“Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.”

It is now uncontroversial to propose that the earth will come to an end. In fact the biblical ideas of the birth and death of the universe, shocking to the ancient world, fit in very well with the ideas of modern physics. What physics does not reveal, however, is the conviction that there is a fundamental purpose driving the universe. St. Paul refers to this purpose as “God filling the universe in all its parts” and “God becoming all in all.” One recent philosopher calls this the “omega point.” The New Testament calls this the “return of Christ,” or the parosia, a Greek word meaning “visitation,” or even eschaton, a Greek word meaning “the last thing.” The point is life as God created it is not static. It cannot stand still. It must move forward. And this is true in everyone’s personal life as well as the whole life of creation itself. However, this idea of progress toward God has two rival ideas in our contemporary society, each of them false and dangerous.

The first is the confabulation associated with the so-called “rapture.” This idea, which has zero support in the New Testament, says that until Jesus returns in glory, there is nothing we can do to improve life on earth and so we really shouldn’t even try. Originally this kind of thinking existed only in antisocial cults like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but now has come home to roost in many Christian churches, especially among so-called “born-again” evangelicals and fundamentalists. Whole series of books attest to its popularity. The Late Great Planet Earth, in several volumes, is one. The Left Behind series is another.
A second equally pernicious idea is the belief in **endless material progress created and sustained by turning raw material into consumer goods.** This is the philosophy of consumerism, very prevalent in our society, driven by a vapid materialism.

Now although one of these doctrines claims to be religious and the other is clearly secular and materialistic, they are both actually the same. **Both ignore the proper human vocation of service.** We are created to be of use to God, not to sit around and wait for the end, nor simply to consume more and more. Both these ideas **promote disrespect and disregard for the creation and the created order and, therefore, of justice** because, in the Bible, justice means the order created and willed by God. Both are **radically self-centered, arrogant, and individualistic.** They throw the world and most of humanity to the dogs. These are not attitudes rooted in Christ.

Of course, it is easy to see why atheists might fall for such ideas, but it is hard to find why Christians do. **If God is the creator of heaven and earth and he desires to fill all parts of the universe with himself,** the entire creation becomes his domain, his dwelling. If we call where God dwells “heaven,” then **the whole universe is destined to become heaven.**

- What practical role each of us has in this is a good question.
- Can we make our hearts and our homes dwelling places of God and through them expand his presence in the world?
- What power do we really have to do good?

These are some questions we can keep with us through the Advent season.
Wondering and Questioning  First Week of Advent  Monday, November 29, 2004
7:00 a.m.  Is 4:2-6;  Mt 8:5-11  (Advent—time of renewal)

“The centurion said in reply, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed.’”

We say that every Mass before communion. And there is a little girl about six years old, first grade in our school. She comes to Mass every Sunday with her parents; sits up front over here. She heard that every Sunday, and one day she turned to her mother and said, “Mom, what is that word?” Say but the word—what is that word? That’s a question we don’t ask enough. Perhaps we don’t ask questions enough because we don’t listen. This little girl, although she is very young, is very bright and she listens. If she doesn’t understand something, she wonders.

Advent is about a time for wondering and questioning. The Scriptures tell us that God’s desire for us is utterly positive, and yet at the same time there is a lot of negativity in the world. The Scriptures are not naïve to that either. And the evil has to be somehow uprooted. This is part of God’s work. The prophets were very clear about God uprooting evil in the world. But that’s not the whole story.

The whole idea of the gospel is we have the power to change our lives through the grace of Christ and thereby avert from ourselves the consequences of the sin of the world. We can live free from fear. We have a right to, you might say, because Jesus has died for us and, therefore, we have a right to look forward to the future with utter hope and total optimism. If we don’t look forward to the future with utter hope and optimism, one must wonder about our faith or one must wonder about our willingness to live our faith, to cover ourselves with the blood that Jesus shed on the cross.

So this time of Advent is a time of renewal. It’s really a time of joy. It’s a time of preparation, not really for the feast of Christmas but, rather, for God’s coming into our world, which is an everyday experience. God is always coming into our world—and to find how we can make a place for God should be a joyful task, and it’s a possible one that we can accomplish. We are not worthy for God to come under our roof, but he wants to come anyway. At his word we can be healed. At his word we can be forgiven. At his word we can be established in holiness.
Evangelization and Sanctification     Feast of St. Andrew     November 30, 2004
7:00 a.m.    Rom 10:9-18;    Mt 4:18-22    (Invitation and Sacraments)

“He called them, and immediately they left their boat and their father and
followed him.”

Today’s gospel focuses on the initial response of these apostles to the call of Christ.
And St. Paul is reflecting on the need that everybody in the whole world has to do the
very same thing: to respond to the call of Christ. And Paul raises the question: Well,
how can anyone respond to the call of Christ if they haven’t heard the call, if they haven’t
heard the invitation? The conviction is the invitation has already been given, but it hasn’t
been received. And that’s the role of the apostle; that’s the role of the evangelist; that’s
the role of the missionary: to carry the invitation to all people. That’s the idea.

Now we can see in the history of our Church, and not only our Church but Christianity
as a whole, that some groups are better than others at getting this invitation out. On the
other hand, we can also see that as the Church reflected on the will of God and the life of
God in the life of the community, it became very evident that getting the message out was
not the only problem.

The second great problem emerged: what do we do once we have the message? What
do we do once people accept the invitation? Now what? Probably the very first answer
to that question was, well, let’s just wait and God will come in the second coming, the
parosia. That’s what we are talking about; that is more or less what we are talking about
in Advent, especially the beginning of Advent—the return of Christ, the consummation
of all things. But the Church learned through its own experience that that consummation
isn’t coming too quickly, and therefore the saints and scholars of the Church focused on
the presence of God in our daily lives and how the believing community needs to
grow in the Spirit of Christ in regard to every phase of life. And this has become
called the “process of sanctification.”

Already even St. Paul was thinking about this. So it wasn’t exactly a long time; it
didn’t take a long time for the Church to start to realize that it’s not just receive the
message and wait for the end. So here it comes down to the process of sanctification. Just
as there are some churches and some groups that are better at evangelizing than others, there are also some groups that are more focused on this process of sanctification.

And that has become the **Roman Catholic focus**. And that is why we emphasize so much the **sacraments** of the Church, because the sacraments are processes through which we can become sanctified: we bring our lives to become interfaced with the word of God and the presence of God in a palpable way, a visible way, a signified way, a symbolic way. And this **brings about what it signifies, the sanctification of the believer**. So we have to keep in mind these two things. We continue to be an apostolic Church; we have to find new ways of being exactly that: extending the invitation. But while we extend the invitation it won’t do much good if we don’t also focus on our own need for sanctification.

There are ironies in the history of the Church. John Wesley really believed in holiness. He believed people should be holy. He believed in sanctification, in other words. Some reformers didn’t. Some reformers said, “No, human beings are just too corrupt. They will never be sanctified. You can just forget about it.” Not Wesley. Wesley said, “No, I believe in that and I believe in good works.” But on the other hand, he never saw the value, apparently, of the sacraments. As Catholics we really have a special vocation to nurture devotion to Christ in the sacraments of the Church and to make sure that the sacramental life of the church is really nourished and really is effective, because if we do not, then our witness will fall inward.

So on this feast of St. Andrew I think the Lord wants to encourage us to continue taking very seriously our walk with Christ and bringing that into interface with the challenges that we find in the gospel and bringing the light of the sacraments, the light of God’s grace, into every facet of our lives, realizing that **God really wants to sanctify every part of us**. There are no dark corners where God does not want his light to shine. And that should give us great confidence and great hope that we are really making progress, although we might not always believe it, toward what God intends for us: a life of wholeness, a life of holiness, a life in the Spirit of Christ.
“The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined.”

It isn’t pleasant to always look at this text and to realize that it’s saying that we surely can completely ruin our lives, because that’s what “house” refers to. It refers to our lives, and the first point is that we build our lives.

Now sometimes people have an idea of a soul that, well, the soul is there before we are and that’s really who we are. Well, not quite! If you want to think about the soul as being God’s idea of who we are and God’s power to become it, yes. But we have to build that. That’s our task on earth, to build a house. And either we build a house on rock or we build a house on sand!

And Jesus’ point here is very explicit. It isn’t enough to be religious. “Those who say, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall not enter the kingdom.” And there are ideas around that take St. Paul out of context, that take teachings on faith out of context, which claim that it is really enough to say, “Lord, Lord,” to accept Jesus as your Lord and savior—once and for all! Well, that is not enough, because that’s not building a house.

Building a house is something that takes some time. If you have ever done it, you know this, that is, if you have done it in the physical sense. Well, building the house of life is also very time consuming, and it’s a long task. I won’t say necessarily it takes one’s entire life. It might; it might not. That depends on us. But it’s a long task. And as we work on this building the house, we have to be doing the will of the Father; that’s...
how we build the house on rock. We do the will of the Father, and this itself is building the house on rock. Saying, “Lord, Lord” is not!

We can have a faith that is purely imaginary. The God we imagine isn’t really real anyway; it’s just a product of our imagination. What do you think idolatry is? **Idolatry is worshipping the product of your own imagination.** Whether or not we put it into a graven image is not important. What’s important is where is it coming from? Is it really God, the only God, who is revealing himself to us that we are really responding to in faith, or is it simply the product of our imagination that we have created that we worship, that we give ourselves to? That’s the point.

And Jesus is saying, “When the real God has come to us, in many ways—through the prophets, through the word, in various and sundry ways—but he is **inviting us always to build our house by doing the will of God.** And this is a very practical thing. And there are no options. It is not up to our consciences. This is not up to our consciences! This is the way we have to work if we want to build our house on rock. And if we do, then our lives will withstand the buffeting that is necessary living on this earth. The trials, the suffering, that go on—that’s necessary, but we will withstand it if we build our house on rock. But if not, our house will be blown away; we will be completely ruined. And, sadly to say, the real problem will be, the real fault will lie, with us because of our failure to build on rock. So following God is not just a matter of keeping some commandments. It’s a much bigger project. That’s why Jesus spoke this way.
This morning’s first lesson is from the prophet Isaiah, and what is very noteworthy is how Isaiah is concerned about this world. When we think of religion we often think of what happens after death, for example, or those mysteries of our origin. And all this is, of course, true; that is what religion deals with: the ultimate issues of life.

But Isaiah’s point is you don’t have to worry about any of that unless you take care of the more proximate issues of life because it’s all connected. There is no point in worrying about what happens after death if you don’t worry about what you are doing today. There is no point in worrying about where you come from if you don’t see what you are doing now. And so Isaiah is calling attention to the very proximate issues that are really ultimate issues, ultimately, because they are all connected. How do we treat other people? What kind of society are we forming? How are we living as a people? Are we reflecting the justice of God? What good does it do to claim that God is just if we are not.

If you think of it, Isaiah was really aware of the fact that Israel’s primary vocation was to be a witness. This word “witness” is found throughout both testaments. Israel as a whole was called to be a witness, if you want, a missionary of God. But Isaiah’s question is: What kind of God are you showing other people? The way you act, people are going to get the wrong idea about God. When you are unjust they are going to think God is unjust. When you are petty they are going to think God is petty—which, of course, people can easily believe anyway.

So Isaiah is trying to proclaim that if we want to be of any service to God, we have to rise above the mediocre. We have to rise above the petty. We have to rise above the normal. We have to be super normal people. We have to develop the best part of our potential, not only as individuals but as communities, and eventually influence the whole society. And if we don’t, what use is all this?

Prophets were not known for the comfort they gave. They were thorns in the flesh of every society. Perhaps we also need to be pricked!
“He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The themes of Advent are themes of endings and beginnings. The world as we know it is passing away and we as we know ourselves are passing away. But something more substantial is in the offing. God is beginning something new.

Today’s readings make it clear that the coming good, however, will apply only to those who await it. Waiting is part of the process. Waiting is part of the plan. But as we wait, we wait, not passively, but with hope, because everything depends upon the promises of God. Since God has worked his salvific will in Christ raising him from death, we can be confident that he will fulfill the promises he has made to us. So our hope rests on our faith in the resurrection of Christ. So as we await God to fulfill his promises we have work to do, especially the work of reconciliation.

Reconciliation means mending relationships, especially between family members. And if we have any sense at all of what St. Paul is teaching about the body of Christ, we realize that we are supposed to be members of each other. Indeed, all humankind is called into relationship. Family—this is what the Church is supposed to be a sign of, the family that God intends all people to be. In St. Paul’s day, the principal bone of contention was the relationship between the Jew and the Gentile. Well, that is not healed, and there are more problems besides! We have enemies within our own families; we have enemies in our places of work, and we have enemies among nations and peoples and groups. Indeed, the need for reconciliation has never been greater!

The point of today’s gospel is this: Don’t worry about your enemies or those who have hurt you, because God will not tolerate unrepented wrong. And since God will not tolerate unrepented wrong, because the chaff will be thrown into the fire, you can
forget about all your injuries and the people who cause them. This requires seeing the big picture, and the big picture is on a timescale very different from our short lives. And the big picture is very different from the little picture with you in the middle.

Moreover, while we needn’t worry about our enemies, we may be the cause ourselves of disharmony. And this should concern us, and it is not too late to seek forgiveness. Although we may not have consciously or deliberately offended anyone, we may be oblivious to others. And this may be causing harm. We may ignore other people; or even without noticing it, we may despise other people. And don’t imagine that you can keep that as a secret. People can feel it!

Now these kinds of conscious and unconscious behaviors hinder our ability to receive Christ. Our opening prayer today was that we will be unhindered in receiving Christ. Well, this requires our work at reconciliation.

Advent preparations therefore include:

- Acknowledging our sins of omission and commission against others.
- Producing good works as evidence of our change of heart. Words are cheap. Actions speak loudly.
- Letting God take care of our injuries—“Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.” Let God avenge the wrongs against us. Leave that in the hands of God’s justice.
- Looking at life and other people through a positive, hopeful, Christlike perspective.

That would be a real preparation for Christmas and for Christ.
I don’t know how much we actually sense the logic of today’s gospel reading. The setting is this: **Jesus finds himself, according to Scripture, he finds himself with power to heal.** This is exactly how it is written. And this may have been a surprise because we cannot understand the human mind of Jesus. People assume that he knew all kinds of things because he was divine. That’s not necessarily true because divine knowledge and human knowledge are two totally different things, and he was human; he had a complete human nature. So he shared in our kind of mind. In that mind **he may have just discovered step-by-step his relationship with the Father** and his power to heal, for example. Anyway, that’s how the evangelist presents this story today, that he found himself with the power to heal.

Now he was convinced—because Jesus always had a deep sense of God, he always had a very unique relationship with God—**he always believed God wanted to forgive.** And I stress the word “wanted.” **The Jewish people,** the authorities and the teachers, **never doubted the power of God to forgive; but they didn’t believe he wanted to forgive.** There is a difference. It’s not a matter of **can** God do this; it’s does God **want** to? And their answer usually was no. That’s not how they saw things. In fact, they saw the relationship with God very much detailed, prescribed in the Law, and the way in which forgiveness was attained was through the offering of their proper sacrifice. So, therefore, the **Temple was very essential to this way of relating to God.**

But Jesus bypassed all that. He said, “No, God just wants to forgive. He wants to forgive everybody. **And the way you receive that forgiveness is to be open to it,** to be repentant, to be acknowledging. So Jesus was, therefore, an ally and cousin to John the Baptizer. But John the Baptizer himself was really a threat, if you want to put it that way; he was a challenge to the whole idea of the Temple because if what John the Baptizer and Jesus said was true, **what was the Temple for?** Now that’s a hard question to answer. So when you have all these disputes, you have to understand the background.

So Jesus believed in the desire of God to forgive, and then he found himself healing. So when this man is brought in, he says, “Your sins are forgiven.” And that may have
been actually what he was teaching at that time: the love of God and the desire to forgive. We don’t know because the evangelist doesn’t tell us what he was actually teaching at that time, but it would be very logical that was the theme. Well, now these Pharisees and teachers of the Law, who are different from the priests, said to themselves, “This is blasphemy. He has no business saying this.” Well, **Jesus did things he had no business doing according to the Law**; he was beyond that. **He had a personal relationship with the Father that was unlike anyone else’s**, so they questioned, “How could he do this?” How could Jesus have the nerve to declare sins forgiven?

Now he took the opportunity, since he realized the Spirit was upon him and he was healing people, so he said, “Well, I ask you this: which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven or get up and walk?’” What’s the answer? Regina, which is easier to say? Right. That’s easier to say than get up and walk. So they were questioning his right to do this. He says, “Well, wait a minute. I’ll show you something even better.” So he says, “Now get up and walk.” So the guy got up and walked. So he said, “Now you see if I can do that, then God forgives even more easily than that. It’s easier.” So that’s basically the logic of this teaching: showing that **because he has the power to heal, all the more so is God a forgiving God.**

And don’t forget that in the mind of many of the people, in the theology of that particular religion, there is often a connection between guilt and sickness, as well. That’s kind of underlying this whole discussion. So Jesus is here to say, **“Time is over for guilt and living with this burden.”** It’s time to let go, open your hearts to God’s grace, and realize **not only is God reconciling you to himself**, but he is even bringing freedom from illnesses: healing in body, mind, and soul—all healing, every division. And that’s what the good news of Jesus Christ is about.
Today we are talking about sheep, and Isaiah’s beautiful poem is about sheep and shepherds. This is not new even in the time of Isaiah. The image of sheep belongs to the earliest traditions of Israel. It goes back in the Book of Genesis; you remember Able. Able was in conflict with his brother, Cain. Well, Able represents the early Israelites, who were shepherds; and Cain represents the early farmers, who build walls to keep the shepherds off the grass, out of their crops. And this represents an actual conflict that existed in the ancient world between shepherds and farmers. And the point is that the poor are the shepherds, and God has a special place in his heart for the poor, and therefore he refers to his people as sheep.

Now sheep were the best friends the poor ever had because if you start with two sheep, well, the flock would grow and they require very little maintenance, especially in the ancient world where you had a lot of open grass. You just had to lead them. Sometimes it took you far afield, but you had free food. And they would give you wool and food and capital because you could sell them. So the best thing that ever happened to the poor was to have sheep.

Now the fact is, however, that everyone who kept the sheep, kept the sheep for what value they had for the shepherd. This is where Isaiah comes in. He says, no, using this very traditional idea of shepherd and sheep, where the shepherd is God because God spoke to the prophets and said, “I will shepherd my own sheep.” Now Isaiah says, “You know, God loves the sheep for their own good.”
Now you have to understand this is absurd! This defies logic. That is what the prophet is doing. He is using something that is absurd and logic defying and saying, “Look, you think in logical terms, and that’s why you don’t know God at all. You are always reducing God. God is something the likes of which you can’t imagine! Just as you can’t imagine a shepherd who loves the sheep for the sheep’s sake, well, that is the way God is.” And Jesus takes that theme and develops it here, and in other texts as well, how the shepherd who loses one sheep would actually leave the ninety-nine unattended and run after the one lost sheep. Of course, no shepherd would do that. That’s the point: God isn’t like human beings, and God doesn’t deal with us in a human way. His love and his concern is totally unexplainable and beyond all bounds: bounds of reason, bounds of logic—forget it! And just as no one would really come back and rejoice at having found one little sheep, especially after having left ninety-nine to wander off, but God is, again, unreasonable; and his love is so great that the one returning sheep is cause for rejoicing.

In these ways both Isaiah and Jesus are trying to break down the ways in which we normally think, and show us that our normal ways of imagining God and thinking about God, and for that matter about life, are really not valid. They are too prosaic. They are too banal. They are too pedestrian. We have to realize that God is unimaginably wonderful, loving, and caring; and his care knows no bounds, and it extends to the smallest and, to our mind, the least significant.
I am very happy to see all of you here this evening. Very often we give short shrift to our holy days, sometimes out of necessity. But it is wonderful to see all of you who have been able to get here tonight, especially I want to welcome our young people.

Today we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Mother, a unique teaching in the Roman Catholic Church, a teaching that most of us don’t think too much about, but which is really meant to enlighten us in regard to Mary’s role in salvation and, by extension, our role in salvation, because Mary reflects the nature of the Church, not necessarily what we have been, but what we shall be. The evangelist tonight, Luke, presents Mary as God’s ideal daughter who totally trusts in his word—and how unusual is that? Perhaps I should say how unique is that because she is the only one who totally trusts in the word of God, up until the birth of her Son.

In this she is the exact opposite of Eve, who is presented in the first reading from the Book of Genesis. She is called, “mother of all the living.” You will recall that she was tempted by the serpent to doubt and distrust in God’s love and concern for her. This is the nature of the temptation: don’t believe God really wants the best for you; in fact, if you disregard God’s commandments, you will be equal to God. And God doesn’t want you to be equal to God. He doesn’t want the best for you. He said you will die if you do this, but you won’t. You will become immortal like God. That was the gist of the temptation. The fruit that she ate, of course, was not from a tree of wood. It was from a tree of knowledge, and this is something we need to ponder: how human beings misuse knowledge for their own purposes and not for our vocation, our role of service to God.

This is what we call in our theology “original sin,” the original sin. And it has two parts. It’s distrusting God, and desiring to be what we are not, namely, God! That’s the original sin. Every other sin is just a ramification, a flowering, of that one: wanting to be God and distrusting, of course, in God’s goodness. And this is the way Eve becomes
mother of all the living, and you can see this yourself if you just look around. Look into yourself. You will see a remarkable consistency in human life, a constant striving for self: self-aggrandizement, self-seeking, self-fulfillment. And this turns the logic of the creation on its head. It makes oneself the object of one’s desire instead of God. It puts oneself at the center of one’s life instead of God. It is utterly perverse and yet so common we take it as natural. One of the saddest delusions we have created in our world—that what is perverse is natural!

God’s plan is for our happiness and our eternal living with God and with the universal fellowship of all human beings created in God’s image and likeness. This is really beyond words! No one can tell us what it means. Jesus only hints at it. But we know what it requires. It requires that we trust in, learn from, and surrender to that love that showed itself on the cross, that love that pours itself out in surrender and self-sacrifice and self-donation, which is the opposite of sin.

Mary was conceived without original sin, and that refers as much to the condition of human nature as the cause of our separation. Original sin refers to the absence of a God who does not come where he is not invited. Suspicions, mistrusts, doubts, emptiness, alienation, loneliness, resentments, anxieties, and fears are all part and parcel of our experience because we have cut God right out of our hearts. This is the human experience. This is human history. And we are part of it as much as we might rue the fact.

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin means that from the very first moment of her conception in the womb of her mother she has always wanted God to be with her. And this itself is miraculous. It’s not by her own power or ability that she did this; it’s through the power and grace, ironically and paradoxically, of her Son. Mary, indeed, made a way for God in her heart. She prepared herself for a life of giving and suffering and gratitude. And her “yes” to God made God’s gift available to everyone.
“To what shall I compare this generation?”

Well, the comparison turns out to be very unflattering, and would ours be any more flattering? Of course not. Things haven’t changed one bit since Christ walked the earth. And what he is referring to is the unwillingness of people to respond to God. “We played the flute for you but you did not dance.” God plays the flute, but we are not in the mood for dancing. We have our own agenda. We believe we have the right to criticize other people, our leaders, our fellows, our children. Well, of course, there is a time for valid criticism. But the point here is, are we really hearing the flute? “We sang a dirge you did not mourn.” Some people are just contrary. We are contrary. It is, we would have to say, our human nature to be contrary.

Now what does conversion mean. Too often we think of conversion only in dramatic ways. St. Paul on the road to Damascus struck down to the ground and blinded, and later in a miraculous healing is lifted up and sees again. And then we imagine the rest of his life is just carrying on from that wonderful experience. That’s very childish. St. Paul’s life was very difficult because God was constantly calling on him to become different from what he had been. He had to relearn everything in his life. His letters give witness to the great difficulties that he faced. That’s conversion.

Conversion doesn’t simply apply to a moment in one’s life, as some of the Evangelicals say. They come to an altar call. They turn their lives over to Christ, as if that’s it. That isn’t it! That is just the beginning, maybe. The proof of the pudding is in the tasting. Does your life really change? That’s what conversion is about. Or do you
simply go along with the way you are? The way we are is the result of all kinds of factors.

But God has a plan for each of us. Following that plan means we listen for the flute and we listen for the dirge. **We learn how to respond to something other than our own likes, our own will, our own proclivities, our own nature.** We just don’t go with that. Being a follower of Christ is not simply being a virtuous person where we get to pick what virtue. It’s a relationship in which we are transformed by a power greater than ourselves, where we become responsive—become responsive—not imaging we already are. That’s what this is about. Advent is a good time to reflect on our responsiveness to the Lord.
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Mary Bringing Jesus to the World  Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe  (observed)
Saturday, December 11, 2004  8:00 a.m.  Zach 2:14-17;  Lk 1:26-38  (Continuing role and ministry)

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior.

As we recall the stories of the apparition of Our Lady at Guadalupe, we may remind ourselves of Mary’s role. Her role is to bring Christ to the world. And with all the saints, Mary included, with all the saints, the apostles, the martyrs, all saints, their roles, their ministry, their mission, does not cease when they go on from the earth. It continues. They continue to serve God in many different ways. Mary continues to bring her Son to the world.

She does so precisely because her soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. We just celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception, which means that from the very moment of her conception Mary was not burdened with, dragged down by, what we call “original sin.” How do we understand original sin? There are many different ways: theological ways, psychological ways, many ways of understanding it. But one very easy way is that we naturally tend to proclaim the greatness of ourselves. We tend to be self-centered. We tend to be primarily concerned about ourselves, our survival, our achievements, our doings, our plans. Mary wasn’t. Mary’s soul proclaimed the greatness of the Lord from the moment of her conception. That’s what she reflected in her whole life. Her spirit always rejoiced in God.

This is why she was able to be the mother of God, because she was always willing to do whatever God asked of her, even though in her own reason she couldn’t understand it, and she said so: “How can this be?” She had no blueprint. No one has a blueprint.
Jesus didn’t have a blueprint about what God would ask of him. But he lived a life of obedience. Obedience is not about foreknowledge. **Obedience is about being able to respond moment by moment to what God asks of us.** Mary did this. Jesus did this. The saints learned how to do this. We need to learn how to do this. It is very possible. With God are all possibilities.

Mary speaks to us of all these possibilities. **At Tepeyac she appeared** not only to one Indian, but to all of the Native Americans of this continent. And why did she go to this extreme? You might say, why did she take this extreme means? Well, perhaps because the gospel of Jesus Christ was being carried by people who were of themselves violent and unloving. It’s a total contradiction, but it’s what happened. She appeared—and in the very clothes and visage of an Indian woman herself—to let the people know that God was for them, that the gospel was for them. It was not a foreign gospel. It was not an alien doctrine. It was not part of some other culture. It was for them. God was coming to them. So in this very extraordinary way Mary brought Jesus to the people of the Americas, the native people, at least they were native in relationship to the latecomers, the Europeans. So that’s what we celebrate today, God’s ever faithfulness to his promises, the universality of his compassion and love, and the enduring and undying faithfulness of Mary bringing Jesus to the world.
“When John the Baptist heard in prison of the works of the Christ, he sent his disciples to Jesus with this question, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?’”

This question from John the Baptist has resounded through the ages. It presupposes something we may take for granted, that our human race is sorely in need of help. This is already the result of prophecy or revelation. It is not obvious to human reason. It is one thing to realize that the world is corrupt or polluted or immoral; it’s quite another to see that the problems of humanity far outdistance its own ability to heal itself.

Thus the hope born of faith in God is very different from the optimism that believes that somehow the human race will evolve into some better, nobler, or more virtuous species. And there are many optimists today who believe just that. They want to change the world, but they don’t realize that they need help from above. They desire to change, and they even desire perfection, but within the framework of nature and within the framework of their own character as they know and accept themselves. This is not God’s plan as revealed in the Scriptures in the lives of John the Baptist or Jesus. God’s plans are far more radical, namely, a transformation of all existence, indeed, human beings sharing in divine life.

Advent is a time for a renewal of our perceptions and perspectives and expectations. The changes that are needed go beyond life as we know it or can imagine it. Jesus does not teach us to sew a new patch on an old garment. His teachings show us the way to a new garment, a new character, indeed, “a new heaven and a new earth.” Even the
greatest natural optimist cannot imagine, much less desire, a change that would affect his character as a whole. And if we are honest, we recognize that even all Christians are not really ready for any radical changes, the kind of transformation made possible in Christ and implied in the question, “Are you he who is to come?”

Many of us, in honesty, lack the willingness or we do not see the necessity of breaking with human standards of goodness and plunging into the fire of God. For example, many are unwilling or believe it unnecessary or even unreasonable to love their enemies. But wherever we are, God meets us at that point. That is the great message of hope and grace. We don’t have to get to a point where God can touch us. God comes to us wherever we are. Indeed, in every sacramental touch, God brings more power and grace to bear than we are ready or able to use just because his heart is abundant love.
We see in this morning’s reading that Jesus does credit people for having a mind and an ability to reason. And very often Jesus appeals to reason if you notice, not to his authority, although he does that as well, more to the authority of God witnessing in him. But he also appeals to reason because we have to connect the revelation of God with our own natural reason. We have to see how reasonable it is and how it really does connect and how it does really fit into life as we can know it.

Now the people who came to him today wanted to know by what authority he was doing what he was doing. Why they asked the question was very simple. He was contradicting a lot of what they believed. He was contradicting the way the Law had been interpreted up to that point. So this is a very valid question.

And when we hear anything about God and what someone says, we should say, “Well, by what authority does that person say that?” There are a lot of people in the world who decide to speak for God. That’s a fact. And each of us has to ask that question: “Well, by what authority does this person or that person or this group or that group speak?”

That is a very valid question. Now how are we going to answer the question? Jesus boxed these opponents into the corner because he knew, or perhaps suspected, that they were not exactly willing to be forthright. If they really did believe that John the Baptist was of human origin, then they should have said so. But they were afraid of the people.

Can we resonate with that? Are there times when we really believe something, but we don’t say so because we are afraid of public opinion; we are afraid of our friends; we are afraid of our associates; we are afraid of being not respected or ridiculed. Well, how
honorable is that—to be quiet because we are afraid of the reception we get? That’s the case here.

We have to realize that there are people in the world who really do not see the Spirit of God at work in the life of Jesus—they really don’t. A way of putting this is they don’t have the gift of faith. This is not to their discredit, necessarily. We don’t understand the mystery of faith, but we know it’s a gift. It has not at this point been given to everybody. I have known people who wish they had the gift of faith, but don’t have it. But we can give credit to people who at least admit that they don’t believe. And we should never in any way disrespect or denigrate people who speak what they really believe. And we should never in any way disrespect or denigrate people who speak what they really believe.

In the history of the Church, the Jews as a whole have been more or less persecuted because they don’t believe in Christ. That isn’t the problem here in this particular text. It’s not that they don’t believe in Christ. It’s not that they don’t believe in John the Baptist. It’s that they don’t speak the truth.

And sometimes we are just like them. We don’t speak the truth because we are afraid of the crowds. We have to have the courage of our convictions, recognizing they could be wrong and recognizing that the great faith in Christ is a gift. And perhaps all great insights are really gifts. So we shouldn’t look down on other people because they don’t have them. But we should be able to speak honestly what we do believe. And when we stop doing that, then the dialogue ends. That’s what this story is about.
Today Jesus contrasts formal religious observance with actual obedience to God. The point is the two are not the same. And not only are they not the same, but they are often almost in opposition to each other. His point is that very often those who are most formal and observant in terms of some organized religious approach are really far from God. They are not really obedient to God. They are saying “yes”, but they are not really doing the “yes.” On the other hand, the opposite is also true or possibly true, that some people who are outwardly nonobservant are nonetheless inwardly, at least eventually, obedient to God.

This applies directly to the life of St. John of the Cross, whose memorial we celebrate today. John of the Cross was a man who wanted to follow Christ in total obedience. In lived in a time during the Reformation. And like the reformers, he knew very well the need for grace that human beings have. However, he was not willing to join the reformers in their denial of the need for good works or suffering in life. He affirmed grace, but also he affirmed the need for work and for suffering, and especially suffering. And that’s what he is known for because he said that the way to God is through the cross of Jesus Christ, and the cross of Jesus Christ is a cross of suffering. Those who do not want to suffer cannot gain the riches that Christ is willing to offer. That’s why he is called “John of the Cross.”

Now he experienced this in his own life because as a reformer of the Carmelite Order he became victimized by his fellow priests and brothers, as Teresa of Avila was victimized by her fellow sisters, because they wanted to reform their communities.
is really more or less a pattern. **Anybody who really wants to speak the truth in the name of God suffers.** We should not imagine that the ways of God are popular. They are not! The ways of God go **against the grain of human egoism.** And that’s where the suffering comes from. We suffer in our own lives when we turn ourselves over to God because we are driven by all kinds of natural but disordered drives and desires and appetites and instincts. So God is trying to change us, and that change is painful—at times.

Furthermore, **once we speak for the Lord, other people are going to oppose us.** So we are going to create enemies. John of the Cross surely created enemies. Jesus created enemies because he spoke the truth. So the truth may make us free, but it will also create enemies for us. The point is, if we really want to be loyal children of God and do his will, we cannot expect that we are going to be repaid in this life with comfort, pleasure, and popularity. And if for no other reason, that is why Christ has so few friends. But John of the Cross and the gospel itself **calls us into this friendship and also awareness of the cost.**
The beloved of God
Advent Reconciliation Service  Wednesday, December 15, 2004
7:30 p.m.  Mt 3:1-17  (Damaged people in need of salvation—love)

“This is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”

I believe that is a message that God wants each of you to hear said to yourself because our faith is that we are beloved of God. We are born into God’s family in the waters of Baptism. And to live by faith means to live with this conviction, that we are God’s, that we belong to God, and that he is well pleased with his creation.

Now God may not be pleased with every little thing. That’s not the important thing. The overriding issue is you are God’s beloved. The message of Advent is that God comes to us just as we are, with all of our wrinkles and problems and hesitations and imperfections and troubles. We do not have to work our way up to some level where suddenly we are available to God. That is—I hate to use the word—“heresy.” That is untruth. The truth is God had descended to us to our level, and in his Baptism Jesus took up solidarity with sinners, with failures, with criminals, with outcasts, with people who were really, in many ways, bad. He took up solidarity because he did not believe that their condition, that the way they were, was permanent or the last word. In fact, God came to earth because he does not want the devil to have the last word about who we are and what kind of people we are. We can follow the lead of darkness; that is possible, but that is not what God wants of us.

It says in the Gospel of John that the Word of God became flesh so that we could have the freedom that belongs to the children of God. Now isn’t that funny that God came to us so that we could be free? You might think that you already are free. Or if you are not free, you are not free because of your parents or because of your boss or because of your spouse or because of your job or because of the police. That’s not it! Freedom is a gift that belongs only to the spiritual. To be free means to be free in spirit. It is a gift from God, and it is a gift given to us in Christ. Without Christ we would not have true freedom. That is our belief. That has been the constant belief of all Christians through all time. Without Christ, without grace, there is no freedom.

Then what are we? What do we call our freedom? It’s really just compulsiveness. We do what we want, but why do we want it? We want it because we are driven. We are driven by our desires. So we are not really free because we don’t choose what the desires are. They choose us. Our wants and our likes and our dislikes lead our life for us. That’s not freedom.

Jesus once said, “From the time of John the Baptist up until now the kingdom of God is taken by force.” Sometimes we have to grab onto something with force. Sometimes we have to grab at a gift when it’s offered. We cannot sit passively around. Even on Christmas you have to open the package. You can’t just leave it there all wrapped up. But sometimes the gift of God’s freedom we leave right there all wrapped up.
So we are full of all kinds of compulsiveness. That’s unfreedom—powers and forces and drives in us telling us what to do. Jesus comes to drive away those forces and give us true freedom. Now we could list a lot of these compulsions or these demons, sometimes they are called—or capital sins. I might just list a few of them. Pride is one. Pride sometimes leads our life for us. Sometimes greed does. Sometimes lust does, or anger or sloth. Sloth is a total indifference to the good. Gluttony. But really the names of these powers and forces and drives are legion; that means you can’t count them.

Christ offers his freedom, freedom to love because love covers a multitude of sins. In fact, it not only covers them, it repairs the damage done by sin. And only love does! That’s why redemption is all about love. Salvation is all about love. It is about Love coming to us and helping us become loving people, even when we aren’t! Love comes to us in our unlovableness and makes us loveable. And this is a miracle. But it’s a miracle we see, and can see if we open our eyes. It’s happening all the time. It happens where people want it to happen, where their hearts are open to God. It doesn’t happen necessarily overnight. It doesn’t happen by snapping one’s fingers. Sometimes it causes a lot of suffering, but it happens.

So who needs salvation? Only those people who need love. If you don’t need love, you don’t need salvation; you don’t need God. But if you need love, you need God. The only people who need salvation are people who have been injured. If no one ever hurts you, you have never been injured, no one has ever done you any wrong, you don’t need salvation. Who needs salvation? People who have been damaged. If you have never been damaged, if nothing in your life has ever been diminished, if you have never been lessened or insulted or excluded or pushed away or bruised in any way, well, then you don’t need salvation. But who could ever say that they have escaped these events? Jesus himself, who is sinless nonetheless, was like that; he was like us in that he was bruised and rejected and excluded and buffeted and insulted and hurt and misunderstood and gossiped about.

We are preparing for the sacrament of Reconciliation. In one way we talk about Advent being a time of waiting. But there is a way in which Advent is about deciding that we have waited long enough! Now it’s time to open our hearts to the grace of Christ.
Today’s gospel reading brings into sharp contrast a motif that is found quite often in the New Testament, often in a rather subtle form. Today it is not very subtle. It’s contrasting those who undergo the baptism of John, which was meant to be a witness to the righteousness of God, and it contrasts them with the Pharisees and scholars of the Law.

Now let me make it very clear the Pharisees and scholars of the Law were very devout and very religious and by all human standards, very moral. But what this gospel is contrasting is our idea of what is religious and what is devout and what is moral with God’s idea. It’s not the same thing. Now there is one thing about human standards: they come from human beings. We set our own standards. We form our own consciences. We decide our own values. This is a fact. The question is this: In the way we decide our values, in the way we form our consciences, are we really following the plan of God or are we following something else, something that may impress ourselves but not be really what God is looking for. This has been the problem since the time of John the Baptist, probably it was a problem before. It is certainly still a problem now. The gospel is calling us to be aware of this difference.

The call of God to righteousness is not the same thing as a call of God to be right. To be right is self-righteousness. When we follow our own standards we are right, but that righteousness is rooted in ourselves because we are ones who invented the standards. God is calling us to a different kind of righteousness, a righteousness rooted in God. We do not think about this. I can assure you the Church doesn’t think about it. The priests don’t think about it. The bishops don’t think about it. We need to think about it.
As we go over the prophecies in the Old Testament predicting God’s salvific will coming about eventually in time, one thing we should notice is that the way God actually fulfills his promises is very, very different from the way in which they were originally understood. And we could take this to be normative: that the way people understand the promises of God has nothing to do with the way God actually intends to fulfill them.

So there are two things now whenever God speaks, what God is saying and how we understand it; and they are not the same. This is true when any conversation ever goes on between two people, between two persons. There is the speaker with the intention and then there is the listener. They are two different things. And what the gospels are saying is that God’s fidelity transcends totally the expectations of people. The fact is if God really explained in detail what he intended to do, it would have been unbelievable in the first place. We come to faith through the backdoor. We experience what God does, and then we come to believe it. But we could never actually believe it if it were described upfront beforehand.

We have to keep in mind that we are constantly searching for the actual meaning of what God is saying. That is a search, and it’s one that we have to be very serious about because we can so easily misunderstand, just as we misunderstand one another. As stories circulate in this parish, they constantly morph. Somebody says something to somebody else, and then somebody else says something to somebody else, and then to somebody else, and pretty soon it’s a totally different story. Were it not for the inspiration
of Holy Scripture we would have no story left! The inspiration of the Holy Spirit keeps us coming back to something fundamental. **That is the work of the Spirit.** But we have to be in line with the Spirit. We can go off on our own, on our own tangent, and then we go farther and farther away.

As we look at the Book of Genesis and the original promises of salvation, the literal meaning does no justice at all to what actually God did in Jesus Christ. Even his genealogy that Matthew provides for us is a genealogy of Jesus’ adoption. He is only the adopted Son of Joseph. This is Joseph’s genealogy. But Jesus really is not the true flesh and blood Son of Joseph, merely the adopted Son of Joseph. He is truly the Son of God. **What God does always exceeds human capacity to comprehend.** So while we have connections with the past, the real future that God has intended far exceeds all the categories of our minds and all the wishes of our hearts. And that is what this particular time of year is about. It’s about trying to recognize, insofar as we can, how God is exceeding our expectations—even now, if only we open our eyes!
“When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.”

Christmas is a time when we think about and are almost obsessed by thoughts of family or home. Well, sometimes this is a very happy thought or happy obsession and sometimes it isn’t. For many this time of year is depressing, for good reasons: they come from depressing homes; they have depressing families.

The gospel addresses itself to our perception of family and home. And it hints that we don’t really know what our true home is; it also speaks of God strangely making his home among people who are alien to his Spirit. If you read the gospels, you will get this very clear feeling—especially Matthew and John. God comes; there is no welcome. God wants to make his home on earth; he isn’t really received.

Furthermore, God decides to be adopted, by Joseph. For what reason? Well, for two reasons. Number one, God has chosen to become Messiah for the people of Israel. Now there is no compelling reason we can make for this. God did not have to. It is simply our faith. Why did God choose this way of entering into humanity? He just did. And he needed a pedigree, a family tradition, a connection to the line of David. As you can see in this gospel presentation, Joseph was not Jesus’ father physically, but he was connected to David. It is Joseph who was a descendent of David. Matthew makes this very clear in the genealogy he offers us. So Jesus becomes Son of Joseph, according to human perception. That’s what St. Paul means “descended of David in the flesh.” It doesn’t mean physically, genetically; it means in human perception and according to human social order and law. Furthermore, for reasons again beyond our ability to think or figure, he has decided to suffer the consequences of just such an adoption. By becoming the adopted Son of Joseph, Jesus gains the right to suffer all the indignities that human beings have invented for each other.

We know that in law legitimate children can be disinherited, and we know that complete strangers can receive an inheritance. This is a fact. It was a fact then. And this is really what the gospel is trying to say, that Jesus, a complete stranger to sin, a
complete stranger to death, a complete stranger to the fallenness of humanity, accepts this as an inheritance freely. He does so in order that you and I can receive his inheritance, which is divine life, eternal life, a life we don’t even comprehend, a life we cannot appreciate. This is the story of the nativity of Christ. It is a story that is told so that we might think in a new way about home and family. God really enters into a broken family, a shattered family, a dysfunctional family, namely the human family. He came into this family to heal and transform it. That is the power of God.

We often say blood is thicker than water, but water is more powerful because it is through the water of Baptism that this transformation begins, that our adoption begins, that we really become brothers and sisters of Jesus, the true Son of God, and gain an actual right to inherit his life, a life I hope we don’t throw away. Christ gives a share in his divine and eternal heritage to all who recognize him as a true brother. And that’s what it means to live in faith, to recognize Jesus as a true brother. And it involves that we recognize a brotherhood and a sisterhood that extends to all similar believers, certainly and, by extension, to all people who are invited into that family. God excludes no one. Any exclusion is our choice.

So Christmas then is a feast and a celebration, not merely a day of fantasy or sentimentality. Nor is it about childhood in the way we normally think of it, but it’s about a different kind of childhood, a childhood in which we are invited to become children of God, not only legally, by adoption, but by the way we think, by the way we feel about other people, the way we deal with all the problems and the pains and the brokenness of our lives and our physical human families. It is good news for the poor and those who find the earth inhospitable because it provides a whole new sense of belonging. It is good news for all who yearn for justice and a life that does not appear on this earth, those whose hearts are still alive with hope and expectation. It is good news for those who recognize that they cannot provide for themselves the happiness they seek. Christmas calls us to that childhood that can continue to hope and wish and expect the greatest things.
When I read the story of the Annunciation I think of Teresa of Avila’s complaint to God. She says, “God, if this is the way you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them.”

And I think of that with Mary because here the angel of the Lord comes to her to announce great news, but it’s really not very great news from a very human point of view. It’s troubling—troubling news. She is being asked to have a child, but she is not really even living with her husband yet. She has been betrothed. Well, betrothal meant—that was a contract between parents. That was the betrothal. But they hadn’t lived together. And so this is really asking for trouble.

And the angel says, “Oh, don’t worry; don’t fear. The Most High will overshadow you.” Well, this is what is called “living in faith.”

I was reflecting on Mary as really the archetype vocation for the Christian. A lot of times people trouble over, well, What does God want me to do? What is God calling me to do? And I really wonder if there are any specific plans as much as just one plan—bring God into the world! Mary brought God into the world in a very unique way, but really all of us have the same vocation—bring God into the world. That’s your vocation. That’s your calling.

Well, how am I going to do that? Don’t worry; the Most High will overshadow you. You are not alone. God will lead you. This is living in faith. It was very scary for her physically in that situation. It may be scary in other ways for us, but this is God’s work. And that’s really what it means to have a vocation. We are called on to do God’s work, whatever that is, wherever we are. And not to have the details! Mary didn’t have the details. She didn’t know how this was going to work out. Don’t worry. This is God’s work.
Today we come to celebrate the liturgy of our Church and to celebrate the mysteries of God and to include in the mysteries of God one of our beloved, who would have been 101 years old this coming January 6. So she lived over one century.

And my point is not to discuss her personal life, but rather to discuss the work of God in the last century and to look forward to this coming century and our possible contribution toward God’s work. Although there are many pundits today who like to take a pessimistic view, it seems to me that life is actually improving when I look back over one full century. Now it is true human beings still fight. There is still war. There is still hunger and injustice.

One hundred years ago the world was preparing for an event of consummate insanity—the First World War. Preparations for the First World War really began in Japan and Eastern Russia in the Russo-Japanese War that finally ended in 1905. That was really a prelude to the First World War, which is a time in which basically prosperous people decided to fight each other, destroying much life and for that matter much wealth. The injustice of the Armistice and the terms of peace of that war led, of course, became a fertile field for the ideas of Nazism. I think, however, the world learned something from that very dark period of the first half of the twentieth century. Again, from 1917 to 1989 the Soviet Union lived in darkness behind an Iron Curtain, much of Eastern Europe incorporated into that also after the second war, but that has also collapsed.

Now it is true things aren’t rosy in that part of the world, but I believe we are learning what we need to learn. And in this process it is God who is our teacher. I believe that everyone here is called on to be a light in this world, and we can be, and we are called to be.

When we brought the body of Rose into this church we placed it right by the Paschal candle. This is the candle we lit on the Easter Vigil proclaiming that Christ is risen from the dead. If we really believe that Christ is risen from the dead, that should change the way we look at life. God is calling for life out of the ashes of our own self-destruction. And with God nothing is impossible. That is the message that the angel Gabriel told Mary.
when he informed her that her cousin was now with child after a life of sterility. “Nothing
is impossible with God.”

That’s what we have to keep our mind on, not only during the Advent season, but
throughout our entire lives, that we are called on to cooperate with God in his work. And
we need to listen to the gospel: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” We allow ourselves
to be deprived of the peace of Christ because we do not look to Christ. We do not see the
big picture. We look only to our small, little lives, our short span of life; and we judge
things wrongly. **Faith should lead us to peace, to allowing God to be God, not
expecting any politician or political system to solve our problems for us, but to look
to the savior who is Jesus Christ.** It is he who has been sent to save us from our sins,
and he will.

And it’s important that we don’t simply have a generic faith in God as in some great
idea or feeling, but in Jesus himself, and to look to Jesus’ life, which is not a life of
success and not a life of luxury and not a life of pleasure. That is not the way to find true
meaning. That is not the way to salvation for ourselves or for the world. The life of
meaning and the way to salvation, the Way and the Truth and the Life, is a life of
dedication and faithfulness to our vocation. And our vocation is really not that different
from Mary’s vocation. She was called on to bring the Word of God into the world, and so
is every single person baptized in the name of her Son. **We are all called on to bring the
Word of God, not in the unique way she did, but in whatever way we can.**

And although I did not know Rose personally, I believe she did that. I believe she
reflected and witnessed to the presence of Christ in her own very personal way. We need
to also and to live in the constant sense of hope and expectation. And it is very similar to
children approaching Christmas—that wonderful things are going to happen, that
wonderful things can happen! “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. We
live on this earth only for a short time to do a job, to witness to the love and the
providence of God, and then to go on to our appointed home. And that is now where
Rose is. She has been called home finally to enjoy the benefits and blessings and glory of
the resurrected Christ. And as we continue to live, we are called on to live in fidelity and
loyalty to that Christ, **witnessing by however we live: by our values, by our choices, by
our words and actions**, to our hope and to our faith in Jesus Christ.
“Mary set out, proceeding in haste into the hill country to a town of Judah, where she entered Zechariah’s house and greeted Elizabeth.”

Our evangelist, Luke, points out the haste in which Mary traveled. And the point that he is trying to make is, first of all, that Mary’s haste is a haste from behind. She isn’t hurrying to Elizabeth because of her need to see Elizabeth as much as she is leaving where she was in haste, because she has just discovered that she is pregnant with the power of the Spirit. And she is probably in all honesty afraid to stay where she was. But she knew that she would find sympathy and compassion in Elizabeth, because Elizabeth was a woman who had lived her entire life under a shadow, because in those days women who were barren were considered somehow guilty. They were barren because somehow God didn’t give them a child. God didn’t give a child because somehow they weren’t worthy of a child. They had no sense of the physical workings of nature. Everything was a miracle. So if God didn’t give a child to a woman, there was something terribly wrong with her. So Elizabeth lived under the shadow, and Mary knew that would be a good place for her to go to find peace and support in her moment of trial. And we have to see this as a moment of trial. People often romanticize it, but it was really a trial.

Now the next section presents two women pregnant through the power of the Lord. For Luke they also represent believers. Believers are pregnant with the mystery of the Lord. We have great possibilities in front of us. And it is really just starting; it’s just growing. And that’s the idea of the Church. It is really just beginning. We now in 2004 look back over two thousand years of history. That really is not that significant. In God’s sight one day is a thousand years, so that’s only two days! When it comes to the point of what God is doing among people, we are just beginning. And that’s what Luke wants to stress too—we are just beginning. We are pregnant with the Word of God, but we haven’t really delivered it yet. And we have to be with these two women of faith, even in their trials, even in their, you might say, rejection by others in order to really be faithful to the call.
“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked upon his lowly servant.”

Tonight in the gospel our Blessed Mother is teaching us how to boast in the Lord. This is also something St. Paul learned. And it is a way to true pride in the holiest sense of that word, to be proud in the Lord, to be full of the highest esteem one can have for oneself because of the Lord. We need to listen to the Blessed Mother as she is full of the Lord. She does not say my soul magnifies myself; she says, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” And this is a way in which every human being can be like her. We all can magnify the Lord. We tend in our sinfulness to magnify ourselves, to be concerned about ourselves, to be worried about ourselves. That is not the way of Mary.

From the moment of her conception she was free from this inordinate self-concern that is really a lack of trust in God. Fear and anxiety is rooted in the lack of trust in God. And Mary was free of that because she trusted. Now this was a gift to her, a gift of grace, but through that grace she was able to echo through the centuries what the Lord has done for her. And she is very humble in saying, “All generations will call me blessed.” She is not claiming that for herself. She is simply proclaiming what is true. All generations will call her blessed because she has given her life to the Lord, because she has trusted what the Lord said to her would be done.

And you can do that too. You can trust in the Lord’s promises. And that’s really what Advent is about. It’s about gathering the Christian community together once again and focusing on what the Lord is trying to do in our midst, not what we are trying to do, not taking care of our agenda, but focusing on what the Lord is trying to do and how the Lord wants to use each of us. We talk about vocations. Hopefully the young people are thinking about the vocation that the Lord has given them. But sometimes we overdo the idea of vocation to the sense we think, well, God has decided that I should be a priest, and someone else to be a doctor, and someone else should be a mother, caretaker, and another person should do something else. I’m not sure that’s true. What I am sure is true is that whatever we do in the world to earn our living or to be of purpose, whatever we
do we are called on to bring the Word of God into the world. That is the vocation
Mary had. That is the Christian vocation: to bring the Word of God into the world,
because the world does not know the Word of God.

Jesus came into his own; “his own received him not.” You can interpret that whatever
way you want: the human race, the Jewish nation, whatever. It’s really true of the world
itself; it does not know God. It has it’s own plans. It believes there is no purpose to the
world. That is one of the fundamental disputes that believers have with many scientists. It
has to do with this idea of purpose. We believe that there is purpose to the world. There is
purpose to your life. There is purpose to my life. And one way of understanding that
purpose is bringing God to earth, which is the vocation of the Blessed Mother. And
Jesus said, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters? Anyone who does the
will of my Father is mother and sister and brother to me.” Do not forget you are called
on, therefore, to be a mother to God, whether you are a man or a woman—not in the
physical sense Mary was, but in this other sense of bringing the Word of God into the
world.

And you cannot bring the Word of God into the world if you haven’t brought the
Word of God into yourself. You have to let the Word of God enter deeply into your
heart. You have to think and feel deeply what that Word is saying and what that Word is
meaning and let it have a home within you. And gradually, if you give the Word of God a
home in yourself, God will bring something out of you. He will germinate something
for his work. Holy is his name.

And if we listen to the rest of the Magnificat, this beautiful prayer, we will see that
God’s ways are not the world’s ways at all. In fact—and this of course was something
that disturbed the people of his day; perhaps we have gotten too used to it—he says, “The
mighty he has put down. The rich are sent empty away.” God doesn’t deal with the
world the way the world wants to be dealt with. God doesn’t kowtow to the power
structures of earthly societies. God lifts up the lowly. His intention is to give his riches to
the poor. It is not his idea to carve up the world into the haves and the have-nots. That is
not God’s plan. That would be incompatible with the beliefs of Mary as she enunciates
the Magnificat, which we know is the inspired word of God.
And that inspired word of God needs to find a home in our hearts. It needs to be there for a long time. It has to germinate so that we can fulfill our vocation in whatever way we can to bring this word of truth and this word of justice into the world. And that means that we will make waves not for ourselves, but to magnify the Lord, not so that people will notice us or heed us or even love us, but so that the people will notice and heed and love the Lord, who reveals himself in his word, not in every pious thought in every pious person, but in the word that he has given to his people, and the Word that took flesh in the womb of the Blessed Mother.

That Word has already baptized and consecrated every one of you, called you forth from darkness into his light, and promised you eternity. But to be worthy of that promise we have to hold on in hope and faith to the mission we have received and not become lazy or forgetful or faithless, despairing because God’s timing doesn’t suit us. God, in fact, does not live in time. “One day is a thousand years.” So we have just begun this great adventure. We’ve just begun this moment that we read about this evening, heard about this evening, about Mary receiving the gift of God into herself, and running to see her friend and cousin, Elizabeth. These two women who lived under a shadow: Elizabeth because she was barren for many years and Mary because now all of a sudden she was pregnant outside of marriage. These two women sought solace in each other, but they also sought guidance and direction from the Spirit, who touched Elizabeth and the child in her womb.

