases and not individual words, but the whole Bible and the whole message in the whole Bible. The Holy Spirit abiding in the community of faith, that is, the Church, is an indispensable component of the search for truth, especially revealed truth. Individual truths and principles which may be valid in themselves, when isolated from other truths actually become unbalanced and distorted. For example, in the area of morality, some people believe that the only sins against morality are sexual sins. They believe that if they are sexually moral, they are moral; no other issue need bother them. This is an unbalanced opinion, and it really detracts from the whole truth.

Faithfulness to the whole truth is exemplified by the whole ministry and life of Pope John Paul II. Although he is himself a passionate believer, he has never allowed one issue to capture and control him—not even the great issue like abortion. He is totally against abortion, but he has never allowed that to dictate all the policies and teachings he gives. And he is a very good example of what it means to be a Catholic. His intellect, or understanding, his being, his concerns are broad. This can teach us and show us that, indeed, there can be no such thing as a fanatical Catholic. To be fanatical means to have a
very narrow vision of truth, usually accompanied with a shallow understanding. To be Catholic means to have a profound sense of truth, to live in the profound vision that the Church has of truth, and to embrace the broad spectrum of concerns that are taught by the living Magisterium. This means to be a true Catholic one has to be, unlike the Sadducees in today’s story, always learning! Jesus Himself said this: “There is one teacher among you. The rest are learners.” The day we stop learning, we cease being disciples!
As we go through life, we meet many people and form impressions of them. And this is very natural. However, what often follows from this is that we make judgments about them. If they like us, well, then they must be good. If they don’t like us, well, they’re not so good. If they treat us well and kindly, again, they’re good, and so on.

And Jesus, in his ministry, was constantly trying to convince his listeners that we human beings do not have enough evidence, no matter how well we know a person, to render a valid judgment. In fact, in one case he implied that—in fact said that—no one is really good anyway; only God is good. On the other hand, in parables like the one we read this morning, Jesus is encouraging attention focused on something else—not being good, but rather being watchful, being attentive. This is what makes a sensible virgin, sensible—it’s being watchful and wary and awake.

This quality is one that is constantly slipping by—being aware. The reference, “We do not know the time or the hour,” does not necessarily refer only to the moment of our death. It can refer to that; but it refers also to the moment of visitation, when we are visited by God many times in our lives. And the Church says that we’re constantly being visited by God. And our ability to respond to God is dependent on our being aware that we are being addressed. Our ability to respond depends upon our awareness of the presence of God. And this is very different from thinking about whether or not we are good or bad. It is very different!

It’s something we need to think about and become aware of because each of us has a limited number of days on this earth. And I would dare say that many of them are relatively wasted because if we are caught up in all of the busyness of life, if we are caught up in the excitement of life, and being entertained—with working, with all the distractions that come to us daily—and we never have any sense that there is a purpose to our lives,
then our lives are, in fact, incomplete, and that our basic job, if you will, our basic purpose is to complete what has just begun—to bring to completion what God has given to us as potential. And there are many parables which speak of this very idea of bringing to completion what God gives us as potential.

Then there are moments when the short duration of life becomes so obvious. And even though they may be moments of sadness because a dear friend, a daughter, a mother has passed away, nonetheless, even this moment of sadness can be a great blessing. It can actually influence the rest of our lives, if only we remember the short duration of our days and make sure that every day really is a day that counts, a day that we can look back on at the end of our days and be happy that we lived that particular day, because no matter how much we suffered that day or how much pain we felt or how much we were harried or hassled or pushed around or exhilarated, we let God lead in that day, and we responded to people around us as we really wanted to, not only blessing those who bless us, but even blessing those who curse us, thus really becoming in fact a child of God that we are in potential! And acknowledging the great bounty of God, we can take a new, perhaps renewed, view of life, recognizing that each day can be a gift not only to us but from us to the Creator, to the source of all blessing, a gift that reflects our decision to live as a child of God; and we are able to be sensible bridesmaids—never running out of light because we live prepared.
There are only two basically different rites or liturgies in the Church, the Eastern and the Western, the Eastern arose in Antioch, and the Western arose in Rome. They both have various, you might say, differences, but there are basically two different styles of worship. And today we celebrate the feast of The Dedication of the Cathedral of Rome, and therefore since we follow the Roman Rite, it is also our feast day.

Christ Himself was always challenging people’s idea of what a temple was supposed to be. In the time of the Old Testament the temple was really an extension of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was a boat. And in the boat was carried the two tablets of the law, not containing 1-5 on one tablet and 6-10 on the other, as artists often portray, both contained all ten stipulations of the Law. Just as even in modern times a contract has two copies, so this covenant between the people and God had two copies; and they both resided in the boat called the “Ark of the Covenant.”

And because one of the copies really belonged to God, the boat was thought to be really the residence of God on earth, since it was where he kept his copy of the law. Now this is a very physical idea of presence. For many years the boat was carried into battle, and it was very mobile. A tent was erected over it to protect it from the elements. Finally in the time of Solomon a house of cedar was built, but it was primarily a place to put the Ark of the Covenant. And so from then on, there was this idea that God resided in Jerusalem, and that, therefore, the Jewish people had an advantage that no one else in the world had because God did not reside anywhere else but on Mt. Zion. And if you recall the dialogue Jesus had with the Samaritan woman when she asked about this question, “Should we worship on Mt. Gerizim or in Jerusalem?” Jesus said, “The time is coming when men will worship God neither on Mt. Gerizim nor in Jerusalem, but in Spirit and truth.”

And in today’s reading from the Gospel of John we see Jesus going to the Jerusalem temple and throwing out the various animals used as sacrifice. This, of course, is a radical departure from the customs of the people; but Jesus had a radical idea about presence as well, and also, you might say, a radical idea about prayer.

Now sacrifices must be understood as a form of petition. You sacrificed animals so the soul of the dead animal would rise to God, and upon that soul you would place the petition. Well, petition may be part of prayer, but it’s not all of it. And it should not become the dominant issue of prayer. Adoration is also a very important part of praying—just to adore God, to be aware of God’s presence. And in all the commotion and the business of preparing animals for sacrifice, probably adoration was pretty well lost!
Another very important point of prayer is thanksgiving: being aware of what God has already given, not only aware of what we don’t have or what we need, but what God already has bestowed. Gratefulness is a very important element in prayer, and of course also very important--contrition. If we pray with no sense of our need for contrition or repentance, then our prayer is pretty dull. So exaggeration of petition is very objectionable--then and now!

So these form two points then that the evangelist wants us to understand. Number one, we should not think of the presence of God as located in one geographic place any longer because God took--actually in the Greek it said, “God ‘tented’ himself among us in the body of Jesus.” “Tented”--now that’s the word used for covering the Ark. So Jesus is really the Ark, the living Ark of the Covenant, his body. And of course, in Baptism we are joined to that body; we become one with it so that truly the Holy Trinity--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--resides in the bodies of those who are baptized, who live, of course, in communion with God. And it’s this communion that is celebrated in the sacraments but especially the Eucharist. The body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ enters into our physical bodies to nurture all of us--body, mind, and soul--with this Bread of Life, this Cup of Salvation.