And that same Holy Spirit will touch you if you take the time and if you flee all the influences that pull you away from the Lord, all generations can call you blessed too—insofar as we are all one in Christ and we all do his work, the only true work God has given to mankind. “He has come to the help of his servant Israel”—and we are the new Israel of God as the Church, and we are to be a servant—“for he has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children”—and we are his children in faith—“forever.”
What, then, will this child be? For surely the hand of the Lord was with him?"

Isn’t that something we believe about every child, that the hand of the Lord is with her or with him? It certainly is, if we are believers anyway! One of the things that has marked the belief of the Church is that every human individual is created by God in a very unique way.

Now this uniqueness is conveyed by the naming of the child. In Greece a child is not named for one year. It’s “Baby Smith,” although that’s not a Greek name, but let’s imagine—Kozenpaps—“Baby Kozenpaps”—for one year. And then on the first birthday they have the Baptism, or the Sunday closest to the first birthday. And on that day they name the child and baptize the child. Why? Because they want to emphasize the idea that that name is related to baptism into Christ. And the uniqueness of that child belongs to the unique role that that child has in the body of Christ. So naming is not superfluous.

Now in the history of the world, as you see from today’s reading, families have, up until recently, tended to name children a certain limited number of names. In other words, certain families have Michael and Helen, and so we name the children Michael, Helen or Mary or Joseph or some group of names so everybody is named after someone, or part of the name is after someone. My middle name was my grandfather’s middle name. My brother’s first name was my grandfather’s first name, and so on. This is the way families operated—until recently.

Now recently people started naming their children all kinds of unusual names no one ever heard of before. Now is this good or bad? Well, it could be either. It means one thing: that we are not going to follow tradition. We are not making cookie cutter children. It’s not just “a chip off the old block.” We are recognizing that this child is new and different, not expected to follow in the path of their parents and grandparents. And
economically this has been true for quite a while, and now it’s being true in even deeper ways. However, there is a downside to that. Sometimes the children grow up without any tradition, without any guidance. They are thrown into a sea without any sense of identity.

The Greeks had the right idea. Our sense of identity has to be linked to our Baptism, into our membership into the body of Christ. It’s true our human families are too small and too broken to give us a solid identity. That’s true enough in many cases. And in those cases where they are whole, where they are holy, that’s because they have already been grafted onto the body of Christ. But children do need guidance and direction as well. That’s the point of the question: “Why are you going to name him John? His father is Zechariah.” Well, the reason he was named John was there was no name John in that family, and he was called to a very unique mission.

Unfortunately, today many of our children named bizarre, unusual or unique names have no sense of mission. A sense of mission comes in and through Christ. The singular vocation for all people is to follow the Blessed Mother in magnifying the Lord and bearing him into the world, maybe not physically as she did, but in our hearts, in our minds. And this is where we get purpose and meaning. And a world full of purpose and meaning would be a world at peace with itself, would be a world where justice reigns, a world where people find the love that God intends for them, and where they would have a clear idea of the happiness he intends for them for all eternity. But a world without this is lost at sea. It’s our role to help it find its moorings.
In the first reading we have a very interesting story about David and his plans to build a temple. And what is striking is that Nathan, without consulting God, said, “Go, do what you say; the Lord is with you.” This is presumption. And too often it is the presumption of people. “The Lord is with you. Go ahead; do it.” Don’t pray first! Don’t discern anything! Just take it for granted the Lord is with you! That got David into trouble; that got Nathan into trouble. So in the night when Nathan went to sleep, the Lord came to him in a dream. “You go tell David this: ‘You are going to build me a house? Aren’t you putting the shoe on the wrong foot? Is it not I who have been doing everything for you all along?’”

And that’s the whole point of the covenant with Israel: that God has chosen a people and he is going to fashion them. They are not God’s benefactors. The world is full of religions where people think they are going to do all this for God. They are going to build wonderful temples. They are going to bring wonderful gifts. They are going to make wonderful sacrifices. That’s not what the Bible is about.

The Bible is about what God wants to do for human beings, how he wants to teach them his law of justice, how he wants to teach them his mercy and help them share in it and spread it, how he wants to make a model out of his people to spread his sense of what is right, of what is proper, of what is good, to all the earth. So the mission we have from God is to follow God, not build him a house, but be a house.
The Incredible Christmas Message!  Nativity of the Lord  (Christmas)
December 24, 2004  10:30 a.m.  Is 52:7-10;  Heb 1:1-6;  Jn 1:1-18  (Three versions)

The central message of Christmas is so extreme that many people believe it incredible! Many people simply do not believe it, the message that God is with us! This is simply a matter of fact. It does not impugn their intelligence, since belief is not a matter of intelligence, but a gift from above. But others neither believe nor disbelieve this message of Christmas—maybe some of you here today—because some people never examine the actual meaning of the message, at least on an adult level. And that is what we need to do.

There are three versions of the story of Christ’s birth in the Bible. Mark does not tell us anything. Matthew writes of Jesus’ adopted family, that is, the family of Joseph. It is not Jesus’ birth family in the sense that Joseph is not really his father, and yet when a child is adopted into a family that child receives, is heir to, the whole tradition of that family—for better and for worse, as all adopted children know. Joseph’s family was not a family of noble lineage. It had some decent human beings in it, but contains also many scoundrels, murderers, prostitutes, adulterers, in addition to all kinds of brokenness and what today is called “dysfunction,” of which most of us are familiar in our own families.

The point that Matthew is trying to make and wants us to see is that God’s work is not the culmination of a long evolution of human goodness and virtue. There is precious little goodness and scant virtue in Jesus’ forebears. God loves his creation because he has created it, not because of its goodness or perfection. He loves what he makes because it is of him. The brokenness of creation, while displeasing to God in one way, is really the source of great anxiety and concern on God’s part. Of course, because God has created free people and not a race of robots he cannot heal, he cannot save, he cannot redeem, he cannot help these people without their consent and approval.

The second evangelist who talks about the birth of Christ is Luke. Luke portrays not Jesus’ family; he doesn’t seem to be too interested in that—but rather his surroundings, the circumstances of his birth. And they are in a word: poverty. He was born in a place suitable for animals. The angels announced the news of his birth to shepherds, the lowest of the lowest class of that society. Now you may take your children and dress them up, and they can play the role of a shepherd in a play, and you may think that is very cute. But in real life shepherds are not cute. They are dirty. They spend months with animals, without a bath, without a change of clothes. The teachers of the Law at the time of Christ held them in contempt because they were so unlettered, because they were so ignorant, because they were so unschooled that they didn’t even know the rudiments of the Law, and therefore in their judgment, could not please God. That’s how they thought. It is to the shepherds, according to Luke, the angels go. And the shepherds share something with Jesus because with both Jesus and the shepherds there was no upward mobility. Jesus spent his entire life away from the in-crowd, marginalized and shunned by all those...
people who were anybody, who had any status, any education, any power, any authority, in his own society—with just a few exceptions.

The third evangelist who talks about the birth of Jesus is John, whose gospel we read this morning. In a sense it’s the most compelling but the most intricate. John does not speak about Jesus’ family. He does not speak about Jesus’ background or his surroundings. He speaks rather of his origin and his destiny. John says Jesus is nothing less than God’s own knowledge of himself. That’s what is meant by the “Word.” “The Word was God.” That means the knowledge of God’s own self. He is “God from God, Light from Light.” His destiny is to share completely in human life, experiencing everything human beings experience, save for a deliberate separation from God. But even so, Jesus suffers all the effects of sin, including doubt, alienation, misunderstanding, and rejection.

Each evangelist has a different way of expressing the love of God, who wants to share our lives so that we can share his. One thing God cannot allow: for love to fail. Love will succeed. Love must succeed. Sin cannot destroy it. Love is not a thing or a feeling or a thought. Love is God, the creator and origin of everything.

To believe in the Christmas message means to believe that love will have the final victory in all of the struggles and trials of life. But also to believe means to live in accord with that conviction, to allow it to shape our responses to life in all its challenges. To believe means to witness to one’s hopes by sharing them with others.

Not to believe, as I said before, is not a sign of a lack of intelligence. But it may be due to a lack of generosity, because the birth of Christ is the birth of God and the gift of a God who cannot be outdone in generosity. And the generosity of God’s self-donation in Christ continues throughout time in many different ways, in a poignant and outward way in the ritual of the Mass, in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice. Every time we gather for Mass we have an opportunity to be part of the great gift that is Christ, as we in turn are nurtured and prepared for glory. Is this too unbelievable? That we must all decide.
The Unbelievable Message!

Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)  December 25, 2004
4:00 p.m. Vigil Mass  Is 62:1-5;  Acts 13:16-17, 22-25;  Mt 1:1-25  (Three versions)

The message of Christmas is actually so extreme that one might say it’s incredible, and literally many people do not believe it. This is simply a matter of fact and does not impugn their intelligence, because belief is not a matter of intelligence, but a gift from above. But there are others, perhaps here today, who neither believe nor disbelieve because they have never really looked at what the gospel proclaims, at least in an adult way. And that’s what we need to do this evening.

First of all, Matthew’s message. Matthew writes of the genealogy of Jesus, but of course it isn’t really Jesus’ genealogy. It’s Joseph’s. But Joseph adopts Jesus, and Joseph’s genealogy becomes Jesus’ genealogy. It is not a family of noble lineage. There are some decent human beings among the names I read this evening, but there are a lot of not so decent human beings. There are murderers, adulterers, liars, and there is all kinds of human brokenness and dysfunction, much of which we are also familiar in our own families. The point that Matthew wants us to see is that God’s work is not the culmination of a long evolution of human goodness and virtue. There is precious little virtue and precious little goodness in the life of Jesus’ forbearers. God loves the creation because it belongs to God, not because of its goodness or its perfection. Its brokenness, while being displeasing, is also the cause of a great deal of anxiety and concern on the part of God. And this is relayed over the centuries by the prophets. Of course, because God has created a people to be free and not a class of robots, he cannot heal or save or redeem or restore anyone without willingness and cooperation.

Luke, the second evangelist who talks about Jesus’ birth, does not focus on his family but rather on his environment. And the environment of Jesus, the surroundings of his birth are in one word: poverty! He is born in a place that is suitable only for animals. The angels announce the news to shepherds. Now because you dress your kids up in costumes and they play the role of shepherds in plays, you may think shepherds are cute, but they really aren’t. Shepherds are the lowest of the low class. They spend months without a bath in the company of animals. They were despised by the teachers of the Law because of their ignorance, their lack of schooling. They are the ones, Luke tells us, who are the
chosen recipients of the first noel, the first announcement, of God with us. And the shepherds to some degree represent the life of Christ as well, because with them as with him there was no upward mobility. Jesus’ whole life was spent away from the in-crowd, marginalized and shunned by all the powers that be, all the people who had knowledge and formation and wisdom—or the vast majority, anyway.

Finally we come to John, the fourth gospel, the third that speaks of the birth of Christ. Mark does not mention it. In the fourth gospel we see the most compelling of all versions of the birth of Christ, although perhaps abstract. John does not speak of Jesus’ family, nor his background, nor his surroundings, but of his origin and his destiny. Jesus is nothing less than God’s own knowledge of himself, that is, the Word. “God from God, Light from Light.” His destiny is to share a completely human life, experiencing everything human beings experience, save for a deliberate separation from God. But even so, Jesus suffers all the effects of sin, including doubt, alienation, misunderstanding, and rejection.

Each of these evangelists has a different way of expressing the love of God, who wants to share our lives so that we can share his. One thing God cannot allow: for love to fail. Love will succeed. Love must succeed. Sin cannot destroy it. Love is not a thing or a feeling or a thought—but God, the creator and the origin of all that is. To believe in the Christmas message means to believe that love will have the final victory in all the struggles and trials of life.

But also to believe means to live in accord with that conviction, to allow it to shape our responses to life with all its challenges. To believe means to witness to one’s hopes by sharing them with others. Not to believe is not, as I mentioned before, a sign of a lack of intelligence. But it may be due to a lack of generosity. The birth of Christ is the gift of a God who cannot be outdone in generosity. And the generosity of God’s self-donation in Christ continues throughout time and is celebrated most poignantly in the Eucharist itself, the sacrifice of the Mass. Every time we gather for the Mass we have an opportunity to be part of the great gift that is Christ, as we in turn are nurtured and prepared for glory. Is this too unbelievable? That each of us must decide.
“But whoever does the will of God remains forever.”

Today’s reading from the First Letter of John is a work that could fit into the ascetical or mystical literature of the world. It is a book in which the world is presented as a rival to God. Desire for the world and for what the world holds is at odds with and contradictory to desire for God and what God wants.

And this is surely partially true. But what we have to understand is God’s will for us is to work precisely in this world, not to desire its accomplishments or its blandishments, but to work within it for God’s purposes. That’s the whole idea of vocation. Sometimes if we take this in a one-sided way, we may think our only vocation is to shun the world and pursue some sort of alternate lifestyle apart from the world. This would be very similar to many people’s idea of religious life both in the West and in the East, both among Christians and among other religions as well.

However, if we look more closely at the gospel, we will see that we are really called to something even more difficult: not to leave the world physically but to remain while not affected by its values or pretense of value, claims to value, living in the world as creatures of God recognizing the world is also created by God and meant to be a home first and foremost for the Word of God. The world can only become a home for the Word of God when people who live in the world make a home for that Word. That Word, of course, is none other than Jesus Christ born of Mary. So as we celebrate the mystery of Christmas, we also acknowledge the unfinished work inaugurated by that great mystery.
There are three versions of the birth of Christ. This one is the most powerful and profound because it not only tells the story in time, but it tells the story that transcends time and really lays a foundation for thinking about everything. And, indeed, if we are to be truly authentic Christians, we should meditate often on this reading. It has so many points we can’t go over all of them. I will mention just a couple.

First of all, everything is created by God; God is the only uncreated reality. Now that may sound like just something we learn once and now can forget about it, but it really is the central mystery of life. God is the only being; only God really exists. And God’s Word has always existed along with God; it’s God’s own knowledge of God. Apart from God nothing exists. Nothing ever has; nothing ever will. So the meaning of everything has to be found in God and in God’s purposes. Apart from God’s purposes nothing can exist. The devil cannot exist. Evil itself cannot exist apart from God’s purpose, so we have to find purposes in everything. It’s not always easy to do. But the main point is that there is meaning in everything, and everything is created by the Word, which is the knowledge of God, so everything is imbued with this purpose.

Now this Word of God is also the light that enlightens everyone. Some people believe that Christianity is narrow because it says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” But this idea of who “me” is, who the Word is—the Word is the light that enlightens everyone. So this is a basis for the greatest, broadest possible understanding of divine revelation. Divine revelation touches everyone. It says so here—includes everyone, invites everyone. So as we look through the history, the cultures, of the world, the peoples of the world, the stories of the peoples of the world, we should see this light reflected somehow.

Those two points we can use to conclude this year and to await the next.
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Requirements for Peace  Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God   Solemnity
January 1, 2005   8:00 a.m.   Nm 6:22-27;   Gal 4:4-7;   Lk 2:16-21   (World Day of Peace)

For the last several years, ever since the time of Pope Paul VI, January 1 has been a special day for praying for World Peace. Now as we pray for world peace, we might reflect on: **What are the minimum requirements for peace?** What would bring about a peaceful world? I don’t think there is a book written that will explain this exactly; it’s something we have to think about.

One of the matters that I reflect on is: **What sort of beliefs do people have to have for them to live in peace?** First of all, we know that given human beings and human nature, we will not eliminate irascibility, the tendency of people to become angry, whether justly or unjustly. We will never eliminate this from human life. So we can’t simply fantasize about a world where people don’t get angry and become violent. That would be worthless. But we might think about a kind of world in which nature remains what it is, but that **various beliefs held by individuals and groups modify people’s behavior in such a way that they can live in peace.**

Now it may seem like a no-brainer, but it isn’t a no-brainer anymore: one of the things **people need to believe in** is not only God, but a **benevolent God.** When you read the gospel, what is the announcement? There is good news. God is benevolent. God has mercy on people. He recognizes the problem, and he is willing to do something about it. Now this good news does not say that God is going to abolish evil, because that would mean abolishing freedom. That’s not the good news. The good news is that **God has joined himself totally to human destiny, to human life.** God has become human—totally, absolutely! Joined in our fate, joined in our destiny! This is the benevolence of God.

Now we need to **believe in this benevolence for us to cooperate.** People who don’t believe in the benevolence of God are not going to cooperate with God’s great act of
salvation. And without cooperation it’s not going to work! If we want a society that’s peaceful and just, we have to believe in a benevolent God.

And secondly, we also have to believe, which the Bible proclaims, that the good are rewarded and the evil are punished. If we don’t believe that, then we are going to be constantly tempted, probably in ways beyond our power to resist, to take justice into our own hands; and that leads to, of course, violence, private violence, private vengeance. And that’s a vicious cycle that never stops. We can see it among nations; we can see it among people. Many crimes are probably committed because people feel that their rights have been offended and that there is no remedy. The law doesn’t care. There is no God, so therefore they have nothing to lose! These simple ideas are profound and necessary for us to live in a just society, a peaceful society. And incidentally, they have to be together. Justice has to be peaceful; peace has to be just. It’s impossible to separate these two. So now if that’s true, we understand that the role of believers and the role of Christian people is to build up the kinds of beliefs that make things work.

The founding fathers of our country—many of them did not claim to be Christian, but they all admired Christian principles. Most of them anyway—perhaps not Tom Paine, but surely Jefferson and Madison and Adams and Washington admired the principles of the Bible. They believed in God, who is both omnipotent and benevolent. They believed in divine providence, and they believed that the good would be rewarded and the evil punished. And they could not see how a society could exist without these beliefs. And I believe they were correct. I don’t think society can exist without these beliefs.

So we need to celebrate not only what God does, but we need to spread the news. That’s what “celebration” really means. It means to “make known.” We need to make known the goodness of God. And this is a daunting task, but it’s one we have no possible choice of avoiding. This will be a happy new year when we all cooperate and spread the word.
“We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.”

Those who familiarize themselves with the stories of the New Testament are very well aware of the use of parable and exaggeration. Jesus, for example, deliberately exceeded the bounds of plausibility in talking about the Good Samaritan, or the story of the Prodigal Son.

The story of the Magi is another such story—utterly implausible, and yet in a symbolic sense completely accurate and truthful. Tradition, especially the work of artists and storytellers, has so over laden this tale with unnecessary and superfluous elements it is a task to uncover its original meaning.

Perhaps the first hurdle to overcome is the matter of stargazing itself. The term “magi” means literally “magicians,” but they were astrologers. Today astrology is regarded as either superstitious or just plain ignorant. But in the ancient world, professional wise men believed that the stars controlled affairs on earth. And this was not a localized idea, but found throughout the ancient world, including China. Even in the seventeenth century Galileo, believed by some to be the first of the scientists in the modern sense, taught astrology at the University of Padua. His students were doctors, and his role was to help them understand the right day on which they should treat their patients.

Now astrologists were not interested in unusual stars or the appearance of something extraordinary in the sky. They were interested in the sorts of patterns that ordinary people would not even notice. Again, artists have often pictured this star as something extraordinary, bright and brilliant. The Bible doesn’t say it was. It simply says that they noticed it at its rising. Probably this was nothing other than the planet Jupiter, which when rising in a particular constellation indicated the birth of a king in that nation represented by that constellation. Now in 6 B.C. Jupiter rose in the constellation Aries,
which indicated a newborn king for Israel. That’s the background for Matthew’s story, but not what he wants to tell you.

What Matthew wants to talk about is something very creative. He is creatively telling you about the history and destiny of Jesus. And in doing so he again exceeds the bounds of plausibility. First of all, why would Persian astrologers care about a new king in Israel? There is no rational reason for them to do so. Second of all, why would a figurehead like Herod be upset about a newborn king when he had already lost all his power anyway due to the occupation of the Roman armies?

For Matthew, the Magi represent all the Gentiles who have from that point to the present found salvation in Christ and acknowledge his deity, his divinity, with an act of devotion, namely, the presentation of gold, frankincense and myrrh—another way of talking about a burning censer. Herod, on the other hand, represents all those kings and leaders throughout time who, although born within the covenant promise, have rejected God’s plans and pursued their own agenda. And these have been legion!

In this sense the story has been repeated over and over again and will continue because God does not force himself or his plans on anyone. God desires a world in which the peripheral can be included. God desires a world where those who seek can find. And even though it causes the death of the innocent, God wants a world in which the evil may freely reject him. Sometimes people ask me “Why does God allow evil menaces like Hitler, Stalin or Mao?” The reason is that without freedom for villains there would be no freedom for the rest of us either. Obviously if we are not free to reject God, we are not free to accept God.

When the innocent suffer, whether from the ravages of natural disasters or from the evil plottings of men, it is a wakeup call for all of us. We all depend on each other. Should we take action? Can we help? Matthew wants us all to find ourselves inside the tableau he paints and not simply looking at it from outside.
“This is how we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit.”

The first reading from the First Letter of St. John is talking about something we need to look at, and that is discernment, spiritual discernment. A lot of believers never really try to discern where spiritual impulses come from, and worse, where they are going to! We have to look at this.

There is a book written recently by a well-known atheist, Anthony Flew. Professor Flew in his old age has decided that, well, there is a God after all. But then he goes on to say, “But it’s not the Christian God or the Jewish God,” whatever he means by that! He says he does think there must be something of a God because of the complexity of the creation, the complexity of the biological world, and so on. As if that in itself proves there is a God! That is really secondary. The fact that there is anything at all is really the basis for believing in God, but that’s beside the point. But his attempt to say, “Well, it’s not the Christian God”—What is this supposed to mean? Well, of course, he has it in his mind what the God of Christians is like, and who knows what that could be? Probably not very flattering!

But the real point the Bible makes is that there is only one God. There is one God, and that God is the Creator, and that we can know that God through the creation. Scripture says this very clearly, and the Church has always believed it. So whatever we learn through studying the complexity of nature, we are learning about the mind of God, the one God. So that is the biblical God.

And it should modify the way we look at God, especially in contrast to some of the ideas we find in the Old Testament, which Jesus himself had problems with. And we should too. And this is where discernment comes in. Jesus discerned in regard to his entire tradition what was really good and holy and what wasn’t? He had no problem
telling the teachers, “You disregard the law of God and replace it with mere human tradition.” How did he get the nerve to do that? By discerning. **He discerned the difference between what people said God was and who God really was.** Of course, Jesus had what we don’t. Jesus had this direct contact with the Father. We call it the “beatific vision.” He lived with this. So, of course, he had, you might say, a certain sort of power or insight that exceeds our normal capacities.

However, through the Holy Spirit we also have contact with God in a real way. And the Church as a group, as a community, needs to discern where the Spirit leads us. The point that the author here is making is the **difference is between the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit**, not the spirit of truth and the spirit of error, in some sort of sense of ignorance. That’s not really the problem. The problem is deceit. **We can be deceived; that’s what we have to be aware of.** We can be misled. But **if we are misled, we are misled voluntarily, if we fail to discern.** And, after all, human nature has certain tendencies that are not very desirable from a spiritual viewpoint, and there are ways to promote that, encourage what is undesirable. And it has been done in the name of God in various religious traditions, including our own, by unscrupulous or deceived people. But the point that this author is making is **each believer has to take responsibility to discern.** Not that any of us can discern all by ourselves, we need others’ help. But it’s still our responsibility. We can’t just say, well, our leaders tell us this. No, we discern the difference between the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit.
Human beings are like all other organisms in one way: we seek a sort of homeostasis, a sort of comfort zone, an equilibrium, a comfortable routine. We seek a comfortable life where all our needs are taken care of, where threats to our welfare are shielded against, where we can be at peace. All living things desire this. Even though we might not think of flowers as desiring or we might not think of birds as desiring, but they do. They desire this. And they seek it in an instinctive way. They are created to, and they wouldn’t survive and reproduce and continue to exist if they didn’t.

However, we human beings are different from all other creatures in another way. Comfort is not enough. Being comfortable is not enough to assure true happiness or a feeling of worthwhileness, which is a quality human beings desire. And in order to feel that one is living a worthwhile life, one has to have a horizon of expectation. We have to have a sense that everything isn’t in the past, nor is everything in the present, but there is more to come in the future. However, if we reflect on this fact of our existence, and I doubt many people deny it, nonetheless, if we reflect on it, we realize that this idea that the more to come lies in the future, in the normal sense of the future, is really faulty, because the future is just like the present and the past, and will be. So the future for human beings has to be beyond time. The horizon of hope has to go beyond time and life in our time-bodies.

This is what Jesus spoke about when he talked about eternal life, the eternal life he was offering to his disciples. He was talking about a life that is not limited to our time-bodies, and not subject to the laws of physical nature, but exceeds these laws and exceeds these time-bodies in ways we cannot imagine. About this St. Paul said, “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has the mind of any man imagined what God has prepared.”

But today Alexander knows what God has prepared, and one day we shall be in the same place he is, in a place of knowledge and experience. Meanwhile we live a life of
hope, or we cease to exist in the full sense of the word. For human beings who live without hope do not really live; they merely survive.

This gospel is not about merely surviving. It’s about living and living to the full, and living in a way that exceeds what we can imagine and what the laws of this world tell us is possible. Faith is our entrée into this life. Baptism is the sign of this life. And we believe that the signs of the Church, the sacraments of the Church, effect what they signify.

Now the disciples were very confused when Jesus told them that he was going to prepare a place for them because they were thinking of a place the way we all think of places, because they, like we, think in terms of images; we think in pictures. And so they were picturing, well, what would this be like? What kind of house? What kind of mansion? What kind of street? But Jesus wasn’t talking really about that kind of a house or that kind of mansion or that kind of place. He was talking about a place beyond places, a place beyond space.

And he said, “So you know where I’m going,” and Thomas says, “No, we don’t. We don’t know.” And he was telling the truth. He didn’t. They didn’t. They didn’t know where he was going, but they did know the way. Why? Because the way is Jesus himself, our relationship with him. This is not meant to be simply some sort of emotional little fantasy. It is rather the foundation of a new birth and a new life. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the gospel we preach and believe in. This is the gospel Alexander was baptized into. And this is the gospel we celebrate today. No one comes to the Father except in a relationship with the Word of God, who has become incarnate in Christ.

And how do we learn about this Word of God incarnate in Christ? We learn about it through the humanity that Christ attached to himself by becoming human. We learn about it because Jesus said, “Anyone who loves the least of my brothers and sisters loves me. And whoever neglects the least of my brothers and sisters neglects me.” So we can learn about Jesus through the least. And that is very important if we really want to continue to hope and to aspire to life.
This morning we celebrate the memorial of Mrs. Seton. She was also known as “Mother Seton,” but when Pope Paul canonized her he called her “Mrs. Seton”—for whatever reason I don’t know. She was both Mrs. Seton and Mother Seton. She was both a wife and a mother. She was a foundress and also a sister. In this way she incorporated many different roles. Now very few of us ever do that. We usually get going on a particular path and we stay on it, and that’s fine. But Mrs. Seton was a woman of extraordinary ability.

And one of the most important things in her life was her conversion to the Roman Catholic faith. She had not been brought up that way. And this was 1805 when she converted, and at that time Roman Catholics in the United States had a very serious problem—children in particular. They were being brought up in a school system that was virulently anti-Catholic. Children were despised just because they were Catholic. Now how many people here enjoy being despised? Nobody enjoys being despised? Oh! Well, they didn’t then either! And it was a very serious problem.

And maybe we need to think about this whole idea of prejudice because there are all kinds of prejudices. And prejudices come from—what? What we call “stereotyping.” Patrick, what does that mean to stereotype? Does anyone know what it means? Okay, very good, Matthew. Stereotyping means to generalize. You take a person and you figure out what that person is like without ever knowing him or her. Now some people stereotype men; women do this. They say, “Well, men are like this.” Or men do this with women. They say, “Women are like this.” Well, women aren’t any particular way; men aren’t any particular way, and white people aren’t any particular way and black people aren’t any particular way and Catholics aren’t any particular way and Jews aren’t any particular way! So when we generalize we attribute to an individual certain attributes that aren’t necessarily true at all. And that’s totally unfair—that’s totally unfair.

Well, Mrs. Seton saw this reality, and she decided to do something about it. Now it’s one thing to notice a problem; it’s another thing to do something about it. Now this was a major problem. It was an incredible problem, and it needed an incredible solution; and she came up with it! And what was that? It was to begin schools, Catholic schools, so that children could grow up with a sense of pride, in the right sense, rightful pride, respectful pride, in their own traditions, in their own heritage. Rather than being ridiculed, laughed at, they could grow up being proud of being Catholic, and they could learn the riches of their tradition. So that’s the origin of the Catholic School System in this United States. There was this prejudice.

Now today it is not so common, but I wouldn’t say it never happens. It’s not as common to have people ridiculed for their being Catholic. I wouldn’t say it never happens; it’s not as common. But there are other kinds of prejudices. There are other
religious prejudices around today. Like what, Monica? Do you ever hear anybody say anything disparaging about another religion? No, you never have? Mmm, I have. I have heard people say things about Muslins, as if Muslins are all terrorists, or Muslins are all crazy, or something like that. Well, that’s not true! I know all kinds of Muslims who are wonderful people. See how unfair that is just to assume that somebody is a certain way just because they belong to a certain group? So we still have work to do in bringing about a deeper respect for people as they are.

That was really the origin of the Catholic School System. It was to help children grow up with respect for themselves so that then they would respect others in a similar way. **You cannot respect other people if you don’t respect yourself**—you know that? Jesus knew that. In fact, the Old Testament knew that because in Leviticus 19 it says, **“Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself.”** You can’t love your neighbor more than yourself! Do you think that’s possible? Anybody think that’s possible? No, it isn’t. You cannot love your neighbor more than yourself. So you have to love yourself and respect yourself, and you love and respect yourself when you take yourself as a gift from God.

Now you may or may not like the way you look. That’s really not very important, and that’s one thing you have to see. It’s not important how people look in the mirror. Nor is it important how popular you are. Some people have the kind of personality that just really grooves with other people, and they just love to talk to other people, and they are just fun to be with. And other people don’t have that personality. That doesn’t mean anything about who they are inside. **You have to look beyond the surface, otherwise you are stereotyping.** You are making assumptions about people based on something you think you observe in them that’s not necessarily true at all.

So Mrs. Seton would be very happy if she saw you today and recognized how you treat each other with respect. Then she would think her whole life was well spent, that she did not throw it away. Now if she were ever to see people in a Catholic school treating each other without respect or bullying each other or trying to have power over each other or excluding each other, then she wouldn’t be very happy about that. But luckily I think there is very little of that—maybe some. And where there is, we have to improve. But on the whole, I think you do a very wonderful job, at least in my observations, which maybe aren’t right, but I think they are—do you think they are? I think you do a wonderful job of loving each other and accepting each other, which doesn’t mean that necessarily you like everybody. It doesn’t mean that. It doesn’t mean you necessarily enjoy each other’s company. You may not always, or you might not ever enjoy someone’s company.

But we work on this, and that’s part of our responsibility, as Mrs. Seton knew, part of our responsibility as Christian people. Christian people—the first prayer of the Mass said it—how do we show our love of God? We show our love of God by our, Neil? Love of others. **We show our love of God by our love of others.** And if—St. John goes into this concept—he says, “If you actually say that you love God while you despise your neighbor”—what does he say you are then? Peter? What does St. John call a person who
says, “I love God, but I hate my neighbor”? What does St. John say such a person is? It’s a very bad word. Liar! He says that such a person is a liar—anybody who says, “I love God, but I despise my neighbor.”

So keep this in mind as you live and grow, and realize that what we teach you here is something to enrich your life and to bring joy to your life and to bring joy to other people’s lives. In this way you realize, as Mrs. Seton did, who became Mother Seton, that we all have a vocation. **We all have a vocation in life.** She had several of them. We all have at least one. And it’s always similar. **It’s always to bring the joy of Christ, the joy of God, to other people.** Now she did this, first of all, as a wife; then she did it as a mother of five children, and then she did it as the foundress of a religious community and a teacher in schools. How you are going to do it, I don’t know. I actually don’t care how you do it, but **that you do it, I do care.** And I hope for this, and I pray for it. And now let us all pray.
Last night we had a little shared eulogy about Francesca, what kind of person she was. And if she had been sitting there listening, she would have probably been very flattered and embarrassed. Yet, there was nothing embarrassing or flattering about what was said. In fact, it was very edifying and honest and truthful, and straight from the heart.

Francesca was a woman, as she was described last night, whose heart was so godly that everyone fit within it. She welcomed strangers; she fed the hungry; she lived out this gospel.

And that is something we are all called to do. We are put on earth to live as Jesus’ disciples in our own peculiar, particular way; we don’t copy other people, but in our own way we live out this gospel of Jesus Christ. And she did! St. Paul used to like to call his adherents, his followers, “saints.” Why not? A saint is someone who accepts God and follows in the gospel as much and as well as one can. And that’s what she did.

More than that—she had a wonderful family to whom she taught the same thing. And that’s why, even though I was very edified, I was not surprised because I had seen so many reflections of Francesca in her children, and even in her grandchildren. Would that all of us on our departure from earth can leave behind reflections of saintliness in the people who knew us. Then we will hear this statement: “Come you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” So that, indeed, is the reason why this earth exists. It can’t be discerned from biology or from anthropology or from philosophy or from science or any other way of life. It can
only be a revelation from God. **We are here on earth to build the kingdom.** And we are
free to do so or not, and that’s the test.

So as we continue I hope it is with joy, because today is a day of sorrow. And sorrow
is part of life. Grief is part of life. But as St. Paul points out in his Letter to the
Thessalonians, “As believers grieve they don’t grieve the same way unbelievers grieve.”
Unbelievers grieve because they are without joy, because they are depressed, because
they are at a loss, because they are deprived. Now we sometimes are deprived and we are
at a loss at the death of a loved one. That is natural. But we are not without joy. Why?
Because we gather in Christ, and death cannot separate us from Christ. **Death has not
separated Francesca from Christ, so it cannot separate us from joy.** Our joy is in
Christ.

That is the meaning of the holy water, which is from the font of Baptism, that I
sprinkled on the casket on its entrance into the church. We are reborn in Christ into a life
that has no limits, that is not limited by this world and the physical laws we are all
familiar with. We are born into a life that is eternal, and that life is a life of joy. And
death cannot separate us from that life. And death cannot separate us from that joy. So as
we grieve, we do grieve, we need to grieve, but **we also grieve with joy because we
have Francesca alive in Christ,** as we are alive in Christ as well through faith and
through our desire to serve the kingdom, as she did. We are still at one in a deep and
profound sense, although not in a physical sense any longer—for a while. Later on, we
will be reunited with our sister. In the resurrection of the just we shall be alive fully in
glory. And that is our faith, and that is God’s promise. So we do grieve, but not like those
who have no faith.
The Three Epiphanies  

Thursday after Epiphany  

January 6, 2005  

7:00 a.m.

1 Jn 4:19—5:4;  
Lk 4:14-22  
(The Baptism of Jesus)

This week we are celebrating the Epiphany of Christ, and the Epiphany has three parts to it: the appearance of Christ in his flesh to the Magi, his Baptism, and the feast at Cana. Those are the three manifestations, the three Epiphanies. All three belong to the feast. We read about them and think of them throughout this week.

What St. Cyril of Alexandria says about the Baptism of Jesus during this week in his meditation is that **the Baptism of Christ is really the manifestation of the Holy Spirit to all the nations.** Just as the Magi were representative of all the Gentiles coming to Christ, so the Baptism of Christ is the Holy Spirit’s descent upon the nations even before they come to faith.

Now normally we think of the descent of the Holy Spirit as associated with Pentecost. Pentecost has to do with the Church being anointed for mission, but there is a prior anointing, an anointing for openness. And St. Cyril reflects on how **in the Baptism of Jesus the Holy Spirit becomes available to all people.** That means regardless of people’s background or culture or whether they have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ preached to them, **if they are open, they have received the Spirit and can be led,** so that those who seek will find what they are looking for.
We celebrate the mystery of the Epiphany, and I mentioned yesterday there are three
Epiphanies: the manifestation of Christ in the flesh to the Gentiles represented by the
Magi in Matthew’s Gospel; the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, which is a manifestation
of the Spirit to the nations through John the Baptist; and thirdly, the manifestation of
Christ to his disciples at Cana when he transformed water into wine, the wine being a
symbol of the blood that he will shed on the cross. These were three momentous
moments, but they were hidden moments.

Today we have in contrast a public moment, the healing of a leper and the coming of
the crowds in great numbers because they also wanted healing. Everyone is burdened
with something. But what the Scriptures are trying to say is that what Jesus was trying
to do and trying to say was often blocked by what the people wanted to hear and to see. The cleansing of leprosy—wonderful! The deliverance from evil spirits—terrific!
But Jesus was really bringing about a new birth, not only in the hearts and minds but in
the total being of people. And that’s really what the Baptism that we receive is about;
it’s about new birth, new being. And this people seemed to be much less interested in.
Perhaps what we might meditate on is not what we need, but what does God want for us?
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Baptism—A New Beginning**  
**Baptism of the Lord**  
**Sunday, January 9, 2005**  
12:15 p.m.  
Is 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; **Mt 3:13-17** (God’s invitation to eternity)

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

It is fitting as we exit Christmastide to speak of Baptism, and the Baptism of the Lord. At Christmas we celebrate Christ’s birth; in his Baptism we celebrate our rebirth. These two events are connected as cause and effect. Christ becomes human, that is, God, **the Word of God, takes up the human nature so that the human nature can become divine.** Through the mystery of the incarnation, which we celebrated at Christmas, our nature takes on a new vista and goal. It has new potential. No longer is human life limited to the physical world and the boundaries of the laws of physics.

Looking very simply at this event portrayed by Matthew, we see, or I should say we hear, the affirmation of the Father: “You are my beloved with whom I am well pleased.” Although this affirmation may not fit every human being, indeed, does not at the present moment, no human being is excluded from this affirmation by God. It is only we who exclude ourselves. It is **God’s will that every single person hear this:** “You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.” Jesus’ becoming human enables each and every person to enter into God’s pleasure. Indeed that’s the meaning of sanctifying grace, to be pleasing to God, to be in God’s pleasure and to receive God’s affirmation.

Ordinarily, in life this is something we need to do for each other. Most people’s hearing is impaired to the extent that they do not hear God’s voice, especially in words of encouragement or affirmation. We might hear God’s voice criticizing us but not affirming us. As believers we have to become God’s voice showing people, by the way we speak to them and treat them, the goodness and even the godliness that often remains hidden or obscured for various reasons: personal faults, failings, other issues.

This is not merely a matter of being nice; it is a matter of bringing people salvation. Too often we dilute the real imperatives of the gospel to just being nice and being good,
whatever those words are supposed to mean! But really the gospel calls believers to bring salvation to others. And we have to be convinced that we all need salvation. And without this help from God we will head downward toward our own dissolution and perdition.

Now “salvation” may mean different things to different people. The lepers who met Jesus wanted to be saved from leprosy. The demoniacs wanted freedom from the oppression of evil that was within them; paralytics wanted to walk. And we could go on and on, and each one of us would have our own preferences or desires of where we want salvation. But all of our needs pale in contrast to God’s desire to extend to us rebirth. Rebirth is a radical restoration and transformation of life. As usual, we are attracted to the here and the now, to the proximate, to the local. However, if we reflect on ourselves, we might be able to see that our desires go beyond the local. Our desires go beyond the here and the now. God has so designed us to want more, but it’s not more of the same. It’s something different.

Baptism is our initiation into something different, a life that exceeds in every way the boundaries that our instincts and experiences place upon us. God’s invitation is not to go on and on, to live on and on in a world just as we know it, without any problems perhaps. God’s plan for us is to live a life in God, indeed, God’s own life, a life that in itself has no beginning or end. It has a beginning for us—that’s Baptism—but in itself it has no beginning. It has no end; it is real Being, what God is. And this is what God wants us to share in, to be in, to participate in. And this is something we cannot achieve for ourselves, but we can receive it as a gift. If we allow this gift to come in the forefront of our human awareness, it will color and transform everything. And this is the true gift of Christmas.
“Jesus said to them, ‘Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.’”

I don’t know if we think very often about this choice of Jesus to call fishermen to be his first pastors, his first disciples, his first evangelists. It’s not an obvious choice. We wouldn’t probably do that ourselves. We would think about the qualities and qualifications we wanted and might come up with something quite different.

What is there about fishermen that makes them suitable for this ministry? Well, first of all, fishermen are not in charge of their business. They depend on something else. They depend on where the fish are. And it’s not something they actually know. They don’t know ahead of time where the fish are. Secondly, fishing actually requires patience. One does not go out fishing and expect to know exactly what one is going to get. One has to wait. One has to be patient.

And these qualities are exactly the qualities of ministers of the gospel. We do not know whom God is going to call. We may think we know. We may have good inclinations, and they may be totally wrong. Ministry in the gospel requires great patience because this is not a matter of simply finding people. Actually it’s a matter of people being ready, being ready to be snatched by the grace of God. There are today many people who do not believe in God at all, and maybe the reason is that God has never touched them. Why? We do not know. We have to be patient.

All believers are called to some form of ministry. All believers are called to some form of sharing. But we cannot determine the time or the place. This is given by God in an inscrutable way. We find ourselves with someone who is willing to listen. We find
ourselves with someone who is not willing to listen. That we do not determine anymore than a fisherman determines where the fish are going to be.

Now one thing we have to keep in mind is that when it comes to fishing for souls, if you want to put it that way, everything really depends upon God’s grace. **And we need to pray!** We need to pray for atheists! We need to pray for agnostics! We need to pray for people who stray because they need the touch of God. **There is nothing anybody can do to bring someone to God if God’s grace hasn’t preceded.** We simply serve, you might say, with the net, but the place is God’s determination. And so we need to pray that those who are far from God’s nets will find their way close to them and continue a ministry which is really **a ministry of humble following what we cannot understand.** That is what it means to be fishers of men.
“For just as the Father has life in himself, so also he gave to the Son the possession of life in himself.”

When I began the Mass I incensed the icons on either side of the sanctuary. Now an icon, according to ancient tradition, is an image of heaven. It is a window into eternity; at least that’s the view of the iconographer. That’s the purpose of icons. But in a true sense every human being is meant to be a living icon, not static like the ones on our wall, but living and breathing and radiating the life of this gospel, the life that comes from the Father, which he gave to the Son, which the Son gives to those who believe in him. This is not simply earthly life, but it’s the life that goes beyond earth: eternal life, the life of God.

Now I know that Mary lived that life, but I don’t know it from my own experience of her. I have been here for eight years, but ever since I have been here Mary’s life was seriously impaired by stroke. But I know about her because my friend, Father George, talked about her quite a bit—her and Lorraine Kraiss. And I heard so many stories about these wonderful women and how they lifted up people, especially Father George—not physically, of course, but in their way of living. The way they shared their lives they shared life. And it is not their own life, but the life of God that they shared.

But Mary’s last several years, last twelve years, have been very difficult, not only for Mary—for Frank and for all her friends, because her freedom was impaired by this stroke or series of strokes. And I think we need to take a lesson from this. We are not free at all times to be who we want to be. We are not always free to be that person.
Trauma, hurt, disease, accidents impair us and impair our freedom and make it impossible for us to share the life we want to share. And we have to keep this in mind when relating to other people. One doesn’t have to suffer a stroke to suffer. One doesn’t have to suffer some major disease to be traumatized. People can be traumatized by many things in life. They can be hurt; their hearts can be wounded, bruised by all kinds of things. And then they are not totally free. We need to keep that in mind because sometimes the way people deal with us may be not at all according to what they want to be and do.

Mary’s true nature was revealed long ago in her life of service to St. Joseph Parish and to her family and to her neighborhood, which included all those who knew her. She was fortunate. Not everyone is so fortunate.

So as we come to bury her, maybe we need to do three things. Number one, we need to keep in mind the difference between the woman Mary really was and the woman she appeared to be in her later years. Number two, we have to keep in mind that there are these impediments in many people which hold them back from what they really want to be. And thirdly, in honor of her we need to take her life and her radiance and her joy and her willingness to serve others, her true love, take it from her and spread it to others because love is no good if it isn’t shared. And that’s what she would want. That’s what she did want. She wanted people to be full of joy and a sense of well-being. And that’s what she communicated. And that’s what I have heard about. In her honor let us go and do likewise.
“It was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking.”

Sometimes there is something said—a great deal said—in a very short sentence, and we may just pass over it. But this particular letter is speaking about the dignity of humanity.

Now in the ancient world there was no idea of the dignity of human beings. In the world of paganism, whether you go to the Greeks or you go to the Babylonians or you go to the Chinese, wherever you go it’s a similar story. The real powers that matter are the gods or the angels or the spirits or some force not human. And usually—usually—this power that rules the world or these powers that rule the world are in alliance or collusion with the temple authorities: the kings, the princes, the emperors, or whatever, which is where they derive their power. And the vast majority of human beings are simply slaves, literally in many cases and theoretically in all cases, save for the one who represents the divine powers.

And what the Letter to the Hebrews is reminding the Christians of Hebrew ancestry is what the Bible always said was that man is made in the image and likeness of God and therefore dominion rests with humankind, not with the so-called gods of the pantheon, not with the powers of the heavens according to astrology, which was the Babylonian and Chinese idea—that the stars more or less controlled human destiny, the Fates you read about in the Greek myths controlled human destiny. No, the biblical view is nothing controls human destiny except human will.
And **human will has to now play its role in relationship to the divine will**, that life is a drama being played out with human beings responding to divine invitation or rebellion against it. And the **rebellion is**, of course, what **sin** is. And the **cooperation is salvation history**. So this author is reminding us of our tremendous responsibility, and, of course, along with this responsibility there is great honor. Or another way of saying this is he is reminding us of our great dignity, but **along with our dignity comes great responsibility**.

The earth is in our dominion. We are to bring it into the perfection God wills, and this is our great vocation as a race. So we have to see all of human activity and **all human endeavor in terms of bringing about the perfection God wills**. What is so sad about modern culture is it sees no purpose to the earth. It is very common for people, even believers, Christian believers to tend to privatize their faith. They think of their faith as a private matter. They don’t understand that **faith** is not a private matter. It **is a public, fundamental issue giving direction to all things** and that our responsibility is to work together to bring about God’s will on earth—the reason for Jesus’ teaching us the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This has to become our desire and our purpose for living. And it’s something we rarely reflect on, it seems!
“Encourage yourselves daily while it is still ‘today,’ so that none of you may grow hardened by the deceit of sin.”

This is a very interesting phrase: “the deceit of sin.” I don’t know how you personally think about sin. Often people think of it in a very shallow way, perhaps illicit pleasure or going contrary to a law or rule—that’s shallow. In a much deeper way sin always involves deceit, especially self-induced deceit. St. Thomas Aquinas says that no one would ever do something evil in itself. No one would ever do evil in itself. Everyone does something good. All sin is something good; it’s seeking something good. The problem is it isn’t the right good or the true good or a substantial good. It’s merely apparent or it’s merely personal or it’s merely one-sided. So it’s not the true good.

So why do people choose a false good, an insubstantial good? Because of deceit. Somehow there is always a lie connected to sin. And the lie has to do with the falseness of the good involved. Jesus himself when speaking of the devil refers to him as the “father of lies.” Again, I think we often have very shallow ideas about the devil. What the devil’s real power is, is to deceive.

But, of course, that is all relative to our ability or our willingness to be deceived. No one can deceive someone, at least over a long period of time, against his will. It’s true we could be deceived for a while, but not forever—not forever.

So deceit is a very important issue when it comes to sin. And we might reflect on that in regard to an examination of conscience. Sometimes we teach, and correctly so, that to follow our conscience is correct, that God actually requires us to follow our conscience, and that is true. But what we don’t often say along with that is we have an obligation to form our conscience in a truly objective way free of deceit.
“Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, pick up your mat and walk’?”

As usual our evangelist is very subtle, trying to get the believer to see deeply into Jesus’ ministry. “Which is easier, to say, ‘Get up and walk,’ or ‘Your sins are forgiven’?” That’s a very good question.

The scribes in this particular reading were doubting that Jesus had the power or the authority or the right to tell people their sins were forgiven. So he said, “Okay, you don’t think I have the power to do that? Well, I’ll show you something even better.” In other words, Jesus in a sense used this paralytic to teach something more important, namely, the power of God and the power of Jesus—and this is really the point: the power of Jesus—to forgive sins. That’s the point that Jesus and the evangelist want to come through very clearly. He cures the paralytic because if he can cure the paralytic, then all the more easy is it to forgive sin because which is easier? Well, it’s easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” That’s clear. Even children know that. I ask children. Third graders, fourth graders know that! So it’s not lost on them. So since Jesus has the power, and he demonstrates it constantly, to restore the sick of body, of mind, he also has the power to forgive sin.

Now the point really that lies behind all this is this: not does God have the power to forgive, but does God have the will to forgive? Jesus’ point constantly was God wants to forgive; God wants to heal. That’s what he couldn’t get through to many of the people at that time because they had this idea that the way the world is, is the way God
wants it. If people suffer, they are supposed to. If people are sick, they are supposed to be sick. That’s retribution for their sins. If people are paralyzed, they are supposed to be paralyzed. **Jesus is upsetting this world that “it’s supposed to be the way it is” by changing things.**

Now who would think this way? Well, the people who are not paralyzed, the people who are not poor, the people who are not sick, the people who are well off, the people who were on top. They are the ones who think things are just the way they ought to be. And Jesus was constantly **undermining their beliefs.** His point is they are not the way God wants them. God wants everyone to thrive. God wants everyone to prosper. God wants everyone to experience God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Now this message still has not gotten through because there are people today who still question the goodness of God and the workings of nature. “Why does God allow tidal waves? Why does God allow mudslides? Why does God allow this? Why does God allow that?” That, of course, is off the point. The point is: **What does God really desire for us to be and to do, and when are we going to carry it out?**
“I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

First of all, we might keep in mind that for Jewish people eating at table was a very intimate action, and one only invited one’s intimate relatives and friends to table. So that Jesus’ eating with these questionable characters was a violation of a very fundamental feeling, propriety, within his own religious tradition. He uses it, however, as a teaching tool. He does it on purpose, as he often does. He violates the letter of the Law in order to teach the spirit of the Law. Here he is teaching about the spirit of his own vocation. He has come to call sinners.

Now you might say, well, that’s obvious; we all know that. Well, no, we don’t all know that! Think about it! There are religious groups today—in fact, they are very popular in the United States—who talk about the “rapture.” What is the “rapture” all about? The rapture is this theory, this fantasy, that God is going to come with punishment to the world; but meanwhile he will rapture, that is, remove from the earth, those few Christians who are true Christians. The vast majority of Christians, according to this theory and according to this teaching, are totally corrupt.

Now the idea of the total corruption of the earth is a false teaching. It’s not totally corrupt. It’s lacking in righteousness, but it’s not totally corrupt. There is a big difference. In the early Church there was a group called “Gnostics,” who said that the earth wasn’t even a creation of God! It was the product of an evil Demiurge, and God, the Father of Jesus, was trying to extricate the holy ones from this awful place. That is not salvation according to Christ. Salvation according to Christ is coming for sinners. He knows
who we are. He knows our weaknesses. He has come out of love and compassion for us.

**He has not come to extricate the holy from this unholy mess of life. That’s a false teaching. That’s a Gnostic heresy.**

It’s prevalent today in some so-called “**Born-again**” Christians, whose theology is exactly two hundred years old, and not older. It was invented around the time that this country was invented, slightly before—a theology that says that up until then no one really understood theology or teachings or the meaning of Scripture, but now we do. **Another Gnostic tendency! Another heretical movement!** And missing the point that Jesus came for sinners.

Jesus came to renew, to redeem, to save, a world that is corrupt, but not hopeless—never hopeless. Hope, indeed, is a basic virtue following faith—the first gift given to those who believe, according to St. Paul. So if we have hopeless Christians, people who believe the world is hopeless, who think that the Church is hopeless, who think that most Christians are hopeless, who think that God will only come and rapture the few, they are not people who are really given this gift of hope, and they are not abiding in the spirit of truth, and they don’t understand this text: “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”
“It is too little, the Lord says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

Too often our window on the world is narrow; we see in only one direction. God sends prophets like Isaiah to motivate our dreaming; and I cannot stress enough how rare this thought in Isaiah is, this positive, hopeful thought. I cannot stress enough how negative the attitudes of the Jewish people were at the time of Jesus, how dark and foreboding the literature of that time, and for many hundreds of years before him.

Now Jesus picked Isaiah as the prophet that would define for him his vocation. And if you remember, when he picked up the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue and opened it up and read from it he said, “This is fulfilled now in your own hearing.” That was an astonishing and shocking statement, one that caused people to marvel, on the one hand, and then try to throw him over the brow of a hill. This is the way people are. On the one hand, we marvel at hopefulness, but, on the other hand, we really don’t want to believe it—we can’t believe it! Isaiah was on that shelf for centuries, dutifully written down, rolled up, and left there! It was not really in the hearts of the people. And when Jesus unrolled that scroll it was his desire to put it back into the hearts of the people.

And he had a hard time. He had a hard time showing people a reason for hope, the bigger picture. People are tending toward pessimism and negativity. I think it is our sinfulness. We all share in this. Just go to the store sometime: you will make friends immediately when you start complaining about the prices. “Oh, did you see the price of this coffee? Oh, my goodness!” And somebody else will say, “Well, did you see the other aisle and what they want for—whatever?” You can always make friends by complaining and being negative, but it’s a very bad kind of friendship.

“It’s too little,” he says, “for you to be my servant.” But being a servant of God would be, after all, at least something! It would give some purpose and meaning to life. But God says to Isaiah, “That’s not enough for you.” God desires more for us than we could ever desire for ourselves. And what he reveals in this particular text is really the vocation of the Church: to be a light for the world. That is the Church’s role, and in this the Church is faithful to Christ and to Isaiah and to the true spirit of prophecy in a rather unique way.

In the early Church there were many people very negative, very pessimistic, called “Gnostics.” Most heresies are actually very negative, pessimistic, especially about all those “other people.” There are so many “churches of the saved, of the holy, of the few”; but that is not the word of God. The word of God says that God is sending his missionaries, his apostles, into the world to be a light to the nations. The goal is to save all the nations. This is not pessimistic. It’s not a “few” who are to be saved. It is the
many who are to be brought into the grace of God and the life of God. This was Jesus’ own sense of his vocation. This gave meaning and purpose to his life. And it gives meaning and purpose to all people who believe in him truly, which is not all those who claim to be Christian!

Many people who claim to be Christian really are not following him because they are not hopeful, and hope is fundamental. “Faith, hope, and love—all three—persevere,” St. Paul says. Without any one of them we are not really truly following Christ. In the new dispensation begun in Christ, it is the Church itself that has the vocation from God to be light to the nations.

In our society we perhaps exaggerate individual vocations. That’s one of our problems. It’s really the vocation of the whole Church that is the most important one. How do we illumine the world? Everything in God’s creation is interdependent. The Church, which is a sacrament of God’s presence, is also interdependent. Everyone has a role to play in exercising the Church’s vocation, but the Church’s vocation cannot be realized at all if certain men and women do not offer themselves in public ministerial office.

Now this very idea of vocation is not really a matter of doing, whether we are talking about the Church as a whole or we talk about the individual members of the Church. Our vocation is not to do something; it’s rather to be something. It’s about being firmly rooted in God, being open to all possibilities, because Jesus said, “With God are all possibilities,” and being full of the joy and the love that comes only from God, that can overshadow and overpower the sorrows and the tragedies and the mishaps and the accidents and the sicknesses which are inevitable in this organic world.

Is the Church or are believers exempt from the catastrophes and disasters of life? Surely not! And no one will ever be Raptured and taken away, that’s part of an ancient Gnostic heresy that salvation is a matter of being taken away from problems. It is not. God came to dwell with us and to stay with us in our problems. However, to suffer the bumps and scrapes of life, the losses and disappointments, with God as a companion is very different from suffering them alone. St. Paul instructs his followers: “Grieve, but not like those who have no faith.” Christ himself learned obedience from what he suffered. Are we better than Christ? Should we be exempt from suffering? Suffering is not a reason to doubt God’s goodness, although that’s what unbelievers say. It’s an opportunity to see God’s goodness working through his friends and allies. And if you look, you can always find them.

Ultimately, no one is able to discern his or her proper role in life alone. One of the problems is we don’t talk to each other about such things as our role in life. If we care about the young, we will talk to them about these issues of good and evil, time and eternity, suffering and vocation. A pagan philosopher, Plato, once noted so rightly: “An unexamined life is not worth living.”
Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Anthony, who was a monk in Egypt in the early centuries of the Church. Now St. Anthony practiced what we call asceticism, which means a great deal of fasting, a great deal of prayer, a hard life—in short, a hard life! He denied himself the pleasures and comforts of life. He lived to be 105. Now is that good or bad? I don’t know. Clean living may not be what it’s cracked up to be.

But it fits into what Jesus is talking about with the Pharisees. There is a way in which people in the ancient world thought that in a sense they would make themselves presentable, make themselves acceptable, to God by a difficult life, by making life more difficult than it really was—already it is difficult anyway—denying themselves comfort, and so on. Well, Anthony was like that, and apparently the Pharisees were like that, and a lot of people have been like that. It’s part of our human nature perhaps. I don’t know where it comes from.

Anyway, Jesus was not like that, and Jesus’ disciples weren’t. And so they were criticized: “How come you are having such a good time? How come you don’t look glum, sad? How come you don’t make yourself miserable the way we do?” Now, of course, it’s questionable whether they were totally, really internally, doing this or whether it was more for show. That’s another matter, but it’s a style of operating that is very common in different places and throughout the world. So Jesus says, “Well, first of all, what you are trying to do is really the wrong thing. What you are doing is you are trying to sew a new piece of cloth on an old garment.” In this way he is really criticizing the whole idea of asceticism. “You are trying to remake yourself a little bit at a time. But
what I’m offering is a whole new being through the power of God!” That’s different—
first point.

Second point, he says, “No one puts new wine into old skins.” That’s a practical
matter. Actually people tried it; otherwise they wouldn’t know what happens. Why did
they try it? Well, they tried it because new skins stink. So you have fresh wine; you put it
in new skins; there is something that really is lousy about that. New skins smell. So old
skins don’t. They have already lost their smell. So some people would try to use the old
skins, not just because they were cheap, but because they didn’t want to ruin the new
wine. They wanted to make it presentable quicker, earlier. Jesus says, “Well, that’s not
going to work. You can’t speed up this process. You have to put new wine into new
skins, and then you have to let the whole thing settle.” You have to wait for the kind of
result you want. You have to have patience.

And there is a way in which certain forms of spiritual discipline can be a form of
impatience. People don’t want the way they are. They want to change themselves. And
Jesus is questioning whether that really is so wise. Rather, he says, “put fresh wine,”
which again is not really ready to drink, “into fresh skins,” which smell, “but let the
whole thing age. And then you will have something.” Be patient with yourself.
“God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love you have demonstrated for his name by having served and continuing to serve the holy ones. We earnestly desire each of you to demonstrate the same eagerness for the fulfillment of hope until the end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who, through faith and patience, are inheriting the promises.

Now, boys and girls, I reread the first two sentences of this morning’s first reading, not because it wasn’t read well in the first place, but I want to emphasize something very powerful in the author of this sacred Scripture, an emphasis that all of us have work to do, and the work that is being spoken of is not the same thing as the careers that people, in fact, have in order to gain employment, in order to gain a living. We do have to live, and we do have to work to live, but that’s not what this is about. It’s not about your job where you earn money. It’s more about the job, the task, the work, that you have in living.

What the author is trying to say is that God is never going to overlook the generous work you do in serving other people because the whole Christian idea is that God is love and love serves; love cares for others. This is truly the reason for living on earth; it’s to give us an opportunity to serve others. This is what we call “vocation.” Primarily, the vocation to serve belongs to all of God’s people. And then it is broken down into different ways, just like rays of sunlight are broken down in a prism in the different colors. You have bright white light coming from the sun, but if it goes through a prism you have red and green and blue and—what at one end? Purple, violet—right? What’s the other end from violet? Red—right? So those are different colors in the rainbow. So in the life of the Church there are different ways in which people live out this vocation the author of Hebrews is talking about, the vocation to serve others.

But it always involves several things that are similar. It always involves a commitment within the context of the Church—always a commitment within the context of the Church. Now the most obvious one probably that comes to your mind is the commitment of marriage, but marriage to be truly a vocation must be lived out within the context of the Church as a sacrament of the Church, something we all acknowledge. It isn’t just, well, I feel like having this person as my partner so we are just going to live together. That’s not the same thing. Marriage is a sacrament of the Church. It’s a vocation to service within the context of Christ, and it flows from the heart of Christ.

All forms of service within the Church are the same; they all involve commitment. For example, Sister Dorothy and Sister Rosemary have made a commitment to two different religious communities of sisters, and they live that out within the commitment of Christ, within the community of Christ’s Church. Father John and I have made a
commitment to the life of the Church as a parish. We made a commitment to serve in parish life in order to bring the Eucharist and the other sacraments to people. That’s a commitment. So there are different ways we have commitment, just like the light of the sun breaks into different colors, but it’s the same light. You understand? It’s the same light. It looks different to our eyes; it’s the same light. Now that’s the light that this reading is talking about, the light of commitment, the light which illumines the world, because the Church as a whole is called on to be light of the nations. That’s actually the words of Isaiah the prophet and the Second Vatican Council—Lumen Gentium, in Latin. That’s the name of a document, a very important document calling the Church to a deeper witness.

Now not always has this been the case. That’s why this week we celebrate the Week of Christian Unity because very often the witness of Christians has not been to Christ. It’s been to themselves! That’s how we get into disunity. “Oh, it’s my idea. No, it’s my way. No, it’s my way! No, it’s my way! No, it’s my way!” That is not unity, and that is not witnessing to Christ. That’s what actually the history of the Church has been, and so we break apart into all kinds of different little groups—each one vying with each other, and there is no unity there, and there is no witness to what Christ wants and desires and calls us to. This is one reason why the Church is a mess. It’s not simply that people are ignorant; it’s that they have been in a way scandalized. So you look at the way people live and their values and you say, “Well, isn’t that terrible!” Well, yes, it is, but in one way it’s partly the fault of the Church because we haven’t witnessed in a clear way to what Christ lived and witnessed to. Not that you personally can be held responsible, because you are too young, but for centuries there has been a lot of scandal. That means bad witness; scandal is bad witness. People have been going their own way and doing their own thing and following their own doctrines, their own ideas, and this is not the way to unity. The way to unity is following God’s way.

Now God has placed within his Church certain leaders, certain ordained leaders, to teach in the name of and through the power of the Spirit. So we need to be aware of that and follow as well as we can the teaching and directions of the Holy Father and the bishops. That’s the idea. In that way we can actually witness to the unity of the Church. But, moreover, in our own lives we need to be servants of love wherever we are—wherever you are sitting, wherever you are standing, wherever you are walking, you are a witness. And that’s what this reading is about. God will never allow you to go unrewarded—never—for your goodness. That would be unjust, and God is not unjust. That’s what this reading is talking about.

It also talks about two other qualities we need as we wait for the purposes of God to come to fruition. One of them is patience. A lot of people don’t have patience, and I will tell you why: because our lives are too short. Our lives are pretty short. Now you don’t think this way now because you are so young. You look at life and think, oh, wow, it’s going to be a long, long time. I am going to live on this earth for a long, long time. Don’t you think that way? Yes, you do! But once you get a little older, pretty soon you are 50, and then you are 55, and then you are 60, and you start to think this is going fast! And then you get impatient. You want things to all gel. You think, well, if God has a
plan, I’d like to see it. But guess what? Maybe you are not going to. God never said that we would see his plans gel and bear fruit in our own lifetimes. If the saints believed that, they never would have become saints! If the apostles believed that, they wouldn’t have been apostles! It doesn’t bear fruit just because your life is getting short! No, it’s whenever. And God doesn’t live in time anyway. It’s hard for us to understand this. Time is just our thing. We live in time; God does not live in time. No time for God! There is no beginning, no end—no time! So God, of course, is patient because he doesn’t have any time. It’s we who are impatient! And in one sense it’s understandable, but, on the other hand, it can actually become a source of a problem for us. If we become impatient with God’s plans, we can decide I think I can do this better, or I just am not going to wait around. I’m going to do my own thing. So a lot of people have done that. They have grown tired of waiting for the fruit of God’s promises. Well, that’s too bad. That’s why this writing was written. Don’t be impatient. You need to have patience.

You need to endure. Now endurance has to do with suffering, and there is a certain amount of suffering in life. If you are going to have a good marriage, there is going to be suffering. You are going to have to put up with certain things. There are going to be trials. There are going to be difficulties. There will be things you wish weren’t in there. There will be sickness. There will be unemployment. There will be kids that are troublemakers—not in your family perhaps, but in others. Isn’t that right? You have heard of this—haven’t you? So there are going to be problems in life. So we have to endure those problems. That’s part of God’s will, that we endure problems as they come up.

The greatest problem really is created by our own freedom. Since people can all do what they want—they are free to do that, otherwise there would be no love in the world—they often choose not to love. They choose not to do what’s right, and therefore they create all kinds of real trouble, problems, sin, injustice, malevolence, crime, tragedy, heartbreak. It’s part of life, but it’s all part of a plan whereby we can choose to love and be just and serve. No one will force us. If we were forced, it wouldn’t be love. Love doesn’t force, of its nature. So I hope some of this is getting into your mind, into your heart, and you understand. You have to be patient. You have to endure. Life will be difficult at times, and that’s all part of the plan that we grow in inner strength and inner conviction and patience and willingness to offer ourselves in service.

We bring all this together when we come to the altar. When you come to the altar, it’s not just the priest at the altar doing something. What the priest is doing is simply gathering the gifts together on the table, but you are putting them there. It’s your gift. It’s your life. You are the bread. You are the grapes that have been crushed to go into the chalice. That’s your life in there. The priest calls down the Holy Spirit to sanctify, not just the gifts, but you. You are being sanctified. Your lives are being consecrated anew in the Eucharist. Then when we gather together we are sharing in the broken bread, and the broken bread is also us. We are the body of Christ; that’s the body of Christ. St. Paul, on purpose, referred to both the Church and bread as the “body of Christ.” We are both. So we receive each other in the Eucharist. We receive one another’s lives and
conflicts and pain and suffering and joys and triumphs. We feast on the brokenness of the body of Christ, first broken on the cross, continually broken in our own experience of hardship and endurance. And that’s what we do in the Mass through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God descends upon our altar and consecrates the elements of ourselves that we have placed there in the bread and the wine. We gather together in the Communion to join together with the risen Christ, no longer broken, but now risen to new life and glory—our promise of the same glory. So even in our brokenness we foretaste the glory of God; we are promised it.

**When we do celebrate the Mass we should be trying to think of what we are doing**, not daydreaming about basketball or whatever else. Okay, so we can proceed now praying for ourselves, praying for one another, praying for our future, praying for our commitment, praying for our endurance, praying for our patience, and praying for the unity of all believers, so that we can give a united witness to God of what God wants for the earth and be his instruments in calling forth his new creation, the new heaven and the new earth God has promised us. So don’t think for one minute that your life is unimportant. Your life is very important. You have a very vital role to play even if no one else ever hears of you. You understand? You don’t have to get into the papers to be important. You don’t have to be in *People* magazine. **What you need is to be faithful.**
In my many years of ministry in the Church, one of the things that has astonished me and disappointed me most perhaps is the way the gospel is either misunderstood or misapplied. This is true, unfortunately, both on the part of Christians and non-Christians. For example, this particular text has often been used to mean that in order to become saved we have to know Christ personally, which is not what the text says. The “me” is the light, which enlightens every man according to the Prologue of John’s Gospel. So it means that the only way we come to God is through God, but God’s light enlightens all those who are willing to open the eyes of their minds and souls to God. And this light is indeed incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, who speaks his Word to the world and who continues his work through the Church. That is really the meaning of the text.

But there are other ways in which we misunderstand and I think therefore distort the hope of Christ. For example, the other day I was reading the writings of a Buddhist who referred to the Christian belief, the Judeo-Christian belief, in an “immortal and immutable soul.” Again, I was startled; I had never heard of such a thing! Indeed, we do not believe in an immortal and immutable soul because an immutable soul could not change. But life is all about change. Growth is all about change. And our lives on earth are all about how we change, hopefully in the grace of God, becoming more like God and more like the person God sees in us and desires in us. And that’s all about change. Life is all about change.

So when we think about our own lives or Edward’s life or anyone’s life we have to think about, well, where are we going? What are we doing with the potential we have? Our potential is basically ourselves, the time we have, the people we love. That’s all our potential—the people we know, the people we influence. The world around us is all part of our potential. What are we doing with it? And from the standpoint of the
gospel, there is a call; the gospel calls us to bring all this to the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit. That’s why we believe in the Trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe life itself has a direction, and the direction is toward the Father. We believe the means is Christ, the incarnate light of God, the incarnate Word of God. Again, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” This is the Word speaking. And in the Spirit! It is not our work. It is not our energy; it’s the energy of the Spirit of God poured out on believers.

So this is all about mutation, change, growth—body and soul. And the Creed says, “I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” That’s the belief of the Church. Not, I believe in an immortal and immutable soul—that is not the belief of the Church! We believe that when we die we are to be reformed in the likeness of Christ through the pattern of his glory, through the pattern of his resurrected body. That shall also be the nature we possess. That is our faith; that is our belief.

And this all begins in our Baptism, even though it’s hard for us sometimes to see, as we are baptized perhaps very young. Baptism is the door, the entry point, into Christ. As we grow in life, and this is what this gospel is about, we cannot allow that entry point to be the place we stay! We don’t enter into a house and stand at the threshold! We enter into the whole of the house. Unfortunately, some people stay at the threshold of the house of God, metaphorically speaking, where the house of God is actually their own soul. St. Teresa of Avila, incidentally, says that most people live their entire lives in the basement of their soul, and they don’t realize what beautiful rooms they have upstairs, graciously furnished and full of light. Indeed, that is true. We enter into life with Christ in our Baptism; we stay right there at the entrance, but there is so much more inside! This is all about growth. It’s about mutation within ourselves, within our minds and souls and spirits.

So as we reflect on where we are going and what does God ask of us, we realize that God is asking us to trust him! And we don’t trust him when we stand at the threshold and refuse to enter in. That’s fear! Trust is something else. When we trust in God—and
this is all about that too—it says, “You believe in God; believe in me also. You trust in God; trust in me also.” We have to trust in God, and we have to trust in Christ—both. We could trust in God perhaps in some sort of rather vague way.

But trusting in Christ is not vague—but very concrete. Put your lives in his hands. **He died on a cross, and there is no suffering you can endure greater than that! Trust in him.** You may contract cancer. You may have a very bad heart. You may suffer terrible losses in your life. It will not be worse than Jesus suffered. His loss was the greatest of all losses. And he did it all willingly so that we could trust in him, so that we could put our faith in him, so that we could enter into our own souls and find God and find the will of God for our lives, and realize that **life is all about change and all about growth and all about movement toward the Father.**

Now when we put our trust in God, then we make faith something very personal. It must be rooted in the stability of the gospel and in the soundness of tradition. It cannot be something flaky and superficial and merely personal, in that sense. It has to be rooted in the truth of the gospel, the truth who is Christ—“I am the way and the truth and the life”—but it **has to become deeply, personally connected in a conscious way to who we are and to who we are becoming because life is all about change.** It’s about being conformed into Christ, being transformed into Christ—not being conformed to life. That’s what the world wants. The world wants us to become just like it. The world wants us to believe in what the world believes. The world wants us to value what the world values. That is not the life of faith. The life of faith is a life of trust in God and trust in Jesus Christ, who is the way and the truth and the life, and who **through his Spirit deeply penetrates every part of our being, but will never invade our own conscious wills without our permission**—never—who will remain at the door knocking and never force his entrance. That is something we must willingly give to God. “No one comes to the Father except through me.”
“The main point of what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man, set up.”

Today’s reading from the Letter to the Hebrews gives us a chance to think about the Eucharist because this letter is a description in image form of the role of Christ as the intercessor for the Church. It stresses here in this particular reading that Jesus’ ministry is a heavenly ministry, not an earthly one. It makes that very clear. It also makes it very clear that he offered himself once for all, but that offering is eternal, and therefore it is always present. So we should not think of the offering of Christ as an event that took place in time in the past. This is saying, no, the offering of Christ is an eternal act that takes place in the ever-present moment of eternity.

I know many works of piety try to talk about Christ offering himself on the cross. This letter and the liturgy of the Church does not actually have that focus. It’s not something that took place two thousand years ago on earth. Indeed, Jesus died on the cross two thousand years ago, but his offering is really something else. His offering takes place as he ascends to the Father and enters into the holy of holies in eternity. Picture for yourself that the Temple on earth is merely a copy of the heavenly temple, which is the true presence of God.

Now you have to understand the thinking of the Hebrews. Their idea was that the Temple in Jerusalem was really the presence of God and that he stayed behind the curtain of the holy of holies. Now I agree this thinking is a bit odd for our mind, so we have to give them that sort of license to have that thought, that God is present physically, if you want to say it that way, one place on earth—in Jerusalem behind the curtain of the Temple in the holy of holies.
Now what was behind the curtain? An empty seat. That was the throne of God. It was empty from our physical eye viewpoint because God is invisible, but that is where God dwelt. Okay, what the author to the Hebrews says is that the real dwelling place is not really in the Temple in Jerusalem. That is simply an image of the dwelling place of God, but God really dwells in heaven. Now we know God doesn’t dwell in heaven in a physical sense and that God is all-present. So this is picture thinking, but it’s necessary to understand what follows: that now when Jesus dies on the cross he takes his blood into the holy of holies, which is eternal in heaven, and he pours it forth.

Now this pouring forth of blood is exactly what the high priest always did on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. He poured it right in front of this empty chair, and this is how he made atonement for the sins of that year. But the author says that Jesus, because his atonement is eternal, does it once for all in the ever-present moment, and he atones for all sin of all time—before his earthly coming and after. So this makes us stretch in our understanding of what is time and what is eternity and to see that all things can be contained in one moment in eternity.

Now that is exactly what becomes present on our altar in the sacred elements. When the priest evokes the Holy Spirit and repeats the words of Christ at the Last Supper, then it is this very blood poured forth in the eternal moment in heaven that becomes present on our altar and that we take to our lips in the cup of salvation. And, of course, this is the living presence of the risen Christ. It is not a dead body that we receive. It is not the blood of a dead person. It is the living presence of the risen Christ who comes to us in one unity: body, blood, soul, divinity. That’s why if you receive Holy Communion under the form of bread, that is sufficient because it is the living Christ, or if you receive only from the cup that is sufficient. It is the living Christ. So as we celebrate the Eucharist we might keep in mind that this is the moment we are most close to the intercession of God and that it is Christ who is interceding for all of our needs; and we bring them to him—explicitly right now, in the Prayers of the Faithful.
Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Agnes, a martyr of some twelve years, that is, she was twelve or thirteen years old when she gave her life for Christ.

Now the story of St. Agnes is instructive of life at the time during the reign of Diocletian, around the beginning of the fourth century. The Roman Empire did not like Christianity because it did not buy into the values of that particular culture. Christians were distinct. At the same time they were good citizens and supported the common good, so it was irrational for the Romans to dislike them except for the fact that the Romans were insecure themselves.

Now the persecution of the Church in the early days was not like the persecution of the Church, for example, behind the Iron Curtain. It was different—or during the time of the Third Reich. In those cases the real problem was the power of the Church. The Nazis were partly envious of the Church’s power, and partly were trying to utilize it for themselves. Communists had hatred for the Church because they were atheistic. But in the case of the Romans it was a little different. They needed a scapegoat. Persecution was not necessarily systematic, and it was not organized over long periods of time, but it would erupt at various times when there was someone that the Romans needed to blame for social disorders or because things were not going well. Then they would start a persecution. And in the period of Diocletian this is what happened.

Now Agnes got caught up in this because actually she was wealthy. She was a devout Christian. She had the misfortune of being born into a wealthy family, which made her a prize to men who wanted her estate. So suitors tried to get her consent to marriage, but
she decided she was going to devote her life to God. Well, that made them angry, so she was denounced before the Roman procurator as a Christian. And that led to her years of trial, which eventually ended in her being beheaded. So she was a young woman; we don’t exactly know how old. As I say, Augustine says twelve, but that’s really too young. It may have started when she was twelve, but she must have been older by the time she was actually beheaded.

The point is **she maintained her fidelity to her vocation, to her dedication to Christ through all of these problems and temptations and trials.** Of course, they tried everything. They tried blandishments, and they tried torture. Neither worked. She remained faithful. **So we pray** in intercession to St. Agnes **that we will also maintain our fidelity to Christ in the midst of a culture that, again, is at loggerheads with the values he preached, and that we will find ways of witnessing to what we believe by the way we live.**
“When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’”

Indeed, what does it mean to be in one’s mind or out of one’s mind? It’s a very important question. Jesus’ relatives apparently thought he was crazy. Why? Well, if you deal with this, the real reason was that their judgment was not sound. And here’s the question: Is most people’s judgment sound? We live in a world progressively more and more, quote, “democratic,” which means more and more relying on the judgment of common people; but is that sound? A good question! I would say, a good problem for all of us to think about.

In the twentieth century we have certain developments which are remarkable: discoveries about the nature of nature, developments of the sciences, and, therefore, technology, and, therefore, control that we have over our world. But what do we do with it? We see, for example, in 1945 our intelligent technology led to the atomic bomb. We see throughout the century, in spite of this tremendous growth of our knowledge on a practical, technological level, we do not see a corresponding growth in our moral sensitivity, our compassion for others, or the soundness of our judgment.

In 1973 the Supreme Court decided that children in the womb were not to be protected by law. What is the basis for this judgment? I can’t find any. I am afraid the lack of sound judgment that is rather commonplace is now even in the highest places: in our academic institutions, and among our authors, among our leaders, among our teachers.
and professors, and, therefore, we can’t be surprised among our judges, politicians, statesmen, and what.

So this is the challenge to the Church now. It is to bring not simply salvation to the poor, and that was originally the gospel—to bring salvation to the poor. It is now to bring salvation to the rich, to bring salvation to the elite, to bring salvation to the educated, to bring salvation to those who have real knowledge in a worldly sense, but who have no knowledge in the true sense: knowledge of God, knowledge of purpose.

It’s the hallmark of modern biology and physics that scientists don’t want to talk about purpose. Purpose is like a bad word. But purpose is the essential concept, if you want to talk about spirituality. Why are we here? What is the meaning of anything? Well you have to talk about purpose. Well, when we say we don’t want to talk about purpose, which is what science says, they are saying they don’t want to talk about meaning. They are saying that things like meaning and purpose are merely subjective. They are really saying they are superficial and irrelevant feelings and impressions people have. That is soundly wrong, grievously wrong; and it leads to really total warping of society as a whole.

So God doesn’t give up on our society. God doesn’t give up on people. Jesus came into a world that was noted for its cruelty and its disregard for life. Well, in many ways that same sort of mentality has reemerged in our own day, and it’s now our responsibility to the gospel of Jesus Christ and its thirst for justice and its promise of peace to all.
“I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.”

It is obvious from the letter of St. Paul that there were divisions and conflicts at the very beginning of the Church; however, this does not mean that they are acceptable. It means, rather, that achieving a level of agreement and communion is a great work that the Church must strive to accomplish. And it is truly a human work and a worthwhile work.

The term “work” is most apropos because work in the spiritual sense means conscious processing.” That is very different from the idea of evolution, in which things just happen by themselves. Among human beings communion and harmony will never take place by themselves. The world is not going to evolve into peace. It’s not going to evolve into harmony. History witnesses to the truth of this; in fact, it’s the opposite. Evolution moves toward diversification and greater division and competition. Some Christians erroneously believe their role is to oppose the idea of evolution. This is foolish. Evolution is true. The work of believers is to oppose the effects of evolution within human society, to introduce different forces on the human level besides those of mere survival.

According to St. Paul, this work has two aspects: work on oneself and work with others. Working with others cannot be successful without working on oneself. In other words, changing relationships without changing oneself is not possible. It will never work. Any leader who proposes it is either a fool or a liar. Changing relationships means opening to changing oneself. On the other hand, work on oneself will never be complete without working with others in relationships. Human beings are not created
to live in isolation, and that’s why Eastern mysticism is not a complete answer to any of the real human problems.

Now you may substitute for “work” any other word related to this process: “prayer, worship, growth, sanctification, salvation,” and on and on. All these are different words for work in a spiritual sense, work that requires both a serious, personal, interior commitment to God and God’s indwelling Spirit, and also an equal commitment to the Spirit dwelling in others—not one or the other, but both at the same time. The bottom line is there is one Spirit, one Faith, one Baptism. Divisions and conflicts belie and perhaps at times even blaspheme this unity, this oneness, that has the Spirit as its origin and binding force.

The sad truth is, as we sit on the cusp of a new millennium, we look back to two thousand years of bad example: divisions, unresolved conflicts, party spirit, and disharmony among Christians in general. Thus far the forces of nationalism, tribalism, egoism, have seemed more striking, more popular, and more effective at marshalling support for their own initiatives than the Holy Spirit of Christ.

Jesus preached the need for repentance, which means looking at life and behaving in a new way, literally, metanoia: beyond the mind you have. He called his first assistants from their fishing boats, and they followed him without a contract, without negotiations. We call this “faith.” The result of their faith was that they were able to cure every disease and every illness, just like Jesus, at least for a while. God and God’s power and God’s promises do not change. If we want a different kind of world from the one in which we find ourselves now, we must be the ones to change it, and we must be able and willing to change ourselves in the process. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
“But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an everlasting sin.”

Today’s reading accentuates the fact that Jesus really did believe that evil was a power in the world. This is not a very modern idea; often even contemporary believers find this somehow awkward or uncomfortable. However, I really don’t know how one can understand the New Testament without realizing that Jesus himself battled evil, as it were, personally, and considered his role in life to be a personal battle with evil in various forms.

Now some of the forms that evil took in his ministry would be what we would simply call “defects,” for example, blindness. That’s an evil, but it’s a physical evil. It’s a deprivation of what we normally expect to see. Eyes normally see. If they don’t, well, that’s a physical evil. But that’s really rather a superficial form of evil.

There are deeper forms of evil, the deprivation of good within human actions. If we are created to know and do the will of God and we don’t, that’s a different kind of deprivation. That’s not a deprivation that’s physical. That’s a deprivation that is more spiritual. It has to do with our wills, with our freedom. There yet are many other deprivations that affect our minds, our wills, our souls, our spirits; and in all these cases Jesus had the power to overcome them. And that is clearly affirmed throughout Scripture. But also he recognized that there was something coming against him. And in this particular case that was coming against him through the teachers of Law.
So that’s another thing we have to keep in mind, that evil is not necessarily what we think it is. Evil is not necessarily parading around as evil. In fact, St. Thomas Aquinas makes it very clear that evil always appears as good. A book by M. Scott Peck, The People of the Lie, accentuates this truth in our modern world. He says, “Churches are full of evil.” Why? Because evil always tries to hide itself. So we mustn’t think that evil is contained only in groups that promote, for example, abortion or atheism, but rather evil can be right in our very midst. And that’s what this story is about. It’s about evil in the midst of believers.

And so Jesus makes some striking statements, which you need to think about. “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” What does that mean? He is really calling on people to discern good from evil in their own experience of him in his ministry. Is what he is doing good or not? And if you could actually look at what he is doing and say that’s evil, then you have blasphemed the Holy Spirit, and you cannot be forgiven. That’s really what this says. So it puts a great deal of responsibility on every person to discern good from evil. That’s something we must work at. And certain people in this particular case receive the most severe judgment of all in the New Testament. No one receives a worse judgment. It says, “They are unforgiven. They have an everlasting sin, for they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’”
Today we celebrate the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, and we might think a few minutes about what it means. What is the conversion? First of all, Jesus preached conversion all the time, but it wasn’t something like this. St. Paul was struck by light, blinded by the light; he heard the voice of Jesus. This is, I would say, a very unique case.

But everyone who saw Jesus saw the light, but did they perceive it as the light? That is partly their own choice and partly the grace of God leading them. And what component or what part or portion is played by the individual, and what part is played by God is a mystery that only God himself knows.

Surely in St. Paul there was a certain sort of enthusiasm and dedication that was under his own control. He mentions how he was trained in the school of Gamaliel, so he was trained in rabbinic teaching. He was a very enthusiastic supporter of rabbinic teaching and the so-called “tradition of the elders,” sometimes called the Halakhah. This is eventually what led to the development of the Talmud. Logically he persecuted the Church because the Church was contrary to the Halakhah. Jesus’ teachings went contrary to the tradition of the elders. And this indicates that at least St. Paul understood the difference—St. Paul understood the difference before his conversion. He was already dedicated to God as he understood God, and he understood God within the context of the legal religion of the Halakhah, the oral Torah. That’s part of the background of who St. Paul was. Now \textit{when God comes to anybody he is always coming to that person as that person is.} We have to take that into consideration.
Secondly, St. Paul did not have the benefit that all the kinds of people who met Jesus personally had. He didn’t have that kind of benefit of seeing him in the flesh, so to speak, so his knowledge of him was impaired. In a similar way we do not see Jesus in the flesh either, so our knowledge is impaired. So we need something else, some grace from the Holy Spirit to help us make contact. But we also have the flesh and blood of the believing body of the Church that is supposed to contain the stories of Jesus.

The problem was Paul was persecuting that very body. And so Jesus speaks to him and says, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” See, that says it all right there. The question says it all. “Why are you persecuting me?” He was persecuting the Church, but Jesus identifies with the Church. And so in the world today, including ourselves, we can see Jesus through the Church, if we know how to look, if our eyes are open. Paul’s were not, so God blinded him for a while, and then opened his eyes. Do we need to be blinded before our eyes can be opened? Is that within our ability to decide? Those are questions we might meditate on for ourselves and for others as well.

God called Paul to a very extraordinary life. Some people have romanticized this, as they have romanticized so many things, but St. Paul’s life was a very difficult life. Yes, God blessed him with extraordinary experiences, but then he demanded from him an extraordinary price, a life given over to hard labor for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus said to all of his disciples, “What you have received as a gift, you need to give as a gift.”
Some people like to work crossword puzzles. Some people like brain-tease games. Jesus preferred to provoke thoughts of a very practical nature, and this is called “the way of wisdom.” Jesus was a wisdom teacher. A wisdom teacher doesn’t necessarily give information. A wisdom teacher stimulates people’s thinking.

Here Jesus says, “Anyone who has ears to hear, ought to hear.” Well, why did he say something like this? He told them, “Take care what you hear.” What’s this all about? It’s about understanding life and understanding God and understanding ourselves. If we have ears, we ought to use them! If we have hearts, we ought to use them! If we have minds, we ought to use them! We are not given a blueprint. We are born without instructions. We are supposed to figure it out, and it takes listening with our ears and with our hearts. It takes deep pondering.

Be careful of what you hear! Watch what you hear. Pay attention to what you are hearing. You can fill your mind up with so much trash; and by that I don’t mean simply entertainment, TV, newspapers, but even religious trash: thoughts, feelings, ideas that are not really inspired by God. They may have a certain good will in them, but they are really not going anywhere. Be careful what you hear. You are responsible for what you hear.

Truth is not a package that comes from somewhere else into your mind! You construct it. Every day you are constructing truth. Jesus says, “The truth will make you free,” but only the truth will make you free—not just any version of it! Today we talk a lot about the right of conscience, and that, of course, is a longstanding tradition in our
Church. Of course we have our right of conscience, and of course we have to do what we think is right. **But what is it we think is right? Where did we get that?** Be careful what you hear. **Be careful how you construct your version of truth,** because if you construct a poor version, then the only guidance you are going to have is a poor guidance. **So you will be following your conscience, but it will be very poorly formed.** Be careful.

“The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you.” This is a principle. It’s a very important one to know. In a certain sense we determine—and this is what he is trying to say—**we determine how God deals with us by the way we deal with everybody else.** Be careful what you hear.

“To the one who has, more will be given.” What’s he speaking of? Understanding. Understanding grows a little bit by a little bit by a little bit. But **if you never have any or the understanding you have is actually incorrect, then what do you have? Nothing.**

“From the one who has not, even what he has”—or imagines he has—“will be taken away.”
Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas’ entire life was based on one principle that may sound odd to us, but it’s the principle that the Catholic Faith is completely reasonable. Now today people might take exception to that statement or simply not be able to understand it at all. The word he actually used was “rationalis.”

Well, things have changed since St. Thomas’ day, especially what we consider rational, but perhaps not for the better. Today the word “rational” or “reasonable” refers often to something that everyone can understand. For example, a scientist if he is going to prove something, has to prove it in such a way that other people can replicate his proof, do the experiments just as he did. And if other people can’t do it, well, then it’s not proved. Now maybe it’s true that not everybody will understand it, but surely everybody in that field should be able to do the same thing and get the same results. And this has given a certain sort of flavor to the way we think in modern times. Everybody should be able to get it.

But what St. Thomas talked about was something different. He was talking about the fact that what God reveals to the prophets, to the holy ones, his own disclosure of himself, is completely compatible with everything we can learn about reality, and when we are learning about reality we are learning about God, the Creator. And this should be a seamless garment of understanding. And that’s what he tried to do: develop a seamless garment of understanding so that everything that we learn about, from Scripture,
from revelation, from our own studies, from our own experience, all would fit together in one whole.

that was the wonderful thing that he gave to the Church, this sense that everything is compatible. From time to time we have forgotten about it, or we have mistaken what is revealed with what is not revealed—we have mistaken that too. But in the long run this is our goal, this is our vision, to see everything together in life. And this is what drives what we call “Catholic education.” Catholic education is driven with this idea that there can be no fissure between the revelation of God and what we learn through our own powers of reason.

And that does not change—the vision, that is. It still beckons us to greater and greater endeavors in the field of research, in science, in everything. We need to bring all of this together and present a whole picture of one God who created everything: visible and invisible, material and spiritual, one beautiful creation that speaks the truth in many different ways, but the one truth, a truth that is embodied totally in Jesus Christ who is the Word of God incarnate. That was Thomas’ dream, Thomas’ vision, and it will remain with us as a great gift. We honor him and his vision.
“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

I never tire of reading this gospel passage and reflecting on its meaning. It has been used and abused. Sometimes it’s used to say that a person has to become a Christian in order to arrive at God, but that’s not what it says. The one who is speaking is described in the Prologue of this gospel as “the light that enlightens everyone.” That is the speaker. The Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ is the light that enlightens everyone—everyone who wants to be enlightened, anyway.

This light is given to us to shine. As Jesus mentioned many times, he said, “Do you get a lamp to put it under a bushel basket or under a bed?” No, lamps are meant to shine, and we are all called to be lights in the world reflecting the light, which is God. That is our mission; that is the mission of human nature itself. But as we know, the world became full of darkness through our own choices, and therefore God came to our aid by being the light in the person of Christ, embodied, enfleshed, in our own humanity.

Now we might agree or we might fumble along with Thomas. In today’s reading he is confused. Jesus says, “Where I am going you know the way.” And Thomas says, “No, Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” How easy it is for us to be confused about our role in the world, our role in life, as if our importance is somewhere else or doing something else or being somewhere else. No, the goal is actually being right here, right now, the light that God created us to be. And that’s the way; that’s the way to God, and that is Christ. That is the Dharma that Eastern mystics look for. That is the Dharma. That’s the Tao that Chinese philosophers have thought about for centuries. That is the Tao, the Way, as living as light in the world because we are made in the image and the likeness of God. And we can do this because in spite of the woundedness that we have all suffered by living in this world, by inheriting sin from our own humanity, we are nonetheless enabled by Christ’s own Spirit to become what we are created to become.
Now **Jim** was one of those people who really had an enthusiasm for being. He loved life. He did not love the things that most people go after in life. He lived modestly, but he loved deeply and touched people deeply. He was the light, the light of God shining through, refracting through, his own personality. **He was, if you want to say it, a conduit of the grace of God, and so we are all called to be that.**

When the body of James came into the narthex I sprinkled it with the water from our font. That’s the font of Baptism. In Baptism we are given a new life. It’s a life we need to nurture. It’s a life we can forget about, put on the backburner, allow to take care of itself. But that’s a terrible mistake. Jim did not do that. He put **the life he was given in Baptism** on the front burner. That was **a priority for him**, nurturing that life and living that life and sharing that life with others. He was ordained a deacon, but the things he did he did not do because he was ordained a deacon. What he did and what he was came right out of his Baptism, out of the rebirth by water and Spirit that we have all been given. And so in a certain way I think that **Jim was calling us perhaps to greater fidelity, perhaps to greater authenticity, to this pledge that God has given to us in our Baptism.**

As we lay him to rest, we need to be very grateful for what he was and what he gave us of himself. St. Paul warns us. He says, “Grieve, but don’t grieve like those who have no hope.” Indeed, the new life of grace begun in Baptism brings not only a sense of **trust** enabling us to live in this sometimes very dark world, sometimes very violent world, sometimes very scary world, with confidence, but also it brings us hope that it will not always be such; we will not always be such. **God in Christ began a new creation.** It is our **service to one another and our commitment to the gospel that will enable our humanity to grow beyond the darkness that grips it now.** The world will see a better day, partly because Jim Donahue lived here, and partly because you are living here. We will carry on shining forth the light of Christ. Thank you, Jim!
This section of the gospel is perhaps one of the best known and probably best loved sections of the New Testament, but for that very reason we might just read it over without thinking about it.

In the ancient world men of letters would gather together groups and discuss the meaning of happiness. And what Jesus is doing today is sharing with his disciples his ideas of happiness. Now in the ancient world, as today, there was a fairly wide divergence of opinion. Maybe you should try this yourself. Gather everybody at home around the table and ask each person to say what he or she thinks happiness is. You may be surprised; you may be delighted; you may be disappointed, and it is possible you may be terrified. People have very different ideas of what happiness is. And, of course, life is nothing but an ongoing quest for happiness.

From Jesus’ point of view, and from the philosophers’ point of view, it’s important that we find out what it is. But when we start looking at happiness we are actually looking at ourselves. Who are we? What are we like? That will determine what happiness is for us—the reason for the wide divergence of opinion. Our ideas about happiness shape our choices, because they define what we are pursuing, but in another way they are the result of our choices because we form habits and it’s unpleasant and sometimes impossible to break them.

If you remember last week in the reading Jesus told his disciples to expect deep changes in themselves. Now he wants to goad them on to thinking about happiness in a new and perhaps astonishing way. By changing the way they looked at happiness they
would change the way they lived. It stands to reason: **change what you are pursuing and your life will be different.**

As we look around at God’s creation we can see that **all creatures are designed to pursue their own well-being, and this is not by our design; it’s by God’s design.** This is true of cats, dogs, gorillas, mosquitoes, everything! When a mosquito alights on you and sucks your blood, it’s for the well-being of that mosquito and her offspring. Of course mosquitoes aren’t evolute enough to be grateful; they don’t stop to say thanks!

For Jesus the well-being of any creature is dependent on the well-being of the **whole of creation.** Thus he uses expressions like “vine and branches.” You are just a branch. You cannot be healthy if the vine isn’t healthy, and your health is all part of the vine, and apart from the vine you cannot even live. This is a profound idea about happiness. Therefore happiness in Jesus’ sense **excluded all forms of violence,** because violence toward some other part of the creation would involve every part of it. Vengeance: the Old Testament says, “‘Vengeance is mine,’ saith the Lord.” **No part of the creation can have vengeance against another part.** It won’t work. **Belligerence, even when provoked**—that’s what he is saying in this series of sayings.

On the other hand, **happiness does not exclude, to our surprise, suffering or discomfort or loss or even hunger and thirst, if it’s for righteousness.** No philosopher ever saw things that way! But Jesus’ vision is the revelation, the disclosure, of a realm that he called the **“kingdom of heaven”** that is not available to our senses. And yet at **the same time it is ever-present and available to the eyes of faith.**
“Then the man went off and began to proclaim in the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him; and all were amazed.”

This story is about the ministry of Jesus leaving the confines of Israel. The Decapolis were the ten cities populated by the Hellenistic Greeks. This man is not a Jew. He was living in the area of the Gerasenes; the Gerasenes were not part of Israel, so it’s really a foray out of his normal place. Jesus said the he was really sent to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, but from time to time he makes a movement away from that. Here is one case.

Now what we have here is a man who is not in his right mind, who is, in fact, extremely self-destructive; but Jesus heals him, delivers his from his ailments, whatever they are. They are pictured here as demons—actually that word is never used—“unclean spirits.” But the other point is that, of course, the unclean spirits rush into the swine. Now that’s kind of an odd reference, which I don’t know what it means. But I know that one philosopher, Bertrand Russell, said that after reading this he decided there was no more reason to even consider Christ as a good person because he destroyed all those swine and that was not nice. But, of course, you have to keep in mind that from a Jewish point of view swine are unclean anyway, so that’s where unclean spirits belong—in unclean animals. It would not seem to them that this was something bad. It would seem he is cleaning up the whole area: he is getting rid of the spirits and getting rid of the swine.

But it’s not a Jewish area, and that’s the point. So Jesus does heal beyond the confines of even Judaism. So it’s already a proclamation of the universality of the gospel and the freedom of the gospel.

Then finally, this man wants to follow Jesus, but he says no. So the call to follow him is not a universal call. It’s for those who are chosen. Why doesn’t he want him to follow him? We don’t know why, but he says, “Go home.” And sometimes that’s really where we belong—and that’s all I’ll say!
“Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.”

Jesus was often using comparisons derived from nature to explain some of the mysteries of life. We can learn how they apply; they are sometimes surprising. For example, right now if we take a walk through our streets, we can see many trees that may appear dead, but they are not; they are dormant. When spring comes they will burst into life. But there may be some trees that are dead, and they will not burst into life. We cannot always tell by appearances, especially first appearances.

On the other hand, Jesus encouraged his disciples that they could not remain dormant. And there are many Scriptures that instruct people to wake up, to bear fruit. And this mandate, you might say, is the very essence of the gospel, that really most people on earth are like dormant trees, not really giving fruit but capable of it. So we can think about the meaning of that.

Connected but different is this particular image about the grain of wheat. A grain of wheat can be ground into flour and serve as food, but it will have even more power if it is planted into the earth and becomes the base of a new plant. Indeed, we don’t think of a grain of wheat as actually alive anymore than we think of an acorn as being alive, and yet it is full of the power of life. And that’s the image he wants us to think about in terms of our physical death. In our physical death we see something pass. But his point is we don’t know what kind of life we have by merely looking at the outside. We are really all acorns or grains of wheat. When we are planted we will become something different. That’s what death is; it’s a planting and, therefore, an unleashing of true life.

When the body of Barry was brought into the narthex I sprinkled it with holy water from our font because it is our belief that in Baptism we are given new life, that the font
of Baptism is the font of rebirth by water and Spirit to eternal life. When we compare eternal life to life in the body we are comparing two very different things, just as we compare the value of a grain of wheat to a whole plant. One is merely potential toward the other. And so that’s how we have to think of our present day. Our present day is potential for something.

- Will it bear fruit? That is largely up to our choices.
- Will we allow what is necessary for our own rebirth?
- Will we cooperate with the gift that God gives us in Baptism?
- Will we awaken to the power that is within us and bear fruit for God, for his kingdom?

These are questions that we cannot answer in general. They are different for each person.

But the gospel is proclaimed with a great hope that we can, and that even though some people’s lives seem perhaps even insignificant they are actually significant in the sight of God, that our choices are imbued with meaning, not by ourselves or by our world or by our culture but by God, and under our very noses all kinds of miracles are happening on a regular basis. We don’t perceive them. But life is coming, and it’s a life that bears itself into eternity through our cooperation with the grace that comes from God, and this enables us to be light and to reflect light in our world.

I personally did not know Barry, but you did. I cannot speak about him, but you can. I’m sure your presence here is a testimony, of a kind, to the fact that he was light for you, that somehow he touched your life with something more than just himself. We live here on earth only for a time, and Jesus assures us, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.” Insofar as we bear fruit, insofar as we are light, insofar as we serve God, we are honored by him and served by him. This does not take away the troubles of life. It does not take away the griefs of life. It does not save us from the hour of temptation, but it is given to us as a pledge and a promise.
“He gave strict orders that no one should know this and said that she should be given something to eat.”

Now I admit the whole idea of not letting people know something like this is a bit absurd. There is no way you could keep something like this quiet, but most scholars believe that is Mark, the evangelist, adding that part for some reason, a literary reason, a dramatic reason, perhaps.

But here we have this story of two healings, and they are both about faith. They both show that the opposite of faith is fear. Now in the first case, which in a sense is the second, the second one introduced, but the first case is the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage. She has utter trust, and she touches Jesus, and she is healed. Here this indicates that there is something even material, quasi-physical, in the very body of Jesus that he feels leave, some healing power or something like that. She is cured, and then she is afraid! So first she is faithful, then she is afraid, and Jesus says, “Well, your faith has really healed you, so there is no reason for you to be afraid. Now go in peace, and be cured.”

In the second case we have a girl who has apparently died, and, again, it’s all a matter of faith. Jesus tells Jairus, “What is needed is trust.” This translation is a little different, but it means that: what is needed is trust. In the face of problems fear is almost natural, but Jesus is saying, “What comes naturally is not necessarily what is right.” Something has to override our natural fears and trepidations.
This is where faith comes in, and faith in this sense is a decision. We can use faith in different ways. Faith is a gift—yes, it is. Faith is some power we have to enable us to believe certain things. Yes, but that is not what is being spoken of here. It is a decision to put your trust outside of yourself. And that is something we have to constantly do. It’s not believing that something is true. It’s not about creeds. It’s not about thoughts. It’s not about ideas. It’s really about what is the source of my life. My life is not rooted in me. It’s rooted in something beyond me—in God. I have to constantly remind myself of that and place myself in God’s protection. That is the faith that is being spoken of here.

The Bible has many different facets of faith. This is a very important one, almost a foundational one because when we are talking about salvation, we are talking about our well-being in the fullest sense of the word. Salvation involves healing to some degree on a physical level, but much more the whole of our being. Now our well-being for it really to be thriving, it has to be rooted in God, the source of life. So that’s a matter of our choice, and we have to constantly make it: to let God be God, and not to specify what would make us happy, but to let God lift us up in his way.
Today the gospel accentuates the power of human freedom. The apostles were given power over demons, whatever that is supposed to mean—evil grasping at the mind of people. We can see a lot of examples in our history and in our world of the power of evil grasping people’s minds. Well, the apostles had power over that. The apostles had a power to heal many diseases, those who were sick.

But they did not have the power to overcome the will of people if they chose to reject them. We have to keep this in mind because we are all apostles sent into the world. We are sent to bring the good news, but not everyone will accept it. Jesus knew that ahead of time. We can be empowered to overcome certain forms of evil, but one thing we cannot do is overcome free will. Free will is at the very center of God’s plan for his creation and for the kingdom he is gathering, the kingdom he is creating anew through his Son, Jesus Christ. And this requires voluntary acceptance. This requires voluntary welcoming. The power of God will never violate the freedom of people to choose or to reject him. And so Jesus says, “When people reject you, when they don’t listen to you, just shake the dust off your cloak, off your clothes, in testimony against them.”

One of the things that we have a hard time dealing with in life is rejection, but one of the central events in the history of the world is rejection: rejection of God, rejection of love. This will never be overcome, in a sense, as part of reality. The Church needs to learn also how to deal with rejection, not only rejection on a personal level where we are personally rejected by someone—and that’s painful enough—but on a more cosmic level: the rejection of God’s word by a world that is capable of receiving it. There is no answer to it; there is no reason for it. It’s fundamentally irrational and therefore beyond explanation, but it’s part of what we are, part of the world we know. The apostles had to deal with it, and we have to deal with it.
Corruption in Society

Today’s reading of the beheading of John the Baptist is a picture into the society of that time, and what we can see is—the picture is very clear—the word of man triumphs over the word of God; the promise of man is more important than the promise of God; the law of man trumps the law of God. This is a biblical way of talking about the utter perversion of a society.

We have to look at the fact that in the Bible God doesn’t simply deal with individuals; he deals with whole peoples. Some peoples are completely unwilling to respond to God, and become worthless from the standpoint of salvation history. They are not part of it. They exclude themselves from it. That’s really the meaning of the ancient story in the Book of Genesis of Sodom and Gomorrah. Their societies are so wholly given over to their own idea of what they want to do, totally apart from the divine plan, the divine direction, that they become worthless. They become of no use to God whatsoever and are totally destroyed.

Well, this is a similar situation, similar only in the sense that it is pervasive. Here is a society, the society of Herod, that has completely lost its moorings. Herod makes a promise. He is afraid of being seen by others as unfaithful to his own promise. He does not care about being unfaithful to God or to God’s law, and so he takes an innocent life. The fact that no one even protests—that is all part of the story. You can draw your own conclusions about our society!
Knowing No Boundaries

Fourth Week in Ordinary Time
Saturday, February 5, 2005
8:00 a.m.  Heb 13:15-17, 20-21;  Mk 6:30-34 (St. Agatha)
(Enthusiasm versus discernment)

“When Jesus disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

This description of the crowd is a description that fits human nature itself. “Sheep without a shepherd”—sheep are of their nature wandering. They wander all over the place. They do not know boundaries; they do not recognize boundaries. Not all animals are like this. Some animals are very territorial—not sheep!

There is a very clear reason why the evangelist and Jesus himself used expressions of sheep for people. We have a way of wandering, not respecting boundaries, not knowing where we belong. And in this particular case, these people didn’t know really what they should even ask for. They came in such great numbers that the apostles did not have an opportunity to eat. That’s another example of not knowing boundaries! They didn’t know when they should stop, just like sheep don’t know when they should stop going—looking for grass. They are driven by their hunger or by their instinct, by their want. So are people driven by want, driven by desire. But it’s blind; it’s a blind desire.

Jesus’ solution to the apostles’ problem of people not knowing any boundaries was to remove them to a different place. There are times when we need to move ourselves, our minds, our attention, from the world around us, because it’s dominated by people who have no discernment. And when you live with people with no discernment, you are constantly being attacked, aggrieved, invaded. This is the experience of Jesus and...
the apostles. So if you want to live a disciplined life, a life centered on the Spirit, you have to learn how to go to a deserted place where there can be discernment.

Every believer has to learn this, and for some it’s very difficult. Their enthusiasm takes over. Enthusiasm is not necessarily good. Read Monsignor Ronald Knox’s book called *Enthusiasm*. It’s not necessarily a blessing, even if it has all the trappings of holiness. **We need discernment more than enthusiasm.** That’s the work of the Spirit. It’s something that goes beyond the human mind, but it involves the human mind more than the emotions, so it’s a transcending movement. That’s what this story is about, about how Jesus and the early Church had to **learn to work on this planet in the present circumstances**—and the Church today is in the same boat!
“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”

It is very clear from today’s reading that Jesus called his followers to a very important task—and I underline important! Perhaps in the name of misbegotten humility Christians have not always appreciated how important they are. This is not the self-importance of false pride, but the importance that derives from God’s own plan and God’s own choice and, therefore, the true pride that we rightly possess, or should possess, in our calling and in our status in the sight of God. Jesus could not be clearer—it’s very clear in the New Testament—that salvation is not a matter of mere passive acceptance, although it seems that many people only bring that sort of passive acceptance to the table. For Jesus salvation was a matter of active collaboration, and he called his disciples—all of them—to active collaboration in this work which has its origin in God, whose purpose it is to bring completion to the creation and allow us to be what we are created to be, which is images and likenesses of God.

First Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth.” Salt is a preservative even now. It’s in a lot of your prepared foods. Too much of it isn’t good for you, but it is a preservative. And when Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth,” he is saying you have a role to play in preserving the world and society. There are Christians today who think that their role has nothing to do with society. They think that true Christians are going to be raptured away from the earth any day now. You may have seen bumper stickers saying such things. That is not what Jesus teaches. It’s utterly false from his point of view. Jesus’ followers have a role to play in preserving life. The Church has done this many times in history. It’s gathered together the remnant of fallen and decayed civilizations as it built up civilization. That is our work. We are not called to be otherworldly totally. We have to have our eyes set on the world that will not perish—true, but meanwhile we work now to preserve what is perishing.

Not all the apostles or evangelists ever got this message quite right, and for good reason. Judaism, the Judaism of Jesus’ day, often regarded the world with indifference and even hostility. But Jesus did not; that’s an important point. Jesus did not regard the world with indifference or hostility. Jesus was, in fact, very different from all the people around him, and his thinking was very different from the thinking of those who trained him and taught him. He was—let us remember—the Word of God, the message of God, incarnate—body and soul.

The second image Jesus uses today is light. “You are the light of the world.” This is a great responsibility. Not only are we to promote the life and preservation of the world around us, but we should be the leading light in that world, in that society. There was a time when this was true. In certain places in the world most leaders were Christians, and the word of God was an important component in the way they looked at the purpose of society, the laws of society, values: what is good, what is bad. But this has not been
true for some time, at least in the West in the countries that used to be dominated by Christian values.

While the world this evening will rivet its eyes on the contest called the “Super Bowl,” we need to know that the great rivalry in life, the great contest in life, the competition that really matters to God is not the Super Bowl or any other athletic event but, rather, it is the battle of ideas, the contest of values, that direct human activity and give shape to the world as we make it to be, that determine how the world turns out. This is the real contest. This is the “Super, Super Bowl!” And it takes place in the minds and the hearts of all of the citizens of the world. And Jesus’ followers are called to be light in that very contest. The outcome of this contest determines the outcome of life itself, namely, whether the world achieves its destiny and purpose or not, and this has not been decided. Let me emphasize that again: this has not been decided. We know that Jesus and the saints have fulfilled their purpose. We do not know about the rest of us. We do not know about the rest of the world. It is not assured. It remains up to us to decide how we will turn out, and it is up to us to influence everyone else. That’s evangelizing.

There can be no doubt about this: those whose ideas about life are false and twisted—and there are many of them in the world today—these people are losers. And if the world follows them, the world will be led to defeat. This is very possible. God has given freedom to the human will. Now these losers may not seem to be losers right now; at the present moment they may seem to be victors. But we have to start looking at life through the viewpoint of the final judgment. Shakespeare said, “All’s well that ends well.” But we could say also, “All’s ill that ends ill!” And how will it end? We have a preview of the end in Jesus himself. We know that those who live for God will reign in glory.