Secondly, in our prayer life we need to have a balance, not to be too much always into petition always asking God for something, but to be aware of how God has always blessed us in ways we don’t even imagine or see, to recognize the need to be present to God as God is present to us in adoration, and of course to be contrite--aware of how we have really failed to live up to our Baptism and have failed, perhaps, to embody this divine presence in the world, which is our primary responsibility as sacraments of Christ. And if we can keep these two points in mind, then we can also be renewed in our faith and liturgy, which is theologically an extension of the Cathedral of Rome.
“Neither is it a matter of reporting that it is ‘here’ or ‘there.’”

It is sad to observe how little Christian people have actually listened to Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom! The kingdom is not something that is here or there, which means it cannot be identified with any place, or for that matter, thing—even a thing like the institution of the Church! The institution of the Church is not the kingdom. There was a time in Europe and in Asia when the kingdom was identified with the Empire: the Roman Empire, then the Eastern, Byzantine Empire, then the Russian Empire. And, of course, this is part of the history of our faith and how misunderstood the kingdom has been; and yet it is the most important thing Jesus Himself ever talked about! And he says, “It’s in your midst.” And he says, “When people say, ‘It is here,’ do not run about excited.” There are always people who feel that being faithful is a matter of being excited. This is not true. Faithfulness to God and being excited are two entirely different things. Faith works in the realm quite beyond human excitability, attraction and repulsion, and ordinary emotions. It is a matter of deep feeling, but it’s not ordinary emotion.

Now today we celebrate the memorial of St. Josaphat. St. Josaphat was born Polish, then he was reared in the Ukrainian culture, in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Now this is one of the sad things in the history of Christendom, that when the kingdom of God was identified with Christendom, then Christendom became separate, people imagined that the kingdom of God was either on this side or that. In other words, it was either the Roman side, or it was the Eastern side. And millions of people for thousands of years have thought this way. St. Josaphat became a monk, and then later on he became a bishop. In the Eastern Church bishops are elected from monasteries, chosen from monasteries. They don’t come from the secular priesthood because most secular priests are married, and the bishops are celibate; they’re monks. And Josaphat was desirous of restoration of unity between the Eastern and the Western branches of the Church, because
he did not identify
the kingdom of God with being “here or there.” He did not believe it was only in the
East, but he believed it was the universal reality of which the Church is a sign and a
sacrament. The Church is a sign and a sacrament, but it isn’t the kingdom itself. And
Josaphat spilled his blood in the effort to re-establish union between the Ukrainian people
and the Church of Rome, which is in service to universal unity.

Now to this day, there are many Ukrainian Catholic people, that is, they are
Ukrainian; they follow the Byzantine Rite. And there may be as many as nine or ten
million such people in the world called the Byzantine Rite, the Eastern way of worship;
but they are part of the universal Catholic Church, and they acknowledge the unity of the
Church visibly headed by the Pope of Rome. And the sad thing is that this is not really,
actually, a bridge to unity, but cause for a division, especially exploited by Stalin during
the 20’s and 30’s where he murdered about twenty million Ukrainians and almost totally
destroyed the Church. He gave the Church’s churches, property, over to the Orthodox
Church, not in union with the Church of Rome. And then when Glasnost came, the
Ukrainian people who had suffered a great deal for all these years--they asked for their
churches back, and we’re waiting to see whether the Orthodox Christians in the East will
return the property taken from them, the Catholic people back in the 20’s and 30’s--but
we are not holding our breath.

But nonetheless, it is appropriate that we pray for this unity and for the healing of all
divisions that are based upon geographical or cultural reasons. One of the great
sadnesses of this is that the divisions between the East and West are actually more
emotional and more profound than the divisions among Catholics and, let’s say,
Lutherans, or Catholics and Baptists, or Catholics and Pentecostals--even though there
are no doctrinal disagreements. So it’s the work of the human heart and its emotions in a
way that identifies, that causes divisions. And it is the Spirit of Christ that is seeking to
heal this division and to restore a sense of unity to the Church. In Josaphat’s name, we
will continue to pray.
Today, we have a reading from the Second Letter of John. And it’s a series of warnings about false teachings that were already circulating in the very early Church. He says, “Many deceitful men have gone out into the world, men who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. Such is the deceitful one! This is the antichrist!” Now actually this may be a little hard to understand. What does it mean, “They do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh”? What it really means is they do not acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ, or Jesus, more than that, is the Word of God coming in the flesh, because that is the proclamation in the New Testament: that Jesus is not a man, but Jesus is the Word of God who becomes man--who becomes man! Now this heresy, if you want to call it that, was very prominent in the early Church. It had a few different forms--one is called Docetism. Docetists claimed that on the cross Jesus really didn’t die, but was rather assumed into heaven. And what died was just a man, a physical being. All these various heresies unfortunately are still with us today, especially in Islam because Mohammed took many of these heresies and made them part of Islamic faith.

So the Islamic people today claim that Jesus is the Messiah. Strange enough, they use that term; they say that he is “Messiah”—he is “Christ.” But they deny, number one, that he is the Word of God, the Son of God, equivalent “Son” and “Word”—the same existence. They say, “No, he is not the Word of God. The Word of God cannot take flesh.” Secondly, the Mohammedans claim that Jesus Christ did not die on the cross, but ascended into heaven from the cross--without dying. It’s a very strange concept. But our belief is that Jesus died, and that is the death of God in this sense--that Jesus is God, and so the death of his human nature is attributed to God as the subject of the being.

Now you may say this is a theological loophole, because God cannot die. The point is that God experienced death through the human nature of Christ because the human nature of Christ was joined to the divine nature, so whatever Jesus experienced, God
experienced, and that God therefore underwent suffering and death; and he underwent it
for our sake. So this is a tremendous teaching on the compassion of God. And this would all be totally lost if we said, “Well, actually, Jesus really wasn’t the Word of God, or Jesus really didn’t die on the cross, or God left the being of Jesus before his death.

So these are all the different ways of skirting around the great scandal of the cross, and the great scandal of the fact that God has so immersed himself in our lives in the love and compassion of Christ—the love and compassion which motivated someone like Mother Cabrini, for example, to establish sixty-seven different institutions in North and South America: orphanages and schools and hospitals, in a tireless effort to extend the compassion of God to others. And it’s always a hallmark of true, orthodox Christianity that people do spend themselves in compassion.

And what is really wrong with heresy? It’s just not someone’s personal opinion; that’s not the problem with it. The problem with it is that it dismantles the whole message. It takes the very spark out of the gospel itself, and if we really meditate on this, we would realize what a tremendous message the gospel is: that God became human by assuming human nature, and then underwent and experienced everything human beings can experience from the sublime to the tragic, the greatest suffering and the greatest joy—all of this emanates from Jesus.