In the contest of life it does not seem that the teams are evenly matched. Hatred looks more forceful than love. Some philosophers actually say that. Nietzsche did. “Hatred is more tonic,” he said. Self-love looks more attractive than self-surrender. Self-will seems to be freer than obedience, but this is only because our vision is obscured by darkness. And the point Jesus made in so many different ways is the darkness has no power against the light. When the sun rises night has no choice except to recede, and so it shall ever be.
Today we begin the reading of the Book of Genesis; and of course we are aware of the fact that this is poetry, but it’s poetry with a message.

The easiest way to understand the message of the Book of Genesis is to contrast it to the message of the mythology of its own time. When the Book of Genesis was written the nations, meaning those outside of the chosen people, had stories about the origin of the world. What’s common to all of them is that the origin of the world was seen as the outcome of a conflict, of a war if you will, between those forces which were the gods, the many gods of the pagan pantheon.

The inspired story is different. In the inspired story the world is the result not of any war or any conflict. There is no multiplicity at the beginning, nothing but the unity of the Word of God. The Word itself is creative and constructs the world as it is with meaning and order and harmony. That’s the underlying point: meaning, order, harmony. That’s fundamental. Therefore, disorder and disharmony come from somewhere else. They are not part of the original plan. They do not really belong to the creation. They are intrusions. Later we find out the intrusions come from a rivalry set up by human will versus divine will. That is explained later, but originally there is harmony. There is peace. There is beauty. There is order.

We know the world is still not that way. This is now the work of redemption, to restore the peace, the harmony, and the order. We might just for a moment refer to certain modern ideas in which the cosmos simply emerges, as it were, by accident. Which is that more like—the first or the second? We might ponder that.
Today’s gospel reading is perhaps one of the key readings in understanding the conflicts that develop between Jesus and the teachers of Israel. It surrounds the value of the tradition he is speaking of here. The rabbis claimed that the tradition really was of divine origin; it went back to Mt. Sinai and the prophet Moses. They were the interpreters of this tradition. It was oral; it was not written down. They called it the “Oral Torah.”

The word “Torah” is also used for the Law of God; it means literally “instruction.” The first five books of what we call the “Old Testament”—they called it the “Tenach”—first five books are called the “Torah.” They contain the Decalogue and they contain six hundred and thirty-one written laws.

Now Jesus in his teachings never teaches against the Tenach, the written Law, either the Decalogue or the six hundred thirty-one written stipulations. But he is not overly concerned about the multiplicity of laws either. In fact, he says that the whole Law and the Prophets can be summarized in two little laws: “Love God with your whole heart, mind, and soul”—that’s Deuteronomy, Chapter 6—secondly, “Love your neighbor as yourself”—that’s Leviticus, Chapter 19. Well, the other rabbis did not agree with him! They thought every single one of these laws was important, and not only the written ones but the oral ones. Well, here you see Jesus dismisses the oral tradition altogether; that’s mere human tradition.
Now before we go on further, we should realize that this tendency to create traditions is a very human tendency. We have to be very well aware of our capacity to do the same thing. How many people today will run out and get these “paczkies,” or whatever you call them, these rolls that are made on Shrove Tuesday, and religiously consume them? How many people will come tomorrow for ashes, but what does that mean? What is the meaning of ashes? This is a human tradition! Does it mean that we are now becoming more aware of our mortality and more dedicated to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Well, hopefully that’s what it means, but I can assure you it won’t mean that for a lot of people! They are just going to get them! They will just come and get them! That’s a human tradition!

People can become very, very focused on these traditions and ignore the real meaning of the law of God. We have to understand what Jesus is trying to do. He is trying to awaken in people a real sense of the divine. Religion doesn’t always do that. Sometimes religious practices almost do the opposite. They almost vaccinate us against the divine. So it would be a very wonderful way to begin Lent to go over this gospel maybe two or three times and apply it to oneself.
Triumphalism Up in Ashes

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Ash Wednesday February 9, 2005 7:30 p.m.
Jl 2:12-18; 2 Cor 5:20—6:2; Mt 6:1-6, 16-18 (Meaning of the Rite of Imposition of Ashes)

Today I would like to focus on the Rite of Imposition of Ashes. These ashes are not just any ashes. They are not from paper or from a log fire. They are from palms, the palms that we used to celebrate and recall Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem a few days before his death.

Indeed these palms are very much connected to his death in this sense, that the people acclaimed him Messiah precisely because they believed that he was about to lead them into a war with their enemies. We may believe that fanaticism is of recent origin, but it is not. Religious fanaticism has lived in the Middle East for centuries, and not only in the Middle East. It is associated with the idea that God is going to do our bidding and put us in a place of honor. It is a belief widely held at the time of Christ by the high priests and by the populace as well. They believed that was the role, the assignment, of the Messiah. He would come and he would reestablish their own national power, throwing off the army of the occupier.

This was an assignment Jesus declined because he was a man of peace. It cost him his life. It led to his betrayal and crucifixion and death and resurrection as well. Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus is the Messiah, but he is also Prince of Peace, and he chose to die rather than to kill.

So the ashes of our palms are the ashes of our triumphalism. They are the ashes of our idolatry, our desire for God to be remade in our image and likeness and to do our bidding and to carry out our will. These ashes represent the end in God’s sight of all forms of violence in his name.
If we are sincere and honest we will recognize that our Church and Christians in general have continued to use God for various reasons in various ways. This rite will become very powerful in each of us if we make it into a rite of separation from that terrible tendency to pervert God’s purposes to our own. We have had state religions in the history of the Church. Today Europe is almost without faith in many countries—and no wonder! When a religion or a faith is nothing more than a department of a government, it cannot hold the loyalty of anyone whose loyalty is worthwhile.

So we come to this rite for freedom to serve God as Jesus did, not for any other reason, not to get God’s help in doing what we want, not to become more successful, more prosperous—although these are good things—but to become more faithful and more obedient to God’s will for us, to become purer and more peaceful in our souls. With it we can really reflect God’s will in our lives. We receive the ashes to let go of all that burns within us that is not of God.
“The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

You will notice that Jesus never says that he is going to be rejected by the people or the Jews or the nation, but by three groups, very specific groups: the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes. These are three different forms of authority, and authority can kill the spirit in three different ways.

The easiest one to understand is the third one—scribes. The scribe is the one who repeats the past exactly. There is never any growth in the spirit of a scribe. The question is, what does it say?—not what does it mean—but what does it say? And this kills the spirit. Jesus put it this way: “The letter kills; the spirit gives life.” The scribe doesn’t have the spirit.

This is not simply a group of people in the past; it could be us. It could be the way we approach the word of God.

The second group is the chief priests. The priests were in charge of the Temple. Temples are important; they are places of worship. Jesus honored the Temple as a house of prayer, but it didn’t always remain a house of prayer. It became a center of power and profit for the privileged class of priests, who benefited inordinately from what went on in the Temple. Not only did it fill their pockets, but it also was the basis for their political desires for power and control and what we call “hegemony.”

Authority can do that too. It has happened in our Church when the men who were in charge of shepherding the people fleeced the people. There are many writings of past saints who have said exactly as much. We can see people in authority who want to use the ecclesiastical influence they have for something else. This is something that kills
the spirit. This is the role of the chief priests. And in this day of the laity it could be the laity who are the chief priests, who misuse the Church for some other goal or end.

But Jesus’ greatest problem was with the first group, the elders. The elders claimed that they were inspired by God, that their teachings were rooted in a tradition that went back to Moses. And Jesus said, “That isn’t true. What you are teaching is just human opinion, human tradition. You nullify the law of God; you replace it with human tradition.” They said, “This is not human tradition. This is divine tradition. This is from Moses.” On the other hand, Jesus claimed to be speaking for the Father; and they said, “Oh, no, that’s not the Father.” Either they said, “That’s just your opinion,” or they said, “That’s from the devil.” So this is the greatest of all clashes.

And this is a clash for which there is no human authority. Each individual has to decide what is God really saying. If we believe the wrong prophet, it’s to our detriment. No one else can prove to us that that’s the wrong prophet. We have to decide that for ourselves.

- How do we hear the voice of God?
- Do we hear the voice of God reverberating through the teachings of Jesus, or do we find that somehow irrelevant?
- Do we think we have light different from what is given in the life and ministry of Christ? We each have to make a commitment to how do we hear God speak to us.
- What is our criterion for belief?—and no one can give it to us.

And that’s why Jesus said, “He who does not gather with me, scatters.”
Right Attitude toward Fasting    Friday after Ash Wednesday    February 11, 2005    7:00 a.m.    Is 58:1-9a;    Mt 9:14-15    (Our Lady of Lourdes)    (Fast to support prayer)

Today we see that Jesus shared the ambivalence of Isaiah in regard to fasting. Recall that there are three great works of the Law. One is prayer. One is fasting. One is almsgiving. The Church kept all three and called them “penance.”

But in regard to fasting Jesus himself and Isaiah the prophet had a certain ambivalent attitude. If you look at Isaiah, from where Jesus got a lot of his teachings or, you might say, background, Isaiah has an ambivalent attitude toward fasting and sacrifice. They are very similar. In fasting we give up food; in sacrifice we give up food. In sacrifice there is a formal destruction of food by fire, pouring out of blood, which has a certain symbolism to it. In fasting we simply don’t eat.

The problem that Isaiah had with these two practices is that he believed that the people thought that because they were sacrificing or because they were fasting that they were doing something that made God happy, precisely because they were depriving themselves, and that, therefore, God somehow owed them something. That’s what is being criticized in today’s first reading—this mentality. It isn’t the practice as much as the mentality behind it. “Oh, you think because you fast now God is supposed to do something extra for you!” That’s not the right attitude. So it’s not so much the practice as the meaning behind it that is being criticized by Isaiah.

When we fast we fast for our benefit, not for God’s benefit! We are not doing something for God. God isn’t happy because we are miserable. We fast really to improve our minds; that’s the true reason for fasting. Fasting is supposed to help us focus our attention. In an odd way, in a physical way, fasting elevates us. The reasons
for this are being discovered by modern neuroscience, where our minds are connected to our brains and all the chemistry of our bodies. Fasting has a beneficial affect, helping us to focus. **So we fast for our own benefit.**

In a similar way, sacrifices are meant for an expression of gratitude. We are not really giving God anything he doesn’t already have. **We are expressing gratitude in sacrifices.** So it’s very important that when we practice fasting and sacrifice, we understand the right reason for it and have the right attitude toward it.

When Jesus went for forty days he really went to pray, and fasting was a byproduct of the fact that he was praying. That’s a good way to think about it. Prayer really should be first in our mind. We want to pray; **we fast to support our prayer**—not just fasting for its own sake—it doesn’t have a sake!
The readings of the First Sunday of Lent bring us face-to-face with the issues of sin and temptation in our lives. They are clearly different, but they are related. Human life on earth involves freedom and, therefore, choice. Eventually our choices crystallize, and we can only grow toward the goal we have chosen, but first we must choose the goal.

Temptation is the potential to go astray in choosing both our goals and the means to those goals. The basic nature of temptation is deception. Jesus refers to a “father of lies.” The gospel refers to the “tempter.” We need to grow out of childish ideas and images of the devil while holding to the substance of the idea: namely, the presence of an intelligent and cunning deceiver impinging on our minds and judgments.

The basic difference between Jesus and our first parents, portrayed in the first reading, is that Jesus believed in his Father’s love, and our first parents did not. Their sin, which influenced the entire history of our race, was a sin of distrust, distrust in God’s love. They believed the insinuation of the serpent that God did not really want them to thrive, prosper, and grow in knowledge. They believed that they could want more for themselves than God did. Have you ever found yourself in their shoes? I believe it is very easy to believe this lie: that we can want more for ourselves than God does—it is God who stands in our way! Consequently they made themselves rivals of God, and hence the history of the world.

Jesus tries in every possible way to end that rivalry and to show a different way of looking at life. He said, “The truth will make you free.” His life on earth was a life of truth countering deception, truth countering the blandishments that can so easily attract and win us over. Note, Jesus was not tempted to self-indulgence or sensuality or living apart from the law, which are the things people usually think of as sins.

This gospel is meant to arrest our attention and to get us to rethink what we even think of as sin. Jesus’ temptations all had to do with power. Now you may say, “Well, that doesn’t apply to me. I don’t have any power.” Oh, yes, you do! We are all made in the image and likeness of God, and we have power. Perhaps one of our sins is that we don’t recognize it. We allow it to lie fallow, unused, like the talent buried in the soil that created such a stern rebuke in the Parable of the Talents. The real issue is, What do we do with our power? How do we use it, or how do we misuse it, or how do we abuse it?

Matthew gives us some great insights into what temptation really is, insights I don’t think we would ever come to on our own. We need to think about what they mean.

- For example, how is turning stones into bread, sin? Why is that a temptation to sin?
- How is trusting that God will save us if we jump off a temple, sin? It sounds like blind faith. Is blind faith sinful?
How is wanting all the goods things that God has created in the world sinful? If God created them and they are good and we desire them because they are good, why would that be sinful? These are important questions.

To answer the first one, we have to observe something: that it’s false love and false charity to do something for someone that they could do for themselves. We are not helpless. We have power. We can do for ourselves, and we can do for others, and we are obliged to. We are put on earth to do that. It would have been wrong for Jesus to turn stones into bread because we are perfectly capable of baking our own bread! It’s a big process. It involves planting and nurturing and harvesting and milling and baking and distributing. It’s a big process feeding the hungry, but we can do it! It is not Jesus’ role to do it for us. It would not have been a proper use of his power.

Secondly, it is false faith to rely on God to make up for our own imprudence, our own lack of shrewdness. Jumping off the parapet of the Temple is totally lacking in shrewdness. And Jesus lamented the fact that the children of light, meaning basically good people, the children of light lacked shrewdness. The children of this age, meaning materialistic people, egoistic people, seem to have a lot of shrewdness—but not the children of light. What a shame! That’s not faith—throwing ourselves down and expecting God to pick up the pieces.

Lastly, desiring the good things of life surely is not a sin, not in our understanding of creation. It is in Buddhism, incidentally. In Buddhism desire itself is the root of all evil—not in our understanding, not in the view of the Bible. But it is a sin to hope in empty promises, and that’s what this temptation really was. “Worship me!” If the devil is the “father of lies,” worshiping the devil means pushing God out of the picture; and that means pushing truth out of the picture. That means putting at the center of our lives something that is false, and, practically speaking, it often involves nothing more than worshiping ourselves and our priorities and our preferences and our opinions.

Matthew intends his readers to understand that these are the real temptations that every man or woman who aspires to a life with God will face. Lent is a time the Church gives us to review how we are doing, not with our small plans like getting by, but with the big plan revealed in Christ, the plan God has for all of us to become one with Christ in faith and action, to allow God to set our agenda as we serve the divine purpose in the redemption and re-creation of the world.
“And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

In today’s reading on the last judgment Jesus makes it very clear that good works are very important. In terms of the theology of virtues, the virtue of love is more important than the virtue of faith, to put it one way. Now I say that in order to contrast this viewpoint with those people, those Christians, who believe that only faith is important, that people are saved by their confession, by their acceptance of Christ as savior. This text says no, there has to be a follow-through. To accept Christ as savior means now respond to him in the gift of love; respond to him through the virtue of charity.

Secondly, there is an anonymity here. Christ appears, but he appears anonymously through the needy, through even the least of the needy. So we have to keep in mind as we now engage in our Lenten fast, in our Lenten practice, that caring for the needy, the poor, involving also visiting those who are imprisoned—and they could be imprisoned by a lot of different things; it could be visiting people imprisoned by their own mental illness, people imprisoned by their own inability to walk—is a very essential attitude of a Christian. But—and this is I think an important point that might not be obvious—these responses that are being spoken of are natural responses of people whose heart is directed toward God. It isn’t as if we can go and do all these things and then become righteous, but rather they are the fruit of a heart already oriented toward God.
Jesus answered and said to her, “If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

The setting of today’s story is very important—Jacob’s well. Not only was Jacob’s well an important point of contact with the entire Israelite tradition—remember there were originally twelve tribes, not only one, not only the tribe of Judah, the Jews, but twelve; Jacob’s well was associated with all twelve of the original family. Furthermore, the very idea of a well speaks of the new life brought to believers in the sacrament of Baptism. Wells are deep passages into the earth that tap into underground rivers. Although unnoticed by our five senses, these rivers flow beneath the earth and are, therefore, hidden sources of life and refreshment. The phrase “living water” in the writings of the prophets refers to an experience of the living God, the source of all being, the source of all life. The evangelist skillfully weaves together these various symbols in his gospel presentation.

The font of Baptism for us and for all believers is likewise a well, a passage to an unseen source of life and refreshment. But the life given in Baptism, which is called a “begetting” or a “rebirth,” is a new relationship with the living God. And the power of this regeneration or rebirth can remain fallow and unused. Baptism is an offer of living water, but an experience of the living God requires two willing parties. The gospel proclaims God’s readiness, but our readiness is not assured!
Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, “If you knew, you would have asked.” Asking, praying, dialoguing are essential components of a living experience of God. True prayer is a response to something begun without our knowledge or understanding; but it invites us, it beckons us, to acknowledge and understand.

We should not overlook both the gender and the ethnic origin of Jesus’ partner—the woman at the well. Just as Jews looked down on Samaritans and men held women to be inferior, so all of us carry within ourselves parts that are inferior or despised. The quest for wholeness and holiness cannot leave these parts out. St. Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is humanity fully alive.” For that full aliveness, of which Irenaeus speaks, to awaken, we must allow God’s word to address our most wounded, rejected, or unloved places. God comes not to judge, but to save, to redeem and restore; and we have to give him a chance!
Accepting the Prophet

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Accepting the Prophet  Third Week of Lent  Monday, February 28, 2005  8:30 a.m.
2 Kgs 5:1-15b;  Lk 4:24-30  (Seeing the simple and reasonable)

“Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place.”

Today Jesus is experiencing rejection, and that’s part of the trial that prophets undergo. They are not accepted—not by their own!

Jesus used two examples, one of which is from the first reading. In that story the only people who really accepted the prophet were the servants. In fact, the whole idea of going to see the prophet was a slave girl’s idea. And when this message came to the king of Israel, he had no idea what to do. When the king of Aram sent Naaman to be cleansed he acted as if he didn’t even know there was a prophet. Not only was Elisha not accepted, he wasn’t even known! It was Elisha who had to send him a letter and say, “Hey, what is the matter with you? Send him over here!”

I think the author really wanted us to realize that very often it is the poor who really listen to God and respond to God. This is the maid, who is a slave, probably captured in some battle—she had the idea. Then his servants who came with him—they are the ones who talked to him with some reason. He was about to march back home, and they said, “Wait a minute. The prophet just asked you to do something simple. Why don’t you try it?” That’s reasonable. It didn’t occur to him! So this is really also about how we, in our perhaps alleged intelligence, overlook things that are really right before our face. So no wonder we don’t accept the prophet!
Is Forgiveness Reasonable?  Third Week of Lent  Tuesday, March 1, 2005
8:30 a.m.  Dn 3:25, 34-43;  Mt 18:21-35  (All School Mass)  (Resentment—a form of torture)

“Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him?”

Very often our gospels contain a question, and I think you should ask the question of yourself. What do you expect of yourself? How often do you forgive people—the same person? Seven times according to the Bible’s way of thinking is many times. Seven is, you might say, a magic number; it covers a lot. Jesus says, “Well, not a lot, but seventy times seven,” which was unthinkable—it’s infinite! You should forgive people an infinite number of times.

Now on the surface this seems totally unreasonable, does it not? Michael? What—you don’t think so? This is not unreasonable? What do you think? You don’t want to think. What do you think? I think it is unreasonable! I think it is unreasonable to keep forgiving the same person for the same thing! Don’t you, Jordan? You don’t! Oh well! I think it is unreasonable, but God doesn’t always ask us to merely do what is reasonable. He sometimes asks us to go beyond what at least seems to be reasonable at the time, and there is a hidden reason for this; so maybe it is reasonable in a deeper way!

What is this all about? It’s about anger. When someone offends you, you feel anger. It’s very natural. In fact, in the Old Testament, I was just reading this morning from the Book of Exodus, and, of course, when the people sinned against God—what happened? It says that his wrath flared up—the wrath of the Lord. So even God feels anger when people do bad things—right? And Moses—the same thing. Moses felt wrath against the people for their total infidelity, their lack of faith, their lack of faithfulness, their disobedience, their disloyalty.

Well, I can understand that. If you try, you can too. When people are not what they could be, it makes us angry. And it should make us angry. There is nothing wrong with that in itself. But here is a problem: anger itself can become—what? It can become a form of torture! Anger is also like a poison that eats away the container that holds it. Now sulfuric acid is a very powerful poison. But if you put sulfuric acid in a metal container, it will eat through the metal and ruin it. Well, anger can be like that. It can eat through us and ruin us. So while it is very reasonable to be angry at evil or at an offense, if we hold that anger in, it ruins us. So in that way Michael is right and Jordan is right. It is unreasonable in the sense that why hurt yourself because of other people’s wrong? So that’s the real question. We have to understand that in itself anger is natural, a natural good, a natural reaction to being offended, to being harmed, to being hurt. It’s natural to feel anger; however, we have to deal with this in a healthy way.

Now how do we deal with anger in a healthy way? That’s the question. I am not going to be able to answer it completely today, but you need to keep this question in your mind. For one thing, don’t deny it! If you deny you are angry, then that anger will be
seething inside. That’s not good. Sometimes anger takes a hidden form we call “resentment.” Resentment is anger, but it’s very quiet, underneath the surface; and it comes up in all kinds of different ways, but it’s doing harm all along. And you know, people who are resentful tend to be very critical with their mouths. They are very critical people. If you know anybody who is always criticizing everything, maybe you are that person or maybe you know someone, well, you can be sure that underneath that criticism is anger that has probably never been admitted! If you don’t like living with critical people or you don’t like critical words spoken to you all the time, you can realize that anger can do a lot of damage. Resentment does a lot of damage. My personal feeling is that resentful people are very critical of themselves as well and, therefore, unhappy.

Well, is that smart? No. God didn’t come to earth in order for us to be miserable or unhappy, but he came to redeem our lives and restore us to the original intention.

We have to learn how to deal with anger, and there are healthy ways of doing it. It starts with admitting that you are angry, and then talking about it in a reasonable way, if that’s possible, with the person who offends you. Jesus always says this. “If you have something against somebody, go to that person.” Don’t go to somebody else! So if you are mad at her, don’t go tell someone else—you understand? Tell the person. Now that’s not always easy either. So if we are going to live in a Christian community, first of all, we have to be open to people who come to us and say, “Perhaps you really didn’t mean this, but frankly you have offended me,” or “Perhaps you really didn’t mean to do this, but you really hurt my feelings,” or “Perhaps you didn’t mean to do this, but I heard what you said about me.” A Christian community is made up of people who are willing to listen to other people’s complaints. That’s really part of it. That’s part of charity or love. If you are not going to listen to anybody who says that you did something wrong, then you are not a loving person. So we have to all recognize we could make someone angry either deliberately or indeliberately. And very often the way we offend people is not deliberate. We really didn’t mean to offend them, but perhaps we just wanted to say something that wasn’t particularly kind or truthful, and we did, and that has its consequences. So if we are going to be real Christian people, we have to be open to them: someone coming to us and saying, “Well, you know, I have to be honest with you. You have hurt my feelings, and now I can’t look at you and not feel that again.” So then that’s time for reconciliation.

That’s what Jesus is talking about. And even if the other person is not willing to listen to you, at least you have to be able to get it out and let go of it, otherwise you are letting that person control your life. Think about that! Are you so foolish as to let someone else torture you voluntarily? You’re voluntary letting them do it! Does that make any sense? No, Jordan will say it doesn’t. That’s what he meant before when he said that this was very reasonable. It is in a deep way—not on the surface, but deeply it is reasonable. So that’s what that is about.

The gospel is always about how we can be most full of life, how we can be most prosperous—not just making money—that’s not what prosperity means in the gospel. It means being full of God, full of life, full of joy, full of the fruits of the Spirit. This is a possibility that comes to us not because we are human. No, it comes to us because we
have been baptized; and we have been baptized with the Holy Spirit! So we are not alone! We don’t just have to have our own little resources inside of us: well, gee, I don’t know if I can do this. It’s not you! **The gospel is not about you! It’s about God in you and how God brings his power into your souls and empowers you to live in a way you could not live by yourself**—never—nobody could! Only Christ could live this by himself, but Christ didn’t start out like us. He is already the Word of God incarnate, embodied.

His life now becomes your life **insofar as you let it**, but it’s a little bit of work letting it in. **It often causes us to stretch, and stretching is very painful.** Ask your mother. When she had you in her womb she stretched. That wasn’t easy. Stretching is never easy. That’s what new birth is about, though. We have to be willing to be born again. Actually, you don’t remember this, but **your birth wasn’t easy either for you**—it wasn’t! It never is! **Rebirths aren’t easy either.** They take work. They take pain, but, see, the pain is worth it! When you were in your mother’s womb, it was very dark in there. It was safe, yes, but dark. Now you are in the world, and it’s light. And it’s full of a lot of possibilities that didn’t exist back then, but it’s not so safe! **Giving up one thing for another is what life is about.** God came to live life with us—not for us—but with us, so that even though it’s not safe we still can trust and go with the program and accept the pain involved in growing and stretching and moving forward—not standing still, not running back into the dark place of safety. That’s what the gospel is saying. **The good news is you can do this, and you are never alone.** You are never alone!

Now you won’t know this for yourself until you really develop prayer. **You do have to pray.** This is not something that is going to happen instantaneously. It happens as the fruit of a life of prayer in the Spirit of Christ, in the Holy Spirit. Now we gather together from time to time for that, for strengthening. **The greatest prayer of all is the Eucharist** because whom do we meet in the Eucharist? Jonas? **We meet the risen Christ!** And don’t forget, the risen Christ is risen from—what? Where did he come from? The dead! Life killed him! But God didn’t leave him dead! He brought him back to meet us in the Eucharist, in the Mass, in Holy Communion, **to give us courage,** to give us strength, to help us trust, to take away our fears—to move on in spite of the fact that life can be scary and can be painful, and people can offend us. **We do experience all kinds of emotions that could get out of line and could do a lot of damage, but they don’t have to.** So Lent is a time for thinking about these things.
Solidarity with Jesus    Thursday, March 3, 2005    7:00 a.m.
Jer 7:23-28;    Lk 11:14-23    (Power in unity)

“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me
scatters.”

The theme of today’s reading is the power for good and for evil in unity.

People can experience being overwhelmed by evil on different levels: personal levels,
social levels, national levels. Evil can have many different forms.

The gospels demonstrate that Jesus always has power over evil, whether the evil is
human ignorance, mental illness, physical illness—even the power of storms he has the
power to quell. He has the power to feed the hungry. He has power over everything, and
he is describing this power as despoiling the strong man.

The reason why evil sometimes dominates is that at some points in the history of the
world people joined with evil; they are one with evil; they form a solidarity with it. And
wherever there is greater solidarity, there is greater power.

His point is this: alone he can quell evil, but now for this to continue his disciples
must be with him. That’s what he means: “Whoever is not with me is against me. You
are either on the side of the kingdom of God and you will gather together and you will
continue to despoil the strong man and scatter his spoils, or you will be against me. And
if you are against me, you will scatter; you will be powerless; your power will mean
nothing; you will throw away your life!”
“Which is the first of all the commandments?”

You will notice that this is asking for one commandment: “Which is the first?” And Jesus answers this question with two answers. He does give a first, and then he gives a second. Now the reason he does this is that in his mind these two are inseparable. They were separated in the Scripture itself. The first comes from Deuteronomy, Chapter 6.

Jesus was not interested, in this case, in being an innovator. He was speaking to a scribe, and scribes were men who wrote down what they received. You could say they were by nature conservative, traditional. And so he answers in a way that this scribe could understand by quoting what the scribe himself has written many times—Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, the so-called “Shema” of Israel.

But he didn’t want to leave him with that all by itself because that would be distorted from Jesus’ point of view. The scribe could accept it all by itself, but Jesus could not. For Jesus, loving your neighbor in no way detracts from loving God with your whole heart. And that’s the point. The Shema might lead someone to think that loving God with all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength wouldn’t leave anymore soul or mind or strength to love anyone else. Jesus did not want to leave that impression, so he attached another law that the scribe had also written many times, Leviticus, Chapter 19: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Neither of these is new, but what is new is that Jesus sees the second in service to the first. And later, in another text, he will become quite radical when he says that the entire law and the prophets as well can be summarized with these two. But today he is being a conservative, teaching one step at a time.
“For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

This is taken from the scroll of the prophet Hosea. Now this idea is not exactly rare; in fact, it’s found in various places in the Old Testament and various places in the New Testament, so we should not ignore it.

“It is love that I desire, not sacrifice.” Jesus himself quotes this when cross with the Pharisees who are accusing his disciples of violating the Sabbath. The problem is this: it is a fundamental paradox because the entire Law is based on the idea of sacrifice, or at least became so at a certain point. The Temple is all about sacrifices. Moreover, for Christians what’s more important, Jesus’ own death he himself interprets as a sacrifice. “On the night before he died he took a cup, and he said, ‘Take and drink; this is the blood of the new and eternal covenant that is poured forth for the forgiveness of many.’” Those words are words of sacrificial terminology.

So Jesus interpreted his own life somehow as a sacrifice, and yet he quotes this very text saying that isn’t what God wants. Now this is what we call a paradox. At the very center of our faith is this paradox, the paradox of the cross. God doesn’t want sacrifice, and yet Jesus finds nothing to do with his life greater than offering it as sacrifice. If we ignore paradox, we are in trouble. Calvinists do ignore the paradox. Calvinists say that God demanded that Jesus offer his life as punishment for sin, and Jesus did, and those who confess to Jesus experience the remission of their sins because they are absorbed into Jesus and, therefore, the debt is forgiven.

But this text and Jesus’ constant teaching is that God desires love or mercy—the word is Hesed. It involves not only love in the normal sense; it involves also the cancellation of all debt. Well, if God requires the cancellation of all debt, then he has to practice it himself. If God practices the cancellation of all debt, he cannot demand punishment. And that’s what is wrong with Calvinist theology. Rather, we have to go more deeply into what is meant by mercy and love. If we see mercy as cancellation of debt and we see love as accepting people as precisely as they are—we know that God accepts people as they are and asks us to do the same thing.

But more than that, in order to live life to the full, we have to be free of negativity within ourselves. The greatest form of negativity comes from the belief, the feeling, that somebody owes us something. People go through life feeling cheated. “My parents never did what they should have done for me.” “My wife doesn’t treat me right.” “My husband does not really provide what he should provide.” “My children do not respect me,” and on and on and on, mourning as it were, lamenting, a life that we imagine should be.
If we had mercy, we wouldn’t lament a life that isn’t. We would simply see that people have their shortcomings. “My father drank too much; he didn’t provide enough for the family.” That’s too bad—I’m not speaking about my father; I’m just using this as an example. “My mother had her own problems; she was emotionally impaired. She did not love me as much as I really would have wished.” That’s mercy; that’s accepting life as it is. The result of this is freedom for oneself. I don’t have to drag through life all of what might have been. I can simply live with what is. So mercy really frees the one who is merciful from feeling cheated, from anger, from bitterness, from all those negative qualities that really weigh us down and even eat away at the container. “It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice.”

So what is Jesus doing on the cross? Well, the ultimate meaning of mercy and love is to completely surrender. Well, this is not the traditional meaning of sacrifice; but in a sense it’s what sacrifice was trying to symbolize all along. Why would God want a goat? Well, God doesn’t want a goat. But a goat is living, and it’s a gift, and so to offer a goat to God is a way of saying we are returning the favor of life, and we are acknowledging our dependence upon you, and we are asking for you to give us more life. That’s the original meaning of ritual sacrifice.

Now Jesus in his own personal life embodied that very gesture and intention, so that his entire life became a gift. In that way it’s a sacrifice, not in the old way. It’s a new sacrifice, a sacrifice of total surrender to a God who is the source of all life and who cannot be outdone in giving life with the hope and even the faith that God will, in fact, return life—not simply more, but of an even more profound kind, which is, of course, the resurrection in glory, which is what Jesus experienced on Easter Sunday. The Church really wants us to think about these things as we walk through Lent so they will prepare us for the Pascal mystery.
Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, ‘We see,’ so your sin remains.”

Today’s gospel is about sin on many different levels. Blindness serves as a potent metaphor, as well. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex question, one could say that the Jewish teachers are presuming that physical blindness, like other physical diseases and handicaps, are caused by sin. Some people today believe the same thing. That is why you will hear someone question, “Why did God let so-and-so get cancer. She is such a good person.” What’s behind that? This assumption: sin is the cause of disease or a handicap, or at least God is the cause of everything that happens.

Jesus clearly does not believe this. But he does not simply contradict his opponents. He uses this opportunity to bring fresh light to the area of human responsibility. For Jesus, the creation, the world that God has made, is a moral world, a moral creation—not because good is rewarded and evil punished here and now in our own lives, in our own time, but rather for a different reason: because we human beings have a moral capacity to make the world better or worse. And because we have the moral capacity to make the world better or worse we are responsible for what we do with our lives, for the effect they have on the world. We may think it’s very small, and perhaps it is; but the world as a whole is the sum total of all these effects.

Further, our capacity to make the world better or worse itself waxes and wanes with our own intentions, with our own desires to serve God or not to. The more we are interested in following God, the clearer it becomes what God wants. We grow
progressively toward holiness or vice versa. **The more we follow our own desires and beliefs and opinions, the more confused and blinded we become.** And this explains the state of Jesus’ opponents in today’s gospel story.

But even in our confusion, **help is available if—if—we admit our blindness and our confusion.** Getting stuck in prideful self-assertion is not a good place to be when encountering God. That was the unhappy place Jesus’ opponents found themselves in today’s story—pridefully asserting their own righteousness, their own truth, the validity of their own beliefs versus the revelation of God himself, the Light from Light himself! And, in fact, as Jesus points out, **God holds us accountable for our prideful blindness precisely because we deny it, precisely because we don’t admit it, precisely because we don’t look for help, precisely because we don’t want help!**

“If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, ‘We see,’ so your sin remains.” Is there any better reason for us to confess our faults? According to Jesus, **we are free of the blindness, narrowness, and even malice we confess, but remain guilty of all that we deny.** Wednesday our parish will celebrate God’s graceful gift of forgiveness in a Communal **Penance Service. All are invited.**
“Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe.’”

As always, Jesus is dealing with human nature, which does not change; so you could say that “you people” refers to all of us—we people. We people are very influenced by our experiences—naturally. But if we reflect for a while, we should realize that our experiences are very narrow, and not any one of us has experienced that much in life that we should use that as the basis for what we believe. We need to realize how great is the creation of God, how magnificent the mind of God that planned the development of the universe. Whether or not this is the only universe we don’t know, but we know this one is, and we know it’s vast, and we know we are in it.

We should start to think about the grandeur and the greatness of this plan that God has of which we are a part. True humility is a matter of seeing things truthfully. If we start looking at life truthfully, we will be struck with great wonder and awe. We will start to realize that the work of God is constantly before our face although we rarely see the signs, because to see a sign is already to recognize meaning. So we pass the works of God, and we don’t see the meaning! They are in our face, but it doesn’t make any impression. And we actually can retire into confusion and anxiety about ourselves, about our health, about our wealth, about our future, about our families, as if this isn’t all part of a magnificent plan of an awesome God!

Now we can all identify with this man and his child and his anxieties, which are not useless—to worry about a child’s health. Yet Jesus is a little bit put off because of the waste that we make of our lives while we focus on so many small things and ignore the big thing right before us.
“Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a Sabbath.”

Now it may seem to us rather trivial that the Jewish leaders are so upset at Jesus’ breaking the Sabbath; but that is unfair to them, and not a good judgment of their history and theology and understanding. They believed in what they said. They believed that God had given the Law to Moses, and Jesus also did—he believed that as well. They believed that part of the Law, but only part of it, had been written down in the Tenach, what we call the “Old Testament.”

But Jesus disagreed. He thought all of it was written down. And not only did he think all of it was written down, he thought that all that was written down was almost unnecessary because it all could be summarized very easily in terms of loving God with your whole heart, mind, and soul, and loving your neighbor as yourself. We don’t see how revolutionary this was, but it was a revolutionary interpretation of the Tenach, the Old Testament, which has actually six hundred thirty-one laws—if you count them.

But secondly, many of the Jewish people believed that this was just a part of the Law, that the rest of it was in oral tradition. Now this is not stupid; it is not irrational, but Jesus didn’t agree! So there is a difference of faith here. And so it’s quite wrong to think that there is a Jewish faith. In a sense there is more than one way of believing within Jewish tradition—Jesus representing one anyway, his opponents another; and there were others—are others, as well.

Now the point of the Sabbath—it is a holy day, but what is behind this holiness? Behind the holiness of the Sabbath is the belief that God himself rested because he was finished. So in keeping the Sabbath there are many things happening. We are acknowledging the fact that we need to rest, and our resting is itself a dependence upon God, and so it is a form of worship and prayer. We are acknowledging our need for quiet, for reflection, for withdrawal from the world and its many activities—all of that—it’s part of the Sabbath rest.
But there is even more. There is the idea that the world is already the way God wants it because he is resting. He is finished. That Jesus did not agree with! The other part, yes—prayer, quiet, withdrawal. He was often quiet and very prayerful and withdrawn, not always on the Sabbath. He took many sabbaths, so the speak, on mountaintops and other places. But **he did not agree that God’s work was finished**—quite the opposite. He saw the Father’s work unfinished, and he said **he was sent to finish it**. And not only that, but he felt an urgency. He had to work while the light lasted. This is different from the way his teachers thought.

So this is **a clash of sincere perspectives**. Jesus’ opponents sincerely believed he was fraudulent. They sincerely believed he was breaking the Law and dishonoring God. He sincerely believed that they didn’t know what they were talking about, that **they did not know the Lawgiver** and, therefore, could never understand the real spirit or meaning of the Law.

It’s important for us in our own Christian life and our Christian development to understand what was going on there because it goes on today among ourselves. **We too can become very sincerely convinced of something that really isn’t connected to the real God.** We cannot rely on the sincerity of our convictions because although we may be free of guilt by being sincere, we are not going to grow merely through sincerity. That’s what this is all about; it’s about **achieving** something that we don’t have yet—**a wholeness, a holiness, a health, a vitality that is what God wants for us**.

This poor man at the pool—he had some kind of faith; it was rather weak. He thought that if he would be the first one to get to the pool, then he would be okay; but he couldn’t be the first one. That is a very damaged form of faith. So Jesus simply superseded the whole motion to the pool. Why? Because **Jesus is the pool**. He is the water, the living water from God. He is the water pouring out from the Temple, described in the first reading. He is what gives life. So **he superseded the symbol with the reality.** **We need that too.**
Feelings within God and Us    Fourth Week of Lent    Thursday, March 10, 2005
7:00 a.m.    Ex 32:7-14;    Jn 5:31-47    (All possibilities and change)

“So the Lord relented in the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people.”

This is from the Book of Exodus, and it’s a very interesting story. In one way it’s far-fetched and unbelievable. Here God has decided he is going to do something, but Moses talks him out of it. That seems conceited, but it isn’t really.

Jesus clarified this when he said, “With God are all possibilities.” Now grant it, I have never heard of God stopping an avalanche already begun—I have never heard of that! There is a time beyond which God cannot act in the world as we know it under the laws of which he has created—that’s true. Nonetheless, the will of God is not rigid. That’s the whole idea of prophecy. Prophecy is warning people about the coming consequences of their actions with the idea that, of course, you can avoid these consequences: just change the way you are! If it weren’t for that possibility, there would be no prophecy. It would be pointless. The point of prophecy is not simply to foretell what will happen willy-nilly. It’s to give counsel and advice. In this way it is a warning of what will happen if things stay the way they are, giving the opportunity for people to change the way things are.

So, on the one hand, there are certain consequences to human behavior, and there is a point beyond which this is irremediable. But, on the other hand, people can change and, therefore, God can change. And that’s what it means to repent. It says that Moses stood in the breech, and God repented, meaning he changed his mind. Well, God is all possibilities, and so change is very basic to his nature. That is, he can respond to all conditions and all opportunities presented by his free-willed creation.

Now all in all because all possibilities remain in God, in a more profound sense there is never any change precisely because all change already exists in an infinite degree within God and God’s mind.
But **how the world works** out is not simply God’s decision. **It’s really our decision.** And Moses understood this. So we need to understand it, as well. The point is not that we ask God to avert his anger from the consequences from our behavior, the causes of his anger, but, rather, that we **take charge of our own choices and, furthermore, intercede for others, as Moses did**—acknowledging their choices are bad, but imploring grace for opportunities to change.

Notice also that **God is pictured here as being rich in feeling.** Some people think feelings are only human or physical. Well, they are not only human or physical. Mystics have extraordinary experiences that are rich in feeling and sensation. Now what all that means, I have no idea. What they experience, I don’t know. But I do believe that **our experience, even in the body, is in some way a shadow of God.** That’s why we are the image and likeness of God. Even **our capacity to have sensations and feelings belongs somehow to something beyond us.**

People wonder sometimes or think that anger, for example, is evil. Well, of course it’s not evil. God is angry. **God feels wrath.** Why? Because of injustice, because of unfairness, because of offence. We also should. But **God’s anger can be dangerous.** That’s what this story is about. **So can ours.** We can harm people with our words or actions, as can God. We are just like God, but a little bit smaller—no, a lot smaller!

And lastly, **anger** if it doesn’t express itself at all, is probably worse. **Seething under the surface it can eat away at us,** as acid can eat away at a metallic container. So we have to be aware also of our own wrathfulness at the injustices done to us and others and pray for balance and healing.
Knowing Christ through Scripture  Fourth Week of Lent  Friday, March 11, 2005
7:00 a.m.  Wis 2:1a, 12-22;  Jn 7:1-2, 10, 25-30  (Inside knowledge)

“So Jesus cried out in the Temple area as he was teaching and said, ‘You know me and also know where I am from?’

That could be a statement, an exclamation, or a question—or all three! What do we really know about Jesus? One of the great problems in the propagation of the faith is that people often think they know what they don’t. This begins with believers themselves, who believe they are formed in the faith but really are not—or very poorly formed. Then it goes on to those who are only in some distant way familiar with the teachings of the gospel, but who think they know what it is all about. If you actually start questioning people, it’s quite remarkable. It’s been done. The University of Chicago ran, you might say, a test—a poll almost, but more than a poll—asking people who called themselves Catholics what was the name of the pope. Over fifty percent didn’t have a clue! Well, of course, they are not really Catholic; they just call themselves that. So we can call ourselves lots of things, but what do we know?

• What do we really know about Jesus?
• What do we know about his actual teachings?
• What do we know about his actual values?

I can say this with St. Jerome: “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” And If we are not really seriously trying to understand what we hear read at liturgy, we are really not being formed in Christ. Without Scripture there is no formation in Christ; it cannot happen. It has never happened.

So we need to listen prayerfully to the words of Christ in the gospels. We need to read the stories about him, not just as if they are some stories about the past, but as if they are telling us about the will of God for us right now. And when we do that, we will not look at him from the outside, but we will begin to know him from the inside.
“Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Today’s gospel reading is a reading about preparedness, about our need to live with a sense of the passing of time. We need to reflect on the purpose of life and our readiness to respond to that purpose. Many of us go through life with a naive idea of good and evil; and we reckon ourselves quite good, like the virgins in today’s story. The point of the story is that it’s not enough to be good; we have to be prepared. The foolish virgins were good, but they were not wise. When the moment came for them to respond to the purpose for which they had been chosen, they were not able to.

There is need for us to become attuned to the ways of God. To us it always seems like a delay. This is referred to in various texts; in particular, I think of 1 Peter. There the author says that it is not really a delay because “with God one day is like a thousand years.” God doesn’t exist in time, but we do. But time is meant to do something for us; we are meant to grow with our time. We cannot if we are asleep in regard to our purpose. Physiologists say our bones grow when we are asleep—that may be true. But in terms of this story we do not grow because we are not ready to.

This is related to the second reading from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans when he talks about a very simple truth. What are we? We are nothing other than children of God. That’s so simple we ignore it! We get involved in so many other things; we have so many different hats to wear. We have so many different roles to play. We have so many different jobs to do. We forget the chief one: to be a child of God. When God revealed himself to Moses in the story of the burning bush, he revealed himself as “I AM WHO AM.” You can’t get more simple than that! If we are made in the image and likeness of God, we are meant first and foremost simply to be—and to be creatures of God recognizing along with the Prologue of the fourth gospel, “nothing comes in being apart from God.” To grow in a sense of our dependence upon this God, our communion with this God, and our willingness to serve this God—that’s the meaning of life! If we are not doing that, we are asleep!
So the gospel is alerting us; from time to time perhaps we have thought about this. The question is:

- **Have we prepared ourselves with the requisite oil so that our lamps can burn?**
- **Are we really illumining the world around us?**
- **Are people different because they know us?**

That’s the question the gospel is asking.

- **Have we so diluted the gospel and have we so diluted our own sense of who we are in Christ, that we don’t really expect anything of ourselves, of our lives, of our work, of our being here?**

In which case, if this is true, we have really insulted God, because God is putting a lot of hope and a lot of trust in his chosen ones. He did not come in Christ to share our lives in all of its infamy and ignominy for nothing. He did this so that nothing would stand in the way of our mission, that no evil would have a hold on us, that no allurements would be able to capture us, so that we would be purified and sanctified and justified in his great gift of love poured out on the cross.

- **Are we prepared to take the light of Christ into our world whenever the possibility arises?**

We don’t know when that will be. It’s not necessarily this very minute. It’s not necessarily tomorrow, but it could be.

- **Are we ready?**
- **Are our lamps trimmed?**

That’s the question of today’s gospel.

- **Is our awareness of ourselves simple enough to reflect this basic truth that we are God’s—we belong to God?**

We have no greater identity than simply being his own. Nothing could be more important. Nothing could be more pertinent. Nothing could be more exciting.

- **Have we deluded ourselves into thinking something else?**
  “Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”
For those preparing for Baptism, this time of year is called the “period of illumination” or “enlightenment.” Unfortunately, **there are many already baptized members of the Church who have yet to experience any real, personal illumination or enlightenment.** This is because we ordinarily look at life through the prism given us by our culture; and this is at odds with the self-disclosure of God in Christ or, for that matter, in the prophecy that preceded it. **Our culture is driven by a materialistic belief** that what is real is material and only what is material is real. This is so ingrained that even sincere believers in God are affected by it without even noticing or realizing it.

Even our idea of God is materialistic: we think of God as a being. But **God is not a being. God is Being itself,** the ground, the cause, of everything. According to the Prologue of the fourth gospel “Nothing comes into being apart from God.” Nothing can exist apart from God. We think of the creation as something that happened in the past. We think of the stories in the Bible as, again, past events. But according to St. Thomas Aquinas, **creation is something going on right now.** God is now creating the heavens and the earth; and if God were to stop creating for one split second, nothing would exist.

Gospel stories are no more about the past than they are about the present or the future. “God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.” The raising of Lazarus must therefore be retrieved from the isolated past: **we need to see how God is bringing life now out of death.** We have to see that death is the most natural thing. In fact, our entire universe is in the process of dying and has been since the very first moment of the “big bang.” This is called the “second law of thermodynamics.” Energy dissipates. Everything goes down. Everything falls apart. That’s nature. But the ministry of Jesus is to alert us to the fact that **there is something else going on besides nature.** There is some other kind of activity that we perhaps cannot understand as easily as nature, but is even more real. **This is the redemptive work of God. And it comes to a head in Christ.**

Lazarus was a friend of Jesus, meaning he was intimately and emotionally connected to him. **All of us are potentially capable** of this same kind of intimate and emotional connection to Christ, to Jesus. However, often there is really nothing alive within us. There is no joy given us by the Spirit of Christ. There is no deep feeling of affection for God, or gratitude to God for the fact that we are—not for what we have; that’s all secondary, but simply for the fact that we are—that we are—that we have been created to participate in God, in God’s Being, called into friendship.

That is a truth that perhaps seems abstract to us because there’s something missing inside of us, in our souls. What we feel inside of us is often nothing but fear, fear of death or fear of sickness or fear of unemployment or fear of poverty or fear of pain or fear of something, or anxiety about whatever: the dark cloud that threatens, although we
don’t even know what it is, or anger at all the injustice done to us and others in this world marred by sin. This anger is very justifiable; there’s not doubt about it. But there is also no doubt about it that anger is like a poison; it’s like an acid that eats away at its own container.

The redemptive work of God addresses these issues, and there are far greater ones. In many ways our emotional lives are all entombed, and we are for all intents and purposes bound up and tied up like Lazarus. This is no more God’s will for us than blindness or deafness or disease or hunger or thirst. We see that throughout Jesus’ ministry he was constantly touching people in their neediness, in their brokenness, in their woundedness, to show them there is something else. There is something else in God’s purpose and God’s plan, something more than what nature gives. Indeed, according to Christ and reading his actions we see that God’s intentions toward us are to bring fullness of life and health and that illusive quality called “happiness,” that we dare not try to define.

Although life can be and is and must be difficult, fraught with testing and probing and trial, God does not intend to leave us on our own. God does not intend to leave us lame or blind or in the dark. Step-by-step Jesus unfolds this truth within his own life by the way he touches those around him with the power that is the power of God and the very purpose of God. For our part, instead of weeping about what has been, we can look to what shall be; and we know what shall be from what has been in the life of Christ, for “God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.” And this will give us vision for our own lives and hope that can inspire all things. What great things people have accomplished when motivated by hope! How wasted and pitiful our lives become when we are hopeless. “Lazarus, come forth!”
Possibilities of New Life  Fifth Week of Lent  Monday, March 14, 2005  8:30 a.m.
Dn 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62;  Jn 8:1-11  (Compassion and Change)

Today we have a juxtaposition of two different stories about adulteresses. In the first story from the Book of Daniel, the point is that the Spirit of God makes things right—to punish the guilty, to free the innocent. **With the New Testament there is a different issue.** It’s really not about justice in the ordinary human sense; it’s about something higher, which is compassion, **the compassion of the Lord.** And the Pharisees and scribes knew that Jesus was teaching in ways that differed from their teaching, and that his interpretation of the Law was different. That’s why they brought this woman. They said, “Now, Moses said this; what do you say?”—because they knew it would be different! They knew they were going to expect something different.

The point that Jesus always made was that there are always possibilities of new life, that because someone has done something wrong in the past doesn’t mean they will continue to. So the issue is not judgment in the here and now. Jesus believed in judgment all right. He believed in the final judgment of God against sinners who don’t repent, who don’t change during this life. Meanwhile, **while we are still alive there is always another chance.** That was the hallmark of Jesus’ teaching.

He says to the woman, “No one has condemned you.” Why? Well, Jesus pointed out that no one is without sin, so what business do you have of judging other people. He just brought that out and pointed that out to the crowd there. The elders who had brought the woman were the ones who knew that best because they were, after all, the people who taught the Law. They knew best their own weaknesses, so they left first. Then eventually everyone left. Then Jesus said, “Now go; sin no more.” **It is possible to change. It is possible to go and sin no more when we are loved and accepted and forgiven.**
This time of year, this very week, in our Church is called “Passiontide,” I’m sure not a word you have heard too much—probably never heard it. “Passiontide.”

Now what we celebrate in Passiontide is the fact of Jesus entering into suffering. Passion is about suffering. And here is the big question: Why did Jesus have to suffer? There is no real good answer, and I can’t give it to you. This is something we have to probe with our own lives, because the question of why did Jesus have to suffer is related to the question: Why do we have to suffer? And we do! You already know that in small ways. You don’t always get what you want. Life isn’t always smiling on you. Not everyone around you is a chorus of praise, honoring your presence. You have conflicts. You have desires that remain unfulfilled. You lose games. You fail tests. There are all kinds of ways in which life is not always smiling on you.

The point is that Jesus, who is the incarnate Word of God, had the same problems. And if there is any difference, the difference is that they were even worse! As he was full of the Spirit of God, this created, you might say, a proportionate intensity of evil around him. I don’t know if this makes too much sense to you now, but maybe it will some day.

The goodness of Jesus created around him a level of badness to fit his goodness. This is the age-old battle between good and evil now coming to a head in the life of Christ.

We are also involved in that battle. It’s not like, well, it’s over now. Not exactly. In one sense it’s over, in the sense that once and for all in a decisive way God has acted in a salvific way, redeeming us from possible hopelessness or possible despair or possible rejection. In that way it’s over, but it’s not really over because we are still living here, and
so each day we continue the struggle. The only difference is we can do so with confidence. Jesus’ struggle and Jesus’ suffering brings us confidence, another word for faith. Faith means many things, as I said before many times. One of them is confidence. We can have confidence that the struggle will turn out a victory for the just, because Jesus was raised from the dead. We don’t forget that. **We must never forget that Jesus was raised from the dead. In his sufferings we have victory over all of our own issues**, problems, evils, contests, failures, sin. This is the basic idea; it’s that simple.

Now each of us has to try in our own way to see ourselves in this picture: **How do we live out the life of Christ?** Sometimes we don’t! Sometimes we rebel against suffering. We refuse to suffer. We get angry or bitter or whatever. Not that anger is not always called for; sometimes it is, but the anger should be against injustice, not against suffering. **We sometimes get angry at the wrong person or at the wrong event or at the wrong issue.** So that’s what we have to start to look at in a prayerful way. I wouldn’t say this is easy. **It is not easy to be a follower of Christ.** I would be lying if I said it were.

The Church is going to lead us, from now into Easter time, into an intimate remembering and reflection upon what Jesus did and what God did in him—knowing this, that if you believe, God will do the same thing in you!
Never See or Taste Death  
Fifth Week of Lent  
Thursday, March 17, 2005  
7:00 a.m.  
Gn 17:3-9;  
Jn 8:51-59  
(St. Patrick)  
(Real death and apparent death)

In John’s Gospel we have many plays on words. Today Jesus says, “Whoever keeps my word will never see death.” When he is quoted they say, “Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.”

What does it mean to see death or taste death? Are they the same, and do they mean the same thing as “to die”? And what does that mean? This is the point of the evangelist; he wants to get people to think about what all these words mean. What does it mean to die? We think we know, but we don’t because we haven’t. Has anyone tasted death? No, you have never tasted death. Maybe you have seen someone else taste death, but you haven’t; and you don’t know what it’s like. Not only that, you have no idea what it is like. It’s always a revelation that we are unprepared for.

Jesus is getting at the point that death really is separation from God. That’s what real death is; death as punishment for sin means separation from God. We can be dead and appear alive. So Jesus says, “Let the dead bury the dead.” How can the dead bury the dead? Well, the dead, who appear to be alive, who are still breathing, who can wield a shovel, can bury the other dead, who appear to be dead, but who may not be. Appearances are deceiving. So we don’t know what death is until we experience it; and true death, according to this, is to be separated from God. We can experience that. We can experience sin. We can experience darkness, and we can experience communion and reconciliation and forgiveness.

Here Jesus is saying that if we believe in him and we hold onto his words, we will never see separation from God. Then when our bodies no longer can live on this
planet—and that’s assured—sooner of later they will fail because they are little machines; they are little organisms, and they are subject to entropy. So they will pass away. We will not see death then. We will see life. We will see light.