And ultimately Jesus’ own human will was a will of surrender to the divine will which he called the “will of the Father.” And this surrender is what we celebrate in our Eucharist, and we really celebrate this surrender. And we need to also bring ourselves into the sacrifice, into the surrender, into the offering. If we do, then our lives will begin to reflect the compassion of God—it will have to because it will be God working in us as we surrender ourselves in our smallness, our self-will, to God. It will be God’s will, God’s Spirit, and God’s compassion. It will take the place of our own small, little egos. We will be then truly manifesting the compassion of God in Mother Cabrini as we celebrate her as a sister, one of our own, that followed and lived out the gospel.
“Will he delay long over them, do you suppose?”

As we look around our world, we can see many tragedies, many adverse circumstances. But unfortunately, the ones that we respond to most quickly are the ones which are not our responsibility. For example, I think there has been an outpouring of sympathy and aid to the people of Central America in the wake of this ferocious hurricane. But human beings don’t really create hurricanes; they’re the result of nature. And, in fact, nature is full of all kinds of violence, and has gone through many periods, building up and tearing down. And without this there would be no world as we know it, and there would be no life as we know it.

Anyway, what Jesus brings up here in today’s gospel is the issue of justice. There are other tragedies in the world too that in a sense we are responsible for because they are part of the human response--or lack of response--to God! For example, I may point out that the devastation suffered in Central America is not directly due simply to the hurricane, but to the fact that many people there lived in completely unlivable dwellings. That’s a horse of a different color. There was great devastation in Florida several years ago, but the loss of life was very minimal. The destruction of property was great, but even that people have responded to, and there has been recovery--with various exceptions of course. But one of the great problems in Central America, of course, is the conditions in which people live even when there are no hurricanes. The question is does that bother
anyone? Is that ever in the news? Does that ever capture anyone’s hopes? That’s really a matter we should be concerned about, much more than hurricanes, which will always come and go. And that’s really what this gospel is about.

Do you suppose the reason for the lack of justice in the world is God, his failure to respond? Jesus’ point is that it’s not God! It’s not God’s failure to respond that is the problem! It is our failure to really ask for justice. We may ask for lots of things, but do we ask for justice? That’s the question Jesus is posing to us. And as we ask for many things and as we find that we are often frustrated in what we ask for, well, maybe that’s because that isn’t the just request. “God doesn’t delay,” Jesus says. He brings swift justice when it is prayed for, when it’s asked for; when it is really wanted and desired, he brings it! So the problem then is, A: not with God, B: it’s with ourselves, and probably not that we don’t pray, but we don’t pray for justice. And of course, we don’t pray for justice because we don’t really want justice. And so considering this is the very point of today’s gospel, what is it, after all, that we really want?
“But for you who fear my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays.”

Today’s text is taken from the prophet Malachi. We are involved, of course, in the annual process of fall when leaves die and nature, as it were, rests. This calls us to think about the cycles of life in our own personal lives and in our social life. So the Church calls attention to this fact, as Christ does today in the Gospel. It’s just that whole societies have springs, summers, autumns, and winters. And with the rites of the falling of society and our own personal fortunes and circumstances there is something else at work. The plan of God is being carried out.

And in the prophet Malachi, there is this reference to “fearing my name.” And it would be good for us to look at this idea of fear, or the fear of God, because that has both a positive and a negative meaning. In the Book of Proverbs it says, “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.” But on the other hand, Jesus says, “Fear is useless; what is needed is trust.” Now fear in the negative sense as Jesus refers to it is first of all related to death—the fear of death. It says in the Letter to the Hebrews that the devil kept the world in bondage by the fear of death. This fear is useless—the fear of death. Death is part of our life cycle. But it’s absolutely necessary for the next level of existence to be introduced. That’s true for us as individuals, and it’s true for the entire world.

Eventually the world must come to an end; it is of its nature temporary although the span of its years is so vast that we don’t sense this. But everyone, every physicist, knows that someday sooner or later the sun will wear out. When the sun wears out, there will be no more life on earth. So it’s useless to fear this. It’s part of the nature of life as we know it. Each of us will eventually pass away. It’s useless to fear this. It’s part of our very life, and it should lead us beyond our very life!

And so the fear that is, of course, bondage—and related to this bondage is the fear of the unknown. Fear of the unknown is useless. We should be able especially as adults to recognize the marvelous power that brought us into existence, the marvelous plan that made the earth and the moon and the heavens possible. It is impossible to study anything and not marvel at the beauty of it; well, if we are marveling at the beauty of it, then why should we fear the unknown? The unknown is something to marvel at.

Furthermore, fear can lead to paralysis. There are people who never do anything because they’re too afraid! Now, of course, in some cases perhaps someone is suffering from some illness of the mind that imposes this paralysis upon them; but other times perhaps it’s that they have never really faced the truth of the gospel. Or perhaps they’ve really never established a proper and right relationship with God, because that cannot
coexist with a paralyzed fear—it cannot! And again, I make exceptions for those who are suffering from some grave illnesses over which they have no power to control.

But fear also can be very positive. It is the natural reaction to wonder . . . and majesty . . . and glory! And it can lead us to a deep reverence . . . an awe . . . and fascination with the mystery of being inside! When we are lead to awe and reverence and fascination with the very mystery of being, we are very close to God. It is in those moments when God touches us most intimately. It is not actually a difficult conclusion to reach that if, after all, the creation is so grand, God must be grander! So by, a certain sense of reasoning we can come to realize the greatness of God by studying of the greatness of God’s work! And this positive kind of fear, this fear which is awe and reverence, is really the beginning of wisdom. This is fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom.

It should lead us also to a profound personal sense that we are not in charge. We are not in charge of the world, and we’re not in charge of ourselves in any total and complete sense. We are bidden to gain self-control, but that’s not the same thing as being in charge! The world and all that is in it is in the hands, so to speak, under the care of God. And perhaps the very idea of control itself maybe doesn’t fit at all. Maybe the truest thing we can say about control is we don’t want to be in control; control doesn’t matter—that control is an intrusion in the purpose of God for life . . . and for me.

But it does bring up the issue of the purpose of life. And if we reflect on the purpose of life—and yes, even modern day scientists reflect on the universe. And they don’t like thinking about purpose; it’s not part of their basic strategy. But many of them cannot help recognize that if a few little factors were different, there would be no universe as we know it. This doesn’t prove anything, but it surely makes very reasonable the belief that there is a purposeful hand guiding and directing the creation and formation of all that is. But of all that is, we are not in charge—number one.

Number two, the action and purpose of creation is not for our own personal comfort, or the personal satisfaction of our own needs and wants. This takes some realizing, because it would seem from our culture that the assumption is that that’s really why everyone is running around doing what they’re doing, and why people work, and so on—to satisfy their needs and wants and find all the comfort they can get, and so on. But this actually has nothing to do with the purpose of life. It’s purely something human beings have created. But indeed we have been created; human beings have been created, to supply to the creation something that only conscious, willful, and deliberate beings can supply. Now I’ll let you think about what that means. Human beings are created to supply something that cannot be supplied by any other form of life! Seeking what that is, is part of our own purpose for living!

Meanwhile, as we recognize the world was not created for our own comfort or convenience or to satisfy our own needs and wants, we should not be dismayed, then, when the forces of nature wipe out what we have built, when human planning comes to naught, because we share our earth with many other forces besides our own. Human
force is a great force; it’s not the only one! This should not be dismay ing. But what should be dismay ing is all the mischief created by the lack of justice in human action! That should be dismay ing. We should not be so dismayed that a hurricane can wipe out hundreds of villages, roads, and what not. What we should be dismayed by is how human injustice can create such hostility, wars, persecution, and suffering, because this is not inevitable! It’s not inevitable! It’s not in any way necessary, given all the conditions that are needed for life. Hurricanes are necessary, but not injustice!

Now Jesus says in the gospel this morning, “You shall save your lives.” And this is the good news. Salvation, freedom from hopelessness, freedom from meaninglessness, freedom from useless suffering--this is possible. But it is not the product of nature, nor is it the result of our own action or planning or cleverness. Human life is invited by God through the gospel to transcend the limitations of nature and to enter into a companionship with God! That’s exactly what Jesus’ message is: that we can transcend the limitations of our nature and enter into companionship with God, and therefore enjoy a quality of life that God is, which is called “Eternal Life.”

Now this requires, as it says in the Gospel today, “patient endurance.” Patience has to do with learning how to wait. God discloses himself to us; we cannot find God. God discloses himself to us, and especially when we are ready; and that usually is in times of need and weakness, but this itself cannot be manipulated either or controlled. Patience! And secondly, endurance! The fulfillment of our purpose in life is actually hidden from our own eyes and understanding. We need to suffer through. That’s what endurance is, suffering through! It goes along with patience. And it’s waiting and it’s enduring. So fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And the absence of wisdom is a “know-it-all” attitude! Oscar Romero, the assassinated Archbishop of San Salvador, summed it up this way: “We are the workers, not the master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of the future not our own.”
“Be on guard, therefore. The Son of Man will come when you least expect him.”  

This text from the Gospel of Luke, of course, refers to the cosmic event of the consummation of history and of the world. But it also can apply to each of us in our own death, or it may also apply to each of us at whatever moment God touches us.

And there are various times in our lives when God is very close. Often it is moments of great need...or sickness...or grief...or betrayal...or hardship. But actually it is not necessarily so that we have to be grieving or in hardship or very sick to behold God. It’s just at those points we tend to have our defenses down. But Phil was an example of a person who deliberately let his defenses down when it came to God. And I can speak of him with great authority because I didn’t know him on a very deep, personal level. What I saw was his public capacity to witness to a Presence in his life.

Now there are many gospels in life we use to refer to a person like Phil. I thought of, for example, “You are the Light of the World.” We have this Paschal candle burning here. Of course, it is from the Easter Vigil when the Church celebrates the resurrection of Christ. That event that brought Light into the world of our darkness--the world of death. And we were promised by God that we could live with God forever in God’s own Eternal Life. And this is the meaning of our baptism. That is why at Easter Vigil we celebrate the baptism of adults: those who have come to a point in their life when they are willing to publicly witness to their faith, and welcome a rebirth within themselves to a new life.

Now this new birth can come in different ways, but it always comes from God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Many of us--and I suspect and I’m almost sure Phil is one of those of us who were baptized at a very early age during infancy. And for those of us who were baptized in infancy, there is a need for us to come to a point where we make a decision that the new birth offered to us in God really becomes our own, that the freedom given to us in the Spirit becomes a freedom we use for God’s sake, God’s purpose. This is not the automatic result of the sacrament; the sacrament merely gives us the freedom to do so. It is the result of our cooperating with the freedom of God’s Spirit.

And this is evident in Phil’s life, because he was clearly one who reflected the Spirit of Christ in his manner of doing business, in his manner of speaking with people, in his manner of attending Mass. He always fully participated. How often can we say that about all those who come to church? He sang through his heart because his heart was filled with the Spirit. The Eucharist was deeply important to him, and he received it with great devotion. He believed it to be the body, the blood, the soul, and the divinity of Christ. And he believed that in the Eucharist he was being enabled to offer his own life, his own struggles, his own pains and suffering to God the Father, with and through Christ--so that
he and Christ became one, not only sacramentally at baptism, but now also voluntarily in his intentional, deliberate act of worship in the Mass.

When Phil was baptized--when we were all baptized--there was a candle given with the prayer that this light is entrusted to you, parents and godparents, and must be kept burning brightly so that this child of yours will always walk as a child of the Light. In Phil’s case, he did walk as a child of the Light, and this Light is still burning brightly in our world not only symbolically here, but in the world because Phil has been with us. He was not the Light, but he was, you might say, the wick that we saw, the flame of Christ.

Another text I thought of when I thought of Phil was, “You are the salt of the earth.” Salt is an ancient substance used for preservation. Salt was used in meats before the days of refrigeration to provide people with food during the winter months. When Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth,” he meant the preservation of the earth is in your hands. We can see around ourselves all kinds of signs of disintegration. This is because people have no sense of meaning for life. Nothing means anything to them except, perhaps, themselves and their own comfort or perhaps just their own survival. And in this desolate wasteland of the world nothing good can come. And we would be totally destroyed if it weren’t for the fact that there are those who are salt. And people like Phil are salt of the earth, and they have preserved our society from total and utter destruction, which is never too far away.

And every man and woman of faith is also salt for the earth. You are all called on to preserve, not by doing anything in particular--by being salt. Again, Phil represented what that is in ways that cannot be exactly described in words. And in this way, he is a good witness, and is--not just was! **He still is a good witness** because his life has not ended, it has been transformed because he no longer thought of himself primarily as just a physical being with physical needs and desires, but he thought of himself as a child of God! And this feeling of himself was rooted in God, in Christ. He allowed the grace of his Baptism to change the way he looked at himself and felt about himself. And this I knew from dealing with him. And as Christ cannot die, the offer is for us to be raised from the dead; and any of us who really put our identity in Christ will **not** know death because Christ cannot die. But whatever is rooted in our own physical natures--that will definitely die! And hopefully we’ll learn the lesson that Phil learned early enough, because “The Son of Man will come when you least expect him.”
“Be on guard, therefore. The Son of Man will come when you least expect him.”

This text from the Gospel of Luke, of course, refers to the cosmic event of the consummation of history and of the world. But it also can apply to each of us in our own death, or it may also apply to each of us at whatever moment God touches us.

And there are various times in our lives when God is very close. Often it is moments of great need...or sickness...or grief...or betrayal...or hardship. But actually it is not necessarily so that we have to be grieving or in hardship or very sick to behold God. It’s just at those points we tend to have our defenses down. But Phil was an example of a person who deliberately let his defenses down when it came to God. And I can speak of him with great authority because I didn’t know him on a very deep, personal level. What I saw was his public capacity to witness to a Presence in his life.