Now the audience here could not understand what he was getting at because they wanted to believe that appearances were reality, which incidentally is the very nature of hypocrisy: believing in appearances. So Jesus is trying to use his words as a crowbar to get them away from appearances. They are resisting, and sometimes we resist, too. We need to be with these words. We need to try to understand what Christ is saying. He is, after all, presenting himself as the very one who called Moses. He says, “Before Abraham was, I AM.”
“If I do not perform my Father’s works, do not believe me; but if I perform them, even if you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may realize and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”

Today Jesus takes the whole issue of faith to a level that most people don’t. For him it is not a matter of authority or tradition or what the Bible says or what someone says the Bible says, but it’s a matter of experience. He is calling on his contestants, those who are contesting his words and his claims, to forget about words, to look at works, to look at the signs he is performing. These, he says, are a demonstration of the Father.

But here is the question: **Do we see the Father in Jesus’ works?** The problem was at that time with many developed people, they didn’t because, for example, Jesus’ works, although beneficial to poor slobs: the blind and lame and so on—beneficial to them—but the works of Jesus violated the Law, which these believers thought was superior to anything else, such as mercy, kindness, compassion. So here is the issue: Where is God in all this? **Does God uphold the letter of the Law first and foremost?** Is that the most supreme thing? Is that a true revelation of God? Is that what God is really like? That’s one issue.

**Or is God more interested in the well-being of his creation?** Is God more interested in helping those who are suffering? And that is a very important question. That is the important question in this dialogue, because **how we answer that question will determine whether we can see the Father in Jesus or we see an imposter in Jesus.** Very sincere people can reach opposite conclusions. However, and this, of course, is the point of the whole gospel, if we reach the wrong conclusion, if we do not see the Father actually where he is, we will not benefit from his self-disclosure in Christ.
“He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.”

The gospel points out that Jesus learned in his human nature, in his human experience; he learned just as we do. He learned from Joseph. Joseph was his teacher. Not only did Jesus learn, but Christian culture learned from Joseph. In fact, it is inconceivable that we could ever talk about Christian culture or Christian civilization without the influence of Joseph. And that’s for two reasons.

The first is respect for work and working people. At the time of Jesus this was not the case. Society relied on slavery as the engine that drove the economy. Joseph was not a slave. Joseph was a workingman. As the influence of Christ gradually influenced society, the influence of Joseph also influenced society. Authentic Christian values include, as one of the primary virtues, respect for work and working people. We know that working people are the actual building blocks of society because it is working people who have families and who live for their families, who sacrifice for their families. This is a very essential quality for a civilization that really thrives, and this is why we should be concerned because of a downward respect for work and for working people, and their needs and their rights in our modern society. Our working people are often used as if they were simply instruments. This cannot be. This in itself is intrinsically unjust. People are never simply instruments, and this is reason for us to be very concerned.

Secondly, Joseph was the guardian of Jesus, although not really the father—but he was for all intents and purposes the father, because fatherhood is really not about primarily generating physical life. It’s about generating, but not primarily physical life.
It’s about generating something else, and Joseph did. So he is rightly called one of the parents of Jesus. He and Mary together are called the parents of Jesus; they were de facto. They really did parent Jesus. **Joseph fathered him in the way that all children need to be fathered.**

In our society, again, we have another **warning sign that many men seem to think that they can bring children into the world and not father them,** or that they have fathered them merely because they have produced them physically. This is not being a father, and it’s extremely worrisome when people think it is. Or when people think that a **woman, alone in a single household,** can provide all that needs to be provided for children! They cannot. It is **unjust to the women, and it is unjust to children.** Yet today some women even promote the idea that they can and they should. This is basically unjust.

**Joseph was a just man.** In fact, that’s all we know about him: he was just. Being just is **not a static quality. It’s a dynamic quality. His justice poured out into his life, his life of caring and his life of working.** Indeed, it is his virtues, **his qualities, that our society needs to see and to value.** Perhaps more than any others, these are the ones slipping away. At one time they were the **values that made our country great.** The absence of them will cause our country to disintegrate. St. Joseph would be a wonderful patron not only for this parish, but for this country.
“Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.”

The emotional movement in today’s liturgy is something of a roller coaster, seemingly from triumph to tragedy; but, as always, appearances are deceiving. We are moving not from triumph to tragedy, but from the human aspirations of the people, our ancestors, to the divine determinations, the way God has really chosen to bring salvation to the world, to us all.

The people in this morning’s first gospel, in the narthex, welcomed Christ because of what they thought he could do for them. When they realized he had no intention of becoming their leader in militancy, in civil war, in insurrection, they looked elsewhere. God, however, is not to be trifled with. His commitment to his Son was irrevocable, and how better to show it than to endure the full wrath of humanity: populists, priests, and politicians. If anything proves Jesus’ purity of heart, it is that he had no friends except his Father, and he sacrificed everything for his Father.

If possible, take some time this week to reflect deeply on this story. If possible, spend Thursday evening with this assembly reflecting on the beginning of Christ’s passion. Then continue on Friday afternoon with commemoration of Jesus’ death. And then come together for the Easter liturgy with hearts renewed and minds uplifted. There could be no better preparation for the rest of your life.
“Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days’ wages and given to the poor?”

This story about Jesus being anointed by a woman is told in different versions in different gospels. You will recall in one version he goes to a house of a Pharisee, who fails to give him the normal forms of hospitality. A woman of ill repute but unnamed anoints his feet, and there is the same objection. So it doesn’t matter exactly who did this act of kindness.

What matters are the responses, and there are two of them: one negative, one positive. The negative response is—in this particular version it’s in the mouth of Judas; in the other it’s in the mouth of a Pharisee. It doesn’t matter. The point is this: an act of kindness, in fact extravagant kindness, was given to Jesus and someone objected: “Why wasn’t this money given to the poor?” That’s the point. The point is the negativity of what is otherwise apparently well intended. So it’s a matter of seeing beneath the surface.

For example, I have heard a very similar thing said about some shrine or some gift to a shrine or a church, something extravagant. Sometimes people are motivated to do something extravagant. The criticism almost always comes up, “Well, why wasn’t that money given to the poor?” And yet I have never in my life heard anyone ask why wasn’t that money given to the poor when the matter was tickets for a rock concert or money spent in a casino or for some form of entertainment—never! But indeed, our society spends billions of dollars on entertainment, billions of dollars on drugs, especially illegal ones, billions of dollars on gambling. None of those things have any real substantial value, yet no one ever says, why isn’t that money given to the poor? Well, why doesn’t anyone ever say that? Why, really? Yet if a very expensive chalice is donated to a church, then that will always come up. “Well, why wasn’t that money given to the poor?” So why are people the way they are?
“You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?”

This dialogue in today’s gospel is taken from Jesus’ parting words to his disciples. It is precisely this event in his life that we focus on during this week, especially Thursday: his last meal. In that discourse he says many things. One of them that to me is very significant is, “I no longer call you servants or slaves; I now call you friends.” That is directly related to this idea, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places,” because reflecting on it St. Thomas Aquinas says, “What is friendship? Friendship is what’s mine is yours, and what’s yours is mine.” That’s what Jesus is trying to tell his disciples, “What’s mine is yours; what’s yours is mine.” The great blessings God is offering to us—all of what is his he wants to give to us! He makes all of us his heirs.

Since his riches are infinite, there are infinite riches for us all, if only we witness to him in our daily lives. This is not asking much, but it’s more than some people seem to want to give. Now there are many ways of witnessing. Some people are very articulate, and they can witness with words. Other people not so; they witness with something else. One great way of witnessing is to live for others, to live for family, to extend your heart. That is a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is a living friendship with God.

If we look at our society today, we see a lot of people not willing to do that. They want to live for themselves. If we look at the disintegration of many aspects of our
society and the loneliness and the poverty and the sadness and the extravagance and the self-indulgence that are so often present, we can see why we really need the gospel of Jesus Christ. It isn’t simply a matter of our personal salvation. It’s a matter of bringing our society to its senses and showing the way to integrity and justice.

Jesus told his disciples, “You know the way that leads where I am going.” And Thomas says, “Oh, no, we don’t.” Well, Thomas didn’t think he did. We often are like that. We don’t think we know. We think there is some secret somewhere that has to be revealed to us. Maybe some great person is going to arise and tell us, or maybe we will find ourselves in some mystical moment and see the light. But Jesus says, “No, you do know the way.” Jesus’ life is the way, a life of service to others. That’s it! Caring for especially those who cannot care for themselves! Young children, the sick, the disturbed, the autistic. These are ways in which we find the way to God. This is the way to God—caring for others.

Although I did not know Jeanette, I do know her in her work, so to speak, in what she provided, which was a great love for others. We need to honor her memory. We honor the memory of someone who has passed before us when we bring their values into our own hearts and when we rededicate ourselves to what they stood for, especially insofar as their values touched us and gave us life. Jesus says, “What you have received as a gift, give as a gift.” We can be no greater witnesses to the love of God than when we hand that love on to others. And what a glorious future we have provided for us by God! As Jesus says, “If there were not,” that is many dwelling places, “would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?” Indeed, that is what Christ is doing now. We need to prepare a place also for him in our own world through the love of others.
“So Judas took the morsel and left at once. And it was night.”

The role of Judas in the drama of Christ’s passion and death is very problematic. He is described as the one who betrayed him. But what was the betrayal? Some imagine, for example, that he made it possible for the police to arrest Jesus, but that was actually a no-brainer. The Temple police would have had no trouble locating or arresting Jesus, so Judas was not supplying information or anything else we can imagine. So I believe the reason is deeper.

John says, “And it was night.” Night is darkness, and this is symbolic of Judas entering into darkness, into the evil, where there is no light. When Judas left the upper room full of Jesus’ disciples, an unspecified number of them, then Jesus says, “Now is God glorified.” He didn’t say it before Judas left. It’s as if Judas did him a favor by taking something out of that room. I believe it is related to many of Jesus’ teachings about division. “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” The body of disciples was divided as long as Judas was there because he wasn’t going along with this—for whatever reason. I don’t think we can actually figure it out; but for whatever reason, Judas did not go along with Jesus’ agenda, with his teachings, with his plan.

Judas had a different plan and a different purpose, whatever it was; we don’t know. Probably Judas was rather typical of those who awaited the Messiah and who really expected the Messiah to inaugurate some sort of major action and probably the intervention of God in some powerful, forceful way. It doesn’t matter what his real intentions were. What really matters is that he did not believe in Jesus and that as long as
he was in the crowd or in the group it was a house divided, but when he left it became a house united; and now God is glorified.

We need to realize our own need to stay with Christ even when we don’t understand what God is doing—and we indeed do not! We suffer many ills. We undergo many trials and temptations. We do not understand the ways of God, for a simple reason: they are beyond us. We need to cling to Christ and stay within the unity of the body wherein there is strength. “He who does not cling to me scatters.” We have to keep that in mind. If we are ever so foolish as to trust our own wisdom and leave Christ for that reason, we are simply going to end up in darkness. “A house divided against itself will fall, but a house united will stand.”
“Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father.”

You will recall only a few weeks ago we read the gospel of the Transfiguration: Peter, James, and John saw, momentarily, the splendor and glory of God in Christ. It didn’t last. They wanted to stay there on the mountain, but they could not. Now comes the hard part: not transfiguration, but transformation, that is, not merely a momentary vision, but a permanent change in being. Jesus has gathered his dearest friends to initiate them into this transformation, because he knows his time has come to return to the Father.

Now transformation is bewildering. The disciples were bewildered, and we too are often bewildered, or we shall be at some point in all probability. True transformation turns our world upside down. It alters who we are by stripping away the world’s version of who we are supposed to be, and it reveals God’s word of who we are. No human being could ever exist unless first God spoke a word, an identity. Yet this truth is something we often find very strange and unknown.

The gospels speak of transformation in two different ways. The first three gospels: Mark, Matthew, and Luke, the latter two following the first, basically speak of Eucharist, the gift of the body and blood. “First Jesus took bread and said, ‘Take and eat. This is my body.’” How often we have heard this! Do we sense how odd it is, how strange, how really incomprehensible? What does that mean: “This is my body. Take and eat”? Jesus’ disciples surely must have wondered what he was talking about! We might well wonder prayerfully rather than simply imagining that we know because we have read some answer somewhere.

Don’t forget, Jesus said, “Beware; if your holiness does not surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of God.” The scribes were those who simply repeated what they had heard. We need to wonder what it means.

There have been polls showing that two-thirds of the Roman Catholics in the United States do not believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Is this true or not? I don’t know. I do know that polls cannot enter into the mystery of faith. They are really about words and statements and concepts. Believing that Jesus is the Bread of life is not a mere matter of words. It is not merely an idea that we must assent to. It is a matter of
the Spirit of Christ transforming our lives from within, much as food transforms our bodies. We are becoming more and more aware of that every day, how food transforms our bodies. “You are what you eat.” The Bread of life can transform our spirits and our minds and our souls from within. Sadly, there seem to be many who do not believe in this life-transforming gift. Although they claim to be Catholic or they claim to be Christian, their lives seem sterile and static; but that is hardly a modern phenomenon. Has it not always been so?

Secondly, Jesus says, “This is my blood of the covenant that will be shed for many.” Again, Jesus is making dismaying changes in the tradition. He does not simply hand on what he received. He changes it, transforms it, through his knowledge of the Father. The word of God given to the people of Israel clearly condemns human sacrifice, and yet here he is speaking of his own blood poured out as in a sacrificial ritual. Jesus is really pushing his disciples to rethink what it means to be holy and to make holy—the actual meaning of sacrifice. He is pushing them to understand in a new way how his life will become not a bloody execution, which they will see, but a willing gift to the Father, voluntarily given so that he can pour out mercy and compassion on all his brothers and sisters and make possible a world of justice and peace. That can only come through forgiveness—that can only come through forgiveness! So rather than the questions the pollsters ask, we should ask a different one: Does the blood of Christ free us from the fear of death? If so, then we have faith.

Most of us by now know that the fourth gospel does not tell about the bread and the wine, but it does talk about Eucharist—just not about the elements of the sign. John says, “Jesus poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet.” Commentators often stress how humiliating and servile this act was. I am afraid this misses the point that Jesus is making. I believe that for Jesus washing the feet of his disciples was no more humiliating than washing his own feet. In fact, that’s the point he is trying to make: their feet are his, and their hands are his; and soon he will have no other because he is going to the Father.

So again, he reinterprets the very nature of life and society and order and the roles we play. Slaves become friends and the master a servant. Why? Because there is only one body. This is about Eucharist. He is living out and acting out the unity of the body, which is the very meaning of communion. St. Paul later will say: “In Christ there is no
male or female, no slave or freeborn, no Jew or Gentile, no Greek or Scythian—all are one in Christ.” The Eucharistic symbol, meal, sign, demonstrates this unity that belongs to the body, to the Church, to us.

Further, it points out something perhaps rather uncomfortable. The boundaries we create around ourselves to protect and preserve our lives in this very dangerous world have no real substance. They are more or less imaginary, and they are meant to dissolve in the love of God, in the communion of the body of Christ. But with them go our identities, who we have always been in our own minds. No wonder Peter protests: “You will not wash my feet!” He senses, rightly so, his world is disintegrating in front of his face, and his plans are coming to nothing. This is transformation. And this is God’s purpose. **He wants our ideas of who we are to disintegrate because they come from the world;** they don’t come from God in the first place. If we are willing to let go of them, then **he can teach us who we really are in the body.** He can teach us how much we really need God. **He can teach us to become like God by caring—by caring—for the whole: head and hands, feet and members.**

Another question: **Are we really willing to let go? Are we willing to be taught?** Jesus said, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” The flesh is the basis, the foundation, of all our habits, even of thought, and surely of feeling. We keep falling back into our ruts. We keep falling back into relying on what we have always been and what we have always done and what we have always felt and what we have always thought. So how can anything new happen? **Well, with God are all possibilities. If we are willing, the grace of God can work wonders.**

Responding to that grace tonight, we are going to follow the Lord’s mandate and do this—wash one another’s feet, in his name. Now we will have about five or six stations up front. I will begin in the middle, and I think the deacons and Father John are going to help. Then I would ask you all to help, in turn **washing the feet of the next person. In this way we will embody the communion that we are given in the blood of Christ.**
Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.” This is taken from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans.

Tonight is a sacred night because we reserve it for the initiation of catechumens into the life of Christ. It is the highpoint of the Church’s year from many different angles, the liturgy that gives birth, as it were, to all liturgies. And by the way, “liturgy” means “work of the people.” I feel that we are very fortunate here at St. Joseph’s because we have so many people who give themselves so much and so competently to the work of worship: who so tastefully decorate the environment, setting up the stage for our gathering and praying; who know how to sing, lead singers and train singers, and read and proclaim and direct; and gently guide the pastor—so to all of them I am very grateful.

This night is not only for the catechumens, those who will be baptized. It is really a time for all of us to reconsider what is meant by Baptism, which, of course, always must be preceded with the word “faith.” Faith and Baptism—they go together, cannot be separated in our theology, in our teaching. For some of us perhaps it might be the first time we really consider what is meant by our faith and Baptism. Maybe we have always taken this for granted.

St. Paul pulls no punches; he states that Baptism means death: death to the life we have just because we have been born on this planet in the natural order—death to that life! What does this mean? Well, no parent can be blasé watching a son or daughter grow up. You know how children are; the best of children are blotters. They absorb everything around them. If you have children, you know they mimic you; and they get to that age when they start copying everybody else, ignoring you. They live with little sense of who they are or why they exist. These questions are too deep for children, for the young. This is all very natural. We can’t complain about it. It’s the way all of us are when we are young. The results can be disastrous. They can get caught in snares of all kinds. Parental worry is not groundless anxiety, although it may at times seem fruitless. The Scripture suggests that God is also anxious about his creation, especially for the part that he gave free will.

It’s in this context we think about Baptism. Baptism is a new orientation to life. Through its power and grace, we can be freed from the snares and deceptions that can easily enslave even the brightest of us—the blandishments and allurements of the world, and we have to admit they are attractive. The First Epistle of John says, “You have only one teacher, the Spirit.” The world around us may be sordid and corrupt, but the Spirit of Christ has overcome the world. That Spirit brings our catechumens to the font of Baptism, and will fill them with his power through the laying on of hands and the sacred Chrism.
But that’s not all! Life needs nourishment. All living things need food. Christ provides not only new life through his Spirit, but sustaining nourishment through the body and blood that he gives us in the Eucharist. While preparing his disciples for his own death, Jesus did not want them to think that the divine power that they perceived in him, that they saw in him, that they felt in him, would also disappear. No, the presence of the Word of God enfleshed in his body would remain with them forever; in fact, it would expand and envelope all who were open to God’s love. This was his farewell promise. This is the reason he imparted to them the Eucharist. Because the love of God knows no conditions, the presence of God will remain even in the brokenness of the body, which is the Church—especially in the brokenness of the body! The presence of God will feed the hunger at the center of human desires—that insatiable hunger that can never be satisfied apart from infinite love.

How often we try to find some substitute for this real food, this real substance. But all substitutes will disappoint and leave their suitors jaded or bored or cynical or resentful or all of these. The abiding presence of Christ in the Eucharist is real precisely because, when received often, it slowly and inexorably remedies the pains and the emptiness of the human spirit, and fills the soul with peace and serenity that eludes human efforts and human fixes.

It seems to me that it would be extremely peculiar for anyone to profess belief in the resurrection of Christ, and then approach his life-giving Eucharistic presence seldom or at great intervals. John Greenleaf Whittier once said: “For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘it might have been!’” Indeed, it would be very sad if we turn away from the joy and peace of God and his many gifts that might have been, because our lives are too busy for the breaking of the bread.
“This man God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” This text is taken from the Acts of the Apostles.

At the center of Jesus’ mission is a burning sense of the Father’s love. There are hints of it in the tradition he was reared in, but only hints. He saw great paradoxes within the narrow, rigid teachings he received. One of the greatest was love itself.

When asked what the greatest law was, Jesus had no problem answering: “Love God with your whole heart, mind, and soul.” He was quoting the Old Testament, the Book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 6. But he was quick to add a second: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Again, he was quoting the Old Testament, the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 19. “The second is like it,” he said. Loving God is no zero-sum game. One can love God with one’s whole heart, mind, and soul and still have plenty of heart, mind, and soul to love others. One doesn’t take away from the other. Love of God is not a limited quantity. We don’t have to worry about running out of it. The love we give away remains forever ours. **One can love God and ourselves and our neighbors with the same strength, the same mind, and the same soul.** Love is God; God is love, and love is infinite.

But this is not true in reverse! Self-love is not God. Self-love is not infinite. Self-love is fragile, limited, and easily bruised. We cannot get very far with self-love. When wounded, it recoils into itself, and we start suffocating. So **loving our neighbor as ourselves cannot come first. Only when God comes first can everyone be included, and the human heart satisfied.**

A similar paradox applies to divine presence. Here again Jesus disagreed with his tradition. In the Old Testament, it seems that God is always present in the heavens, but only for brief moments on the mountain. Later, he is present in the Ark of the Covenant,
and finally in the Temple, but only behind the veil. It seems that God was somehow rather stingy and parsimonious with his presence.

For Jesus, God’s presence was like love: infinite, all embracing, not: here but not there. While preparing his disciples for his own death, he did not want them to think that the divine presence that they perceived in him would also disappear. The presence of the Word of God enfleshed in his body would remain with them forever—in fact, would expand and envelope all who were open to God’s love. Because the love of God knows no conditions, the presence of God will remain even in the brokenness of the body, which is the Church—especially in the brokenness of the body! That is a truth we rarely contemplate, how it is our brokenness that acts as a magnet drawing to it the love, the redemptive mercy, the saving gift of God. The presence of God will feed the hunger at the center of all human desire—that insatiable hunger than can never be satisfied apart from infinite love.

How often we try to find some substitute for this real thing, this real substance. But all substitutes will disappoint and leave their suitors jaded, bored, cynical, or resentful. The abiding presence of Christ in the Eucharist is real precisely because, when received often, it slowly and inexorably remedies the pains and emptiness of the human spirit and fills the soul with peace and serenity that eludes human efforts, human fixes.

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The impression is given in this reading that the empty tomb was some sort of a problem for the opponents of Christ, the chief priests and the elders, and they had to make up a story to cover the fact that the tomb was empty. But actually the empty tomb doesn’t say too much. Mary Magdalene herself thought that someone has stolen the body.

The power of Christ’s resurrection is not the empty tomb, but his presence among his disciples in so many different ways, not only at the beginning when he actually appears to some of them, but his sustained presence through tremendous persecution. In the first place it took centuries of persecution before the Church was actually freed. It has subsequently undergone many different forms of persecution. It is the sustaining presence of the risen Christ that is the sole explanation for the Church’s survival.

Just look at the teachings of Christ. They don’t apply or appeal to most people. Why? Because they are spiritual. The teachings of Judaism are more practical. They are concerned with what people really care about: money, sex, marriage, pleasure, how much you can have, under what conditions they are legitimate, and so on. That’s what most people care about. Judaism was well suited to take care of all these things. But there is one problem: What happens when you die? The Old Testament had actually no real teachings about this. They had a hope that someday God would raise up at least the Jewish people in the resurrection of the just, but that was just a hope. In Christ that hope became concrete. So we no longer merely hope for the resurrection, but we believe in the resurrection. Not only do we believe in the resurrection, but we believe in the One who was raised, who gathers us together, and whose resurrection is the only explanation, once again, for the survival of the Church. The Church’s teachings are actually very spiritual teachings. Reflect on them. Reflect on the gospels. Most people can live their lives quite well without them.
That’s what St. Thomas Aquinas calls *gratia gratis data*. It’s a grace given for no reason except the inscrutable purpose of God. St. Augustine was another one—he became a great leader of the Church, but not through his own choice. He experienced a conversion. Many other people have not, however. **Most of Jesus’ opponents did not receive these kinds of conversion experiences.** Why? I don’t know. You don’t know. **No one knows the inscrutable wisdom of God!**

**St. Paul** himself thought about that quite a bit. He **wondered why God didn’t give his fellow Pharisees the same graces that he received**—and he never did explain it to himself, but always wondered about this. He figured out finally that it was in order to enable the Gentiles to come into the Church. But it won’t explain why some people have these graces, **why some people are visited from on high where other people are not.** We cannot explain that. It is very clear in the Acts of the Apostles, the author, who is Luke, says, “And we know that he appeared not to all, but only to those chosen beforehand.” That’s God’s way. We can’t understand it.

What we can see is that the risen Christ is at work in our world—that we can see. We can know that the mere existence of the Church and survival of the Church is due to that risen Lord. We can know that the draw or **the magnetism that the gospel has for the vast majority of people centers on this one thing: the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead and will raise us from the dead.** St. Paul says that is the foundation of our faith, the very cornerstone of our faith. Without it there would be no Christian faith.
One thing about these stories about Jesus appearing to his disciples is that they were very slow to catch on, often frightened or terrified or startled or troubled, but found it very hard to take. It’s important we keep this in mind because we might imagine, or someone might imagine or someone might claim, that the resurrection of Christ was wishful thinking, that the disciples wanted to believe and simply experienced what they more or less induced themselves to think. But the stories of Jesus appearing to his disciples are very different from such a scenario. They are all taken up, you might say, with the feeling of loss and their minds are quite confused.

Now when Jesus meets the disciples on the road to Emmaus they feel something, but they don’t know what it is. They can’t sort out what it is that is so remarkable about this journey. It is not until he takes bread and blesses the bread and breaks the bread that they recognize who he is, that God is with them, in Christ. There is a reason for this because in the breaking of the bread we see an image of the Church, which is the body of Christ broken, broken through sin, broken through frailty, broken through weakness—but God is present anyway! Especially, God is present in the breaking of the bread and in the brokenness of the body. This they come to see more and more. It isn’t in their moments of triumph, but in their moments of failure that they find Christ.
Finding Christ in Everyday life  Friday in the Octave of Easter  April 1, 2005
7:00 a.m.  Acts 4:1-12;  Jn 21:1-14  (There is work to be done.)

“This was now the third time Jesus was revealed to his disciples after being raised from the dead.”

Each of the evangelists has a slightly different way of presenting the resurrection of Christ; but there is something in common with all of them, and that is the disciples go back to life; they go back to work; they go back to living as they had before. Their lives are transformed gradually, but they are still living in the world they were living in before. And the point the evangelists are trying to make is that God’s will for us is not to be transported to somewhere else, not right now. The resurrection of Christ from the dead is our pledge and promise of a similar resurrection, a like resurrection, however, not right now. Right now, go back to work. Right now, return to your fishing nets. Right now, there is work to be done.

The earth was created by God for a purpose. It’s not a purpose we can explain in easy words. We can think about it and pray about it, but we can’t explain it. That purpose is not complete. Human life was created on this planet for a purpose; its purpose is not finished. Jesus meets his disciples in the midst of their daily tasks. He does not meet them in the Temple. He does not meet them in the synagogue, and he doesn’t meet them when they are praying! He meets them when they are working. He meets them when they are talking. He meets them when they are walking on the road. These lessons are meant to be taken very seriously.

Finding Christ in Everyday life
Even though we are very familiar with the various stories in the gospel they reveal deep questions that are very pertinent to us, to our lives, to our own growth; and they have to do with faith and belief—and the difference.

Throughout the gospels Jesus is constantly dialoguing or arguing or debating with the teachers and with the priests—his encounters with the priests are not exactly debates. He is encountering these two sources of authority within his own religion, and he is coming up with a very different idea of God! With the teachers, he argues the real meaning and scope of the Law in various ways. In regard to the priests, he is very unhappy with their purpose and their use of the Temple. These two issues, the Law and the Temple, are the basic points of friction between Jesus and his own established religion. After his death and resurrection this doesn’t stop. It continues.

In today’s story it continues in a very funny way, odd way, strange way, with his own followers. This is because of the difference between faith, as a response to revelation, and belief, which is something else again. We have to realize that the teachers, and for that matter the priests for the most part, were real believers. They believed in what they were doing. Jesus’ point was they weren’t open to revelation, so therefore they weren’t open to real faith, faith being a response to revelation. They couldn’t come to faith because they weren’t open to revelation.

Now sometimes, and very rarely, God almost pushes the door of revelation open for someone. Not very often. St. Paul, on the road to Damascus, breathing threats against the Church, believing very much in what he was doing: persecuting the Church, believing very much that Jesus was a fraud and that his people, his followers, were threatening the truth of God in the Law, found the doors of his soul, as it were, forced open and the grace of God poured in, and his eyes were blinded with this light. But that was a rare occurrence. Usually God doesn’t work this way.

Later on Paul would wonder about this: why doesn’t God give this grace that I received to my fellow believers? And he never did come to an answer. He says, “Does that mean God had terminated the covenant? No, God wouldn’t do that. God is faithful. Does it mean God has rejected his people?” Paul says, “No, it doesn’t mean that. God would never reject his people.” So why? He says, “I don’t know, but maybe it’s just to give time for the Gentiles to come to Christ.”

The issue here is grace and revelation and faith. Grace comes to people at God’s behest and God’s timing. There are people who want it, but don’t receive it—necessarily the way they want it anyway. On the other hand, we can see from the end of this gospel that Jesus’ will is for all people to receive the gospel. “Go to the whole world. Proclaim to everybody—to every creature—the gospel, the good news.” Presumably—presumably—the grace to receive it would go along with the proclamation, and yet it
doesn’t seem to be our experience. **It seems that the proclamation and the grace to receive it are not always coming together in lives of people we know.** This is a mystery. We can puzzle over it the way St. Paul puzzled over why God didn’t give that grace that he received on the road to Damascus to all of the rabbis and the teachers of his own time. Faith does not give us answers necessarily, but these are certainly questions that come up.

On the other hand, now there is **the issue of belief and unbelief.** That’s a little different because the Pharisees and the Sadducees surely believed in what they were doing. I already said that. **They believed in their religion, and they believed in their tradition, but they were not open. Here the disciples—same thing!** Could you say they were unbelievers? No, but they had unbelief. They had believed in Jesus. They had followed Jesus. But now they don’t believe he has been raised. In other words, **they don’t believe their friends!** Jesus’ point is this: God’s grace works in odd ways. God wants everyone to be saved, but **the way in which we are saved is up to God. Sometimes God uses your friends, or sometimes God uses a stranger.** “I was hungry, and you gave me food.” “Oh, but when did we see you?” “Oh, I was there anonymously, in disguise.” In this case it wasn’t disguise. It was the friends that they should have trusted. They were bringing the truth of the gospel, and they closed their ears. It says here, “And he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart.” So there was something missing in there; that’s why they didn’t hear. That’s why they didn’t accept in faith this revelation of the raising of Christ.

So these are complex issues. **We have to follow our beliefs and our consciences, but they might not be enlightened, because maybe our hearts aren’t open enough.** The evangelist wrote this for us, not just for the Church two thousand years ago. We need this too. We need to bring our beliefs into the light of the risen Christ. We need to ask for the openness of our hearts that we will accept in faith God’s revelation of himself, his disclosure of himself to our lives, to our hearts, to our minds and souls, that we will become **witnesses to him, not to a set of beliefs**, not to a set of convictions, but to him!

That’s the role of the Church. **That’s the mission of the Church.** And too often that’s not what we do. We teach a catechism. Well, that’s nice, but that’s not good enough. **We have to bring Christ to the world.** We cannot bring Christ to the world unless we are open to Christ ourselves, unless our hearts are open to the message, whether it comes anonymously in the least of his brethren and sisters or whether it comes through a friend that we should trust. This is the work of God and this is the mystery of grace. We will never understand it, but we need to be open to it.
Empowered to Forgive!    Second Sunday of Easter/A    Divine Mercy Sunday
April 3, 2005     7:00 a.m.    Acts 2:42-47;  1 Pt 1:3-9;  Jn 20:19-31  (Everyone’s mission)

“Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

It is providential in a certain sense that on this Sunday with this reading our beloved Pope John Paul returns to the Father. He termed this Sunday “Mercy Sunday,” and promoted prayers for forgiveness, especially on this day, but also novenas for that purpose throughout the year.

Jesus is nothing if not relentless in his promoting of this idea of forgiveness. There is no one topic in the whole New Testament repeated more often. And now, as he returns from his death, he goes back to the same topic, but now with a difference.

Previously, it was he who was forgiving and offering forgiveness and stating people forgiven. Now he is empowering and mandating and sending forth his followers, his disciples, to do the same. One could say without exaggeration that this is the foundation of the Church’s mission: to forgive and to preach forgiveness. Let me add that this is not a ministry only for the ordained. It is a ministry for the whole Church.

It is not simply some juridical power like an acquittal pronounced by a judge. It’s much deeper than that. It’s more powerful than that. It is not a mere matter of words. Sometimes when we were children our parents said, “Now say you are sorry. Now say you are forgiven.” Well, that’s all very nice, but not too powerful.

Jesus is talking about power, the power really to love those who have caused us harm. Don’t forget, love is not a feeling; it is a decision. It is a choice, but it’s a choice we often cannot make! But in Christ we can. As we think about our Baptism and about the rebirth
we have in Baptism, this is what it is about. It’s about having a power that is not from us, but a supernatural power that comes from God, can only be found in God, but given to us in our Baptism, and enables us to love those who have caused us harm and have made themselves our enemies. This is not about pretending that everyone is our friend. It’s recognizing we have enemies, but it is saying that we are now empowered through the suffering and death of Christ to forgive them.

Too often the focus is shifted away from our need to forgive to our need to be forgiven. Well, of course, that’s all true. We are all frail, and we hurt people’s feelings, and we need to avail ourselves of the sacrament of Reconciliation—that’s true, but that’s really not what this is about. Inverting the order of importance, that is, moving from our power to forgive to our need for forgiveness is really not only unfaithful to the gospel, but it’s self-centered and self-absorbed. If Jesus was about anything, he was about moving people away from themselves.

Jesus’ question to you today is: Who needs your forgiveness today?
“According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it.”

It is usually supposed that when Karol Wojtyla was elected pope and he took the name John Paul II, he did so first and foremost in honoring John Paul I, who had just passed away after being pope only a few weeks, but, secondly, that that combination was in honor of Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, the two previous popes before John Paul I. Well, that may be true in some way, but I think there is another reason for John and Paul being chosen, because the two most important figures in the early Church in terms of the way the Church thought and promoted itself were St. Paul and the apostle St. John, whom we call “St. John,” although we really don’t know what his name was, the beloved disciple, who stands behind the fourth gospel and this whole body of literature we call the “Johnanne literature.” Those are the two great sources we have of Christian teachings.

Pope John Paul was really interested in bringing Christian teaching to the world. That was a vocation that was both official and personal with him. Now in bringing the teachings of Christ to the world he was following along with what St. Paul said in Corinthians: “According to the grace of God give to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation.” This is St. Paul talking about his work building up the Church two thousand years ago, and another is building upon it. There are others. One very important one was Pope John Paul. He built upon the foundation of the apostles. He was able to do so because he knew what the apostles did and said because he was schooled in the thinking of Scripture and in the study of Scripture.

Pope John Paul to me represented Christ in three ways: first, in his extraordinary love for all people, not only his own. He didn’t only love Polish people. He didn’t only love Roman Catholics. He loved, really, everybody in a deep and affectionate way. When a Turk attacked him and tried to kill him, he responded with love and forgiveness. This is not a power he had of himself. This is the Spirit of the Lord shining through him. He was the first pope to go to synagogues and pray. I shouldn’t say the first; Peter probably did that too! But he was the first in a long time to go to synagogues and pray with Jewish people. That act and many like it broke down many walls of separation that the first St. Paul was praying for since his ministry. He puzzled over the fact that he had received this grace on the road to Damascus that his other fellow Jews did not receive, and therefore they remained very much convinced that their faith, which was like his earlier faith, was correct! He came to realize that it was nothing in comparison to faith in Christ, but he couldn’t convince his fellows. But Pope John Paul has taken some extraordinary steps toward exactly that, showing them the way of Christ through example—going to the Wailing Wall, and putting a prayer in the slit there, in the crack in the wall, sharing solidarity with the Jewish people. He showed solidarity with the
Jewish people, Muslim people, many people of many different races and ethnic groups.

This was not always well received! We mustn’t imagine that the whole world opened their hearts to him. I don’t want to mention who didn’t, but there are quite a few groups that didn’t. You can find that out for yourself. But he didn’t stop because he wasn’t accepted. This is a very important lesson, Jesus taught too. If we love, we love with the power of God, and we don’t love only to the degree to which we are accepted or to which it’s returned. Jesus says, “If you love only those who love you, what credit is there in that?” John Paul knew that and lived that, and to his credit he loved those who did not love him, and pursued their welfare and their salvation in spite of their disavowal of him.

You know that Jesus himself had to learn obedience through what he suffered. Now you sometimes might wonder what that means. Well, when Jesus was first confronted by the first Gentile who wanted his help, a Syro-Phoenician woman, he said to her, “It is not right to give what is holy to dogs.” In other words, you are not part of my group, so bug off! But she persisted, and Jesus learned. I could say Jesus changed in his human nature at that moment, and he did grant her request. I believe Pope John Paul also learned through what he suffered. So suffering can be very helpful. It doesn’t have to turn us bitter. It can expand our hearts to include everyone, because ultimately everyone shares that with us—suffering. No one is on this earth who doesn’t suffer. So we have this in common. It’s more important than our biological nature. Along with it comes our capacity to love and, thereby, become divine through the grace of God. Pope John Paul lived that doctrine, so to speak, that teaching, in the way he lived. That is very important to me.

A second way in which Pope John Paul showed me Christ was his great devotion to the Holy Eucharist. One of the saddest things about our modern-day Church is the number of people who do not appreciate the Eucharist, who do not realize that in the Eucharist the risen Christ is coming to us, not as a static thing to be consumed, but as a living presence to embrace us and to nourish us with his own substance, his own life, his own death, indeed, his very incarnation, his very enfleshment, his very embodiment. He comes to give that to us, to include us in his own life, and thus reconcile us to the Father. The Eucharist is the most powerful way Christ touches us. We are so blessed in the Church to have this great gift of Eucharist. Pope John Paul never ceased to focus on this great gift, declaring, in fact, this very year the “Year of the Eucharist,” the year in which he now has gone to the Father. And, of course, the Eucharist is all about going to the Father! Jesus gave us the Eucharist before he went to the Father, so that we would not be orphaned, so that we would not be alone, so that we would not miss his presence, and we won’t if we develop a devotion to the Eucharist, if we follow the teachings of our pope and the practice of our pope.

The third way in which Pope John Paul was important to me was his simple humanity and the degree to which he really was an embodied person. He went skiing. When I was growing up, when I was a child, the pope was Pius XII. I don’t know if you
ever knew him or heard of him, but he never went skiing! John Paul was a man that enjoyed life! **Pope John Paul loved life, and I think that’s part of loving people.** How could you love people and not love life? It’s all one gift. **This is a gift of mystical vision, to see how everything is all connected.**

There is an unfortunate tradition in our Church in which some very good things are seen as bad. People think that pleasure, for example, is somehow intrinsically bad. Holy people don’t enjoy anything. Holy people are supposed to be sad all the time. Holy people are supposed to be miserable. They are supposed to wear hair shirts. This is a very peculiar idea. It is not John Paul II! He loved life. He went skiing. He enjoyed friends. He worked constantly, but he played too! Of course, for him everything was prayer—everything was prayer—whether he was on the slopes or whether he was in his study or whether he was at Mass or **wherever he was, he was in prayer, because he had learned how God infuses everything as a result, of course, of a deep Eucharistic spirituality.**

**My prayer is that the gifts that Pope John Paul brought to the Church will never be lost,** and that all those who feel any kind of loss inside of them, that feeling of missing someone because of his departure from earth, I hope that that will cause them to **seek more deeply the presence of Christ on the altar and in their hearts in the reception of Holy Eucharist.** In this way we will honor the pope most by listening to him and following his teaching.
Jesus as Intercessor  
Annunciation of the Lord  
Monday, April 4, 2005  
7:00 a.m.

Is 7:10-14; 8:10;  
Heb 10:4-10;  
Lk 1:26-38  
(New understanding of sacrifice)

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight. Then I said, ‘As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God.’”

Today in the readings we have the work of the Letter to the Hebrews. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is performing a task called Midrash, which means going into the past and taking bits and pieces of different documents and ideas and Scriptures, and fitting them together in a new picture. It is very interesting how he arranges these different quotations, reflecting an ambivalence that was found in the Old Testament itself about the role of formality, the role of ritual, the role of Temple sacrifice, in the life of the people. The problem was the prophet said, “Well, God doesn’t really want these things.” The whole cult of Israel was all bent on offering sacrifices which had a very specific meaning, namely, when the animal died the animal’s soul went back to God, and upon the soul the petitions and the needs of the people could be placed—simple enough. In other words, the sacrifice was a form of intercession or intercessory prayer. But in time that original idea got blocked, and a sort of materialistic idea took over: if one sacrifice is good, two are better; three are better yet, and so on. The prophets complained that the people lost sight of the original purpose of the whole thing.

Now the author is reflecting on the fact that when Jesus came into the world in his human body he came to restore the original idea, to himself become the intercessor, to die in order to return to the Father and plead for us in his Father’s presence. That’s the picture that the author is drawing for us. Indeed, then he will go on to say that when Jesus dies on the cross he takes his blood and he pours it forth in the heavenly throne room, pictured as a Temple with a mercy seat, and he pours it forth to obtain mercy for all people.
When the Fathers of the Church took these images, they saw them as reflecting the reality of our **Eucharist**. When we gather at the Eucharist and the priest calls down the Holy Spirit upon the gifts, those gifts become the very body given up for us, the very blood Jesus poured out on the cross, **the very blood Jesus took to the Father and poured forth for our redemption**. That very blood is the blood on our altar, the blood we take in Communion. The body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ, of course, are all one now because Christ is raised from the dead. We cannot separate what God has put together. So whether we have the body of Christ in the form of bread or in the form of wine, it is the body, the blood, the soul, and the divinity of Christ. It is the same blood that Jesus poured out as a gift and the same blood Jesus poured out in purification and redemption of our lives.

So **Jesus stands as the high priest for all time eternally** in the heavens because “As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God.” He came to become the intercessor. He came to embody in himself all that God always wanted in his creation, to become that obedient servant, **that obedient Son, that really reflects God**.

But we are all created as images of God, too. We are created for that same purpose. So **our purpose is in one way fulfilled as we gather around the Eucharistic table**, as we take the body of Christ broken for us, given up for us. That’s what the words of the Mass say. “Take and eat. This is my body given for you. Take and drink. This is my blood poured out so that sins may be forgiven.” This is so that the image of God may come to perfection in each of us.
“Jesus said to Nicodemus, ‘You must be born from above.’”

This expression in Greek is actually a kind of pun. Born from above, begotten from above, born again, all sound the same: gignethen, anothen. What is being taught here is, of course, very important, that we need a spiritual rebirth. I would say this is something that most Christians, Jews, and Muslims do not understand. Even those who claim to be “born again” do not understand it, because so often people who claim to be born again show absolutely no indication at all of any spiritual understanding, which is what this is all about.

Jesus says, “Flesh begets flesh; spirit begets spirit.” Now this is not meant to be an absolute dualism, as if there is no connection at all between the world of matter and the world of spirit. That would be far from the mind of Christ, far from the teaching of the Scriptures that believe that the very Word of God became enfleshed, joined to the human nature and therefore to material reality, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the announcement of which we celebrated yesterday, the feast of the Annunciation. That would be the farthest thing from the mind of Christ or the teaching of the Scriptures. But, nonetheless, what is meant is that just because we are born on this earth, in itself does not make us children of God. That makes us creatures—period. We can just creep along in our creatureliness and never really know God, and at the same time we can have all kinds of religious faith!

This is what we have to see: not all religious faith leads to this rebirth. That’s what Jesus is trying to tell Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, but Nicodemus is interested in
Jesus and in what Jesus has to say. So he is trying to lead him to understand you may have a very wonderful religious faith, but in a certain way you have to let go of it. This again is the death-resurrection motif; it is intrinsic to Baptism. He will tell Nicodemus, “Unless a man be born again,” “begotten from above” or “born from above”—all three are correct translations—“by water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The kingdom of heaven, now, is a dimension and a reality that is not ours just because we are born on earth. It’s not meant to be far away. It’s meant to be part of us, but it’s something that requires another kind of movement, not an earthly movement, not a matter of personal experience—something else: God at work. This is all about God’s working and our openness to it. We have to keep telling ourselves that. God is at work; we need to be open.

If because of our faith, we close ourselves to God, that would be a terrible situation—and it has happened! It happens all the time. All forms of fanaticism are people closing themselves to God and his gentle Spirit because of their faith. Think about what a tragedy that is! And then you will understand something about what crucified Christ!
“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him.”

In the readings that follow Easter there are many beautiful references to Christ’s teachings as well as many stories about the Church in the early days. We have to be careful to keep these separated to some degree. They are not the same kinds of stories.

For example, in today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we see the battle that was going on between the apostles and the followers of the Sanhedrin. Now we might imagine that the followers of the Sanhedrin, who were persecuting the Church, would fall into the category, “Whoever disobeys the Son,” but not necessarily. Why? Because their motivation was faith. They were following the faith that they had been taught, the faith they had received from their forefathers, the faith that was in the Torah. So we cannot be simplistic about this.

St. Paul wasn’t. On the road to Damascus St. Paul received an extraordinary revelation, and he knew it. He knew it was extraordinary, and he knew that without that gift he would have remained opposing Christ. He puzzles about this. Why did I receive this gift? Why don’t all receive this gift? He didn’t know. We don’t know. The workings of God are very mysterious in this way.

Those who oppose the Son or disobey the Son mean those who really turn away from the light that enlightens everyone. We do believe the light enlightens everyone. God’s call to salvation is universal, but apparently not all in the same way.
In the early 1950’s there was a Jesuit priest, Father Finney, Leonard Finney, who expressed the belief that there is only salvation in the Roman Catholic Church. He could be forgiven for saying that because that is really what a lot of people had always said and thought the Church taught, but he was excommunicated for holding that contumaciously.

Pius XII clarified that what the Church teaches is that we must enter the Church when and if we receive the grace to realize it is the true Church and the fullness of God’s revelation in Christ.

In a similar way we are required to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ precisely when we receive the grace to do so, but apparently not everyone does, even people who have real faith in God. That’s why Jesus once said, “You have faith in God, now have faith in me also.” But not everyone is led that way. Again, the ways of God are very mysterious. Why should it be? We don’t know.

One of the great teachings of our recently deceased pope is that we have to work together with those who believe, even if our faith and theirs is very different. So in the light of the passing of our pope, in the light of the resurrection of Christ, these are some very good points to meditate upon.
“When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, ‘This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world.’”

The fourth Gospel is divided into two parts; the first part is called the “Book of Signs,” because it is a series of signs that Jesus performs. A sign is something more than a word. A sign is full of meaning.

The meanings of this sign are what we need to focus on. The question is the crowds saw the sign, but did they really perceive the real meaning of it? Probably not. Later, Jesus criticizes some of the people following him. He says, “You are only following me because you saw the loaves,” in other words, “You are following me because you are hungry, and you want me to give you something to eat!” But it’s a sign of something more.

First of all, it’s a sign of the abundance of the kingdom. Abundance is part of all the signs. Think of the wedding at Cana, the abundant wine Jesus provides. It’s not just wine, abundance of wine! Here it’s abundance of food. Both of these have Eucharistic symbols, because bread and wine are the elements that we use to bring down the Holy Spirit, so Jesus can continue to nourish us, again, with the abundance of his love and with his very being! It isn’t simply love in the sort of emotional sense, but with his very being, which is given to us.

Again, the Eucharist itself is one of the preeminent signs of Jesus’ work. And he is performing it today! He is gathering his people together today, and he is trying to convince us of his abundant mercy, and he is trying to communicate with us, and he is sharing today his very being with us! So he says, “Take and eat. This is my body. Take and drink. This is my blood.” The very stuff, the very material of his being, and he comes to spend it on us.

Now there is great danger that we will take signs for their own sake and not look to what they signify. We need to quiet ourselves and to focus on who it is today, this morning, who is performing the sign!
Ordinary Recognizing of Jesus  Third Sunday of Easter/A  April 10, 2005
5:00 p.m.  Acts 2:14, 22-33;  1 Pt 1:17-21;  Lk 24:13-35  (In the breaking of the bread)

“Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of bread.”

Today’s gospel story is about how Jesus makes himself known to his disciples ordinarily. There are all kinds of extraordinary events like, for example, St. Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, but they are extraordinary. They are not for most of Jesus’ disciples. **This story is about how Jesus reveals himself ordinarily.**

It is very clear from the story that Jesus is accompanying his disciples even when they don’t realize it. We can deduce from this that it refers to us: that Jesus is in our lives even though we do not see it, even though we do not see him, even though we do not recognize him or feel his presence. A great deal of God’s coming into the world is anonymous: “But when did we see you hungry and feed you?” ask the just. You will recall the story. The truth is even the just do not recognize the Christ. That is why saints have decided to treat everyone the same. They treat everyone as if he or she is indeed the Christ. They have learned to believe what they cannot see.

True holiness requires a certain kind of discontent. If we are pleased too easily, too easily satisfied, we will never stretch or search. If we don’t stretch or search, we will not find God. Sometimes we may be too busy to notice that there is something missing in our lives. Sometimes we may make ourselves too busy because we don’t want the uncomfortable feeling that there is something wrong deep within us.

It is the role of our sacramental life, the role of our sacraments, to make God known, to show us how God comes to us to meet our deepest longings. That is one reason why if we are never aware of our longings, we will have a poorer sacramental life. The more aware we are of our need, the richer will be the reward. Too often Catholics assume they have received all there is to receive, have gained all there is to gain. I think sometimes Catholics are like people who grow up with too much money: we don’t appreciate what we have!

**Learning about the presence of God is an ongoing process.** It’s not a matter of having the right answers from the Catechism. We are affected by ideas and attitudes from our modern society. Too often in our modern society people associate the presence of God only with the beautiful, the joyful, the pleasant, the wonderful events in life, such as a stunning coastline or a lovely beach or a magnificent mountain range or a quiet day in the forest. Of course, God is present in all those places; but to think of God as only in those places is neo-pagan. Christ did not have a beautiful life, a fabulous life, even a pleasant one, nor did the saints, and really nor does anybody in the total sense. In everyone’s life there is pain and there is sorrow and there is suffering; in other words, there is the cross. But do we find God in that?
The pursuit of the good life is perfectly natural and good. We are created to do that. To want to succeed, to want to achieve, are all good desires. But it is tragic, in fact, a tragic mistake, to equate God with just whatever seems good to us. Our ideas of goodness are too narrow; they are too incomplete. The cross of Christ shows us that God’s goodness envelopes all of life including suffering and death. God’s goodness includes and goes beyond whatever the world can contain. We can learn this little by little, step-by-step, week after week, as we gather for the breaking of bread. The Holy Spirit reveals to us the presence of God.

However, God does not simply work in us and for us. He also works through us. Jesus sent out his followers on mission. We are his followers. We have the mission now to extend his good news, his gospel truth, his saving grace, to all the world.

One way we can do that or one way we can help that is by supporting our diocese in its many ministries. “Church” does not simply mean St. Joe’s! “Church” means the whole local Church to which we belong, which is, for us, the diocese of Joliet. The diocese provides many services for us, for all the parishes—more for some than for others, especially the poorer ones. It also provides many services to the poor in many different ways, especially through Catholic Charities: counseling and outreach and housing and rental help and food and many other ways. Furthermore, the Bible says, “Workers are worth their pay.” Incidentally, the workers of our diocese have not received a pay increase in several years! Also there are many buildings that have to be maintained. We need them for our assemblies, our gatherings—well, they take money to keep them going, to heat them and air-condition them, to turn on the lights, to keep them clean, and to fix the leaky roofs.

Recently our bishop has written a letter to all of you, if you are registered in our diocese somewhere, asking for your help in keeping our diocese afloat. If you by chance have lost your letter or didn’t get one or lost your envelope, we have more. They are in the narthex. Please ask for one after Mass. I ask you to be generous in aiding the work of our local Church. You may mail your envelope to our parish or you may drop it in the basket—and I thank you for your generosity.
Good morning! How are you today? You look like the weather—sleepy! Well, that may be.

Today we have two very interesting readings. One is about the murder of St. Stephen. How many here are named Stephen? Not too many. Not a popular name anymore. Well, it used to be very popular. Stephen was murdered by—whom? Who killed him? It was in the reading this morning. Did you catch it? Who was there at the death of St. Stephen? A very famous person. St. Paul! St. Paul before he became St. Paul was called Saul. Saul was a very devout Jew. He was at the death of St. Stephen, and he helped with the cloaks while everybody else stoned Stephen.

Now it says in the Scripture here, “And he fell asleep.” It doesn’t mean he fell asleep; it means he died. Stephen was stoned to death. Why was he stoned to death, Jordan? Well, not only did he believe in Jesus—that’s true, but what else did he do? Yes, he praised God. Did anyone object to that? Not necessarily. What did they object to? Why did they kill him? He not only believed in Jesus, but he spread the word! Is that what you were going to say? He spoke the word to people who didn’t want to hear it. It says that they covered their ears and shouted. Well, should we all try that? No, but if you cover your ears and shout, you can’t hear anything. Right? Have you ever tried it? Don’t do it here; do it outside. Cover your ears and shout. You won’t hear a thing. That’s what they did when they didn’t want to hear.

You know what, boys and girls, we always can be like this. We don’t always want to hear the word of God. Sometimes the word of God upsets us. Sometimes we don’t think we need the word of God because we believe. Well, guess what? Those people who killed Stephen were believers! They were faithful. They were devout, but they hated Stephen, and they killed him. St. Paul himself, before he was St. Paul, Cory, when he was—who? What was his name? Saul. When he was just Saul he hated Christ, and he hated the gospel. He hated the gospel because—and this is the thing you have to remember, to realize—he thought it was against his faith. So it was because of his faith in God that he hated Christ. Does that make any sense? Well, yes, it does in a very weird way. So in the history of the world we have all kinds of religions, and there is something good in all of them, but we have to be careful because out of a religious faith we might actually start hating. And that would be tragic, but it happens. It’s even more ridiculous that it happens that sometimes even Christians hate other people. Hate is bad enough from people whose beliefs are not opposed to it. But when Christians do it, it is really absurd because Christ taught against hate, period!

Now that is not true necessarily of Judaism. There is nothing in the Law that says you can’t hate. In fact, it says that you should hate. You should hate your enemies. Doesn’t it say that? So they were just doing what the Law said. Weren’t they being faithful to what they believed? Yes, they were—yes, they were. Who is going to judge all this?
God; we can’t. We can’t figure out who is right and who is wrong, who really knows what they are doing is wrong or who knows what they are doing is right. We don’t know that; God knows that. But we do know this, that people in the name of God have hated and killed other people. In some cases, like in this morning’s story, that hatred didn’t go against their beliefs; that didn’t go against their Law. But in other cases, as in the history of our Church or in the history of Christianity, that does go against our beliefs. But that hasn’t stopped a lot of people.

So we have to be careful when we talk about belief in God. The question is: How do you understand God? If you are a Christian and if you choose to be a Christian, then there is only one option for you. **You have to look at God through the eyes of Jesus.** You can’t say, “I’m a Christian; however, I don’t believe in Jesus.” Well, then you are not a Christian! You understand? You are free to decide what kind of person you are going to be, whether you are going to be a Christian or not. But if you are a Christian, you have no option but to look at life through the eyes of Christ. Okay? Through the eyes of Christ!

Christ was reflected in today’s reading through Stephen. **Stephen looked at life through Christ.** He actually loved those people he was preaching to. He was making them angry. He was making them upset, but he loved them anyway. He wasn’t making them angry because he didn’t like them or because he hated them or because he was trying to irritate them. He was really trying to help them, but they didn’t want to hear it. They didn’t want to get his help. But he accepted the situation, and he prayed. How did he die? What was the prayer on his lips? Who was the reader this morning? Was it Maura? Did you read? What was his prayer? “**Do not hold this sin against them.**”

Where have you heard anything like that, Michael—similar? Dan, where have you heard something like that? Correct! When Jesus spoke on the cross and said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Correct! **So Stephen and Jesus look at life in the same way, through the eyes of Jesus.** Stephen could do that. You can do it. It’s a life in which we **accept people as they are whether they love us or don’t.** I’m not saying it’s easy. Stephen ended up dead! You understand this, Matthew? It cost him his life. It has cost all the martyrs their lives.

Why did they do this? **Why** would you spend your life in that kind of a belief? There can only be one reason for it. What is it? Well, yes, true, and more specifically because—and the only thing that can motivate this is—because **Stephen knew Christ as risen!** That is the only possible motivation. He knew Christ as risen. He did not know Christ as someone who used to live on earth, who used to teach. He knew him as risen, and therefore death didn’t bother him at all! He was not swayed by other people’s acceptance of him or rejection of him. It didn’t matter at all because he knew Christ as risen. If you want to know why the Church actually took off, why did it start, why did it move on, only one reason—because **the early believers experienced Christ as risen.** If they did not know him as risen from the dead, if they did not know him as a living being, they would not have been Christian. The Church would never have happened, because his teachings are too complicated. The vast majority of people couldn’t understand them. It
wasn’t his teachings. It was the experience of him risen from the dead—that’s what drew people to the Church. That is the foundation. St. Paul said, “That is the foundation of the Church.”

In the case of St. Paul, incidentally, he never asked for an experience of Christ. On the road to Damascus he was thrown down! A blinding light took away his sight for days. He didn’t ask for that! He heard a voice say, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute ME?” The risen Christ saying this! He didn’t ask for that. Why did Saul, and later on he wonders about this—how come I got this gift and my other brothers, my Jewish brothers, who believe the way I did, how come they didn’t see Christ? How come Christ didn’t come to them? What’s the answer to that? Nelson? Why didn’t God give that gift to the others? You don’t know, do you? Nobody knows is the answer! No one knows why God made Saul an apostle through an extraordinary, blinding experience of the risen Christ, and why he didn’t do that to other people! We don’t know why! It’s going to work out someday. By the end of the world we will know, but now we don’t.

So we cannot understand what is going on in life, necessarily, but we can experience the risen Christ. That’s the story. and that’s the purpose of our gathering. Why we really come together is so that we can experience the risen Christ. Now sometimes people say, well, I don’t experience anything. That’s really too bad. I feel sorry for people who don’t experience anything when they come. But what was the gospel about? “I am the living bread.” That’s what Jesus says: “I am the living bread.” He didn’t say I was the living bread or I will be the living bread. “I am the living bread.” Now as you come to the altar, as you come to receive the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ, Jesus is meeting you—the risen Christ—nobody else!

Now are you open to Jesus? Are you willing to meet him or are you rather thinking about something else. Is there something more important right now—this morning—is there something more important than meeting the risen Christ? That’s an important question. I can’t answer that. You can answer that. And each of you will answer that one way or another. Not to answer it is a kind of answer, if you gather my meaning, which some of you do and some of you don’t. So you come this morning to the Eucharist. You come every Sunday. Why? To meet the risen Lord, so in the breaking of the bread we can learn how the Lord has been with us all week; and gradually we learn how the risen Lord can change us, touch us, move us, in our walk, in our studies, in our relating to each other, on our good days, on our bad days, when the sun is shining, when it is rainy. Whatever the situation, Christ is with you.

Now it’s not easy to see most of the time. But if we pay attention to the breaking of the bread, to that moment when he comes to us in his body and blood, we can learn—over time, not all at once—we can learn over time to start to discern, to see, to recognize, the presence of Christ, the risen Christ, in our lives. It will make a big difference, as it made a big difference for Stephen. If you live with utter courage and you really believe that nothing can destroy you, ultimately, that is going to make a big difference in your choices, in what you do and how you live. So that’s why Jesus is coming to you today, to be the living bread, who has come down from heaven.
“I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

In the first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles, we see an example of a person, an Ethiopian eunuch, experiencing the power of Christ’s resurrection. He was drawn by the word of God in the prophet Isaiah, connected to the presence of Philip. So it’s not a simple thing. It begins with the word of God that has a particular meaning. Philip comes by, in the power of the Spirit, to explain how now this refers to Christ; and presumably Philip and the eunuch had some conversation as they were going along. Then he asked to be baptized very quickly. This represents an occurrence that was common in the early Church: to experience the resurrected presence of Christ in Baptism.

The problem is that we can only be baptized once! And every religious experience tends to fade away, as do all experiences, actually, not just religious ones. All experiences fade away with time.

So we see in the gospel today a remedy, a Sacrament of Initiation that can be repeated over and over and over again, which is the Eucharist. So Baptism was the most powerful sign—true—but of its nature Baptism can only be conferred once in a lifetime. In this reading from John’s Gospel, the fourth gospel, we have a reflection of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Jesus in this particular gospel pictures himself as “the bread that has come down from heaven.” Now the allusion, of course, is to manna. Manna was called “bread that came down from heaven.” Manna was something we don’t quite
understand, some sort of dew, hoarfrost, that covered the ground and could be scraped together, ground, and then made into bread. It fed the people in the desert.

Jesus points out that that wonderful gift from God was wonderful and timely; it was just what they needed at that time, but it didn’t provide for eternal life. But now he is the bread that has come down, who is also ground up and made into bread in his suffering and in his death. But this bread will last. This bread will, in fact, provide eternal life. This is the bread that we can eat every day, just like the people ate manna every day.

Now in the story about the manna, do not forget, the people got tired of it. At first they were thrilled, but then they got tired. “Do we have to eat this again?” There is great danger that we too will tire of the bread that comes down from heaven, that familiarity will breed contempt or boredom. And that we have to be careful about! After all, our nature is what it is. Human nature can become very bored with what is typical. We have to make sure that we don’t allow this great gift to become so typical that we no longer appreciate it. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”
“But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for this man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and children of Israel, and I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name.’”

Of all the experiences of the early Church recorded in Scripture of the risen Christ this is to me the most extraordinary. In the other cases Jesus is appearing to people who knew him already, people who had loved him, walked with him, shared his meals, hung on his words, saw his miracles, prayed with him. In this case and only in this case does Jesus appear to an enemy, to someone who has made life miserable for the early Church.

It raises several questions. One of them is this: if God can work so extraordinarily in the life of Saul of Tarsus, why didn’t he work in a similar fashion in all the other people who persecuted the Church? After all, the Church had several hundred years of very difficult life until gradually it took hold; and then suddenly the Emperor, Constantine, decided to give up persecuting the Church. But it wasn’t the emperor who persecuted the Church all along anyway. It was many other people and especially people of Jewish belief, precisely because they were believers and they believed in what they were taught, and that’s not what Christ taught, and therefore they felt impelled to persecute what they saw as wrong. Saul was one of the greatest.

Now God intervenes while Saul is on the road to Damascus in this extraordinary way. Again, the question comes up: if he could do this for Saul, why not for the others? Wouldn’t that have made life better for the whole world? If the purpose is to bring Christ to the nations, well, this would have been a great way to do it! Instead of only one Saul how about five? Why not? Or ten or twenty or thirty—that would have been much better. But that’s not God’s way. But there is a hint here. First of all, this very interesting point that our author, Luke, same author as the Gospel of Luke, says. First of all, “He has been
chosen to carry my name before”—first—“Gentiles and their kings, then the children of Israel.” That's inverting the order that the early Church understood.

Jesus was almost totally concerned about the children of Israel, “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” only reluctantly extended his ministry to others, and only now and then in a very limited way. The early Church as well, although open to the idea of Gentiles coming into the Church, they surely were not the primary concern. But here they become the primary concern. Everything is turned around: first the Gentiles, then the children of Israel! Why? Again, we can’t say why, but it is rather different. It is a turning point, as it were, in the mission of the Church. Again, through the inspired word of God we know this, otherwise we never could.

But secondly, there is another point—there is another point—I mean that explains why perhaps God did not want more than one Saul turned St. Paul. If he wants to go first to the Gentiles, it would spoil things if all of a sudden all the Jews became Christian, in other words. But here is another part—and we have to read this carefully—“I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name.” When speaking of the extraordinary gifts God gives us, we should never forget that they cost something down the road. Yes, Paul was chosen. He was given an extraordinary light and an extraordinary experience of the risen Christ. No, he didn’t ask for it. No, he didn’t even want it, but he got it anyway. That’s an extraordinary grace, but it cost him something. It says here, “He will have to suffer much.”

Now in wondering why God’s extraordinary graces don’t grace more people, perhaps it might be for this reason. Maybe most people—including us—maybe we are not willing to suffer for his name!
“It is the Spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail.”

This discussion is about belief. Now everyone has beliefs. Belief is not necessarily associated with God; it’s associated with being human. But what do we believe in?

Jesus says, “The flesh is of no avail.” What does the flesh mean? The flesh means, basically, our human bodies and our sense organs and our brains; and he says that they are of no avail! What does he mean? Well, they are of avail, of course, living in this world, day to day observing what we come in contact with. The point is this: we don’t come in contact with, in this very natural way, the real underlying reality of life.

That’s, as it were, a different dimension.

We can use an example the grass growing in your lawn. You see the green grass. You may see weeds next to it or within it or among the grass, but you don’t see the roots. You could dig up the roots it you wanted to spend a little time, but then what would that do? That wouldn’t explain where the grass comes from, because the grass doesn’t come from the roots. The grass comes from the seed, which is just part of the grass itself.

That’s the problem with the flesh. We can look around and investigate and dig, but we never get anywhere. We are involved in a mystery even with grass itself. Biologists might say, “Well, grass evolved from a lower form of life.” That may be true, but so where did that come from? The flesh, our human mind and our human reason tied as it is to the world around us, is involved in what we call infinite regress, infinitely going back to something more simple, more simple, more simple; but that doesn’t explain anything. So
you get to the smallest particle in the universe—does that **explain where anything comes from?** Of course not.

The issue is the creativity of the Spirit. **It’s the Spirit that gives life.** The Holy Spirit is the Lord and the giver of life. The Holy Spirit is not in the ground; you can’t dig up the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works through the seed, but is not in the seed. So modern people think they are very sophisticated because we have telescopes and microscopes and all kinds of scopes that can see into all kinds of different dimensions that the naked eye cannot see. But have we arrived anywhere? No, there is still a lot more—more and more and more, and there always will be. For every mountain we go over, there is another one. It’s the Spirit that gives life. **The Spirit cannot be accessed through the flesh, through ordinary reason, through our eyes. We have to learn how to listen with our hearts.** We have to turn our perceptions to what is not visible, what is not tangible, if we want to know what is real. This is what Jesus is saying.

Now his disciples thought this was too much to take; they didn’t want to think about this. “How can he give us his flesh to eat?” Well, it takes some real thinking, but also takes real openness to symbol and metaphor and sign and analogy and poetry and philosophy, and thought that is not rooted in this world and in our human senses. **We have to let God be our teacher if we want to know anything about God.** That’s what this is about. There are times when we are tempted because of the world around us, partly, partly because of our own pride, not to let God teach us. If we learn something on our own, well, then we can be certain—that’s what Thomas thought! “Oh, if only I put my finger in his side.” But that’s a very foolish way of living. “The flesh is useless; it is the Spirit that gives life.”
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Relationship with Good Shepherd** Fourth Sunday of Easter/A April 17, 2005 8:45 a.m. Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Pt 2:20b-25; *Jn 10:1-10* (Personal knowledge of love)

“A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”

The fourth Sunday of Easter is always focused on the Good Shepherd. All of the evangelists use this image; it was no doubt close to the heart of Jesus himself. The image of the shepherd was, after all, common in the culture of Israel. In a pastoral economy based on shepherding, people are very well aware of the dependence that sheep have on their shepherds. **Sheep are in danger** from their own wandering, the threat of wolves, the dishonesty of thieves, and the ill will of those who would kill just to deprive their enemies of their livelihood.

In many ways we are similar, and we have similar vulnerabilities. **We also can wander**, not knowing where we are going. **We also can be misled, deceived.** We also can become **endangered by forces stronger than ourselves**, and we can be **killed, especially in our spirit.** For this reason Jesus says, “Do not fear the one who can kill the body only, but fear the one who can kill the spirit.”

**Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd**, who has come not for his own gain or glory, but for the sake of the sheep’s prosperity and thriving. Now this takes some thinking about. The first point Christ makes is about God and God’s intentions. **God intends only for the good of the sheep or in biblical terminology “life in abundance.”**

This in itself is arresting because ordinarily **shepherds do not keep sheep because of their love for sheep.** Shepherds keep sheep because sheep provide them wool for sale and meat, food, for their sustenance. **But God is different, and doubting this does**
serious harm to our relationship with God, the relationship that God wishes to establish that is—not the one we want, but the one God wants.

And this leads to the second point: that we have to gain a personal knowledge of the shepherd. We have to learn how to tell the difference between his voice and the voices of phony, dishonest, or diluted pretenders, who are certainly in evidence in our world. For sheep it may be instinctive to know the voice of the shepherd; it is not for us. We have to learn. On this point Pope St. Gregory mentions that we don’t learn about the shepherd through faith, but rather through love. We don’t become acquainted with him through mere conviction, but through action.

Recently in the life of Pope John Paul II, we saw a man who modeled himself on the Good Shepherd. He did not work for his own gain; he died with no possessions. Yet it is important to add, Pope John Paul was not the Good Shepherd himself. He merely modeled his life on the Good Shepherd. It is Christ and only Christ who is the true Good Shepherd of our souls and the “guardian of our souls,” in the words of St. Peter. We must not become dependent on Churchmen, however holy and approachable they may be. Jesus’ teachings were unique because they focused on the possibility of each and every person experiencing God. We must never forget this. Today he has led us to this table. The question is: Will we invite him anew into our hearts?
When they heard this, they stopped objecting and glorified God saying, ‘God has then granted life-giving repentance to the Gentiles too.’”

This first reading from the Acts of the Apostles is an example of how confused believers can be, how confused the Church can be, because as it was already stated long ago in the Old Testament, “‘My ways are not your ways,’ saith the Lord.” And ever this shall be true. We cannot figure out the Lord’s ways. Jesus himself told the disciples that the Spirit blew where it willed. They never understood what he meant by this.

Now in the experience we see in the Acts of the Apostles, we see how the Spirit is working, and it goes beyond what the people think it should. For example, the people of Israel had certain ideas: God gave the Law; the Law was the Law; it was from God; it had to be obeyed. Well, Jesus from time to time, in fact, in certain ways, often violated the actual Law, for example, working on the Sabbath. Nonetheless, in general, the people Jesus worked with were Jews, and they believed in the Law, including the kosher rules.

Now in their particular case we see that Peter violates the kosher rules, which we never see Jesus actually doing; Peter does, and then some object to him. They say, “Well, how can you do this?” He explains he had a vision. But behind that whole idea of the vision is really an experience that God is going beyond the confines of that particular time and place and that particular religion and culture. The people, that is, the apostles, were not ready for this.

We have another experience here where the Holy Spirit descends upon people who haven’t even been baptized! Well, that’s not the order they understood things should be.
We have our idea of order as well. In the sacramental system we start with Baptism; then we go to Confirmation, and then all the other sacraments. What they were experiencing is the gift of Confirmation, the gift of baptism in the Holy Spirit, before people were even baptized with water. They said, “Well, this can’t be.” But it was!

The point is this: what is meant by the Holy Spirit first and foremost is the experience of God. The experience of God goes where God wants it to. We have to keep that in mind. It is not ours to give to others. It belongs to God, and God dispenses it appropriately according to his inscrutable will.

However, we might ask ourselves: Have we experienced the Holy Spirit to the degree that God really wants us to? Or are we thinking in too many categories that we have made up? That’s what this reading is suggesting, that we need to look to the Spirit and see what the Spirit wants to do.
Clarification by Separation

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Clarification by Separation    Fourth Week of Easter    Tuesday, April 19, 2005
7:00 a.m.    Acts 11:19-26;    Jn 10:22-30    (Our point of view versus God’s)

“If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

Today’s dialogue is about the breakdown in communication that can occur because of our limitations, because of the limitations of language and the meaning of words. The questioners wanted an answer, but there was no answer. Jesus says, “I already told you.” They said, “No, you didn’t.” “Well, yes, I did, but you don’t get it. You don’t get it because you are thinking on one level.”

What does “Christ” mean? Well, in Hebrew it’s Meshiach. It means “anointed.” But what do you mean by anointed? That’s the whole point. The Jewish questioners here were saying, “Are you the one we are looking for?” And he said, “I told you, and the answer is yes and no.” The answer is yes and no. “Actually I am not the one you are looking for. I am the one God has sent, but I am not the one you are looking for, because you are not looking for the one God has sent. You are looking for something else. You have some other kind of expectation. You have some other kind of idea. You have dreamt up some other plan. It’s not God’s plan.”

Now I think we have to understand he is saying this without exactly blaming them. But he is saying factually, “Well, you are not among my sheep.” It’s more “sad to say” than a matter of accusation. “Sad to say, you are not among my sheep. My sheep know me. They hear my voice. Who are my sheep? My sheep are the ones the Father has called. They are the ones whom the Father has given a heart that knows how to listen and to respond internally. So, am I the Christ? Well, I’m not your Christ. But I am the shepherd God has sent, and my sheep know me.”

So this is a period of clarification by separation. Very often this has to happen if the truth is ever to be honored. Incidentally today there are people who are always, as it were, fighting for their point of view in the Church. This is a demonstration of something we have to always be aware of. It isn’t what I want or what we want or what we expect that matters. What matters is: What is God sending to us? What is God eliciting from us?
“Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us.’”

Well, even though the one who spoke this prayer was a criminal, even though he was reviling Jesus, his prayer is not uncommon, and I might say not unfounded. It is so often that we pray that God will save us from our travails, from our suffering. But we see in the life of Christ something different, that God comes in Christ to share totally our lives, our weaknesses, our travails, our pains, and even our death, so that salvation is really not from our weaknesses or from our problems, but through them to what he called “eternal life.”

Now Jesus himself, had he merely preached, would not have been very convincing. He may have had followers—he would have had followers—he did have followers—but it would not have been very convincing if he had lived a full, rich life. Believers have always believed this about themselves as well, about the Church, about disciples, about followers of Christ. When we are rich and strong we are not great witnesses. St. Paul put it this way, “When I am weak, then am I strong, but not in myself, in my power to witness.” We have only to think of our late Pope John Paul II. Perhaps his greatest gift was the way he kept living with Parkinson’s Disease, with his frailty, with his slowness, with his pain. That made his message all the clearer, that he really believed in Jesus Christ risen from the dead. So likewise, we all experience various forms of sickness, disease, weakness, or frailty. It is precisely then and there that God touches us,
but not to extract us from our situations, but to save us through them, to show us the way, who is Christ.

Jesus says, “I am the way.” What is that supposed to mean? It’s not like a plan that you can read about. **The “way” is a person that you have to come to know.** Pope St. Gregory the Great says, “You don’t get to know the person of the Good Shepherd through faith as much as through love, and not in mere convictions, but really in action.”

It’s when we step out of ourselves and go to others that we learn about the power of God. **Every temptation in life is to go inward, to be self-sufficient, to be self-controlled, to be self-sustaining.** That’s not God’s way. If that were God’s way, Jesus would have been a very poor model of God’s way. But indeed, he is God’s way. He is life poured out. He is life given up. He is life surrendered to the Father. But his surrender is no kind of hopelessness. It’s not throwing in the towel, quite the opposite: it’s a surrender made in total trust because he knows the Father. His warning or his admonition to his followers is “You need to know the Father too; and you will, if you get to know me.”

That’s the whole idea. **God sends Jesus,** who is like us in all things except sin so that we can get to know the heart of the Father, and that we can get to know this heart of the Father that is the origin of all life and also the destiny of all life, this heart that has prepared for us a banquet and is inviting us to that banquet even now, a banquet we anticipate at the altar as we take the body and the blood, the soul and the divinity of Christ into ourselves for our sustenance and nourishment in this very vale of tears, in this very moment of sorrow and darkness. It is when I am weak that I am strong.
“Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.”

This is spoken with great authority. Jesus says, “Amen, amen, I say to you.” Ordinarily the word “amen” is said by somebody else affirming what someone says. When I first went to St. Francis Parish there were some black parishioners, and they would do that. I would say something, and they would say, “Amen.” At first I was very startled, but after while I got used to it; so you can do that anytime you want. Just say, “Amen.” But Jesus now is affirming his own statement before he makes it, which is very unique. It’s unknown anywhere else in world literature, inspired literature—only in the fourth gospel; and only Jesus does this.

The point he is making is that he sends messengers out to carry his message and to carry him, so that “whoever receives the one I send receives me, and not only me, but the one who sent me.” So he is now identifying himself as the one the Father has sent, and, in turn, his disciples are to go forth in his name, and whoever receives his disciples is receiving him and the Father. So this is an intimate relationship really within the Trinity. The Trinity is opening its own intimate relationship to others, to incorporate theoretically all people into its love.

The only problem is this: religious people tend to always think that their message is the message. We have to keep in mind yes and no. The real point is the messenger, not the message itself. That’s what Jesus is trying to say here. It’s a matter of being open to the God who sends. If we are open to the God who sends, we will be
respectful and respectable people. Respectful and respectable people are, in turn, respected. Sometimes we have forgotten that in our enthusiasm—perhaps for ourselves, not for God—we have sold ourselves to other people. I am speaking “we” now as our historical Church or even Christianity as a whole. Sometimes we have tried to force people to accept us, not God. Whenever we are using force we are not doing anything for God.

What Jesus is describing here is something very peaceful. It’s an invitation. It’s an opening. Whoever is open can receive. But all this reception and all this giving is all done in peace and in love, which is the Spirit of God. So we have to keep that in mind. And if there is rejection of God, that’s up to God to take care of. We need to accept rejection. We need to accept it; that’s part of the cross—that is the cross! If we are faithful disciples of Jesus, we will accept the cross; we won’t reject the cross. When we use force, we are rejecting the cross. So this is the mission of the Church. We need to be about God’s business.
“You have faith in God; have faith also in me.”

We don’t know whether we have the exact words of Jesus in the gospels—probably not. But this phrase or this sentence really puts in a very succinct way the message of Jesus throughout his whole ministry. **He was, after all, dealing with people who believed in God.** The people who put him to death believed in God; at least the Sanhedrin believed in God—whether Pontius Pilate did, I don’t know! His people, the Jewish people, believed in God; they were God-fearing people. In today’s first reading St. Paul addresses “fellow Jews and God-fearers.” “God-fearers” means either converts or people who were on their way to conversion, you might say, catechumens in the Jewish way of life, so he was talking to people who believed in God.

He is making a big jump. **He says, “Now believe in me as well.”** Now I don’t think any rabbi would ever have said that. I have never heard of it. They taught belief in God—yes. But no one every said, “Oh, also believe in me!” but that is exactly what Jesus was saying. **He was saying that he had a relationship to the Father that was totally unique and that he knew the Father in an intimate way.** He wanted to share this intimacy with his disciples, and **the way in which he could share this is only through trust.** They had to trust him, and they had to trust HIM!

I think often we don’t quite know what that means. For example, in Judaism you learned the Law; people had different opinions about what it meant, but you learned it. Then according to what you thought it meant, you followed it. That’s not really trusting in anyone but yourself! You are trusting in your judgment, your conscience, if you want
to call it that. Jesus says, “Trust in me. Trust in my knowledge of the Father. Trust in my capacity to be a bridge for you, to bring you into life”—not what people call life, but real life. “Trust in my capacity to put you into contact with the source of everything, with the true Being, who always was, who is, and who always shall be, whom I know because he is my Father and I come from him.”

Again, I doubt Jesus ever spoke exactly in this way, but he said it more or less in the way he taught, in the way he disputed what other people said, how he reinterpreted, for example, the Law of Israel and the history and the meaning of morality, how he opened his heart to the marginalized and even the people who were really not so good, according to the standards of that time, how he touched the suffering and the sick and the depressed and the diseased and the troubled in mind and heart, how he touched all of them with his life-giving power. He was saying, “You have to—you don’t have to—I am inviting you to trust in me, trust that I know what I am talking about because I know whom I am talking about.”

And this is really distinct to Jesus: that he had this intimate sense of who God really is in a way that many faithful and faith-filled people simply do not—do not now, did not then! That’s what is really important in this text, to realize what Jesus is really indicating, that if we want what he has, we have to trust in him. That means also in the way we make choices. What are the standards we use? What are they? Are they abstract, something we learn, something someone taught us, the feelings we have gathered from our families, or do we judge everything in accord with him? Do we believe in him?
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Are You Ready?  Fifty Sunday of Easter/A    April 24, 2005    12:30 p.m.
Acts 6:1-7; 1 Pt 2:4-9; Jn 14:1-12  (First Holy Communions)  (Receiving Jesus into all of our being)

Well, Good afternoon. I want all of the First Communicants to relax. You needn’t worry about anything. If I ask you a question and you don’t know the answer, you can ask your parents.

Now today is a very happy day, but it’s also a very serious day. It’s joyful, but also very solemn. I want you to think about right now what you are doing here, not what is going to happen later. There will be festivities and that’s wonderful, but right now just think about why we are gathered here now.

Jesus says in the gospel today, “You have faith in God; have faith also in me.” Now to whom was Jesus speaking? Who was the audience for Jesus? Well, let’s put it this way, what was Jesus’ background? What was his religion? What was his mother’s religion, the Blessed Mother? Jewish, correct! So that’s the people who Jesus was speaking to. He was speaking to Jewish people. He was saying, “You do have faith in God; now have faith in me.” Now one of Jesus’ most important points was it’s not what you know—it’s not what you know, even though we are always teaching you all kinds of facts. But that’s not important. What Jesus said is whom you know. His point was you have to get to know God. That’s why he came. He came so we would get to know God.

This whole gospel is about knowing God through him. But we can’t know God through him unless we—what? Trust him. Right? That’s what it means to have “faith in me.”

Now the Jewish people believed that the Law was given through whom? Who gave the Law to the Jewish people, the Hebrew people, the Israelites? Who was the great prophet? Mom is going to tell you. Moses, of course! Moses, but did Moses tell the Hebrew people “have faith in me”? No! Correct, he never did. What about Mohammad? Did Mohammad ever tell the Muslims “have faith in me”? Never! Did Buddha ever say to the Buddhists have “faith in me”? No! Nobody ever said that. Jesus is the only one who said that: “Have faith in me. Through me you can learn what the Father is like.”

After all, it is pretty hard for us to know God except by him telling us. How else can we know? We can’t figure it out—can we? You are what, seven years old? Eight years old, okay. Well, you are eight years old, and you don’t know much about God, but if you are ten times eight, you would be eighty, right? Would you still know anything about God? Not much, not much!

So God has to tell us. That’s what Jesus is about. It is God’s telling us, revealing to us, showing us, his own nature, life, what he is like. Why does he do that? Because he wants us to become like him. In fact, according to the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, we are made to be like God, his image and likeness. That’s going to take some time, of course, to bring that to perfection, to bring it to fulfillment. But that’s okay; we have all eternity, right, to grow? But we better start right now. That’s Jesus’ point: don’t wait! Get going! Let me show you the way. “I am the way,” in fact. That’s
what it said—the gospel—Father John read it, didn’t he? “I am the way.” Jesus speaking: “I am the way.” So we learn from Jesus the way to God and how to be like God.

St. Gregory the Great said, “We don’t really learn about God through faith.” That’s a very funny statement. But he says, “We learn about God more through love, not so much through convictions”—that means beliefs—“but through action.” Well, what kind of action? Well, right here we are doing something. We are gathered together in the action, we call “worship” or “liturgy.” Who has brought us here? Christ! He has invited us. In this very action we are learning something. We are learning how to be like Christ—in our character. It doesn’t mean in our physical looks. We are not supposed to dress like him or talk like him or move over to Palestine. That’s not the point. The point is to become like him in our character, in our values, in our morals, in our priorities. That’s what this means. It’s God’s work in us that transforms us, that changes us gradually—not all at once, day after day, week after week. It’s a slow process because it’s a growing process. You didn’t get this tall overnight, did you? Although there are times when children spurt up—it seems like overnight, but actually we grow gradually. And so with God, we grow gradually.

We grow gradually through actions like worship. When we came here today, what did we do? We told God that we are ready to worship, but we need his help. That was the Sprinkling Rite. We are saying, well, we need to be purified. We thanked him for our Baptism, where our new life came from, but we said we need more purity and more forgiveness. See, it’s an ongoing life. Then we listened to the word of God. That’s not about the past; that’s about now, because God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. If he dealt this way in the past with the believers in Jesus, he will deal that way with us. Then we come to the Offertory. That’s not here yet, is it? It will be in a few minutes. What comes up the aisle in the offertory, in the preparation of the gifts? The bread and the wine! The bread and the wine represent you. You are the bread and you are the wine; and you bring your lives to the altar. You put them on the altar. It’s your studies and your problems and your pains and your suffering and your play and your practice. All of that you take to the altar. You put it on the altar, and then the Church through the priest calls on the Holy Spirit to sanctify our gifts, which is sanctifying you. After you have been sanctified by the consecration of the gifts, Jesus comes to you.

Now the most important thing to keep in mind is that we can know Jesus because he is not dead. He is still alive, and he is alive because he was raised from the dead; and we celebrate that every year, especially on what feast? Easter! Right! On the feast of Easter we celebrate in a very special way, solemn way, the resurrection of Christ. But really every Sunday and every day we celebrate that, do we not? Every Eucharist we celebrate that, yes. Jesus is alive, and now he is coming to you—the whole living Christ is coming to you, body, blood, soul, and divinity, under the form of the bread and the wine that represents you. They are your lives now consecrated by the Holy Spirit. He comes to you as a living presence.
The question is, **Will you let him into your whole heart, mind, and soul, or will you keep him just in your body?** If you take the host and you eat it, your body has received Christ. The question is, Will your heart and your mind and your will? **Will you take Jesus into all of you?** Only you can decide that. He wants to. He wants to become part of all of you. **He wants to fill you with his presence and his love and his power.** **Then through his presence in you, you will become like God.** Really, we believe that! We become divinized; we become like God. It sounds impossible, but it’s possible because God has promised it. It takes a long time. When people live for others, they are living like God. **When people sacrifice for others, they are living like God.** You can do that. Your parents do it. This is God’s promise to us. **Are you ready?** Are you all ready? Are you ready? Are you? Yes? Sean, are you ready? Okay. How about you over here? Are you ready? You too? You are ready! Okay, how about you? You? Okay, we are all ready? Okay, now let us stand and profess our faith.
Well, boys and girls, I don’t want you to be nervous at all because if I ask you a question and you don’t know the answer, that’s why your parents are sitting next to you. All right? Is that a good deal? No problem!

After all, faith and religion is really not about what you know anyway, although it is nice to know some things. It’s really about whom you know. It’s about God. It’s about the very power that brings us into life, that gives us a mission, a purpose, for living, stays with us throughout our lives. That’s what religion is about; that’s why we are here tonight, because someone has called us here.

In the gospel Jesus had a very interesting statement. He says, “You have faith in God; have faith also in me.” I think we ought to think about that. Why does Jesus say, “Have faith also in me”? Jesus was—what? What was his religion? No, it wasn’t Christian. What was Jesus? Jewish! Right! Jesus was Jewish. Jesus’ mother was Jewish, our Blessed Mother. So don’t ever be anti-Jewish, because you will be against the Blessed Mother! Jesus’ foster father—what was his name? This parish is named after him; you better know! Ask Mama. Yes, Joseph! Joseph was Jesus’ foster father. What religion was Joseph? The same as Jesus, Jewish! Correct! Right—isn’t that right? So they were a Jewish family. When Jesus spoke to these people, with whom was he speaking? When he was praying he was speaking to his Father, but now when he is preaching, to whom is he preaching? Natalie? Jewish people, of course! He said, “You have faith in God.” He could say that anywhere he went in the world. If he is talking to faithful people, if he is talking about people who believe in God, he could say, “You believe in God.”

But now he adds something: “Have faith in me, as well.” That’s different! You see, Moses was the one who gave the Law to the Jewish people. Isn’t that right? But did Moses ever say, “Have faith in me”? No. Is that what you were going to say? No, right? No. He did not; right, he didn’t. Buddha, who was a teacher in the East, in India, centuries before Christ, did he ever say, “Have faith in me”? No. You are right; he did not say that. Did Abraham ever say, “Have faith in me”? No, he never did. Did Mohammad ever say, “Have faith in me”? No, he never did! Only Jesus said, “Have faith in me.”

It wouldn’t have been too smart to say that except for one thing: when he died, he rose again! If he hadn’t rose again, then that statement would have been kind of foolish. But he rose again from the dead. We celebrate that every year on what special feast day? Easter! But actually every Sunday, don’t we? Every Sunday we celebrate the resurrection of Christ—every day, really!

Okay, now when Jesus was raised from the dead, he was raised from the dead so that he could be part of your life—and part of your life—and part of your life—and part of your life—and part of your life! You understand? Jesus was raised from the dead
for you! That’s why he said, “Have faith in me also.” Not just God! God is good, but, after all, we don’t know much about God—somewhat mysterious. **We can get to know Jesus;** we can know him! We can become acquainted. Although I must admit it takes some time. How many friends do you have that you know real, real, real well? Count them. Do you have one friend you know real, real, real well? One, okay. How long did it take you to get to know her or him? You don’t know. How many years? Eight years! Well, that’s pretty good! How old are you? Well, that’s a good one. She is eight years old, and it took her eight years to get to know this one person. That’s right. Well, when it comes to getting to know Christ, if you are seven years old or eight years old, it takes seven or eight years to get to know Christ. But if you are seventy years old—think of this: ten times, I bet, as old as you are now! How old are you. You are eight. Oh, it’s not quite ten times. Are you seven? Oh, you are nine. Well, not that old, but if you are eight years old—ten times eight is eighty, right? If you are eighty years old or you are ninety years old, think about that. Think about that. That’s a long time! You are still just getting to know God, and you are just getting to know Christ, but you are getting to know him.

When we go to the Lord, **we spend our entire eternity knowing God.** But we start right now. St. Gregory the Great said that we don’t get to know God the way we get to know other people, necessarily. “We don’t get to know God through faith. **We get to know God through love. We get to know God through actions.**” So that’s very important. One of the greatest actions we do is actually coming together to worship. **We actually get to know God by coming together to worship.**

Now when we come to Mass, let’s look at what we are doing. We gather together, and we start by telling God that we are happy to be here, but that we have need for mercy. We start off right away. That’s the beginning of the Mass. Today we had the Sprinkling Rite. That’s a mercy rite. That’s expressing our need for God’s forgiveness. That’s a really good place to start every day, really, asking for forgiveness.

Then we move on to the lessons read so beautifully today. **We listen to the lessons God has for us in our Scriptures.**

Then we come to the gifts. What do we bring up? What comes up to the front? Wine, correct—what else? Bread, that’s correct. **Bread and wine are brought up.** What is all the bread and wine about? It’s about you. It’s about your life. **You are giving your life to God. Your life is like bread. Your life is like wine.** It’s a product of your own work, plus what you have received. That is what you give to God. You put it in the cup. You put it on the plate—yourself; you put yourself there! That means all the hours you spend studying; they go right onto the altar. All the arguments you had with your best friend, they go right onto the altar. All the misunderstandings, they go on the altar. All the time you spend practicing basketball, that’s on the altar. The time you enjoyed the parties and the picnics and whatever else you enjoy, that goes on the altar. **All of us, our whole lives, go onto the altar.** But you have to put them there. They don’t go there automatically. **You have to intend. You have to want to give these to God.** You see?
Then the Church, through the priest, calls on the Holy Spirit to bless these gifts, which are your lives. You see? **What you have given to God is blessed and sanctified, and then it returns to you as the body, the blood, the soul, and the divinity of the risen Christ.** That’s why he said, “Have faith in me,” because he is going to come to you. He is going to come to you, and he is going to offer himself. The question is, **Will you receive him with your whole heart, mind, and soul, or just let him pass into your body? Or do you really want him into your heart, into your soul, into your mind?**

**God wants** to come in there. He wants to come into all of you, to change you, **to transform you into the most perfect godly being,** that we reflect God, because we are made in the image and likeness of God. It is such a beautiful invitation God is giving to all of us. Being like Christ doesn’t mean looking like him or dressing like him or talking like him or going over to Israel living where he lived. **It means living with a character like his.**

Now you are not always sure what that means, but you know it is good. You know it begins when you start treating other people the way you want to be treated. That’s the beginning. You know that already. You know that when your parents go ballistic because of something you have done, that’s probably not what Jesus would have done. Right? So **we learn gradually what Jesus is like, and he empowers us to be like that, to be like him in character.** Through that way he continues to influence the world, to touch the world, to change the world, to be Lord, to be Lord of the world. He did not come to abandon us; he came to stay with us. He is staying with you so that you can be his hands and his eyes and his ears and his feet and his presence—not just you, of course, all of us; but now you are included in a very special way.

So that’s where our Mass is. **Our Mass is God including us into his own Being, gradually, step by step, day by day.** We couldn’t be transformed into God overnight. It can’t happen. We can be transformed into Christ day by day, week by week, **Eucharist by Eucharist,** moment by moment. That’s why we are gathered here today, so **we can have faith in Jesus. He has been raised from the dead. He is alive, and he is coming to you.** He has already incorporated you into himself, but now he wants to enter more deeply into your life.

So I want you now to just close your eyes. Sit back, and close your eyes. I want you in **your own words to tell Jesus that you are ready, that you are ready to receive him, that you want him into your heart. You want him to enter into your mind, into your soul, into all of you—your entire being.** When you are finished with your prayer, open your eyes. Open your eyes, and look at me so that I know you are finished. Okay, now you are all ready? Now we will proceed and stand.
The problem so often with our gospels is either we believe them literally or we don’t believe them at all! This is a fundamental weakness in our understanding. Don’t expect me to bring in cobras and start handling them to show my faith. I don’t believe that that is what is intended here, although there are preachers who do this—supposedly, anyway. I’m not sure that those fangs haven’t been altered, but they say they do this.

The point is that Jesus told his disciples to go forth and preach, and to preach—what? To preach the gospel, the good news. What is the good news? The good news is that **Christ has been raised from the dead, and through him we have access to a transcendent life**, a life that transcends all the limitations that we know on earth through our normal human experience. So the dead experience rebirth. Now that “dead” means many different things. It means that when we die, we will be reborn in Christ, but it also means that in our own physical life we experience something more than just physical life, a spiritual rebirth. It means sickness is not the last word. It means there is another principle at work in us and among us bringing life and health. It means, basically, that **God’s will for us is totally positive**, and that we are to go into the world with this positive optimism, and it’s not an **optimism that in any way diminishes the obstacles in front of us**. We don’t deny anything. We don’t deny the problems of the world.

We don’t deny evil. The first reading talked about the devil prowling. That’s a very good image, I think. There is **something that prowls in our world and seeks to ensnare and trap and destroy**. That’s a fact. If we are so sophisticated we think that all these
metaphors and images don’t mean anything, then we are fooling ourselves, and that could be very detrimental.

On the other hand, the fact that there is evil in the world and the fact that people can be deceived and the fact that people can be overcome with all kinds of troubles, is not significant in light of Christ. The gospel brings something totally new, in fact, the revelation of the original purpose of God in building a creation that really reflects his own image. Now that image of God in us is not brought to perfection. In fact, Jewish interpreters of that phrase in Genesis claim—some do—that the image of God is in the collective, in the whole, not just in each individual person. It’s very obscure at this point, but it shall not always remain so. What Jesus is telling his disciples is that you have a very significant role to play in bringing about a new world. So go forth!
Well, Good morning. I take it you are wearing the sweatshirts from the school that you are going to be at next year? Wrigley Field, Notre Dame!

Today we have two beautiful readings, and I think that they are in perfect contrast to each other. The second reading, which I just read, the gospel, talks about how Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid, don’t worry; “I have come to bring you peace, but not the way the world brings peace”—but it’s real peace! But then the first reading was really quite different, wasn’t it? It was about—what? What was the first reading all about? Joe? The apostles spreading the word, and what ensued? Paul was practically killed—right? Stoned, they thought to death, but as it turns out he recovered. In fact, that was a common pattern: where the gospel went people were very angry for various reasons. That doesn’t necessarily mean they hated God or anything. In fact, sometimes the reason they were angry was that their faith differed from this gospel. They thought it was their duty to start to try to crush it. Well, St. Paul was the greatest example, but he wasn’t the only one. So we have to keep in mind one of the problems in the world is the way people look at God.

Why did Jesus come into the world? So we would know what God is really like! People can be in very good faith but very wrong! You can be in good faith and wrong. I can be in good faith and wrong. Being in good faith does not assure anything. The gospels proclaim that the way we really know God is to look at the person of Jesus and the way he lived, that his life is the way to the Father, that his manner of life is the way the Father proves it; and his way was very different from most people! We need to study that.

If you go to the first reading, it says, and I quote, “It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” Now what is that—a hardship? What’s a hardship? What does that mean? What does hardship mean, Tom? Trouble, okay, trouble, difficulties, evils, if you will. In other words, if you are going to establish the kingdom of God, and that’s what the apostles are sent to do, it’s going to cause a lot of trouble for them and for a lot of other people!
Now that sounds a little bit funny when Jesus says, “Don’t worry; I come to bring you peace.” The point is this: that the peace Jesus brings doesn’t take away trouble; it doesn’t take away hardship. A lot of people have a hard time understanding this. They think that if they are faithful, then life will be fine. If they do what God wants them to do, then they will just float along: they’re not going to get sick; their kids aren’t going to get into trouble; they are not going to have problems; they are always going to have a good job. In other words, God is assuring them a life of comfort. But that’s not what it says, is it, Molly? God never says that you will have a life of comfort if you spread the gospel. It says that if you spread the gospel, you will have many hardships. And guess what? Even if you don’t, you will still have many hardships.

So the point is, why don’t you pick the hardships that come with the gospel, because the rewards are so great and because along with those hardships comes a peace the world can’t take away because it doesn’t give it? The world does give a certain kind of peace, for example, the peace of might overcoming weakness. That is a kind of a peace, but that’s not the kind of peace Jesus gives. It isn’t the peace of might overcoming weakness. It’s something else. It’s the kind of peace that can dwell within us even when everything else is going wrong, even in the midst of failure, or in the midst of defeat, or in the midst of tragedy. The peace that Jesus gives us can stay in our hearts and souls, because it doesn’t come from the world where all these troubles take place, so the world cannot dispel it either. You see the idea? So we have to be aware of the fact that life will bring difficulties, but that we shouldn’t worry about them. We expect them, but they will not overcome us.

Now, of course, the Lord asks us to use our good judgment in not making more problems than we need; you know what that means—commonsense—right?—good judgment? Hopefully what we are trying to help you form in your life here at St. Joseph’s School is really good judgment about what is really valuable, what are the good priorities, what are the most important priorities for you in life! What is really of value as opposed to what is not very valuable? You learn it in different ways at different times. There is a lesson for every first grader, and there is a lesson for every second grader and every seventh grader and every eighth grader and everybody who is thirty and forty and fifty. We keep learning this. Don’t think for one minute that one day you are going to
graduate from the school of the gospel and you are going to have your little diploma!

You are never going to get a diploma from the school of the gospel until maybe you enter into the last judgment, and then I am not sure there is a diploma; there is just life with God forever!

So the gospel is trying to tell us that, yes, there will be problems, but, no, you needn’t be upset about them. So I want you to try to think about this the next time something goes haywire in your life. Remember what Jesus said, “My peace I give to you, and I give it not as the world gives it.” You have to learn what that means in your own life. I can’t explain it to you in the terms that your life will explain it to you. So you have to take this gospel and make it your own. Each and every person has to do that; and we have to do it all the time as we grow up, as we grow older, as we mature. Hopefully we are maturing in Christ. So that’s the gospel for today. It’s a gospel of joy and yet it is a gospel of sobriety—not to worry, but on the other hand, don’t relax too much.

Jesus says, “I will no longer speak much with you for the ruler of the world is coming.” Who is the ruler of the world? No, no, the ruler of the world is not God. No, the ruler of the world is not Jesus. Who is the ruler of the world? Were you going to answer? What does this mean? It really means the devil. Jesus in this text calls the devil the “ruler of the world.” Why? Because so many of the things that go on in the world really are not God’s will. Does God will war? No—right? God does not will war. Does God will crime? No. Does God will any evil at all? No. Evil persists, so that’s why he calls the ruler of the world the devil.

“The ruler of the world is coming, but he has no power over me—but he has no power over me. The devil has no power over me.” Well you could say that too, if you live in Christ. If you live in Christ—but if you don’t live in Christ, the devil will have power over you. That’s the whole idea. You will be controlled by forces beyond you, the world around you. You will be sucked into this great vortex. But if you believe in Christ and you live in Christ, then you can say, “He, the devil, has no power over me!”

“But the world must know that I love the Father.” The world must know you love the Father, too, and that you do just as the Father has commanded. That is our life as disciples to do just as the Father has commanded. So we proceed every day to try to do that.
“And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the Holy Spirit just as he did us.”

This is a speech taken from the Acts of the Apostles attributed to Peter. The point is that the Gentiles are being called into the Holy Spirit just as they, the Jewish followers of Jesus, are called into the Holy Spirit. Now what does that mean, “granted the Holy Spirit”? It means that they experienced God. **The Holy Spirit is the experience of God.**

When Jesus says, “The Spirit blows where it wills,” he means that the experience of God cannot be controlled. It is a spontaneous experience that **settles upon those whom God wants it to.** It cannot be controlled. It cannot be created. It is something that God disposes people to according to his inscrutable will. Here Peter is saying, “Well, now we see that God indeed wants the Gentiles to receive this experience of God.”

Now there might be different ways of describing an experience of God, but in Christ the experience of God always involves a sense of wholeness, forgiveness, and salvation. There are other ways of describing an experience of God from other traditions. They always involve awe, sometimes trembling, often fascination, but that’s rather vague—in Christ always a sense of wholeness, healing. Jesus always healed those he touched, and not selectively! Very often the gospel says, “And all who came were healed.” **No one was more a healer than Jesus** in the history of all religions, although many religious figures are attributed some form of healing, but none more than Christ, none equal to Christ.

Christ continued—and this is the point of the Acts of the Apostles—**Christ continued his ministry in the disciples, in the apostles, in the Church.** That just as he did as he walked on earth in his physical body so he does in the Church, who are his hands and his feet—same power, same Spirit. There is one Spirit. There is one Spirit, one Lord, one Baptism. All religious experiences have to go back to the same one Spirit because there is
only one. But not all are immersed fully in the Baptism, because to be immersed fully in the Baptism of Christ means to experience a vibrancy and a vitality, a wholeness, and, yes, a physical power or energy, which enables us to do. One of the fundamental programs, if you want to put it that way, of the covenant was the requirement to do, to do God’s will. People might often say, “Well, we can’t,” or “They can’t,” or “We have no strength; we have no power.” But in Christ we do have strength and power and we can. That’s the point of the Acts of the Apostles.

That’s what Peter is saying, and he is saying not only is that true of us who have been with Jesus on earth and who have been commissioned through his Last Supper and through his appearances after his resurrection, but it’s even true of others, namely, Gentiles, who had no idea at all who he was. Nonetheless, they are chosen as well. So not only is the Church now being empowered, but it is also being instructed in the ways of the Lord, which are inscrutable. Jesus, of course, had already said that, but it’s hard to get through. The ways of God are inscrutable. The ways of God are now including Gentiles into this experience of God, this experience of wholeness, of redemption, of salvation, and of purpose.

So when we hear the word “Holy Spirit” and we pray for the Holy Spirit we are not praying for some bird! We are praying for the experience of the risen Christ to take hold of us and the Church, to empower and to enable us, first of all, to live in Christ, in the fullness of Christ, and secondly, to thereby carry out the mission he has given to his Church. This mission remains unfulfilled and unfinished.
“I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.

We might think long and deep about this word “friend.” St. Thomas Aquinas reflects on the meaning of the word, and he says what is a friend but someone who says “What’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine.” What Jesus is reflecting is that he is sharing his divinity with his followers; he is sharing knowledge of the Father. He is sharing the Holy Spirit, which is another way of saying an experience of God. He is inviting his followers into the inner life of God, to know the Father as he knows the Father, and not only to experience the Spirit, but to even give the Spirit, since the Spirit is given by the Father and the Son, and to be one with the Son means to also give the Spirit.

St. Augustine says that when we gather for the Eucharist it is the “Whole Christ,” that is, body and members, who offer the “Whole Christ” to the Father. And Blessed Isaac of Stella says that actually even the “Whole Christ” has to include God, since Jesus is God. So we are one in Being, not in the same way Jesus is. Our Creed says Jesus is “one in Being with the Father,” that means, however, one in Being by nature. We are one in Being by adoption, the adoption happening through the grace of Baptism. Nonetheless, even though our oneness with God is through adoption, it is still solid and substantial; and we are truly transformed from the condition we were in by birth into a new condition. This we, I think, rarely reflect upon.

It is from this new condition that we can bear the fruit that is referred to later on in this same gospel. What does it mean to bear fruit. Does it mean simply to do good works?
Well, that might be part of it, but more, a vine always bears grapes because its very nature is to produce grapes. Therefore, the vine of the Church is to produce more members—not simply good works, but more members. That’s what the fruit of the vine is. So in order to bear fruit, we have to be believable witnesses. We can only be believable witnesses if we allow God to draw us into his own inner life, which is what friendship is about. Too often, I am afraid, the Church has thought that bearing fruit simply was doing nice things or good things, helping the poor, for example, which is important; but really bearing fruit is much more than that. It is bringing new members to the vine. That’s bearing fruit, grafting on new members, if you will, being witnesses to Christ to the ends of the earth—that’s bearing fruit. We cannot do that unless we really exercise our friendship with God and recognize what is his is ours. It is a lifelong work of transformation that is outlined here—and it is the mission of the Church! And we all are the Church!
A Good Christian Woman      Funeral      Ruth Ennis
St. Andrew the Apostle, Romeoville, IL     Pro 31:10-31; 1 Cor 13:1-13;  Jn 6:51-58
(Life in service of the bread of life)

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

First of all, I would like to thank Father Jerry for inviting me back today to St. Andrew’s, a place where I had many wonderful years as an associate. An associate is a priest who has all the privileges of priesthood and none of the burdens—incidentally, what I would give to be one again!

One of the greatest beauties of St. Andrew’s parish was the wonderful people who extended their hearts in so many ways, one of whom was Ruth. Ruth—and I don’t intend this to be a eulogy; I intend it to be a homily; I am going to weave it together—Ruth was an example to me of a good Christian woman. She loved the bread of life because she hungered. I think people are often today indifferent to the bread of life because they don’t really hunger; they don’t experience hunger, or they try to fill themselves up with something else, something transitory.

Everyone suffers something in life, various setbacks, various sorrows. These can either be our undoing or our making, depending upon how we take them. One of the worst of all possible sorrows is the sorrow a parent has in burying a child. Ruth had this sad experience when her teenage son passed away in an accident. Ruth herself was very interested in letting go and moving on, but her husband, Gene, had a harder time. Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, my burden light.” But sometimes the yoke is not so light. And marriage is a yoke—for better, for worse, and Ruth took that very seriously. This was both her great burden and her great glory in the eyes of God, because she remained always faithful to that commitment to care for her husband, even in the times of great sorrow and sadness, even in the absence of times of joy.

But Ruth did not let that stop her. She sought the Lord. She loved the Lord and the work of the Lord, in particular in the liturgy. She was an outstanding reader. When Father Klepec was pastor and there was ever any solemnity, he would say to me, “Well, which reading is Ruth doing?” It isn’t that there weren’t other good readers, but she was his favorite. She spoke with great clarity and nobility. She really loved her ministry, which she didn’t regard as hers really, but the ministry of reading and proclaiming the word of God. When she did it, we knew the word of God; we heard the word of God. She was a gift in this way.

She also loved this particular building, which she spent a great deal of time taking care of in terms of “Art and Environment,” as we called it then. She had her very strict ideas, definite ideas, simple ideas, about what she wanted. She was sometimes upset with certain people, as I recall Father Bruno, who had big ideas about how to decorate a church. Ruth’s ideas were more simple, more sober, but always beautiful. She
worked very well with Jim Urban. She was on our Liturgy Committee, and worked very hard to really enhance and beautify everything that had to do with this building, what we do here: the gathering of the community for worship.

This is all part of really honoring the bread of life, because as Catholics we understand the bread of life in a sacramental way. It refers, of course, to Christ, but in particular to the living Christ, the risen Christ, who comes to us in the Eucharist in his body, his blood, his soul, and divinity. Ruth believed this, and because she believed it and because she was so devout and devoted to the Eucharist this filled a great void in her life. In this way she became more and more spiritual. She sought the Lord in so many ways and turned to the Lord in her sorrows and difficulties and, therefore, was a great example to me.

I found her company very consoling when my mother passed away. In general, I found her company very enjoyable, anyway. She would always fix something to eat whenever I would come to visit her, usually crackers and cheese and wine and whatever else she could find. She enjoyed life. She enjoyed trips to Ravinia, which she said was her vacation. She didn’t get away any other way, so when she would go with us to Ravinia that was one of her great highpoints—the highpoints of her summertime. In all these ways Ruth really appreciated beauty. She appreciated people. She appreciated the goodness of the Lord. She will remain forever in my mind a great example of Christian womanhood, which was so beautifully expressed in today’s first reading from the Book of Proverbs. I will conclude with a quotation from that reading. “Many are the women of proven worth, but you have excelled them all. Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting. Give her a reward of her labors, and let her works praise her at the city gates.”
Well, Good evening, boys and girls! I want you all to relax. Last week I told the children that if they didn’t know the answers to any of my questions, they could ask their parents. Then their parents complained because the questions were too easy. So if you don’t know anything I ask you directly, you can just point to whichever parent you want to answer—is that all right? Is that all right? Good deal, huh? Then I will grade you on what they say. Is that okay?

Well, tonight Jesus has this rather difficult lesson about love. He says, “If you are my disciples, you must love one another as I have loved you.” Well, how was that? How did Jesus love his disciples? That’s a real good question. I’m not going to ask you right now; I want you to think about it! How did Jesus love his disciples? Was it tit-for-tat? That’s often the way we love people. All right, you did something for me; I’ll do something for you. You were nice to me; I’ll be nice to you. You get the picture? You have seen that work—haven’t you? But that’s not the way Jesus loved his disciples. How did Jesus love his disciples? Well, just look there. The cross is the sign of how Jesus loved his disciples. He gave himself totally. He gave up his life for his disciples. Well, that’s a pretty tall order—don’t you think? Pretty tall order! Do you think you could do it today? I don’t know! One lady told me that she was a very holy woman when she was seventeen, and she told God that he could take her any time; but now that she is over 68, she doesn’t want God to take her! So whatever you think now, I’m not sure it’s true anyway.