Now there are many gospels in life we use to refer to a person like Phil. I thought of, for example, “You are the Light of the World.” We have this Paschal candle burning here. Of course, it is from the Easter Vigil when the Church celebrates the resurrection of Christ. That event that brought Light into the world of our darkness--the world of death. And we were promised by God that we could live with God forever in God’s own Eternal Life. And this is the meaning of our baptism. That is why at Easter Vigil we celebrate the baptism of adults: those who have come to a point in their life when they are willing to publicly witness to their faith, and welcome a rebirth within themselves to a new life.

Now this new birth can come in different ways, but it always comes from God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Many of us--and I suspect and I’m almost sure Phil is one of those of us who were baptized at a very early age during infancy. And for those of us who were baptized in infancy, there is a need for us to come to a point where we make a decision that the new birth offered to us in God really becomes our own, that the freedom given to us in the Spirit becomes a freedom we use for God’s sake, God’s purpose. This is not the automatic result of the sacrament; the sacrament merely gives us the freedom to do so. It is the result of our cooperating with the freedom of God’s Spirit.

And this is evident in Phil’s life, because he was clearly one who reflected the Spirit of Christ in his manner of doing business, in his manner of speaking with people, in his manner of attending Mass. He always fully participated. How often can we say that about all those who come to church? He sang through his heart because his heart was filled with the Spirit. The Eucharist was deeply important to him, and he received it with great devotion. He believed it to be the body, the blood, the soul, and the divinity of Christ. And he believed that in the Eucharist he was being enabled to offer his own life, his own struggles, his own pains and suffering to God the Father, with and through Christ--so that
he and Christ became one, not only sacramentally at baptism, but now also voluntarily in his intentional, deliberate act of worship in the Mass.

When Phil was baptized—when we were all baptized—there was a candle given with the prayer that this light is entrusted to you, parents and godparents, and must be kept burning brightly so that this child of yours will always walk as a child of the Light. In Phil’s case, he did walk as a child of the Light, and this Light is still burning brightly in our world not only symbolically here, but in the world because Phil has been with us. He was not the Light, but he was, you might say, the wick that we saw, the flame of Christ.

Another text I thought of when I thought of Phil was, “You are the salt of the earth.” Salt is an ancient substance used for preservation. Salt was used in meats before the days of refrigeration to provide people with food during the winter months. When Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth,” he meant the preservation of the earth is in your hands. We can see around ourselves all kinds of signs of disintegration. This is because people have no sense of meaning for life. Nothing means anything to them except, perhaps, themselves and their own comfort or perhaps just their own survival. And in this desolate wasteland of the world nothing good can come. And we would be totally destroyed if it weren’t for the fact that there are those who are salt. And people like Phil are salt of the earth, and they have preserved our society from total and utter destruction, which is never too far away.

And every man and woman of faith is also salt for the earth. You are all called on to preserve, not by doing anything in particular—by being salt. Again, Phil represented what that is in ways that cannot be exactly described in words. And in this way, he is a good witness, and is—not just was! He still is a good witness because his life has not ended, it has been transformed because he no longer thought of himself primarily as just a physical being with physical needs and desires, but he thought of himself as a child of God! And this feeling of himself was rooted in God, in Christ. He allowed the grace of his Baptism to change the way he looked at himself and felt about himself. And this I knew from dealing with him. And as Christ cannot die, the offer is for us to be raised from the dead; and any of us who really put our identity in Christ will not know death because Christ cannot die. But whatever is rooted in our own physical natures—that will definitely die! And hopefully we’ll learn the lesson that Phil learned early enough, because “The Son of Man will come when you least expect him.”
Today we are reading from the book of Revelation. And this book is in a sense a complaint; well, prophecy is always about complaint, really, God’s complaints against his children’s infidelities. And this has to do, basically, with the lack of fervor. And it is rather remarkable that there are so many Christian people, Catholic people, who are marginal. They seem to have an attraction to God, to Christ, and to the Gospel, but not that much. And this is the topic; “I wish you were either hot or cold.”

Now in today’s Gospel we read about Zacchaeus. And Zacchaeus was also a curious man. But Zacchaeus didn’t stay curious. Having met Jesus, he allowed the presence of Jesus to touch him. It says in Scripture when Jesus walked the streets, people with demons were thrown into convulsions. The presence of the Word of God is felt by sensitive spirits, whether they be good or evil! And Zacchaeus, who was a publican tax collector, not a great leader at all, nonetheless, had a fundamental goodness that responded to the presence of Jesus. And right on the spot, he had to go through what you might call a conversion--in this case, a moral conversion. He didn’t say, “I will believe in Jesus for the rest of my life.” But what he did was he recognized what was not quite right in his own life, in his moral response to life; and he resolved right then and there to do what is right.

Now God touches different people in different ways because we have different needs. The need to become totally conformed to a being that is fully alive in Christ is really the goal for all of us. Some of us need more conversion in the moral area, others need conversion of our affections. We need to trade-in negative emotions for positive ones:
emotions stemming from the world for emotions stemming from the spirit. Some of us need an intellectual conversion to really look at life a different way to understand what it is God is doing. And thus there are various steps in our lives depending on who we are and where we are in our own journey—what we need. To hold back at any point is to become mediocre and lukewarm. This is what the Book of Revelation is written to avert: that anyone would think that because we make some small gesture toward God, or because we have received baptism, or baptism and confirmation, or baptism and confirmation and the Holy Eucharist, or whatever, that now we can sit back! Following God is always a matter of responding each day to whatever invitation God sends. When Zacchaeus responded well, Jesus said, “This is what is means to be a child of Abraham.”
Throughout the Old Testament there is the awareness of what we can call “corporate responsibility.” Corporate responsibility refers to a shared responsibility that each and every one in the body of the people has for hope. It was through the prophets, especially Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah that the idea of individual responsibility was born--probably in the world for the first time! Now in our own day, we are in a sense from the other side of the world when it comes to responsibility because of the individualism of modern culture. If we believe in responsibility at all, which many do not because it’s a spiritual idea, then we tend to think of it only in individual terms. And so a prophet today would have to stress the corporate, in contrast to the prophets of long ago who needed to stress the individual.

Now Jesus today is seen weeping over Jerusalem. The reason, of course, is that Jerusalem would soon be destroyed. Prophecy is a foreseeing of the inevitable from the standpoint of God’s plan and purpose. Jesus is weeping today because the whole of Jerusalem, the people on a whole, have completely lost from view the path to peace. And we must make it very clear that the New Testament authors, like Luke in this case, never did blame individuals for the death of Christ. Certain individuals are named, for example, Caiaphas; but there is no intention to blame Caiaphas, much less Pontius Pilate, for the death of Christ. It was a corporate act of the whole people. And not really the whole people at that particular time, but the whole people of the whole earth for all time!
That is really the belief of the New Testament and the teaching of the Church. This is a corporate responsibility.