The thing is usually we have a very hard time really loving people totally the way God loves us, but that’s the plan, and how are we ever going to do it? We are going to learn how to do it. God is going to help us do it. He is going to give us his strength to do it, and that’s really why we are here now. We are really here now so that God can touch us with his power to love unconditionally, with no strings attached, totally loved, not tit-for-tat. This is hard for us to understand, but God loves us because God is love, and he will make us the same gradually as he transforms us with his power, his grace.

That’s really what the Eucharist is about; that’s what the altar is about. We come together—we come together as a community of believers. The first thing we do is we sign ourselves “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” because that is the sign we have of God’s nature revealed to us in Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

Then we tell God that we are very happy to be here, but that we need some cleansing. That’s what that rite was with the sprinkling of the holy water. Do you think we do that because you need to grow? No. We are not sprinkling you like that. That’s the sign of the power of Baptism, the power of purification, of God’s love and grace in our lives. “Grace” is another word for “power” when it comes to God.
Then we listen to the word of God here from the ambo. Why? Well, God is talking about his love for us and his plan for us, and the deal is this all took place in the past, but it's equally true for you. Just as it was true for St. Paul, it’s true for you. Just as it was true for Peter, it’s true for you. You have to listen with that in mind.

Then we come to the presentation of the gifts. What is brought up in the gifts? What is brought up? What do we put on the altar? Bread and wine—correct. You get an A. Bread and wine, but what does the bread and wine represent? I bet you don’t think about that. Oh, you do? What does it represent? No, no it doesn’t represent that yet. What? Not yet. No, the bread and wine represents something else. No. No. It represents you! You are the bread and the wine—your lives. That’s what you are putting on the altar—your lives. You have struggles—you put them on the altar. You have problems—you put them on the altar. You are really happy about something—put it on the altar. You work hard at learning sports—put it on the altar. Everything good and bad in your life: your health and your sicknesses and your needs and even your wants, if you dare—you put them on the altar.

Then the priest consecrates them through the power of the Holy Spirit. What represents you becomes consecrated and returns to you now as—what? Now it returns to you as—the body and the blood and the soul and the divinity of whom? Of whom? Of Jesus, the risen Christ—right—because he died, but he rose again. Isn’t that right? Why did he rise again? Why did Jesus rise from the dead? Because the tomb was too cold? Why did Jesus rise from the dead? “To show that God exists”—that’s a good answer. Not what I was thinking about. Why did Jesus rise from the dead? No, don’t look to her. You don’t know. That’s all right—that’s all right. Yes, to save us, and you were going to say that too? That’s very good. Any suggestions over here? Why did Jesus rise from the dead? Read my mind! You can’t get this from school. Read my mind! It’s really so that he could be part of your life, so he could be part of my life, our lives. He rose from the dead so he could be part of your life. He comes to you this evening in the form of bread and wine, which represents you, but now consecrated by the Holy Spirit to become the risen Christ. Why? Because he wants to be part of your life.

Now here is the question: Do you want him to be part of your life? He wants to be part of it—do you? That’s the question. Don’t tell me. Tell him. That’s what you have to do. You have to tell Jesus you want him to be a part of your life. You have to tell him personally, so that when he comes to you in the form of the sacrament he just doesn’t go into your body and into your mouth and down into your stomach, but that he goes into your heart and into your soul and into your will. God will never go into your will or into your soul or into your spirit without your wanting him there. God never pushes or intrudes. God never intrudes. Okay? So you have to tell him, “Please come in. I want you to be part of my life, and all of my life!” So Jesus comes, the whole Jesus, the risen Christ: body, blood, soul, and divinity, to be part of your whole life.

You have to welcome him in and let him touch you and lead you and guide you. And he will in many ways, but one step at a time—one step at a time. Now, how old are
you—about eight? Eight years old. Okay, that’s a good age. You have learned something about life—right? Something, not a lot—right—but some—right? Well, when you are eighty years old, which is ten times as old as you are now, you are still going to have a lot to learn. Isn’t that amazing! It’s true. It’s true. So **we have a long time to learn**; in fact, that long time is called—what? Eternity, **we have eternity to learn all about God**.

But we start now; that’s the point. **Jesus wants us to start now; don’t waste any time.** Earth is not about wasting time. It’s about beginning a process, a growth, that will continue into eternity. **We begin it in a very special way tonight when you open your heart and your mind and your soul to the risen Christ and invite him in.** So are you ready for this? Are you? Are you ready for this? All of you? Very good. Okay, let us profess our faith.
Well, again, Good afternoon, boys and girls. I want you to relax and don’t worry about anything because I have a deal I made with the kids last week too: if you don’t know the answer to any question I ask you, you just ask your parents. So get ready to point if you don’t know the answer, all right? Of course, if you are on the end, then your mother gets off—right? You can’t point to her; she is too far away. Then I am going to give you all a grade based on what your parents say. Is that fair? What are you worried about Ben? Are you worried about what grade your Dad is going to give you? No—good. Well, last week the parents actually complained because they said my questions were too easy, so I’ve tried to think up a little more challenging questions for you.

So we will start with the gospel. Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Well, what commandments? What does he mean? No, what commandments? The Ten Commandments? No, that’s too easy. They might be included, but what real commandments is he talking about? Well, yes, his—what? That’s it! A+! “Love one another as I have loved you.” That’s really what he answered, more or less in a different phrasing. “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Well, how did, Larry, how did Christ love his friends, tit-for-tat? Huh, tit-for-tat? What about you; what do you think? You don’t know. All right. Tit-for-tat, in other words, you did something nice for me; I’ll do something nice for you. Have you ever heard of that or seen that going on? Sure you have—sure. You are my friend; I’ll be your friend, but don’t cross me—right? That’s the way it is usually—right? But not for Christ! Look; you see—the cross. He loved totally with his whole life. He loved people who really didn’t love him back. That’s the way he loved.

Now he is saying, “Now I want you to love each other the way I love you.” That’s a pretty tall order; don’t you think? Are you able to do it? You are! Congratulations! Most people can’t, and in our nature we cannot; but we are not all alone, you see. We are not all alone. Jesus has been raised from the dead, and why was Jesus raised from the dead? That’s very good: “to prepare a place for us in heaven.” What else? Yes, what else? Why was Jesus raised from the dead? I can’t hear you; what did you say? Well, that’s a really good answer, but that’s not what I am looking for. You have to read my mind. Jesus was raised from the dead so he could be part of your lives. Yes, so he could go to heaven; yes, so he could be with the Father; yes, that’s all true, but so he could be part of your lives. That’s why he was raised from the dead. As part of your lives, he is going to empower you to love one another as he loved his friends. That includes you. You see the plan emerging here? You really can’t love one another as he did, but he will make you able to. He will empower you; he will transform your character and give you energy that is not of human origin.
How is that going to happen? How is that ever going to happen? That’s right, the Holy Spirit. Did Dad tell you that, or do you know that? You knew that! A+ again! Through the Holy Spirit. And how are we going to let the Holy Spirit take over us? Well, actually through the Eucharist. That’s why we are here. We are gathered together so that God can transform us personally and individually, and, I emphasize, gradually—gradually! Don’t expect to be totally different tomorrow. We grow gradually in the Spirit of Christ, a little bit at a time. That’s why it’s so important to be faithful to the practice of your religion, because you can’t have this all at once. So every day you come; every week you come for the Lord to touch us with his love, with his Spirit, with his word, with his sacrament.

So when we gathered together today, for example, what did we do? We started with a Sprinkling Rite. What is that all about? Is that like sprinkling flowers so you grow a little taller? No, what’s it about? What’s the Sprinkling Rite? If you don’t know, make your parents answer. Who do you want to answer, your mom or your dad? She doesn’t want to answer either. How about you; what’s Sprinkling Rite about? Yes, it’s a blessing, but what’s it about? What kind of a blessing? Do you know? What starts your life in Christ? Ben, come on—Baptism! There, you’ve got it! Sprinkling Rite is about renewing our Baptism. It’s acknowledging the fact that, yes, we have the Spirit, but, no, we haven’t been brought to perfection yet. We need purification. We need forgiveness. So we start with that.

Then we listen to the word of God. Why? Because what God did in the past he is going to do in your life, too. So we listen. Well, how did God deal with the apostles? Well, how did God deal with St. Paul? Well, how did God speak through Jesus? Well, it would be the same thing now. You just have to apply it.

Then we come to the gifts. What gifts? What gifts are brought up here? You know—what—the wine and the bread! That’s correct. Were you going to say that? The wine and the bread, and what does the wine and the bread represent? This is a trick question: What does the wine and the bread represent? No, no it doesn’t. No, not yet. No. No. No. What does the wine and the bread represent? No. Body and blood is the wrong answer. Pardon? It’s not blessed yet; that’s right, so it can’t represent the body and blood—right. You get A+, too. So what does it represent—not blessed yet? It represents you! That’s your life. That’s your life you are bringing up and putting on the altar. The bread is your life; the wine is your life. It’s your struggles and your happiness and your sickness and your pain and your work and your study and your confusion and your tiredness. That’s what you put on the altar. That’s you. That’s your life right now; however it is, good or bad, that’s what goes on the altar.

Then the priest imposes his hands over the gifts to invoke the Holy Spirit, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, it becomes—the bread and the wine become the body and the blood of Christ. There you have the body and blood, after the consecration. Through the consecration of the gifts that represent you, Christ comes to you now in his glory, his glorified presence. That’s what you receive. You receive the glorified presence of the risen Christ in Holy Communion, under the form of the
bread and the wine that originally represented your lives. The whole idea is God comes to us within our own lives. You see? You make a gift to God, but he does much more. He consecrates. He transforms your lives, so that you will be another Christ, a true daughter or son of God—you see?—with the power that goes with that and the character.

This is a very slow growing process. You are not going to be six feet tall tomorrow, are you? But someday you may be; whenever you will stop, I don’t know. With the Lord you never stop growing. See, it’s not physical. That requires, however, that you want this. So physically in your body you will take the sacrament into your body, but the question is: Will your heart and your mind be open to the presence of Christ? He wants to come in. He wants to take possession of your whole soul, your spirit, your mind, your will. But you have to allow him to; he will not push his way in. God never pushes his way into anyone’s heart—never! You see? So you have to invite him in. Are you ready to do that? Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to open your heart and your mind and your will to the presence of the Christ who has been raised from the dead to be part of your life? That’s the question you have to ask yourself right now. Are you ready? Yeah. Are you? You too? Are you ready? Are you ready? Over here, are you ready? You look like you are ready for a nap! You didn’t sleep well last night, right? So excited, right? Okay, are you ready over here? Back there? Everybody? Okay.
These last weeks of the Easter Season the gospels focus on the Holy Spirit. Of course, the resurrection of Christ is itself inconceivable without the action of the Holy Spirit, so it’s not that we go from one thing to the other, but our minds cannot comprehend everything at once. So it’s **toward the end of the season that we focus more on the Holy Spirit, the abiding presence—the abiding presence—of God in the life of the Church.**

Here Jesus says, “I’m telling you all this so that when it happens you will not fall away.”

The sad fact is that **we can fall away from true love.** It happens all the time. It happens between people. It happens between God and us. We can become enamored of God and deeply touched by him, and then **we can turn away because life gets too hard.** Jesus wants us to understand that life will be hard and will be difficult.

Part of the difficulty will come from **others who deliberately make it difficult,** who even believe they have been sent by God to do so. It was true then; it’s true now: there are people in the world who think their job from God is to destroy others, to imprison others, to terrorize others, to torture others. **They think this is a mission they have from God.**

Jesus says that they don’t really know God. “They don’t know the Father; they don’t know me either.” This is a fact. This is the world we are living in. We cannot expect that we can live a life in comfort and peace. The peace that Jesus gives is not a peace without conflict. **To deal with conflict according to Christ’s principles of complete surrender to the Father—that is the life of the disciple.** He is now telling his friends what will be in store for them and for us.
Lack of Recognition of Presence  Feast of Sts. Philip and James  Tuesday, May 3, 2005  7:00 a.m.  1 Cor 15:1-8;  Jn 14:6-14  (Divine companionship in our trials)

“Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip?’”

The evangelists present the apostles as models of faith, but not only in the sense of models of virtue! They are also models of frailty, models of doubt, models of ignorance, models of missing the point.

As we are engaged in a life of faith and a journey, we are being accompanied at all times by Christ. That is the meaning of the Eucharist. Yet sometimes, perhaps, we wonder: Where is God in my life? We may pray, “Show us your presence.” But actually God is manifesting himself at every moment. Our existence itself is a manifestation of the love of the Father. But we take our existence for granted. I’ve heard older people talk about how the older they get the more they appreciate being able to get up out of bed in the morning. This actually is a spiritual development, to be grateful for life, to realize that every moment is really a miracle: we are always dependent upon God. The beauty and the fruitfulness of the earth is a constant gift. The repair of our bodies and minds and souls, which happens all the time, is really a constant work that God is doing.

Yet our minds tend to focus on those moments and those times when it is least visible, our suffering moments, the suffering moments of others. Well, Jesus did not come to take away death, but to help us through it. Sometimes our understanding of God or what we want from God is to be saved from the very thing Jesus came to lead us through! And so we say, “Show us the Father!” The Father is with us at all moments. Existence itself is his gift. Jesus is also with us to lead us through the pain and the suffering and the death that is part of God’s creation, that is really a passageway to glory and eternity. So in many ways we are like Philip. And Jesus might be asking each of us, “Have I been with you all this time and still you do not know me?”
This evening we come to crown the image of the Blessed Mother, who is also called “Queen.” Now this word “queen” is not used in our vocabulary too often in this country, and even the way it’s used in England is not the way it’s meant in this case. When we say that Mary is the Queen of Heaven or the Queen of Saints, it means something very different from the way we use the word “queen” in ordinary English. So we might want to think a little bit about what it means for Mary to be our queen and our mother.

Jesus is the Son of God; we know this. Jesus became human because God decided that was how he was going to work on our earth. Now the way God decided to work on earth required human help. See, if God wanted to become human, take up life in the human person, he needed the help of a human mother. He could have done something else, but because he chose to do this, that in itself required cooperation, human cooperation. Now we do not say that God needed human cooperation to save the souls of human beings, or to save the world, or anything else; but it’s just that the way God chose to work, he needed human cooperation. The first and primary cooperator in his whole scheme, his whole plan of salvation, has been and is, even now, the Blessed Mother, because without her nothing would have worked right. Now perhaps somebody else could have taken her place; that’s all possible; we don’t know. But given the fact that God wanted to become human, he needed some woman to be the mother of his own Son. Mary is the one who chose to cooperate—and that we know. What else could have happened, we don’t know. We do know that’s what did happen.

But another thing is we know also that Mary and all the saints do not exhaust their work on earth, their ministry among us, during their lifetime. All the saints, Mary most especially, continue to minister from a place with God in heaven. No one person who has ever left this planet has had more influence on the planet after she or he left than the Blessed Mother—human person excludes, of course, Jesus, who is really a divine person.

For example, there are these stories of Mary’s appearance in various places and times. These appearances have changed the history of the world. For example, take Mexico in the sixteenth century. What do you have? You have people, actually Christians, but not acting very Christian, conquering the people of Mexico. Given that situation and the violence that was included, we could imagine that none of the Mexican people would ever want to hear anything about the religion of those people who conquered them—the “Conquistadors,” they were called. But Mary appeared in the image of an Indian woman—where did this take place? Where did Mary appear as an Indian woman? What is the name of this apparition? I can see you are not Mexican! The Blessed Mother appeared in Mexico in the sixteenth century, in the fifteen hundreds, several times. You don’t know where. How about over here, boys? Any Mexicans over here? You are? No. She appeared at a place that we today call “Guadalupe.” That’s not the original name, but Guadalupe. So Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared as an Indian woman, and because she appeared as an Indian woman she converted through her
presence, really, all of Mexico and much of South America, because people then believed that God was with them, number one. Number two, what did she tell them? She said, “I am the mother of Jesus.” So then they believed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. You see how important her apparition was? Without her I don’t believe that the people of Latin America would have ever become Christian, but through her they did.

Now this has been repeated many times. There was a very important apparition of the Blessed Mother in Portugal. Any Portuguese boys here? No Portuguese either! Oh my, we have to work on this! All we have is Irish, and what? Philippino, Polish, Polish, Irish, Irish. You don’t know! You are not Japanese, no. No, this was a very famous apparition. It took place, again, on several different occasions in—where? Portugal. What city? What town? What place? Fatima. Fatima, Portugal. What did Our Lady say in Fatima? She said—what? What did she say? No, that’s not what she said there. She said, “Pray the rosary.” Pray the rosary for what? Why pray the rosary? For a new bike? No. Why pray the rosary? For no reason at all? Why? You are not sure—okay—that’s honest. Pray the rosary for peace, for peace in the world—for peace in the world!

Now there was a very famous battle in 1571 in Lepanto, which is really in Greece, when Christian people, Christian forces, defeated an onslaught of Turks. They were trying to attack Europe. The pope said, “You better pray to the Blessed Mother.” And they did, and they won. That was October 7, the Feast of the Holy Rosary.

The point is this: prayer is the way to victory for Christians. We are not going to succeed through the force of might and power. That is not our way, but through the force of prayer. So prayer is very important for believers. One of the things the Blessed Mother said at Fatima was that you must pray the rosary so that you will overcome the dangers and the errors of—what? No, not evil. No, not life. Of a certain country—Russia—the errors of Russia. What kind of errors did Russia have? Russia spawned what? Communism! Right?

Now you don’t remember this, but for a long time during the 1950’s, 1960’s there was a Cold War; and the world was on the brink of nuclear disaster because of this war, this Cold War. Now through the intercession of the Blessed Mother, Communism has been defeated. Now that’s not the only factor—not just one factor, but prayer is very important in world peace. We have to believe that.

So we believe we are all warriors. We are prayer warriors. Okay? We are all called on to pray for peace. That’s what a prayer warrior is. That’s really one reason we are here today is to pray for peace in our world. We have to believe we are very important, that our prayers are important and our prayers are effective.

When the pope complained, back in World War II, about what the Communists were doing, the head of the Communist Party at that time, whose name was Stalin, said, “Well, how many divisions does the pope have?” Divisions of what? Divisions of army—right?—soldiers. The idea is, well, the pope doesn’t have any power, so he can’t say anything. But what Stalin didn’t realize is that God’s power works very differently
from human power. While he thought he was the strongest man on earth, his strength was really made up of something very false.

Our beloved Pope John Paul II has shown us, did show us, the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ in undermining the threat of dictators and tyrants. In many ways he who was very devoted to the Blessed Mother was the pope, by divine providence, who presided over the collapse of that Soviet empire.

Now today there are more problems. We have war now in Iraq. You need to pray for the overcoming of all hostilities. Why do we have war? We have war because people are full of hatred, because people are full of all kinds of evil designs. That can be changed through prayer. You understand? The rosary is a very powerful prayer. It is not the only prayer, but it is a very powerful prayer.

So we come tonight in order to honor our Blessed Mother, but also to ask her for help in quelling what rages in the human heart, the hatred and the hostility. We know in the past she has helped, so we expect she will in the future. Okay? You understand why we are doing this? You understand how important it is? It’s not just to get dressed up because you have some new suits! You understand? It’s very important. It’s for our future. Your prayers, boys and girls, are very important because you have in your young age a certain purity. God really honors your prayers, probably more than he honors the prayers of a lot of adults. So I really ask you to pray for the world, for world peace, that we overcome the hatreds and the animosities that keep us at war, and we can live together in peace, and the gospel of Jesus Christ can spread. That’s why the Blessed Mother said “Yes” to God, so that God’s good news could come to the world. You can have a role in that if you say “Yes” to prayer and be faithful to this devotion—or some devotion—to the Lord. One of the easiest for you is the rosary, so I recommend it to you highly. All right? You understand now why we are here? And, girls, do you understand why we are here tonight? Yes, no—what? Yes. Yes. Okay, let us proceed.
“Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy.”

First of all, one thing we might note in particular today, when Jesus says, “Amen, amen, I say to you,” which you hear all the time in the fourth gospel, it’s actually very unusual. It’s never found anywhere else in all of literature—this expression—it’s only in the fourth gospel. Normally “amen” means “yes, I agree with that,” so it’s usually said by someone else affirming what someone says. But he is affirming what he is saying before he says it! The reason for this is that what he is saying could never be affirmed by someone else. No one could say “amen” to that because they don’t know! He is revealing something to them that is beyond their experience at the moment.

Wherever he says that, he is saying, “Now listen to this. It’s not something you can actually believe through your own experience. It’s something that I am telling you that will serve you well if you listen to it.”

So he talks now about how he is going to go away. We know that the whole message of Christianity is based on the fact that God has chosen to take up his existence in the person of Jesus. He has tented himself among us, taken upon himself our human nature. But this has a downside, and the downside is that his followers became very dependent upon his physical presence during his earthly ministry and after that. Even after his resurrection they became dependent upon his extraordinary ways of touching them, appearing to them, having breakfast with them, breaking bread, and so on.
There is now a need for a **transition to a different way of experiencing God’s presence.** It’s one that will be not as tangible as Jesus physically touching them, but it will be just as real, even perhaps more real. “Greater things than I have done you shall do also.” This was spoken to the believers. So it’s not that God’s presence will disappear anymore than Jesus evacuated heaven or left his Father when he became human. He did not leave anyone when he became human. He does not leave his Church as he ascends into glory. **It’s a shift in the nature of presence.**

So Jesus says, “You will weep and mourn because what you are used to will be gone.” That’s human nature. We weep and mourn when what we are used to disappears, when our friends die, when our parents pass away, when our children pass away or leave home. We feel a loss. “You will weep and mourn.” You will be at a loss. “The world rejoices.” Of course, the world’s rejoicing is the fatuous rejoicing that comes from not knowing anything. The rejoicing comes from self-indulgence and self-satisfaction. But that kind of rejoicing is hollow and very temporary. “You will grieve, but your grief will become joy.” That’s the key: **in the grieving for what we have lost there is something else that will come if we pay attention.**
“Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy.”

One of the qualities that runs through the whole Old Testament, and New Testament as well, is this idea that in good times and bad times God remains God. This is unique as we discover when we study the ideas of other nations. The god of any other particular nation is only god as long as he can bring about the welfare of the people; but if he fails, he goes into the trash bin. In that way we see there is a constant recycling of gods among the nations. That is one reason why the Jews looked down on the nations. They thought the Gentiles were such a bunch of bums because they had no sense of the divine. Whoever was called god was only god as long as he or she could deliver something. They had no necessary stability.

But in Israel something else happened. They started to recognize that whether things were good or bad, the Lord was the Lord; and they owed God something, namely, loyalty and obedience. They started recognizing that when everything was turning against them, there was some reason for that. When their land was no longer blessed, there was reason for that. They were doing something wrong, so they were then led to reflect upon their ways and their choices.

Now Jesus is transferring this same idea, fidelity to God at all times, to something more personal and intimate. He is telling his disciples that they are going to suffer greatly. He knows this for a fact because he himself suffered greatly. He was aware that this was going to happen before it did, because he knew the Father’s heart and he knew...
that the Father would never use force even to protect him. **He knew that the Father’s compassion, although infinite toward him, was nonetheless truly infinite toward all; and so God would not intervene in his own personal history to protect him from suffering** or pain or being double-crossed or being abandoned or being threatened or being condemned. He knew all that was going to be part of his life and fate because he could see it all around him. And he accepted solidarity with human life; that was the meaning of his baptism. **But he believed that God would lead him through it**—and indeed God did!

Now he is telling his disciples, “As God has led me through thick and thin, as God has led me through suffering, **he will lead you through suffering**. You will grieve. You will mourn, and the world around you may be laughing, focused as they are on themselves. But you will rejoice, and **you will rejoice with a joy** that the world can not take away because the world doesn’t give it to you. The world can not take it away because it’s **rooted in** something far beyond what the world can even imagine, and that is **the transcendent.**

**Jesus communicates this transcendent presence to his people, to his disciples, in his resurrection.** So in a sense, this only makes sense from the standpoint of Jesus’ being raised from the dead. In fact, John could not have written this if Jesus had not been raised from the dead. It would make no sense whatsoever. But from the viewpoint of Jesus’ resurrection, this is exactly **a description of the life of faith. We suffer as Jesus did. We are not exempt in any way from the travails of life. But that is not the end of the story.** Even in our grieving we have an opening to the gracious mercy of God; and we too can find joy—and be surprised by it!
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Love through Ministry to Others  Funeral  William J. (John) McDonell
Saturday, May 7, 2005  Wis 3:1-9;  1 Thes 4:13-18;  Mt 11:25-30  (Childlike openness needed)

“At that time Jesus answered: ‘I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike.’"

It might be beneficial for us to consider what is meant by childlike. It is used here in contrast to wise and learned. God’s revelation, the opening of God’s heart to human beings, is not the result of human beings’ search. It is not the result of their learning or their even natural wisdom gained through experience. It’s a gift heart to heart. For us to be able to receive this gift we have to be open, and that’s what childlike is about. It’s about openness.

But being childlike is not being childish. Childish is not taking responsibility for what one is given. Every child born into this world is given a great treasure—life itself. When we bring a child to the waters of Baptism, we give a greater treasure—eternal life.

That’s what we celebrate every time we have a funeral; we celebrate the eternal life that God gives us in Baptism. The question is: what do we do with this? Are we childlike, being open in mind and heart and ready to receive the Father’s love, or are we childish and really never take responsibility for the gift we are given, take it for granted and, thereby, allow it to lie fallow in our lives.

One of my great concerns as a pastor over many years has been that too many people let their gift lie fallow: they do not really develop their relationship with God. They have been given this seed, but it doesn’t grow too much in their lives. This is a great sadness and even a tragedy for the Church.

Love through Ministry to Others
That is what is always beautiful to see when a family takes responsibility for other people. Although there aren’t many people here today, there is one family. The wonderful thing about this particular family is that they got to know William, our deceased, through ministry, through taking the Eucharist to him. They learned a lesson that all of us learn sooner or later if we practice it, that when we minister to others in Christ’s name, we are repaid in various ways. We are consoled and we are edified through our ministry. It is because of their relation with William that the Ineichs wanted to have this memorial Mass this morning. For myself, I am very warmed by the fact that William meant so much to you, and I want to thank you for all you did for him and for the parish.
The Ascension of Christ is a point of transition. It marks the accomplishment of all things in Christ, but it does not mark the end of the world or the end of salvation. Rather, Jesus is handing on to his disciples the work he began. That is part of the whole idea that God begins something and people finish it. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.” This companionship and this sharing in the work of God is the very essence of Church. Do we realize that all of us are given work to do? And this work gives meaning and purpose to our lives! The late Pope John Paul II often stressed this point that used to be taken for granted in Christian culture! But, sadly, Christian culture is no more; and this idea is no longer taken for granted. The world has surely turned against Christian values and with that the estimation and dignity of work.

On this day perhaps it would be good to look at a very special work and special purpose, namely, motherhood. In Scripture there is no human being more honored than a mother, the mother of Jesus. Motherhood itself is an honorable ministry to God and for God. However, in the world today there is less and less admiration for this true participation in God’s creative work. The population of the world is actually falling—and this is astonishing! Not many years ago people were full of all kinds of fears of population explosions. Well, now we have a new fear—population implosion! According to one sociologist named Ben Wattenberg, and I quote, “Never in the last 650 years since the time of the Black Plague, have birth and fertility rates fallen so far, so fast, in so many places.” Each year Western Europe loses 750,000 people, net. 750,000 more people die, in other words, than are born. An equal number is lost in Russia. In forty years Germany will lose 20% of its population, which is approximately the entire population of East Germany. Japan is on line to lose 25% of its population; Bulgaria, 38%; Romania, 27%, and it goes on and on.

Various reasons are attributed to this situation—most of them are economic. But this is part of the problem: we have allowed economic well-being or our vision of economic well-being; our idea of what economic well-being is or might be, to color all other values. They have priority in our society and by and large throughout the whole world. The irony of this is that the economic consequences will be horrendous as an ageing population relies more and more on fewer and fewer workers, contributors to taxes and social security, and so on. Further, since justice and charity have been shoved aside as the fundamental building blocks of character, where will the willingness come from to sacrifice for the growing number of helpless, debilitated, ageing people?

Nothing could be more obvious than a need for a whole new attitude toward life. Human future is not written in stone; these are simply trends—they can change; they must change! What is needed is a pro-life mentality.
Our Creed proclaims the Holy Spirit is the “Lord and Giver of Life.” The Holy Spirit is not just another name for God, but it signifies an experience of God, a sense of the holy. And this is the soul of the Church! That is something we need to reflect on: an experience of God is the soul of the Church. A sense of the divine, a sense of the holy is the soul of the Church. Another way of putting this is: it is experiencing God that makes people generative in the truest sense of the word—not just having babies, but giving life, which is a much fuller and richer idea.

Never has the Church and never has the world had a greater need for the experience of God, not the idea of God but the experience of God—the Holy Spirit! This will lead to a deep religious conversion to the Lordship of the risen Christ, the ascended Christ, the one who has died but is risen again, who has ascended into heaven to continue his work through his people: the work of salvation, the work of redemption, the work of fulfillment of God’s magnificent plans in creation.

- Only the guidance and direction of Christ can free the world from its blind and self-defeating egoism.
- Only the guidance and the direction of the ascended Christ can motivate the generosity that builds, a new world, a new order.
- Only the guidance and direction of Christ can redeem the future of our planet.

Now you are all believers, or you wouldn’t be here this morning. As believers you are privileged with an intimate understanding of the situation. But you are also obligated to pray and to do whatever else you can to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ. That’s what this means. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.” You all receive this mandate. This is not just given to twelve men 2000 years ago. It’s given to all believers in Christ.

Next Sunday we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, the so-called “birthday of the Church.” It would be very appropriate if we spent some time every day this week in praying for the gift of the Spirit, which means the gift of an experience of God to renew the life of the Church, and thereby give hope to our world.
“Lifting up his eyes to heaven, Jesus prayed saying: ‘I pray not only for these, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.’”

This prayer of Jesus written in the gospel of John might be grammatically choppy, but the point is that Jesus is praying for unity, not only unity between himself and his own small band of followers, but a unity among all those who will ever listen to the word of God.

Now this unity is the great vision that is presented at this point in Jesus’ life because he is now going to the Father. Believers have to always keep this vision of unity in the forefront of their minds. It is very hard for us to live out that vision because we tend to live out visions based on small areas of agreement. For example, we agree on the same convictions. We have the same opinions. We have the same small goals, so we work together. Even politics is a matter of finding allies for some particular goal or another—worthy or not, it doesn’t matter. The process is finding allies.

Jesus’ point is that the love of God transcends all differences, so therefore there must be a fundamental alliance among all people regardless of their own particular opinions, beliefs, and goals. This unity is based on complete and total selflessness—not self-interest, not shared self-interest, but something that goes beyond all self-interest.

And yet, and that’s the other point, this is the most fundamental self-interest of all: to recognize who we are. Jesus’ point is our identity really does not come from the world.
Our identity is really from the Father. This is not something we are simply supposed to believe; it’s supposed to be something we come to know. We have to know that we come from the Father. That’s the prayer. That’s what Jesus is praying for, that everyone will start to know that they come from the Father and it’s therefore beyond all their own particular goals, beyond their own particular opinions and beliefs and ways of looking at things and valuing things. There is something that we all share.

If we live out of that very deep place within us, we will have a unity that the world will not be able to take away because it does not come from the world. It will not be the unity that associations and parties and organizations have because they are all by nature temporary. In politics there are no permanent allies, and there are no permanent enemies. But in God there is something much deeper. Jesus’ prayer is that somehow we will learn to live in that deeper place, and that will transform the world. That is his prayer as he goes to the Father.
Today we celebrate the memorial of Our Lady of Fatima. I think in this Easter Season, especially right before Pentecost, it might be good to point out how the Blessed Mother is frequently standing in for the Holy Spirit. In the early Church, in the Acts of the Apostles and in the writings of the apostolic period, we see that there was constant activity of the Holy Spirit. In fact, no one was considered initiated into the Church if that person had not experienced the power of the Holy Spirit, sometimes called the “Baptism in the Holy Spirit.” But as time went on we have more and more Christians who do not even know what the Holy Spirit is. They only have the name “Holy Spirit.” They sign themselves, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” but the Holy Spirit doesn’t mean anything to them—just another name. The Holy Spirit is the experience of God.

Now when the Blessed Mother appears, wherever the Blessed Mother appears, that signifies the work of the Holy Spirit; that is the work of the Holy Spirit! The Blessed Mother does not appear by herself. She appears through the power of the Spirit to bring about an experience of God, of the transcendent, in the lives of people whose lives have more or less floated off. Institutional religion can become preoccupied with itself: prayers and rituals. Originally they may feed the soul. Originally they may provide contact with the transcendent, but then they stop. Since we are habitual animals we get caught up in our habits.

When the Blessed Mother appeared to the children in 1917 she had three messages. The real three messages were, first, you have to experience conversion of heart. That is precisely what a lot of adult Catholics do not experience. The Catholic Church—like most Protestant Churches, like most Christian Churches, the Orthodox included—baptizes infants. This is not bad. Infants can be included in the kingdom of God—why shouldn’t they be? But the problem is this: How do you force anyone to grow up? You can’t! Physically there is something about human nature that forces us to grow up; but nothing forces us to grow up mentally or spiritually, and so a lot of people don’t. They are baptized all right, but they remain baptized infants in an adult body. They do not
experience conversion of the heart. They do not turn their lives over to God. Something in them has been sanctified. There is this origin or presence, this sign, of Baptism, this mark, as Augustine calls it, “character.” But most of their lives has nothing to do with this. They become more and more influenced by the world around them. As children they use models which come from the world. They want to be like this person or that person, not Christ, not one of the saints! Those aren’t the models they follow. They want to be a movie star. They want to be an athlete. They want to be something else. This is not the way to form a character in Christ. So what the Blessed Mother said is that **the first thing adult Catholics need is a conversion of heart to turn their lives over to God, thus enabling them to experience the power of God.**

The second thing she said is **repentance from sin.** Again, sin is not simply breaking rules. Sin is *veering one’s life away from God.* *Harmartia* in Greek, in the New Testament, means “missing the mark.” When our lives are not formed in Christ, then we are not leading them in the right direction. In fact, we are not leading them at all if we don’t have the Holy Spirit in our lives. Something else is leading them. People think they are free when they do what they want, but they don’t control what they want! They are not free. They are slaves to their desires. Conversion of heart and repentance of sin leads to true freedom in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, **she talked about prayer, especially the rosary.** It is not so important that we pray the rosary. It is important that we pray, and the rosary is one of the simplest ways of praying. So no one could say, well, that’s just too much for me. The point is that **a life of holiness is for everybody.** That’s what our Lady of Fatima was trying to tell Catholics: the Catholics of Portugal, the Catholics of Spain, the Catholics of Italy, Catholics who have lived for so long in cultures where everything is given to them, and they expect nothing of themselves.

She mentioned that if people don’t grow up and wake up, then the errors of Russia will take over the world. Do those errors mean Communism? Perhaps they include Communism, but perhaps they include other things too. You might get some idea by reading the newspapers of what the Blessed Mother was talking about.
Pentecost is called the “birthday of the Church”; however, Pentecost is not a day in the ordinary sense of the word, that of a twenty-four hour period. Rather, it is a day in the sense of an extended period of light and warmth in the power and in the presence of God. Some want to know, well, what happened on that day? What were the tongues of fire and what was the nature of the languages the apostles spoke? None of these questions has an easy answer. The evangelists speak to us in veiled language, but there are certain conclusions we can reach.

The first one and the most important one is that the early Church experienced God's power in a full and rich manner that embraced and included everyone. You may recall this was not true of the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection. These were special, reserved occasions, for those selected beforehand, as attested to in the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. However, in contrast, there is here a gift meant for everyone, for all believers—and all people are called to belief! The very existence of this Pentecost event, this gift of the Spirit, means that in the plan of God there is not an intended division between the “haves and the have-nots” when it comes to God’s power or God’s knowledge. Belief does not mean acceptance of secondhand reports only. Belief may begin by accepting someone else’s experience, but they are verifiable through the Spirit in the community of the Spirit, in the community of faith. Even the psalm said, “Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.” Don’t only take someone else’s word for it. Perhaps we haven’t always reflected on that.

Many, if not most, Catholics are baptized as infants. This is also true of Presbyterians and Methodists and Lutherans and most traditional Protestants. And this is very fine. After all, we want our children included in the blessings that belong to our faith community. But there is a rub. There is a problem. Nature requires only physical growth. Nature does not require spiritual growth—for that matter mental growth or even emotional maturity. These kinds of developments all are based on personal initiative, and sometimes it’s lacking.

Further, in growing up in a basically secular culture, as we all have, the force and power of purely worldly character models tend to overshadow and overpower the force and strength of Christ and the saints. Worldly models seem more attractive, more relevant, more desirable. This means that in the character building years from around the age of reason, seven years old or there about to the beginning of high school, the probability is—it’s only a probability, but it is a probability—that baptized children will be seduced by the blandishments of a worldly culture and therefore will not be formed in their characters as Christians. Christian ideas may lie within their memories, but they won’t be part of who they are.

Families need help in the formation of their young. But even Catholic schools are not a certain remedy for this problem because the power of television and other media
can often neutralize even the very positive influences of a Catholic education. This means that the formation of the average Christian in today’s modern world is incomplete. Receiving sacraments is not enough, nor is Christian formation primarily a matter of information: getting the right knowledge about Christ or the Bible or the Catechism or the Church or the faith. That is helpful, even important, but it is not the crucial issue in formation.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1917, our Blessed Mother appeared at Fatima to several Portuguese children. What was her first request or requirement? It was for conversion of the heart. And what does that mean? It means placing Christ at the very center of who we are, acknowledging him as Lord, meaning that it is his reality, his being, his knowledge, that forms for us our goals and aims in life, that all of our choices are through him and with his guidance and direction, that our values derive from his values.

Adult Catholics need to recognize that faith formation is an ongoing process, but it can progress only with their willing and heartfelt participation. The Spirit descended on Christ at his baptism like a dove, it says in Scripture, that is, gently—not like a hawk or like an eagle! But like a dove! The dove-like gentleness of the Holy Spirit will not come near those who resist or do not feel the need for God.

When the Spirit does fill a soul, the results are astonishing! People bubble forth with the love and the goodness of God. The sick are healed, if not physically, in their attitude toward themselves and life and others. The despairing and depressed have hope. Those blinded by their own pride and ignorance begin to see. Those dead inside because of lack of love are restored to life and begin to live.

The feast of Pentecost is a perfect time for all of us to acknowledge our need for continued growth in the Spirit of Christ, our need for conversion of the heart, not merely of the head, our need for repentance for sin, and our need for prayer as a staple of our daily schedule. But perhaps even more important is ridding our own minds of the self-deception that we can manage our lives without God’s constant help, guidance, and protection. This is the truth that will make us free!
Pentecost is called the “birthday of the Church”; however, Pentecost is not a day in the ordinary sense of twenty-four hours or a certain date on the calendar. Pentecost is a day in the sense of a period of light and warmth in the power and presence of God. Some want to know what happened on that day. What were the tongues of fire like that hung over the heads of the apostles? Were they hot? How long did they last? Were they visible, tangible? What was the nature of the languages that the disciples were speaking? None of these questions has an easy answer. The evangelists speak deliberately in veiled language so that we will investigate, so that we will search, so that we will look, so that we will follow our desires and not remain passive. But there are certain conclusions that we can reach from the description we have of the first Pentecost.

First and foremost, the nascent Church experienced God’s transcendent power in a full and rich manner that embraced and included everyone. I will repeat that: The early Church, that is, the people, the believers, the disciples of Christ, experienced the transcendent power of God in a full and rich manner that embraced and included everyone. This was not true, you may recall, of the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection. Those were special, reserved occasions, for those selected beforehand, as is attested to in the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. However, in contrast, here in Pentecost is a gift that is meant for all, all believers, of course—and everyone is called to belief! The very existence of this event, the very fact that it came about, already shows that in God’s plan—contrary to the way things usually are, but in God’s plan—there is not an intended division between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in regard to the riches of God—those who experience the power of God and those who do not. That is not part of God’s plan. That is more a disorder or a deficiency that needs correction.

It also means that belief is not meant to be the acceptance of secondhand reports. Oh, it may start that way, but is not meant to stay that way. Belief is meant to be verified in the experience of the Spirit. That is the gift of Pentecost. This is what the community of faith is really for—it is to enable people to experience the transcendent power of the Spirit. Even in the Old Testament, one of the psalms says: “Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.” It doesn’t say just take it on my word that the Lord is good. “Taste and see.” All the more so, in the resurrection of Christ, we should taste and see the power and the glory of the resurrected Christ and his gift of the Spirit to the believers.

Many, if not most, Catholics are baptized as infants. This is also true of Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and most of the so-called classical Protestant denominations. It is also true of the Greek Orthodox and the Russian Orthodox and all the Orthodox Churches. And this is very fine, well, and good. It should be that way because we want our infant children to be part of the blessings that come to the faith community, the Church. We don’t want them excluded. However, there is a rub. There is a problem with this practice, and it’s simply this: nature by itself requires only physical
growth. It doesn’t require spiritual growth. Nothing in our nature and nothing in our world, nothing in our culture and nothing in our society requires us to grow up spiritually. For that matter, nothing requires us to grow up mentally or emotionally. We can remain forever infants on the inside, even while sporting a grand physique or a beautiful body. There are indeed many examples of this, as you well know. When it comes to spiritual growth, emotional growth, mental growth, this depends on the initiative of the individual—supported, hopefully, by others.

Further, in growing up, as most of us have, in a basically secular culture, the force and power of purely worldly character models overshadow and even overpower the force and power of Christ himself and the saints as character models. The result of this is during the character building years, from around seven to fourteen, most baptized children will probably—only probably, but probably—be seduced in one way or another by the blandishments of a worldly culture and, therefore, will not be formed as Christians inside. They may have Christian ideas, but they stay in their head. They don’t enter into their character from whence they would emerge in actions—that’s the very nature of character.

So families need help, there is no doubt about it! Christian families need help in the formation of their children, and children need help in their formation as Christians in this kind of a culture. But even Catholic schools are not a certain remedy for the problem because the power of television and other media and other social forces can often neutralize even the very positive influences of a Catholic education. This means that for the average Catholic or Methodist, or any other type of Christian, their formation as Christian is incomplete—almost always. It’s not enough just to receive sacraments. Nor is it a matter simply of filling the head up with information, for example, from the Catechism or from the Bible about Christ or about the Church or about the faith. It’s not enough!

In the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1917, our Blessed Mother appeared to some children in Portugal at Fatima. What was her first request; what was her first requirement? It’s very important what she said. She said what is needed is conversion of the heart—something lacking throughout Western culture among believers. What does it mean to experience conversion of the heart? It means to give one’s life to Christ, to place Christ at the center of one’s own heart, and thereby make him Lord—and that means master. That means no more seeking an autonomous life, a life of total independence. We cannot be independent from God. We cannot be autonomous from God. That is the original sin. If we trust God, we trust that he knows what is best and will lead us and guide us toward it, support us in our desire for it, enlighten our minds and strengthen our wills.

Adult Catholics need to recognize that faith formation is an ongoing process, and that it can only progress with their willing and heartfelt participation. The Spirit descended on Christ at his baptism, it says in Scripture, like a dove. It doesn’t mean it looked like a dove. It meant that the descent was dove-like, in other words, gentle—not like a hawk or an eagle! But like a dove! The dove-like gentleness of the Spirit will not
come near those who resist or those who do not feel the need for God. The Spirit never comes where it is not welcome, and that means very often the Spirit does not come into our hearts because really and truly God is not welcome there. We do not trust God enough—not to lead our lives, not to be our master!

But when the Spirit does fill a soul, the results are astonishing! People bubble forth with the love and the goodness of God. The sick are healed, not necessarily instantaneously and not even always physically, but in their attitudes toward life, toward themselves, toward God. The despairing and the depressed have hope. Those blinded by their own pride and ignorance begin to see. Those dead inside because of lack of love are restored to life and begin to live.

The feast of Pentecost is a perfect time for all of us to acknowledge our need for continued growth in the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit—the gift of Pentecost—and our need for conversion of the heart, for repentance of sin, especially our desire to be a rival to God and our basic distrust of God’s love, and of our need for prayer as a staple in our daily schedule—not every once in a while, when we get around to it, if we have time—but a staple part of daily life. But perhaps even more important is ridding our minds of the self-deception that we can manage our lives without God’s constant help, guidance, and protection. This is the truth that will make us free!

If right now you are saying to yourself you wish someone would help you with a conversion of your heart, you wish you had someone to turn to, to help you repent of sin, or if you needed someone to pray with you, your prayers are answered! Right after Mass, right here, there will be ministers of the heart for you to come to, to pray for whatever you need. And what we all need most of all is the fullness of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the release of the Holy Spirit, to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. If you stay and ask for that, it is my prayer that your prayers will be answered very quickly.
“He said to them, ‘This kind can only come out through prayer.’”

There are many obsessions, compulsions, addictions that can possess a human life. They possess and use up and destroy human life. It is happening all the time in our families, and it doesn’t only affect the individual who is afflicted. It affects the whole family. The whole family is thrown into turmoil, just as this family was.

There are two points that Jesus makes. One is that there are certain kinds of evils that can only be thrown out through prayer, in fact, quite a few of them! It’s true that there are some things we have will power over. In fact, even the worst evils we bring on ourselves by permitting them to take root. But this poor child seems to have been taken over at a very early stage with something. That’s a little more rare, but it can happen. But then we would have to study the rest of the family to know how that can happen. Evil is intergenerational. We do pass down from generation to generation certain fundamental flaws, evil habits, and disorders. Sooner or later even the most innocent become victims. But there is always hope because, as Jesus puts here, everything is possible to one who has faith. We have not been thrown into this world, evil as it can be, without any remedy for our problems. There is always a remedy, but it requires trust. Trust always leads to surrender and to obedience to one who is greater than ourselves—and that is not always forthcoming! But prayer is the beginning, the beginning of the remedy, of the solution, to our problems.

The second point is that when Jesus delivered this poor child from his affliction he seemed like a corpse. That is because evil can become so much a part of us that it is all we are—practically, almost. It is our lives, and that’s why we cling to our addictions. That’s why we cling to our obsessions—and it is really we who cling to them, because without them we wouldn’t have anything. But, again, with God are all possibilities—including life after death!
“My son, when you come to serve the Lord, stand in justice and fear, prepare yourself for trials.”

This first text is taken from the Book of Sirach. The Book of Sirach is not found in the Hebrew Bible, but it is found in the Catholic Old Testament. It belongs to a particular kind of literature called “wisdom literature,” the origin of which is teaching children, especially boys because they didn’t teach girls in ancient times.

The point is the content of the teaching: prepare for trials. This is wisdom. If we think about life, it is actually constructed in such a way as to provide all kinds of trials. But modern people, in contrast to ancient people, often think that trials are things to be avoided or overcome or they are very unfortunate interferences with their plans. We tend to have developed such a self-centered idea of life that my life is really mine; it all depends on what I want to do with it, and therefore my plans are paramount. Anything that gets in the way of what I want to do is a terrible problem.

That’s not the way the Book of Sirach looks at life. According to the Book of Sirach, life is already a challenge of itself. The goal is not to accomplish something you have decided or something you want, attain something you want. That’s not the goal. The goal is to learn about what life is, where it comes from, and what it’s for. This is a lifelong task.

In order to accomplish this task there has to be real serious challenges—not so that we can win a million dollars, like on television, but so that we will win wisdom, so that we will gain insight into the meaning of life, therefore, the reason why we are here and what we are participating in or invited to participate in. None of this can be put into so many words. We learn it, if we learn it, in our trials and the way we deal with our disappointments, with our sorrows, with evils that come to us from outside or inside, with our human weaknesses, with our temptations—the greatest of which is to rival God or to replace God with oneself or one’s own plans.
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Reflections on Our Hearts  Funeral  Marguerite McNulty  Thursday, May 19, 2005  Acts 10:34-36, 42-43;  Rom 14:7-9, 10c-12;  Lk 12:35-40  (We learn from each other)

“In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.”

These readings in today’s liturgy all reflect Christian faith, and they are meditations on the end of life, a theme that is a very healthy theme for us to think about—not to ruminate in a sort of morose way, but to simply reflect on because we shall all some day come to the end of our lives. Death can become our counselor in a very wholesome way, in a very enlightened way, if we allow it to. That’s what these readings are about.

This particular reading talks about how God looks into the heart of every person. It doesn’t matter what nationality, what ethic origin, where the person lives or when, or what culture or what language this person uses or belongs to. It’s all about something else. It’s about the heart. It’s about how God sees the heart.

Now the second reading urges us to realize that we cannot know that about each other, but we can know it to some degree about ourselves. That’s what’s important, that the judgment which belongs to God is also something that we ask for as we walk in our lives. Why? To guide and to direct. The wonderful thing about human beings is that we are not cast in stone. You plant a tree, and if it’s planted in the right way, it will just grow up and it will grow out and there will be no real surprises. All life forms except the human follow certain very close patterns. Spiders spin webs. They are not going to surprise anybody and spin something else or do something else. But we human beings are full of mystery because we are free beings and we can develop whatever patterns we choose to.
The point of the gospel is God has given us the pattern in Christ, and **we can model ourselves on Christ.** If we do, we are assured that we will live eternally with God. Why? Because we will have God’s life. This is promise a that comes to us in Baptism.

When we brought the body of Marguerite into our Church, I sprinkled it with the water from the font to remind all of us of our Baptism, and **God’s pledge and promise that comes in Baptism.** For what? **For eternal life.** Now this life is a very precious life, but it’s one that needs to be nurtured. It’s one that has to grow and be taken care of.

Here in the front of the church we have the candle, which represents the Pascal mystery of Christ’s resurrection, which is a light in a world of darkness. Jesus has been raised from the dead to enlighten us and to show us the way.

When we come to bury a loved one, it’s very important that we learn how to celebrate that person’s life, that we think of the good things that God gave to her, that she gave to us, that we shared together. It’s also important that we **allow a loved one’s life to act as perhaps a measure for ourselves.** If we have received **any good** through that person, then we ought to ask ourselves this question: **To whom are we going to pass that on?** If we have observed anything in this person’s life that wasn’t quite finished yet, well, **what in our life is not yet finished?** If we saw a loved one make mistakes, well, **what mistakes are we making?** We need to **teach each other and learn from each other.** In this way we are a community of faith. And so as we come to bless and to bury our sister’s remains, it’s important that we spend some time thanking God for her, commending her to the Lord, and accompanying her with our prayers.
“Keep salt in yourselves and you will have peace with one another.”

One thing that we have to be clear about is that Jesus took very seriously the idea of reward and punishment. In this particular case, reward for a very small thing, a reward that far exceeds what it might seem to call for. “Anyone,” he says, “who offers a cup of water to a disciple because he is a disciple will not lose his reward.” Well, that’s not much, but Jesus is stressing the generosity of God, but also—and this is the part we often forget—the justice of God. So he talks about the word “hell fire” or Gehenna, the “fire of Gehenna”—we don’t have to go into the history of what that means, but the truth is that he believed in punishment in a way that exceeded the rabbis of his time. So we can’t say, well, he is just using the language of his time. No, in a sense he focused on this more than others. So he believes that God really is a just God and a holy God who will not bring into his company, into his communion, people who are wicked. So that’s one thing we have to keep in mind.

But now he says, “If your hand is the cause of your sin, cut it off!” But is your hand ever the cause of anything? No. If your foot causes you to sin—is your foot ever a cause of anything? No. So even in this teaching Jesus keeps his parabolic style, his style that moves toward excess in order to make a point, that teases the mind into some kind of insight. What is the cause of sin? It’s not our hand or our foot or any part of our body. That’s what he wants you to think about. And how do you pluck it out? Is your eye ever the cause of sin? Never.

Well, what is? What causes us to sin is our egoism, our self-centeredness, our desire to be God, to rival God. That’s what causes sin. How can we pluck that out? That’s our work!
Today we have a beautiful reading from the Book of Sirach on friendship. Friendship was an important topic in ancient philosophy. Aristotle wrote on friendship. Cicero wrote *De Amicitia*, a favorite book of John Adams. He read it several times in Latin.

There is a reason why ancient peoples looked deeply into this relationship we call friendship. It is among the most human of relationships, if I dare say—far outpacing, for example, various commercial relationships. In the ancient world friendship was even more intimate than marriage, which was often more commercial, a business contract. But the human heart yearns for friendship. True friendship has to *transcend all utilitarian considerations*, which is what the topic here in Sirach is about. There are many ways in which friendship can be betrayed, and this, again, goes into them, one after the other.

But ultimately friendship is really what God seeks from his creation. God has created a creation that is capable of friendship—capable, but in no way coerced, since the very nature of friendship is that it is free from all forms of cohesion. Not only that, but in Christ God has become friend of creation, at least the part of it that can respond, the human part. So God has come to teach us what it means to be a friend.

Although the word is not used here, but the word “compassion” describes the nature of true friendship, a *willingness to share in everything good and bad*. Aristotle said, “What’s mine is yours, and what’s yours is mine.” St. Thomas Aquinas pointed out that is exactly what Jesus told his disciples before he suffered on the cross. “I call you no longer servants, but friends.” He, indeed, was their friend. He has been our friend. The question is: Will we be God’s friend? It’s important that we go beyond the Book of Sirach in the sense that this is really talking about what we need. The question it does not ask is: Are we willing to be this for someone else? That, I think, is the question that Jesus asked with his life.
It is important to take notice if there is any one theme that runs through all three readings. Today there is a very definite theme that runs through all three readings, and that is that they are so totally counter cultural.

The first reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes is about a time and place for everything. There is a time for joy and a time for sadness; and a time for rejoicing and a time for grief. That’s not really something our society believes in. We seem to think we know really what’s best. We have to avoid trauma at all costs and medicate ourselves to avoid the results of sorrow and grief. In many ways we deny death itself, making it pretty or even hoping it will disappear. But the great conviction of the Book of Ecclesiastes is that there is something in every stage of life that is good and it’s the responsibility of the wise person to find what that is. So here we are as Americans in the twenty-first century. How are we going to find meaning in suffering? How are we going to find meaning in dependence on others? How are we going to find meaning in weakness? That’s the challenge.

In the gospel, of course, Jesus himself is totally counter cultural because he is saying that we are blessed when we are poor, in other words, when we are dependent, when we are not in charge, when we have no power. What kind of blessing is that? Many of us need to find out. He says we are blessed when we are mourning. How can we be blessed when we are mourning? Of course, we will never find that out if we don’t have friends. We will never find that out if people don’t love us. But in the very neediness that is created by mourning we can find who are true friends are, and we can experience a sort of love that we could not otherwise even receive.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We all hunger and thirst. We have all kinds of wishes and desires, but are they really for righteousness? Jesus assures us that we will be satisfied if we hunger for the right thing. On the other hand, if we hunger for something that is ephemeral or worthless, being satisfied will be impossible.