It is the idea that actually we are intertwined in a very delicate web. That means that we all suffer, or we all enjoy the blessings and curses we as a whole bring down upon ourselves. Mind you, Jesus does not single out certain moral lapses breaking certain moral or divine laws or anything like that; but he says, “You failed to recognize.” This is the fundamental flaw, and this is grievous and mortal sin which brings upon itself total and utter destruction. What is it? Failing “to recognize the time of visitation.” And we might borrow from the other text this phrase: “Those who have ears, let them hear.”
Today’s reading is often misunderstood. It is the story of Jesus ejecting traders—it has nothing to do with money or selling books in the lobby of the church, as many have told me. It has to do with confusion of two very separate issues. First of all, the law. The law was given to the Hebrew people as a moral guide to urge them, challenge them, compel them, to live justly, to live a life of holiness—which means a life of right conduct. Holiness, right conduct, that’s the original meaning.

Now a second very different idea has to do with power of ritual. In the ancient world and in the Bible, it is believed that every living creature breathes with the life of God. And that is the basis of what is called a “sacrificial ritual.” We can pray at any moment, but so the ancient people reasoned, especially the biblical people, we can pray at any moment, but if we sacrifice a living creature to God, then the return of that life force, that soul, that spirit, to God will surely give us a hearing! It’s like sending a message Federal Express. Surely it will arrive. And so this is the idea of the sacrifice system as it was set up in the temple.

Now the two realities, law and ritual, became very confused for several hundred years before Christ. And the law began to be a description—not really a challenge or even a demand for a moral, just life—but it became a description of how many rituals people were required to meet. And holiness became confused with the right form of ritual. And so in this kind of system where people are performing rituals for the sake of law, what happens to prayer? It severs the whole notion of prayer from the idea of sacrifice, which is where it came from. Sacrifice becomes a way of fulfilling the law, not really praying.
So Jesus throws out the traders. What were they trading? They were trading in sacrificial victims, animals: pigeons and turtledoves, or even larger animals--calves or sheep. And he throws them out and he says, “My house is meant for a house of prayer. Let us get back to the basics. Let’s recognize what sacrifice is really about. It’s not about importance of law. Law is not about ritual; law is about holiness, being with God in justice. And ritual is a form of prayer, so let’s pray.” Actually Jesus is simply trying to restore the original intent of the institutions--a personal relationship.

Now whether people understood, I don’t know, evidently not! Luke says that people were “hanging on his words.” Unfortunately that is not what we’re supposed to do with the word of God. That’s why the Book of Revelation says, “Eat this scroll.” You’re not supposed to hang on the word of God; you’re supposed to eat the word of God and digest the word of God! And we will find it sweet to taste, but it will sour in the stomach, because when we are confronted with God’s holy word, we will recognize how much we really need to change.
“One of the criminals hanging in crucifixion blasphemed him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Then save yourself and us.”

Well, our evangelist Luke talks about the criminal who blasphemed Christ; but perhaps he is a little bit strong calling it blasphemy because it is very natural for people to question, after all, the very idea of salvation. And this criminal had an idea that many people have, that salvation is “from something.” And you yourselves perhaps have had a feeling that “God saved me from this or that,” perhaps from sickness or from some disaster like divorce or some terrible business or some terrible family misunderstanding. “God saved me from this.” In fact many people believe that faith is really a matter of protecting themselves from bad things, that if they are faithful or if they are good--however that is conceived in their own minds--that then they will be exempt from all the awful things that can happen to people in life. And so we hear people expressing dismay that someone as “good’ as old Joe would actually get cancer, or what have I done wrong that this disaster has met me? Of course, the error in this way of thinking is to think that suffering and pain and disaster are really from God as if we are mere puppets on strings being controlled from above. And there is no justification for such thinking.

Rather, **Jesus brings the idea that when there is something wrong or defective in life, it’s an opportunity for God to work.** And thus when he met the man born blind and the Pharisees said, “Well, now was it this man who sinned or his parents?” Jesus said, “Neither, this man was born blind so that the glory of God could be revealed.” And this is a constant theme throughout Jesus’ life and teaching. And Jesus Himself was not saved from anything, but in fact endured the greatest problems and evils that anyone could--and furthermore, even learned from them! As it says in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Son though he was, Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered”--obedience being, of course, the goal of a worthy and dignified life, a life of service to God, a useful gift to God the Creator. And so in Jesus’ accepting death--again, it says in Philippians: “Son though he was, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at, but rather emptied himself accepting death.” And in accepting death Jesus showed us and revealed to us that nothing can separate us from God or God’s life or God’s love except our turning away. And when we turn away from God, then our hearts become small and bitter and lonely. But Jesus was saved all right! He was saved for something. That’s what obedience is about; he was saved for life in God, for service, which no evil, no sickness, no malice, no force on heaven or earth can prevent from being fruitful. So he was saved for his Father, in service to his Father.

Now if there are true and false ideas of salvation, there are also true and false ideas of what it means to talk about kingship. St. Paul talks about the “kingship of Christ Crucified”...
crucified.” Do you ever think of what that could possibly mean? It’s associated with an idea of power, but not the usual one. Kingship and power and anointing are often associated with an ability to do or overcome or bring about. And this indeed is correct; but do what, overcome what, bring about what?

So often we are so embedded in the physical side of our existence that we only think in terms of a physical power, a force. But the real need in the world is not for physical force. The real need in the world is not something any physical force can do. **But the need in the world is for an overcoming of human selfishness, self-centeredness, malice, unforgiveness, the coldness, the bleakness of the human heart.** And no physical power or force can do this. And when we think of the power of Christ crucified or the kingship of Christ crucified, we have to think of a power that is very different from a physical one.

In our own culture selfishness has bred a whole culture of individualism in the basic belief that the individual is the building block of society. But it cannot be. The building block of society is community. The building block of society is relationship. And that has always been the teaching and the tradition of the Bible and of the Church.

Now on the cross Christ displays what is truly absolute and almighty power. It is the power that St. Paul describes in 1 Corinthians as the power to endure all things, by which he is referring to love. **Love is infinite power.** Love and only love is truly almighty. Nothing else, nothing physical can be almighty. It is love that is ultimate power. It is the power to forgive. It is the power to heal. It is the power to make new. It is the power to create, to make out of nothing. But it’s not the power to fix. It is not the power to control because human beings are only partly physical, and therefore we really can’t be fixed. And human society can’t be fixed. And our families can’t be fixed. And nobody can be really controlled. But we can be loved, and we can be healed, and we can be restored, and we can become new.

Now the supreme paradox of the cross is that Christ reigns from the cross. **Evil is defeated by sacrifice.** The appearance of weakness is merely a veil for infinite strength. And the cross also reveals the mystery unfolding in all of our lives because each of us must meet all these issues, all these problems, all these difficulties, in our own personal lives. There was a book written not too long ago called “The Crucified Jesus is No Stranger.” The crucified Jesus is no stranger! We know him well! We share his experience! Only a robot can avoid spiritual battle unless, of course, we totally capitulate. **Each of us faces in our own lives the very issues that Jesus faced on the cross.**

And we come today to the Eucharist because we have been baptized into a new life in Christ, because on the cross Christ offered to the Father his struggle and himself and therefore made everything holy. And although this may be very difficult to understand, on the cross Christ made human life infinitely valuable so that nothing we suffer or experience is not of value. Nothing we experience cannot be holy because actually Christ gave it to God, and that’s why it’s holy. And he gave us to God, and that’s why
we’re holy. And
we acknowledge that gift in our own baptism. And we come to the Eucharist to join our sufferings, our limitations, our struggles, to the Father with Christ’s because his offering is an eternal moment, because, as God, Jesus broke the time barrier into eternity. And his sacrifice is all-present; and we can join in it today in the order of sign, which is the very idea of a sacrament.

Now since Jesus gave himself and ourselves to God, we no longer own ourselves. And the biblical word for this realization is “stewardship.” **We are really stewards of our own lives.** We are stewards of our own time. It’s really God’s. We are stewards of our own talent. We are stewards of everything that we have. And a life of faith has to therefore be a life of stewardship when we share our time which is God’s with God, and when we share our talents which are God’s with God’s work, the building up of his kingdom. If we are faithful people we have to spend our resources for the purposes of God, supporting his work and recognizing that indeed in so doing we are doing God’s work; we are living God’s life, and we are building up God’s kingdom until the end of time.
Today’s reading and the readings of this week are observations concerning the temple, and they culminate in the prophecy: the temple will be destroyed. And Luke and the Church mean the believers to contemplate the meaning of the temple. It is easy for us to say that the temple is a metaphor for the body of Christ. Now what does that really mean? John would say, for example, that the temple that Jesus is talking about when he says, “Tear it down and I will rebuild it,” is referring to the resurrection of Christ. But the temple has more meaning than that.

The temple was really the culmination--the building of the temple was the culmination of the empire, but also the beginning of the end. God saved the Hebrew people from slavery, drew them into the desert and made a covenant with them at the time of Moses. The covenant was that they would be God’s people--yet, on the condition that they lived by his statutes, which were all statutes of justice. Now this was really the grand experiment, one might say. And for a while it worked--almost up until the time the temple was built. Israel expanded, grew in greater dependence upon God; and God was with the people to the time of Joshua and Judges, into the time of David. And the people grew stronger and stronger; and then they built a temple. And from that moment on, the history of Israel goes downhill! And it would be good for us to contemplate why that was.

The temple became a symbol and sign, not so much of God, what God wanted, but what people wanted. And the many decorations, offerings, in the temple were not so
much a tribute to God as a tribute to themselves, because somehow people started to forget that God made it all possible.

Now this widow comes today, and she is remembering God upon whom she trusts, the God whom she needs to get through life. And she makes this small, little offering. Jesus says, “This is greater than anything.” Why? Because it’s a true offering. It’s an offering of self. In this way she is foreshadowing Jesus’ own offering of himself--all that he was. There is no partial way of offering yourself to God.
Historical Overview of Gratitude

Thanksgiving Day, Thursday, November 26, 1998
9:00 a.m.   Is 25:6-9;   Col 3:12-17;   Lk 17:11-19

“Was there no one to return and give thanks to God, except this foreigner?”

We’ve all heard the expression “Monday morning quarterbacking.” But to a great extent being thankful and giving thanks is a matter of Monday morning quarterbacking. The greatest example of this is the Christian Eucharist itself, that began as a reflection on the real meaning of the passion and death of Christ in the light of the resurrection.

Without the resurrection we would not actually know the meaning of the death, or the passion, or the ministry, even, of Jesus. And this is really true about all of our lives, and it’s true about the life of the world as a whole. Christian philosophers, looking at the history of life preceding Christ, used a term called “salvation history,” meaning that they see the history of salvation unfolding in the long life of the people of the Old Testament. Sadly, our Jewish brothers and sisters do not see their own history as a history of salvation. Without the light of resurrection the real meaning of those events cannot really be ascertained.

Shakespeare said, “All is well that ends well.” And the gospel proclamation is all “shall” and “well,” because of the power of God at work building God’s kingdom. This kingdom was the very central message of Jesus, as it has been reiterated recently by Pope Paul VI, where he said, “The kingdom of God is the only absolute in the teachings of Christ.” This kingdom has had a very long and rocky road. It is not an always upward, always progressive, always ongoing, history of growth. It’s more like a heartbeat, where expansion is found by contraction. And anyone who looks at the nature of a heart can tell that if the contraction stops, the heart stops. It seems it’s the same way with the history of God’s grace, pumping life into the soul of the world. Periods of expansion are followed by periods of contraction, on a scale that far exceeds our own individual lives, which often blurs the meaning of events for us, especially if our perspective is too narrow or too low. For example, the call of Abraham actually took place in a time of great prosperity. And Abraham himself was a rich trader; and God promised Abraham that he would, because of his faith, become a blessing to all the nations. But a couple generations later his own prodigy were enveloped by a famine, and they ended up in Egypt where they remained for 1,500 years in a great period of contraction.

Now these periods of contraction can be periods when people might see nothing of the work of God and know nothing of the presence of God; and yet, God is preparing something. Indeed in the darkest hour of the first millennium before Christ, God did bring the light of his power to bear on the sufferings of the Hebrews, as he lead them forth out of the darkness in Egypt into the light of their own land, to live in peace and freedom with the responsibility of working for justice.
And there was another period from the Exodus onward: expansion and growth to the time of David and Solomon and the building of the Temple. And from that moment onward another long contraction, where the fortunes of the people worsened day by day, where eleven of the twelve tribes were lost, deported or disseminated, where eventually the last tribe Judah was exiled to a foreign country where it was ministered to by the prophet Isaiah or one of the prophets Isaiah. Now in the darkest moment of that period of time, the prophet says, “A time is coming when the Lord will gather all people together and bring them to Zion and he shall defeat them, and all nations will come and grab the cloak of an Israelite and say, ‘Teach us the ways of the Lord.”’ Now that prophecy would have been ridiculous and ludicrous and laughable, if it hadn’t come from the heart of God Himself.

And this is something we have to learn about our own lives as well, and our own society, that at the darkest moment, God begins to work something new. And the fortunes of the Jewish people did turn for the better, and they were restored partly; but the real gift many did not see: the gift of God’s own Son, the Word Incarnate.

But lo and behold, and this is the second point, not only is God’s work a matter of progress and then regress, expansion and then contraction, but the second point is that God’s work is always taking a new turn. In today’s Gospel, it is a Samaritan, a foreigner, who senses, who perceives, the work of God, and who returns to give thanks, who follows his insight, who recognizes the importance of the moment, that something new is now happening and he’s part of it! And Jesus approves of him. And there were others. There was the Centurion, a Roman, who came to Jesus to be part of the kingdom. And there was a Syro-Phoenician woman who came to Jesus, because she wanted also to be part of the kingdom. And within a few short years, there was a whole assembly of Gentiles called “Church,” who had come to realize the great gift God had given the world in Jesus. And as Jesus himself said, “Salvation is from the Jews”; but as we learned, it could not be contained by one nation.

Now this pattern will continue and did continue in the history of the Church, and I believe even into the formation of our own country. Again, the Founding Fathers of our country: James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton; these men were not actually Christian people. And yet they were doing to some degree the work of the kingdom, as unpredictable as it was that a Samaritan would return to give thanks. Thomas Jefferson said, “We hold these truths to be self-evident”--of course, they’re not self-evident. You can ascertain this for yourself if you want to go talk to someone in Malaysia or Singapore or India or any culture that has not been touched by the Western ideas that were planted really by the gospel. The ideas that Thomas Jefferson had in his mind, that he took to be self-evident, were self-evident because the kingdom had been planted in the culture of the West. And even though assailed on all sides, those ideas remained and continue to influence the life of the world. Is this not too also the work of God?
After all, we hear from St. Paul, “In Christ there is no male or female; there is no Jew or Greek; there is no slave or freeman.” Has this not been a burning desire in the hearts of Western civilization to bring freedom, equality and justice to all people? And from where did this come? It came from the gospel, according to Paul. The greatest benefits we have enjoyed as a civilization are actually the result of the spiritual work of the kingdom of God established in Christ! And as we should suspect, that kingdom is always breaking the boundaries that we might expect it to stay within--working in unaccustomed and strange ways in places and people. But what the gospel always said is, “The work comes first.” And people are invited into the work to participate and to enjoy and to benefit from what is really God’s plan.

Now the American Revolution itself is not unique at all; there are lots of them in the history of the world. But what was unique, what was an extraordinary coincidence, are the kinds of people who gathered after the Revolution. In France those who developed the French Revolution had no creative ideas, nor did those of Russia. We see the mess they made of the so-called former Soviet Union. But in this country there were men who were really alive with light. And Pope John Paul has recently reminded us that faith has to go hand-in-hand with reason, if we are ever to build a better world. And as citizens of this country, I think we need to be very deeply grateful for the coincidence that gathered together long ago in the formation of our land, of our country. Of course, they were not perfect, and the system they made was not perfect. And yet it has a power to bring people together, to assemble people from all over the world for the purposes of elevating human life.

And as always, all the gifts we receive, we need to give as gifts. The great bounty we enjoy in this country has become an obligation that we share with all other countries and all other people. And the very spirit of our present pope, John Paul, is a spirit of sharing the work of the kingdom with everyone who will share in it to whatever degree--people not necessarily of our Church, but perhaps who believe in Christ, or people who don’t believe in Christ, but nonetheless, believe in the ideals that Christ preached. Mahatma Gandhi, himself a Hindu, so often quoted Christ that some of his followers said, “Well, if you believe so much in Christ, why don’t you become a Christian?” He said, “Well, I never met one.” The witness of our Church has not always been the best, but it can be; and that’s what we are called to. And it begins with a true sense of gratitude for all that has happened by the work of God: all the blessings that have been made available to us, which we are supposed to enjoy and then also share. As Jesus said, “Whatever you received as a gift, give as a gift.”

Have a happy day!
This morning we’ve heard the reading from the Book of Revelation which, as I mentioned before, is a series of visions similar in nature to dreams--and very different from theology as we experience it in our waking state.

Now in this series of visions the author, St. John, is being given comfort. The whole purpose of the book is to assure believers that regardless of what they suffer, victory shall not be taken from the One who was slain, that through Christ there is complete victory. But it acknowledges that the victory Christ won does not remove us from the suffering in this world. Nonetheless, suffering in this world, its struggle and striving is an essential theological issue that we need to reflect upon. And Christian people have not always done this in a very reasonable way. Again, Pope John Paul is encouraging Christians not only to have faith, but also to be reasonable. And in this sense Catholicism has always tried to put these two elements together: faith and reason.

Now when we think in a reasonable way about life and we recognize that it does contain suffering, then the reasonable thing is to question the meaning of the suffering. And the spiritual authors, theologians and doctors of the Church, over a period of many centuries have done exactly that. And they have come to the idea that suffering is an important component to growth, that in suffering there is something that is actually changed within us, that in some mysterious way, it can’t be exactly be proved or shown, but at least it’s an opportunity for people to grow in compassion, to grow in mercy, in a sense to grow into one another’s lives. Suffering tears down the walls that egoism erects.
and which separates us one from the other. In a sense by suffering we are all made level, and therefore can really feel with one another, thus enter into the mystery of Christ who by suffering formed together all of us into one body--as it says in the Letter to the Ephesians, “Through his blood Jesus has broken down the barriers which have separated us, and reconciled us to himself.”

Now Christians have not always come to this reasonable conclusion. Sometimes suffering is regarded as a terrible imposition and a sign of the power of the devil, which then should create great fear. But this is really not the Catholic way.

The Catholic way is to acknowledge that in Christ we have been redeemed, and yet the redemption is not complete. In facing life as God has created it, with its limitations, with its imperfections and flaws and diseases and other untoward events, we are undergoing something like Christ underwent in his passion. We are being given an opportunity to believe in God without signs. We are being given an opportunity to believe in God in spite of the fact that it doesn’t seem as if God is really helping us. This is purification of faith. This does not take away the fact that we have been redeemed, that grace is available, and that gradually we are moving in the direction of the kingdom and its fulfillment. So as the Church brings the year to a close, it does so with a great spirit of hope, not fearing the future in any way, but looking toward the future as the fulfillment of God’s promises.
“The great day will suddenly close in on you like a trap.”

This gospel today points to what life is really all about. And the point here is that time is very limited. “The great day will suddenly close in on you like a trap.” Time is not infinite; actually I think we live with a sense that time is infinite, and there will always be another day. This is saying, “Well no, there won’t! There won’t always be another day.” The day will come when there will be no more days. And if we are to live wisely, we have to always keep that in mind. The choices we make about everything have to be informed by this awareness that time is fleeting--and it’s a limited thing!

Now people often say something like this, “Well, everybody has to die.” People know this in a certain way, in a certain abstract way. However, here’s the question the gospel asks us: Do we allow that knowledge we all have to actually influence the way we spend the time we have? It says, “Be on guard lest your spirits become bloated.” What does it mean for a spirit to be bloated? “Bloated” is puffed up, filled up, with what? Indulgence and drunkenness and worldly cares. If we live wisely as men and women of faith, we have to be not bloated, just like not full, and cautious about how we are to live, not with a sense of fear--this is not based on fear--it’s based on wisdom. We just have so much time; let us spend it as well as we can.