“Blessed are they who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.” “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

So in a certain way Jesus is trying to show us the way to wisdom, a life in which we seek what is truly substantial. It starts with peace with ourselves and reconciliation with God. We know that is not something we can do for ourselves, but has been done for us and given to us as a gift by our Lord Jesus Christ. He has come into a very cruel world, a world full of all kinds of evil and ill will and suffered the cruel fate of that world and has willingly forgiven all of it. We believe that Jesus’ cross was salvific, that through his suffering on the cross he really did bring something new to the earth. He brought
forgiveness to those who have not even asked for forgiveness. He brought mercy for those who see no need for mercy. Because it is necessary, as he taught himself, to forgive in order to be forgiven, he has brought forgiveness because he has given it. He brought forgiveness not for himself, but for us because he was fully human and he shared all of our humanity. All of our pains and all of our suffering belong to him, and he has redeemed it all. It is through him that we really have the answers to the questions brought up in Ecclesiastes. What is, after all, the meaning of suffering, and what is the meaning of pain, and what is the meaning of dependence? It’s all answered in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

So when we brought the remains of Joe Miller’s life into our narthex, I sprinkled it with the water of the baptismal font because it’s in Baptism that we receive new life. It’s in Baptism we are given the promise of new birth. It’s in Baptism that we share in the fruit of our redemption that we receive through Jesus Christ. It’s in Baptism that we also receive the pledge to eternal life with God, a life that Joe is now enjoying.

The candle represents, of course, the resurrection of Christ, but it also represents the faith of believers. How can we take that light into our world of darkness? How can we take the message of the gospel to others? Well, we can if we first bring it into ourselves. That alone will prepare us for working with God and becoming his companions and collaborators in a great mission to show the world the great love of God and the great purposes of God in bringing us here.

Meanwhile, we need to be very attentive to one another’s weaknesses and sufferings and to be compassionate and willing to extend ourselves to others, especially those who mourn. Ultimately, we have to recognize that we are all one. The loss of one is the loss of all. By a similar logic, the gain of one is the gain of all. So we rejoice with those who rejoice and we weep with those who weep. We celebrate a life lived in honesty and integrity, a gift for all.
“Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.”

Let’s just remind ourselves that the kingdom of God really means the realm of God or the reign of God, the presence and power of God, in human life, among human beings. Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is among you.” It’s not a place in the geographical sense, but it is a place in a psychological sense. We find the kingdom among ourselves, and we enter it when we take on the mind of a child.

Now Albert Einstein, one of the great minds of the twentieth century, once said that the reason that he was able to discover what he did and see what he saw was that he had the mind of a child. What is it about the child? Perhaps it is that they don’t have clear-cut expectations. Perhaps they don’t know what they are supposed to see, and therefore they can see what others don’t. Or vice versa, they can admit they don’t see what others claim to, as in the story of The Emperor’s New Clothes. It was a child who said, “Oh, but the emperor is naked,” when everyone else was pretending otherwise.

In the opening prayer of today’s Mass, the Church prayed that we will develop the wisdom grounded in humility, as did the Blessed Mother, in a sense that God planted the Word of God in her physically, spiritually, psychologically, and metaphorically—all! In her humility she became the one who could receive the wisdom of God. As opposed to what? Well, in the prayer it was as opposed to or in contrast to the wisdom of the proud. What is the wisdom of the proud? The wisdom of the proud is all about me and my viewpoint, what I think, what I see, what I want, what I believe, my opinion. One of
the problems with our modern intellectual life, if you want to call it that, is that in our modern culture, it is all about me. Instead of being embarrassed by the fact that this is a view that only one person has, people actually relish it.

So we are called back now to the child. **How can we be open to see what perhaps we are not expecting to see, or to observe what we expect isn’t there?**
“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”

The mystery of the Trinity is the distinguishing feature of Christian faith and sets it apart from the other two great monotheistic faiths, namely, Judaism and Islam. Unfortunately, expressing this mystery has been very difficult—for different reasons—over the ages.

Today the problem people have is not that the words used are abstract or rare, but the other way around, they are too common. “One God subsisting in three persons”—well, we use the word “person” every day, but not in this way; and therefore it tells us nothing of the actual meaning of the word. The problem existed in the past, as well, but for different reasons. In the Greek, hypostasis does not mean person in our modern sense. In Latin, persona does not either. Persona means “mask.” It’s used in drama. Actors wear a persona before they speak their parts. In Greek, a different word is used. It means something else again—so confusing that this has had major historical results.

Namely, Mohammad refused to become a Christian because he believed that Christians believed in three gods—three different beings! How different would the world have been if Mohammad had become a Christian! Do you have any idea of how the entire history of the world would be very different from what it is now? All sorts of forces that have been set in motion over the last many centuries, back to the year 600 A.D., would not have been set into motion! We would have had a different life altogether.

So theology is important, and understanding what we believe is important. Today we are getting together a little more peacefully with Muslims and with Jews and speaking to them on a regular basis. It is good. It is important for Christians to know what they believe and understand it in some simple way. It isn’t that difficult!

Perhaps we have to start with what Mohammad started with: the unity of God. Actually it’s true: God is one. According to Scripture, there is only one uncreated mystery. Everything flows from the oneness of God. When John says, “God so loved the world that he gave his Son,” we need to realize the Son is not another being. It is not someone else, like your son is different from you. The Son of God is not different from God, but God—and there is one God! There is one mind of God. There is one will of God. Jesus, in his human nature, has his own personal human will, his own personal human mind, but God is one and has one mind and one will. That is why in our Creed we profess every Sunday the Son is “one in Being with the Father.”

Now this idea has been utterly rejected by Jews and by Muslims. And it has caused a lot of headaches also for Christians, but this is not necessary.
First of all, let us say that what we understand about God, we only understand because God reveals it to us. It’s not something we figured out. We haven’t figured out hardly anything! **What we believe, we believe because God revealed it.** **What Christians believe about God** is that he spoke in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, not just in his words, in what he said, but everything about him: his personality, his actions, his presence, his humanity.

God spoke in the humanity of Jesus. That is a tremendous clue that does not exist among the Jews or the Muslims—that God speaks through the humanity of Jesus. Therefore, we say and believe that **Christ is God’s own self-expression, or another way of saying that: the Word of God embodied.** The self-expression of God embodied!

When we say “Father,” we are saying that God is totally beyond all created beings, all human thought, all words, all language.

When we say “Son,” or “Word,” or “Light,” which are equivalent words, we mean that **God can and does touch us.** We cannot go to God, but God can come to us—and he has through the Son, through the Word, through the Light. And this Word, this Son, this Light, perfectly embodies and **communicates God’s own knowledge of God**—another powerful belief! God’s knowledge of God embodied in Jesus! **Everything he does and everything he says expresses what God knows about God.** Think about that!

When we say “Spirit,” we mean that God’s presence blows wherever it wills. **All authentic religious experience comes from the Spirit of God—the Holy Spirit—in all times, in all places, before Christ, after Christ, in the Holy Land, outside the Holy Land, in the past, in the present, in the future!** In no way can anyone control God or limit God’s work.

It is the duty of every believer, of every faithful religious person, to be open to God, to God’s purpose, to God’s work, and to be obedient to what God asks of us. In this way we are all servants and witnesses of God. **Christians share with all other religious people and all devout lovers of God the Spirit and the Light, but through our connection with Jesus and by our membership in his body, which is the Church, we form a bridge with all humanity.** Jesus said, “What God has joined, no one may put asunder.” That includes the **union of God and man in Christ.** That includes the union of Christ and his Church. No one may put these asunder.

The mystery of the Trinity is the key to understanding God’s profound union with us, his creation, and the ultimate gift, which is drawing all human beings into **divine communion.** This is the promise of our Baptism. This is our destiny.
“All things are possible for God.”

This may sound like a truism, but it has a lot of power in it. It could be used in different contexts, but this context is really about the power sin has to ensnare us. Sin can ensnare us. What ensnares us is really desire, desire for something other than what God wants for us. There is such a thing as holy desire. That does not ensnare us; but there is such a thing as unholy desire, which is for anything out of order, out of kilter.

In the first reading from the Book of Sirach, the author is talking about how sin can lead people astray. We know from modern-day experience that there are all kinds of addictions: alcohol addiction, narcotic addiction, sex addiction. What are they? These are ensnarements, if that’s a good word. They are snares that have caught people. When we talk about substance abuse, we get too much into the substance and not enough into the abuser. The abuser is the issue in the Scriptures. The spiritual focus is on the one who abuses. Where does that come from? It comes from, as the first reading talks about, one’s desires are out of kilter, one isn’t looking to God.

In this gospel reading, here this young man, actually a very good man—very good man, almost perfect—only one thing wrong: his desires aren’t in the right place. So this is comparing the work of the spirit, which begins in the heart, contrasting that to a legalistic kind of ethic. Well, it’s very good, and he kept himself pretty much on the straight and narrow, but not exactly, because his heart wasn’t quite right. So that’s even deeper, more important.
The whole thing is that even though sin can ensnare us, **we are not so unfree that we cannot be free.** So that’s another thing. Then people when they get ensnared say, “Well, I can’t do anything about it. I’m not responsible. I’m helpless.” That is very common today in our society—all these helpless people, all these victims! They need someone to help them. They need therapy. They need this; they need that.

But actually that’s not what the Scripture is saying. It’s saying **they need God.** “With God all things are possible.” They need God. **They need faith in God.** Then through their faith they need to reorder, reorganize, their focus and move on. It’s possible! “All things are possible with God.” That’s why we remain really responsible. **We are responsible because “all things are possible with God.”** If that weren’t true, then we couldn’t be responsible. We would be hopelessly victimized by the world, by our own weaknesses, by the devil and his cunning and his deceit. But we are not victimized by all these things only because “with God all things are possible.” Therefore, in God we do have freedom.
Those who are first will be last, and those who are last will be first.

What’s this all about—being first—what is this all about? Jonas? Right, there is something natural in people; **people want to get ahead of other people.** That is really not something odd or strange; it’s rather typical—is it not? Would you want to be last in your class by choice? You don’t know. Okay, that’s honest. Anybody here want to be last? Would you choose to be last in your class in anything: a contest, running, jumping, spelling, anything at all. Would you prefer to be last? Normally, no. Somebody has got to be last—right? It’s the nature of things—isn’t it? How could you possibly have everyone not last? No, somebody has to be last; it’s the nature of a series. But we don’t choose to be last. **It’s something natural in us that wants to get ahead, be better.** And that’s natural. It’s instinctive. It’s part of the plan of God.

**The only problem is people get all mixed up at what the race really is.** For example, they might think that the race is having more. Having more—that’s a big thing today. People are always trying to get more, to have more cars, more rooms in their house, more things, more bikes. How many bikes can you ride at once? One—that’s all—right? So if you had three or four bikes, what good would that be? You understand, Carl? But a lot of people are like this; they are always **adding more and more** to their collection of whatever. But Jesus’ point is, well, **getting ahead isn’t bad, but you have to get ahead in the right things, not in the wrong things.**

Peter started this whole thing about—what did Peter say to him? “Well, Lord, what are you going to do for us?” Isn’t that what he said? What else did he say? “We have”—what? Yes, yes, what else did he say in today’s reading? Peter said, “We have”—you forgot already? “We have given up everything.” Didn’t he say that? **“We have given up everything to follow you.** What are you going to give to us?” Isn’t that what he said? That’s what he said! It’s a natural question, actually. “All right, we are following you. We are not asking for a salary. We didn’t ask for this. We didn’t ask for that. But what are you going to do for us?” I mean, you have to do something! What Jesus said is, “Well, for everything you give up you are going to get a lot more back.”

Now how can that be? Well, actually, what he is talking about is actually true. The reason is this: one of the biggest things that keep people apart is their own pride. **Our pride forms a boundary that separates us from other people.** The very idea of wanting to get ahead is itself prideful. We want to get ahead. We want to be better. But that also is distancing ourselves from each other, and that is also part of the whole human makeup. So we do put a distance between ourselves and others. We try to create a bigger distance by excelling, which in itself is not wrong, as I said before. It’s not wrong to get A’s and to want to have the best grades in class. That’s not bad. But Jesus’ point is this: **too often the contest in life is about outdoing others, having more than others, being more important than others—and that’s a mistake.** The contest of improving yourself
is good, but improving yourself in this sort of way in competition with other people is not right. It isn’t the best way, anyway. It’s not the best way really to excel.

When you give away—when you give away—what you could have for the sake of the kingdom, you get back more than you ever gave away. So he says, “As many sisters, brothers, houses and lands”—well, what could he be talking about? Johnny, help me out! What does he mean? How do you have more houses? How do you have more lands? How do I have more mothers? Do I have more mothers? Yes, I do. I have all kinds of mothers. I have all kinds of houses. What kind of houses? Look at all the houses where I am welcome because I’m a pastor! I’m welcome all over the place! Why? Because people love those who serve Christ. It’s a fact. And when you don’t compete with people for what they want, then you are no threat to them. You see? That’s what Jesus is saying. Don’t compete on the basis of what other people want, and you won’t be a threat; and then when you are not a threat, you will be a friend! You will be welcomed into their homes, on their lands, into their families. You will have many times more mothers than you could ever have on your own. You can only have one on your own, right? Well, if one is not enough, you can have more by serving God. You will have all kinds of mothers, and all kinds of sisters, and all kinds of brothers. They will be there for you because you are not a threat to them because you are not competing with them for what they want. You are doing something totally different. You are trying to serve God. That is the very idea of a religious vocation per se, in itself.

Now everybody has a vocation; is this not true? Say yes. Yes! We all have vocations. Every baptized—isn’t that right, Rachel—every baptized Christian has a vocation to serve God, right? In some way, correct? You all heard that before, Jonathan? It’s not new? Say it’s not new. It’s not new; that’s right; that’s the right answer. You have actually heard this—right, David? Every baptized Christian has a vocation.

But there are some special vocations, and they are about giving up everything else, the normal life, and serving God in a very special way. This has it’s own rewards. That’s what Jesus is talking about. Many times many houses, lands, sisters, and brothers, and a great sense of life and vitality that is really a gift. So that’s something you can think about. Do you think the Lord is calling you to that? Maybe, maybe not. You don’t have to decide now. You are all too young to decide now, but you are not too young to think about it. The service of the Lord has its own rewards—very different from what the world wants—very different—but good! You see? You understand? Very good, very worthwhile.

That’s what Jesus is talking to Peter about. Do you think Peter was satisfied by this answer? What do you think? I don’t know; I wasn’t there—I wasn’t there! I think Peter probably had to think about it for a long time. But guess what else Jesus said to Peter? “And also persecutions.” Was Peter persecuted? Yes, he was, because among the people of God, of course, if you serve God, then you are not competition; but you are competition to whom? Who would also want to get control of people? The devil. Correct. The evil one. So the evil one does not like people who give away everything to serve the Lord. The devil does not like that, so you do open yourself up to persecution, but not
to worry because **even there God is always with us.** Right? Good days, God is with us; bad days, God is with us! Isn’t that right? The sun shines, God is with us; it rains, God is with us. Right? You get an A on your paper, God is with you; you get a D or an F—is God still with you? Of course he is! And he is saying, “Hey, you better study a little better.” Isn’t that right? Of course he is.

So we can improve and we can grow and we can develop, and we are supposed to find joy and happiness in life. Just be careful—**just be careful—you don’t let the world determine what you think is worthwhile to live for.** That would be a tragic mistake if you were to let the world set your agenda for you. Let what other people think—who cares what people think? I would hope that is one of the results of your being here at St. Joe’s is that you **stop caring about what other people think!** Because—and this is a secret, but I will let you know—other people don’t know, so what they think doesn’t matter. That’s what the gospel is saying. Listen to the voice of God and you will be happy—**wherever God wants you, let him lead you.** If it looks like it is difficult, that’s all right. If God wants you there, he will take care of the difficulties. You understand? The main thing is find where God wants you to be. You will be happy. That doesn’t mean you will never have a bad day. That does not mean you will not get tired out. That does not mean you won’t get sore. It means **you will be inwardly happy and adjusted,** and you will be able to **enjoy life and appreciate the joy that comes not from the world, but from God.** It’s very possible. All we have to do is be open and listen and follow.
The first reading is from the prophet Ezekiel, and it was written between 587 and 520 B.C. during the time of the exile. The exile was the period of time when the Hebrew people, the Israelites, had been taken bodily to the land of modern-day Iraq, Babylon, as it was called then. They were in exile; they were deprived of their homeland. Meanwhile, the homeland was pretty well devastated and many were killed.

In certain ways the Church today is also in exile because the lands of its early occupation, the Middle East and Europe, have been taken over by other ideas — Middle East by Islam, Europe by secularism. We might also as Christian believers look at the vision of Ezekiel, and get something from it.

It is a vision of the Temple in which water is welling up from underneath it. This is not a plumbing problem; this is a mystical image of the experience of God. Living water means the experience of God. It’s saying that the Temple represents, of course, the people. Beneath the surface to the people, although it may not always seem so, there is this tremendous fountain, this spring, of living water, and it will eventually well up, and when it does it will overflow. The overflowing of the Temple will provide fertility for all the plants: for medicine and for fruit. This is really the role of faith. Faith is supposed to overflow from believers and bring medicine and fruit to all the people around.

This has not always been the way that institutional religion has acted. Every time there are reverses the people of God always try to look back on their original foundation and question. What have we done wrong? Why have we been sent into exile? Where did we fail? That sort of questioning is also very appropriate for the Church. When we do as a whole, not just the priests or the clergy or the bishops, but when the whole people of God start to really question where the Church went wrong, what it did not do, how it was not faithful to the Lord’s calling, then we can be renewed. Without this reflection I doubt we will be renewed. It is not a lack of power. It is not a lack of promise that is at the root of the Church’s problems. It’s rather a lack of response. Anyway, that is what is indicated by the vision of Ezekiel.
Effective Prayer  Eighth Week in Ordinary Time  Friday, May 27, 2005  7:00 a.m.
Sir 44:1, 9-13;  Mk 11:11-26  (St. Augustine of Canterbury)  (Sacrifices in right
perspective)

This is a rather long discourse, and it’s all about one thing—prayer! It’s about
effective prayer. **Effective prayer must be rooted in faith.**

Why does Jesus become angry in the Temple and clear out all the moneychangers
selling doves? Because the Temple is supposed to be a house of prayer. Well, what’s
wrong with what they were doing? It wasn’t a bake sale. They weren’t raising money for
the Girl Scouts. They were selling doves and pigeons, and this was necessary for the
sacrifices. But Jesus’ point is this: **What are all these sacrifices for?** There is a
longstanding tradition within the prophetic works of the Israelites in which the **whole
idea of sacrifices was brought up for deep questioning.** What are we doing here? Yes,
the Law proscribed all kinds of sacrifices, but the prophet said, **“Do you really think you
are doing anything for God when you are making these sacrifices?”** Apparently that
was the idea that God was pleased, that God was augmented, that God got something out
of these sacrifices in the Temple. That’s what Jesus is objecting to, as the prophets did as
well.

The basic idea of the sacrifice is gratitude, returning something to God for the many
blessings one has. There is nothing wrong with this, and Jesus does not object to it, but
this whole idea can be carried too far whereby we think we are doing something for God,
whereas what **Jesus is pointing out is that the Temple is a place of prayer, and prayer
is about asking for and being dependent upon God.** God doesn’t mind that we are
dependent. God isn’t really looking for something. God wants us to be dependent upon
him and wants to provide for us, but he also wants our trust. He wants us to trust him. **He**
wants us to trust him with our entire lives. That’s really what faith is about. **Sacrifices** only mean something if they are coming out of a life of faith, if they are symbolic of a surrender that’s happening inside of us. But if they are a substitute for a surrender, then they have no meaning; then they are just a form of hypocrisy, where there is this great disjoining of the inner and the outer within ourselves.

This is a quotation: “‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples’”—all peoples—“but you have made it a den of thieves.” Two points—all peoples. Yes, the Israelites were called on to be a **center of prayer for all people**. This is also something that they forgot; **sometimes we forget**! It’s not my God and it’s not our God—it’s God, period. There is only one. “You have made it a den of thieves.” What is a den, but a hideout! This is another reference to hypocrisy. **Sometimes within the people of God and within the sacred places there is a lot of hypocrisy, people hiding out**—and we need to look at that too!
“Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.”

It is no coincidence that the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, or Corpus Christi in Latin, is celebrated on the Sunday after Trinity Sunday. In the mystery of the Trinity, Christians have the essence of their identity as Christians: what distinguishes us from the Jews and the Muslims, who are also monotheists, who believe in one God. **This mystery of the Trinity is a gift to the whole world, and Christians are its guardian.** We could have never known of the Trinitarian life of God save for the revelation of God himself in Christ, that is, the embodied presence that God took up in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. Although implausible from a purely rational point of view, this belief is the bedrock of Christian faith.

The implications are staggering: **God becomes human so that humanity can become divine.** Most people cannot imagine what this could mean, and that’s all right. The destiny and purpose of the creation now exceeds the boundary of the creation itself. We are created for nothing less than to be drawn into the inner life of God: to know the Father as the Son knows the Father, to receive the Spirit from the Father and the Son. Yet this unity or this communion exceeds all human explanations.

**In the sacramental order, however, this unity becomes concrete in the Eucharist, primarily, and also in Marriage,** because Marriage is an image of Christ’s relationship with the Church. Therefore it can share sacramentally in the unity between God and humanity. This is what sanctifies the union of man and woman in Marriage. The bold and outrageous claims that Christ makes, proclaimed this afternoon by Deacon Pat, and found in the Gospel of John, are meant to jolt his audience. **Jesus is calling for bold and outrageous faith.**

The unity or communion that God has established in Christ is perfect in every way, but faint and weak in Christ’s followers; therefore, the bond must be strengthened. This is the idea of food and drink. We may enjoy eating and we may enjoy drinking, but that’s not the real reason we have to eat and drink. We have to eat and drink...
so that we will have strength to live. **The Eucharist strengthens us and enables us to live in God, in the Trinity itself.**

Even more, we are what we eat. The Eucharist not only strengthens us, it transforms us. The presence of Christ is dynamic. It is at work, **changing, molding, developing, burnishing the image of God** that is the very basis of our creation in the first place. Christ is not a thing, and the Eucharist is not a thing, but a living presence in relation. When we come to the altar we need to be coming to a **living presence who wants to relate to us: touching us and nourishing us and transforming us.**

In Christ, something new began. Jesus is not the continuation of what started on earth four and a half billion years ago with the formation of the planet, or fourteen billion years ago with the beginning of the universe. **In Christ, there is something totally new, and that continues in the life of the Church.** The Eucharist is exactly what we need it to be wherever we are in this process of becoming more perfectly the image of God, of becoming sanctified, of becoming like Christ. **The Eucharist is milk to babes and meat to adults.** Babes are those Christians who need something that is easy to digest. Adults are those who need something more substantial. The Eucharist is both—and everything in between!

Then we have to **consider our response** to the great gift of God. We know from Scripture God never imposes himself upon anyone. God never pries us away from what we really want. So we do have to confront ourselves with the question: What do I really want? **What do I, the choice maker for my life, really want for myself?** Even the most precious gifts can remain unopened.

**How do we respond to Christ’s presence in the Eucharist?** Swallow fast and move on to something else? Rushing to get back to something else? **We need to find ways of spending time with our Lord so that his gifts and his power can sink into us.** Perhaps today on this feast of the Body of Christ we could make a commitment to do just that.
My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

The feast of the Visitation is really based on a very beautiful story about two women, two very simple women: Elizabeth, in the autumn of life and Mary, in the spring of life. Now at that time there were two things a woman would avoid at all costs: the first, having a child outside of marriage—it was punishable by stoning; the second, not having a child in marriage—this was punishable by, you might say, disrespect and rejection. Here we have these two women; both of them were living under a curse of a sort. Elizabeth, because all these years she had never had a child and everyone assumed it was because God was displeased with her, because she was not good enough, because she was not holy enough. Then Mary, who has just discovered quite to her surprise that at age 14, about that, or maybe even 13, she was to be the mother of the savior. She herself queried the angel, “But how can this be? I do not know man.” So here are two women who are not unusual in any external way, but inwardly are extremely unusual because God has chosen them both for a very important mission.

That tells us something about ourselves too. We are not unusual either, not anybody is that unusual in the sense that we are not from unusual families. Our families are all rather normal. We don’t have famous names. We are not scions of great fortunes. Yet we all have a very important role to play in the world. We probably don’t know what it is yet. Elizabeth didn’t know what God wanted of her until late in life. Mary found out perhaps much earlier than she wanted. So it is with the ways of God: they are not our ways. But what is true and what is affirmed throughout the gospels is that every person is called to service. Every person has a vocation, and they are all as different as we are. But they are all the same in the sense that they are all like Mary to bring the Word of God into the world. That’s why Jesus said to the crowd, somewhat rhetorically, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters?” And he answered his own question: “The one who does the will of my Father is mother and sister and brother to me.” That is your vocation; that is my vocation, to be mother and sister and brother to Jesus, to do the will of our
Father in heaven, whatever it is in our particular life, in our particular circumstance. Some of us may be called to a certain kind of heroism; surely Mary was and so was Elizabeth—maybe we won’t be—but to the same mediating, midwifing the Word of God into the world, that is our vocation as believers. **We receive that vocation at the baptismal font.**

For the last eight years we have done our best as a faculty, as parish staff, as a parish itself, **to nurture that vocation in your hearts.** Alongside of this we have tried to train you in the skills you are going to need in life, and I think we have done very well both ways. What you do with them, of course, is now your choice. We are not going to accompany you on your journey to high school, university, home, business, or whatever it is you do with your lives. **You are going to take with you whatever you want to take.** It will be your choice. You can remember what you choose to remember. You can treasure what you choose to treasure.

**What we will send with you is our prayers and our hopes that you will always remember that however difficult life might become, God is always present.** When you feel the weakest of all, perhaps you might remember what Mary said: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.” She said that in spite of fear and misunderstanding all around her. “For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant,” and he does look with favor on all those who serve him however lowly—you let God’s action through you and in you. That is why we gather today to celebrate this great occasion of your stepping out into the world now into a very different kind of environment than what you are used to. In a sense the kid gloves will be off from now on as the world more or less buffets you here and there. You will get into scrapes; that’s all part of growing up. You will be bruised, but we believe nothing will be too much for the Lord’s grace working in your hearts and minds and souls.

So we send you forth and our prayers go with you, and I surely hope that your prayers will be with us, as well, and that you will **remember always to come to the Lord’s table and share in the Eucharist, which is the bread of life, because we all need strength and we all need nourishment.** That remains true until the last day of our lives. If you remember the Lord, all will go well in the long run. Of that I am certain. God bless you all!
“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.”

Looking over the three readings for today’s liturgy I was impressed that they all follow a single theme, the theme of wisdom; and all three are poetic pieces. The theme of wisdom, of course, has to do with three basic issues.

The first is time. What is time? Time, of course, is something we can’t describe, but we live in it, but we shall not always live in it. In the first reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes there is a “time for everything.” The author, although sometimes considered rather cynical, nonetheless, does see that under the heavens there is a time and a place for everything. It is wisdom that looks for the meaning and the purpose of each moment.

In our modern culture we tend not to do that. We tend to think that we can control events and make sure that events follow our wishes so that we have a lot of good days and very few bad days; a lot of pleasure, very little pain; a lot of ups, few downs. But that’s not necessarily the way life is. Part of this book of wisdom was trying to instruct people that we have to look into our darkness, into our pain, into our weakness, and find meaning there because somehow it’s all part of a whole, so that we don’t fail to appreciate every day and every moment, pleasant or not.

In the second reading, the Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul is focusing on what is really important. What are the real priorities of life? He is convinced there are three great values: faith, hope, and love. But of these three, love is far more important. But he is not talking about ordinary love, the love that we sing about in our ordinary songs or even hear in our ballads, but it’s the different kind of love. It’s the love which is of God himself, the love St. John says is God. This is total, unconditioned acceptance. God loves us because he is God, not because we are loveable. But in his loving us he makes us worthy of love if we accept it, if we just learn how to live in that unconditioned way. That is another great way of wisdom.

Then thirdly, the beautiful gospel we call the Beatitudes. These, of course, are all about values. What do we live for? What is important? They are not the values,
necessarily, we are given by others, and they are not the values our society admires. But they are the values that Jesus admired: not necessarily accumulating the greatest amount, but being willing to suffice with little; not always full of glee, but willing to share others’ grief; not always pushing ahead and being number one, and yet being able to inherit the earth itself; hungering, yes, and thirsting, but not just for satisfaction of our earthly, physical needs, but for something deeper: the need we have as human spiritual beings for righteousness and justice on our earth; the desire to share with others the mercy God gives to us, and to stay free of that egoism that perverts and corrupts everything it touches; being really dedicated to God’s ways that make us children of God and peacemakers. These are the qualities that Jesus focused on in his teachings on the wise life.

Now whoever picked these three readings is a person who really understands that Christian faith is something that involves work, because all these three readings talk about how we have to spend some time in reflecting on who we are and where we are going, otherwise they don’t make any sense. We have to be reflective on ourselves. Where are we in this journey of life? How much are we appreciating every moment? What are our priorities? What are our values?

I personally did not know Beverly, but she has to be like the rest of us. We all are people who need to think and to reflect carefully on who we are and what kind of people we want to become. The gospel is giving us an opportunity and a possibility that does not come with nature itself. It comes from a rebirth that comes from the font of Baptism itself. That’s why when we brought the remains of Beverly into our narthex, I sprinkled the casket with the holy water from the font to remind all of us that we have rebirth in Christ and we have a power in Christ that exceeds the creation itself and brings with it a promise that it is up to us to fulfill, to live a life worthy of a true child of God, a true adopted daughter or son of God. If we do, then we can come to our final resting place with no regrets. We will have been embraced by God and we will have our place in the eternal life of the divine Trinity. This is the offering that God has made to all of us. We rejoice that Beverly has come to the end of her journey, but we need to keep in mind ourselves as we continue to seek the wisdom that will make our lives worthwhile.
“When Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’”

I don’t know how many of us would be very pleased to hear Christ tell us that we are not far from the kingdom. Perhaps we would be offended that we are just “not far,” but not closer! The point is that this great law, the first law, the great commandment to love God with all your heart and mind and soul is something we cannot do. **We cannot love God with all of our heart.** Why? Because **all of our heart isn’t under our control. We are divided.**

Jesus was able to love God with his whole heart, but Jesus was unusual. The saints are those who eventually find a unity within themselves through great struggle, and then they can love God with their whole heart. But most of us really cannot do anything with our whole heart. So we try, but we have to always depend upon grace. It is grace alone that enables us to find unity, and for that matter even attention. **So our whole heart, mind, and soul needs the grace of God to become one, to become unified, to become aware and attentive and willing.**

Now it is **Jesus** who has come into our world precisely to show us what human life can be. He is **the one of a single heart.** He is the one single-hearted, the one who is single-minded, the one who is single-purposed, in his devotion to the Father. **The saints are those who use him as a model and who depend upon him for their strength.**

As we gather for Eucharist we are depending upon Jesus continuing his work through his Church. His sacrament of the Eucharist is the gift that brings together into unity all the many parts of the Church. We are broken, but we are also being mended. **We are mended especially in the Eucharist itself,** which is why we call the sacrament of the Eucharist “Holy Communion.” We are brought into a holy union of heart and mind, soul and body—all parts of us together. So we continue to depend upon the Lord and to acknowledge that it is he who is joining all things and all parts of us to himself as he has been raised up.
Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.

A yoke is an instrument used by draft animals, usually one stronger, one weaker, mainly because ordinary peasants couldn’t afford two strong oxen, so they would have one good one and then one not so good one.

When Jesus talks about his yoke he means that he is the good one, the strong ox doing most of the pulling, and he is asking us to be the lesser one. So in all truth he is saying, “I want you to help me.” It’s not the other way around. Too often in our lives we think of God as helping us, which is true in one way, but not in this way. The idea of the yoke is that God is pulling us through life, that God is the one who has come into our world to bring us what we need. It’s not as if there already was a world and now we are going to ask God to help us with our agenda, as if we know what it is. No, there is God, and he is the Creator. He has given us an agenda. He has given us a vocation. He has given us a role to play in his creation. The role is merely in helping a purpose that he has already initiated and born the great weight of on the cross to bring freedom and salvation to the whole.

We often go through life weary, and that’s natural. We do work hard. We do wear out. But Christ wants to remind us that we need to come to him for refreshment. We need to keep in mind that his yoke is easy. Sometimes we are worn out in life not because of the yoke that he has given us, but because we have thrown off his yoke and taken on our own. Nothing will wear us out more than pursuing tasks that God has not given us. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”
“But they did not understand what he said to them.”

This is a very beautiful story, one of my favorites, because it shows paradoxically both how unusual and how normal the relationship was between Jesus and his parents. That’s what they are called here is “parents.” I think we can reflect on this. In one normal sense Jesus was a twelve-year-old in every way. “Why were you looking for me?” Well, that’s typical what a twelve-year-old would say, unaware of parental anxiety, unaware of why someone would be worried when what he is doing is exactly what he thinks he should be doing; and where he is, is exactly where he thinks he should be. That’s the normal side of Jesus, anyway.

The normal side of Mary—she was full of anxiety! Naturally, whenever parents lose their children, don’t know where they are, this is a very anxious moment! She didn’t seek him for an hour or two, but for three days! Many parents can relate directly to this kind of anxiety. It is not useless anxiety. It’s natural, normal, and necessary anxiety because of the care and the natural guardianship parents have over their children.

But this story also reflects the other side, the unusual nature of this relationship. Jesus is in the Temple with adults asking questions that are astounding the doctors of the Law. People are marveling at his questions, as well as at his answers—but his questions! Questioning is a very important thing. Jesus did not grow up without questioning. Jesus never came to fullness or maturity before God and man without questioning. What is this about? What does this mean? Why? His questions were not the sort of dumb questions that some people ask, where it is just contrary and they are really not looking
for an answer. He was looking for an answer, and that’s why they were so astounded at how keen was his mind, looking for reason, looking for light, looking for truth.

This is extraordinary for a twelve-year-old. It’s extraordinary for a twenty-year-old or a thirty-year-old or a forty-year-old, but it is something we need to emulate. We need to learn how to do this, how to question the meaning of the word of God. What does it mean? How can I apply it to myself? How can I grow from this? Not how can I get away with the most and just do the minimum! That’s not an intelligent question. That’s not what he was asking. He was asking about the wholeness and the holiness of the Law, a Law he would later challenge, reinterpret in ways that the doctors of the Law did not like. Later on he would become very much antagonistic toward these people who are now astounded by his intelligence and his wisdom. So that’s the other side of Jesus, the unusual side that we need to emulate.

Then Mary—her unusual side. She didn’t understand, but she accepted. She didn’t know why he said this, but she did not berate him, which normally I think a mother might, but she didn’t. She realized she didn’t understand, and she dropped it. So she was also presented here as the Seat of Wisdom. It is wise not to pursue things in certain cases. It is wise to admit what we can’t know, but we must seek understanding and meaning. We also have to know our limits and what is the nature of the mystery that has brought us to life. Mary here is the Seat of Wisdom. She was right on the boundary, and she reverenced it.
"Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

If we put ourselves in the sandals of Jesus, think about what kind of life he had growing up, we realize he was taught by the teachers of his faith, the Jewish faith, all about how to do good and avoid evil. He never disputed the basic principles of good or evil as he was taught them, but he had an attitude towards sin very different from his teachers. Perhaps we don’t always recognize how important attitude is in the life of the Spirit if we are really to follow Jesus. He takes us beyond childhood. He brings us into a personal encounter with the living God that is not merely a matter of following somebody else’s rules or someone else’s ideas of what the rule should be.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, and these are probably not his exact words, but John’s Gospel reflects this teaching: “I am the way, the truth and the life.” “I am the way!” If you think about it, what Jesus’ teachers thought was that what they were teaching was the way, and they thought it was a lot of laws written down or even orally remembered by those in charge of doing that. If you go to the Old Testament, you can count six hundred thirty-some laws. And that’s not all. There were ten thousand oral extensions. When this was all written down it took between seventeen thousand and nineteen thousand pages. You have never read it; I haven’t either. Jesus didn’t believe in it. He didn’t believe that was the way. He said, “I am the way.” In other words, his life is a way of living truthfully. His life is given so that we can live truthfully, as well, and thereby please God and so accomplish the very meaning of righteousness, but not by following the Law. That’s different. It’s a different method. Christians don’t always understand what method he was actually using.

Now Jesus was not unaware of human shortcomings. He knew people were all full of flaws and faults and failings, and he realized that people were off the path into various forms of egoism. But that didn’t bother him, per se, in this way. He was interested in what people could become more than what they were. So he could eat, which in Judaism means to enjoy a very intimate relationship. He had an intimate relationship with public sinners like tax collectors, who were collaborators with Rome, the oppressor. He could do that because he saw what they could become, not what they were.

Likewise, if we learn to take on a positive attitude toward ourselves and other people, we will be able to follow the way and live truthfully. This involves admitting our mistakes. Is it really so hard? Apparently it is, because so many people don’t—they won’t admit their mistakes! How much energy is spent in excusing oneself, suing people? We have to be able to look and see our own faults. It’s easy to see the faults of others; it’s not so easy to see our own faults, but it can be done. And if you are married, you should know what your faults are because your spouse should have told you by now!
We can learn if we trust and hope in God—we can learn how to change and improve. If we do, our future will be great. It doesn’t matter where our past has been. That’s Jesus’ point. That’s why he ate with sinners and tax collectors. We could say that Jesus not only believed in God, he actually believed in people. He believed that people could change if they were confronted with a real picture of God, not a false picture, but a real picture. He thought that could motivate change and transformation.

St. Paul, in the Letter to the Romans, asked this question: “If God is for us who is against us?” The answer, of course, is not: “no one.” A lot of people are against us; we have to be honest. But the point is, it doesn’t matter. **God is for us. Does that really color the way we think about ourselves?** Do we allow ourselves to worry about what other people think? “If God is for us who is against us?” Who cares! Who counts—but God? That’s Jesus’ idea, and **if you really put your effort into pleasing God, then you will be happy regardless whether other people are happy about it.**

The final outcome of life—the final outcome, at the end of time—and God’s judgment on the world can actually be seen already in the resurrection of Christ. This is a vantage point that is a matter of revelation. **In the resurrection of Christ we see the end of everything, the destiny of humanity.** We see this fact revealed to us ahead of time, that in the end **goodness and good will triumph.** Goodness and good will triumph—we know that! That’s a matter of faith. We believe in Christ’s resurrection; we believe goodness and good will triumph. We have to keep that in mind every day.

From this point of view, **the good news of Jesus Christ is the most important information we could possibly have about the whole universe.** There is nothing else we could learn more important than that, and we should **allow it to color everything we think and every choice we make.** If we don’t, we are being foolish. Foolish is a good word. We are being foolish; we are being stupid even! Or we doubt that Christ was raised from the dead or we don’t comprehend what it means—the triumph of goodness.

So as we consider these facts presented by our faith—and eventually our faith does yield facts; it yields information; it yields knowledge—there are certain consequences.

- **Our attitudes toward other people and toward ourselves should be always positive** if we believe in Jesus, not only in his teachings, but in his fate: that he was raised from the dead. We should be positive toward other people, even if they are foolish, even if they are mistaken, even if they are wrong, even if they are malicious. Be positive toward them anyway; they can change. That’s why Jesus ate with the publicans and the sinners, not because he admired them.
- **Serving God is smart; serving self is dumb.** That’s not what the world tells you, but it’s the truth. It’s based on this most important information.
- **Trusting God will lead to happiness without end,** and distrusting God will lead to unhappiness without end.
- 1 John tells us: **“No one can love the God they do not see while hating or disregarding those they can see.”** We have to keep that in mind in our
• We have to go beyond our narrow confines and realize that all people who believe in God are allies in building a better world. That is what the Christian vocation is. To live a truthful life will build a better world. Our allies are everyone who believes. So we have to make friends. A faith that is inward looking and narrow is not consistent with Christ’s teachings.

• We need to keep our hope focused on God; and when we do, we have to believe in ourselves since we are God’s handiwork.

• We need to remember that God came to earth to establish a personal relationship with all human beings, not just with me. It’s not about me. It’s about the whole creation, how God wants to save the creation, redeem the creation, and love the creation into new life.

• Salvation and healing is Jesus’ work; and when we need it, it is there for us. When we recognize our own sinfulness, our own sickness, our own disorders, that’s all right. Jesus is our healer. Jesus is our savior. But, in turn, he will also ask us to share in this ministry: support the Church, pray for others, be very well aware of the dangers of independence and autonomy, which our culture is promoting all the time. We are created not for independence and autonomy, but for interdependence and communion.

Indeed, we need to learn the meaning of the words: “I desire mercy.”
He heard this and said, “Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick
do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I did not
come to call the righteous but sinners.”

So much of what Jesus disputed with his opponents, the Pharisees, was a matter of
attitude. Perhaps we don’t know how important attitude is to good living, at least from
the viewpoint of Christ. We tend to be either goal oriented or result oriented. Carl Jung
said that thinking people are goal oriented; they are always looking at the future. Feeling
people are more result oriented; they are looking at the past. But we do want to see where
we are going and where we are coming from, where we are headed or where we have
been. For Christ, that’s not so important—more: How are we getting where we are
going? It’s a matter of means, the way, the manner, the attention we pay to life, to God.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” There is no
measurable goal here or result either but, rather, a means of living truthfully.

Jesus was not unaware of the many shortcomings in human life. But he was much
more interested in the future than in the past. In regard to the future, one’s attitudes are
all-important. If we know how to admit our mistakes, see our faults and learn how to
change and improve, then our future will be great. Jesus believed that. We have every
right to pin great hopes on our future, if we learn this: to admit our mistakes, to see
our faults, and to learn how to change and improve.

We know that Jesus believed in God, but we often don’t look at or acknowledge that
he also believed in people. He not only wants you to believe in God, but he wants you to
believe in yourselves, because he saw that people had a great ability to grow, to change,
to move on, and to flower once they were presented with a true picture of God, once they
knew the truth about life. He once said, “With God all things are possible.” We have to
take that totally literally. With God, literally, all things are possible!

St. Paul later would say: “If God is for us who is against us?” The answer to that
question is not: “no one.” Of course there are people against us! Of course we have
enemies! Of course we have antagonists! Of course there are people who don’t like us or
even hate us! That’s part of life. But the point is, it doesn’t matter—if God is for us. **Those who oppose us if we are God’s friends, are then enemies of God as well; and they eventually will lose.**

The final outcome of life and God’s judgment on the world can be seen already from the vantage point of the resurrection of Christ. What do we see in the resurrection of Christ but that goodness and good will triumph and, moreover, push beyond life as we know it or as we taste it or as we can see it—and push us into communion with the eternal. Through faith in Christ, we can have that now. From this point of view, **the good news of Jesus Christ is the most relevant information available to us**, the most relevant information in the entire universe. No matter what else you will learn—I hope you learn a lot—it cannot trump this! Furthermore, as you will discover in life, when you really know something and you are really sure of something, it colors everything else. You cannot put anything into a little closet and forget about it if you really know it’s true. So this information that we learn in our experience of Christ **will color everything else in life**. To live without this information about how God looks at life and how God looks at us is to live in a very seriously blind-sided and handicapped way.

Now this leads to certain consequences.

- **Our attitudes must be positive towards others**, even when they are foolish or ignorant, because they have the potential to change.

- **Serving God is smart**, the most intelligent thing we can do with our time. Serving ourselves is not. It’s a dead-end game.

- **Trusting God will lead to happiness without end**; distrusting God will lead to unhappiness without end.

- **Human life is precious to God and, therefore, must be precious to us as well**. All life, as yet unborn, headed toward the end, suffering, is still important. It’s still valuable in the sight of God.

- **No one can love the God they do not see, while hating or disregarding those they can see**. This St. John tells us in his First Epistle.

- **All people who believe in God are allies in building a better world**. It’s self-defeating to remain narrow. We need to make friends, build alliances with others, if we really are serious about our vocation to make a better world.
• **Hope in God and believe in yourselves:** you are God’s handiwork.

• **Do not worry about pain or suffering, sickness, old age, or weakness.** All life has some of that. It will come to you in some form or another, sooner or later; and worry takes none of it away.

• Remember, **God came to earth to establish a personal relationship with all human beings,** and according to today’s reading, **especially the sick and the sinful.** “The healthy do not need a physician; the sick do.” That means when we are the weak ones or the sinful ones or the sick ones, God has us especially in mind and desires to touch us. We should never consider our condition simply the will of God. It is the will of God to be healthy. It is the will of God to be holy. It is the will of God to be fully alive. That’s what the will of God is for you.

• **Salvation and healing continue in the ministry of the Church.** It will also be your ministry, as you are the Church. Remember to be part of what you are called to be. **Support the Church with your prayers and your presence.** The body of Christ needs all its members to function best. We are created to be interdependent, not independent. Our society encourages independence, autonomy. That is not what we are created for.

• Observe everyone. Observe everything, but don’t necessarily go with it! **Judge life through the eyes of Christ and his attitudes and his gospel.** Falling away from the Church is usually simultaneous with falling into the trap of self-sufficiency, and this becomes a very lonely place.

• Finally, **when you are lost, ask for directions, but only from someone who knows where you are headed.**
We are all very familiar with the Beatitudes. The question is, Have they taken root in our lives? Sometimes spiritual authors recommend frequent Confession. The problem is that people only confess what they are aware of. But this reading suggests that we are not aware of what it really is to be blessed, and therefore it stands to reason that we are not really aware of what it means to be cursed.

Do we understand that we are cursed when we are rich in spirit, when we think that we have got it made, when everything goes well? Do we understand that that is no blessing at all? Do we understand that the very ideals of the world lead us away from true happiness?

Do we understand why there is blessing in grief? What can we get out of that? Do we understand that when we lose someone very important to us that creates a cavity, an emptiness, that can be filled with the Spirit of the Holy Comforter, the Holy Spirit?

What does it mean to be meek, and how do the meek ever inherit the earth? It would seem just the opposite. It would seem that the earth is being taken over by the violent, by the powerful. So how is meekness going to lead to inheriting the earth?

These are questions that we need to answer for ourselves. Perhaps we cannot even put them in words, but we have to try to understand what Jesus is getting at in these Beatitudes. Matthew regards them as quintessential to Jesus’ whole gospel preaching. They are almost a gospel, you might say, in miniature. So it would be very good for us to sit with our Bibles, and that’s what it means incidentally to offer spiritual sacrifice. It means to study the word, to pray the word, to ask the Lord to help these Beatitudes take root in our own understanding and thereby color all that we think and all we desire.
“You are the light of the world.”

Jesus was not unaware of the meaning of light, associated as it has always been with goodness, with wisdom, and even with God. In the Prologue of John’s Gospel it says: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” In that case the light refers to the Word of God, meaning the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

Now Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” How does he mean that? He means that we are made in the image and the likeness of God, and we are enabled by God to live his life. This is both a great joy and also a responsibility because we need now to shine.

There are ways in which people misunderstand the virtue of humility. They understand humility in a rather negative way. They think poorly of themselves, and they think they are being humble. It is not humble to think poorly of oneself. “You are the light of the world.”

On the other hand, the reason why we are called to be light and the reason why we are called to shine before men and do good deeds is to glorify God, not to glorify ourselves. That would be a lack of humility if we were to understand our purpose as somehow feeding back to ourselves, gaining something for ourselves. If we are the light of the world, there is nothing to gain. We are here to serve God and bring glory to God, and that itself is our gain—glorifying God. It’s not for recognition. It’s not for admiration. It’s not for respect. It’s not to make friends. It’s not to be loved. It’s to glorify God. That’s humility: to recognize we are the light of the world, and we are here to glorify God.
“You will not be released until you have paid the last penny.”

This sounds like a very dire warning, and it is! One should take the warnings of Jesus rather seriously. He uses language that is actually unusual for his day. People often misunderstand this; they think a lot of the things in the New Testament are just cultural. Well, in fact, it was not cultural to talk the way Jesus did. He is very unusual, especially in his dire warnings about the fate of people who do not surpass the holiness of the Pharisees. That could not possibly be cultural. The Pharisees determined the culture of their day. They were the leaders. Jesus is saying, “Unless you go beyond what your culture is telling you is right, you will never see and you will never enter the kingdom of God.”

He goes on with some specifics. He is talking first of all about the idea of law. He says, “In your culture, according to our tradition, the Torah is all about outward behavior. But I’m telling you is isn’t!” It’s not about outward behavior; it’s about inward behavior. It’s about attitudes toward people. It’s about what you are thinking. What you are thinking and what you are feeling—that’s what makes you either righteous or unrighteous in the sight of God. So beware; beware of what is going on inside of you.

In my observation, many people don’t even know what is going on inside of them. They allow a cauldron to be brewing of all sorts of evil thoughts, malicious feelings, negative ideas, about other people—and they don’t see anything wrong at all! They are not in the kingdom. They are far from the kingdom of heaven. You cannot live that way.
You cannot spread rumors. Just because you hear something, oh, I’ll tell people. St. Paul says, “Say only the things people need to hear.” If you are not filtering out what you are passing on, you are not living in the kingdom. I don’t know how to impress people with this!

He goes on: “Whoever is angry with his brother is liable to judgment.” Why? Because that’s something going on inside. You have heard “looks can kill”; well, so can thoughts kill! Feelings can kill. We have to be the guardians of our souls, the guardians of our minds.

Then he says, “When you come to the altar and you know there is something wrong with your relationships, go take care of what’s wrong first.” What does it mean, after all, for people with broken relationships, with people who are angry with other people and with whom people are angry with, what does their worship really mean anyway, when they have made no effort at all to reconciliation? What good is it? That’s the question.

Then finally the whole idea of arguing with people. When we have disputes, of course we are always right. He says, “Be careful. You may not be right. You want to go to court with somebody, well, guess what? You might lose.” And in his day, unlike today, but in his day, if you lost, you might end up in jail yourself. And then he says, “You will never get out until you have paid the last penny.” Why? Because what’s keeping you in is your own desire for vengeance and your own blindness about yourself, and your own unwillingness to admit your faults. That’s what’s keeping you there in the first place. It’s not a very wise way of living.
“We hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us.”

This reflection from St. Paul is surely something that is deeply true even though it is a paradox. It is something that goes against our common sense. Common sense is driven by our instincts, which are for survival and for thriving and vitality and enjoyment and pleasure and everything good. But what experience shows us, if we are quiet enough and truthful enough and reflective enough to look at it, experience shows us what St. Paul is talking about: that when we are afflicted and when we suffer and when we are ill, something can happen that never happens without those conditions. Counter intuitive as it may be, it is true. The surpassing power of God will manifest itself precisely when we are weak.

The greatest saints are those who have had to battle against inner conflicts: neurosis, addictions, illnesses, various afflictions of mind and emotion—so much so that people can honestly say that their sickness or their affliction or their addiction is a gift, and I have heard that from many people. I have met many people who were actually very developed spiritually precisely because they had to deal with an addiction.

Now on the other hand, let us take life as it is—if things just go well all the time, why would we ever rise, why would we ever improve? It is the nature of life to meet challenges; and so when everything is going well, that might not be so good. When we are healthy, when we are prosperous, when we have no challenges, we float.
Not only do we float, probably not really improving at all day to day, but worse, we are no witness. \textit{Where is there a witness?} Why was Pope John Paul II such a great witness? Not because of his early years. His early years were remarkable, and he gained people’s admiration for his vigor and his outreach to others and his ability to constantly travel and speak fourteen languages. But that’s not where the devotion or the respect or the true admiration for him came from. It came from the way he dealt with Parkinson’s Disease and old age. There he was an earthen vessel. \textit{The more his body collapsed, the more Christ came through.} That’s what St. Paul is talking about, and we need to keep that in mind.
“Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons.”

In today’s world we have a lot of mission statements. Corporations all have them. School boards have them. Pastoral councils have them. It may seem rather imperious, but Jesus did not have his apostles develop their own mission statement, but he gave them one. And this is it! This is their mission, their raison d’etre, their reason for existence: to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and drive out demons.

You will notice the absence of the admonition to preach or teach or even worship! Those come as a consequence of this more fundamental mission. It’s when we learn how to do these things and how to live in the new life they present that we then pass this on with teaching, challenge people with preaching, and render thanks through worship.

Now how could ordinary fishermen or tax collectors or housewives or mothers or fathers or carpenters or anybody like us ever do these things? How can we cure the sick? How could they cure the sick? Who could raise the dead? Who can and how can anyone cleanse lepers or drive out demons? All of this depends upon the presence of the kingdom of heaven. That’s what precedes this whole mandate, this mission statement. Announce the kingdom of heaven is at hand. This term refers to God’s presence and power working in and through people. It’s God’s power working through people. That’s what the Church is about. It’s about God’s power working through people.

As time goes on, of course, many things change, but some things should not change. They should stay. One of those fundamentals is the kingdom of heaven. It is the focus of all Jesus’ work and teaching and expectation and hope. It is not an exaggeration to say without it there would be no Jesus!

Now the question might come up or should come up: How are we doing with the mission statement? After all, we claim to be an apostolic Church. We claim to be founded on the apostles. Well, are we carrying out this mission? Well, let’s see point by point.

First, cure the sick. Many statistical studies have shown very impressively that people of faith are much healthier than those who claim no faith. They respond better to treatment, including chemotherapy, surgery and recovery programs. And they are less prone, by far, to depression and are markedly less suicidal. They also have fewer divorces. Further, what is even more astonishing, in test after test those who are prayed for whether or not they have any faith at all are helped in remarkable ways. The last statistic I heard was fifty per cent, fifty per cent better response in test groups where half the people were prayed for, half the people weren’t prayed for. They all underwent the same kind of surgery, had more or less the same diseases or conditions. They all agreed to this. They agreed that half of them would not be prayed for. Now some people might
pray for the half that wasn’t prayed for, but that would all work out statistically because that could be true of the other group too. These tests have been repeated over and over again—the same results. So we could say that in this regard the Church is carrying on the work that Christ gave it to cure the sick.

Second, raise the dead. This does not refer to resurrection of the dead. It does not refer to people already in the grave. It refers rather to those people that Jesus referred to as “the dead burying the dead.” You may remember his comment: “Let the dead bury the dead.” Well, who are they? They are the people who drag themselves though life. They can talk. They can walk, but there is no life in them. St. Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is humanity fully alive.” God does not want people to drag themselves through life from one day to the next. God’s expectations are for us to live a vital life, a wholesome life, a holy life. As believers we can do a lot for people in their moments of need and darkness by encouraging them and supporting them. Everyone has experiences when it seems as if the roof has fallen in. These are challenges. There is nothing wrong; that’s part of life. These are the important challenges when we grow, when we learn how to let go of certain ideas or certain expectations or certain people who are not good for us—or certain jobs—and move on to life. These are the opportunities for us to live the paschal mystery. The eternal life of God is not a treasure to be kept safely from people, but one which we need to share with others. That means we cannot always keep our spiritual experiences private. Sometimes we have to share them.

Thirdly, cleanse lepers. Well, now leprosy in its original form, in the form it was meant in this text, is no longer with us—praise the Lord! However, leprosy in the Bible is a kind of condition that causes people to be excluded from society; and people are still excluded for various reasons. Cancer patients have told me how their friends and neighbors just drop them when they hear the news that they have cancer, as if it’s contagious. Well, we all know cancer isn’t contagious. But very often we don’t want to face people with problems. We don’t want to look in the face of suffering. We don’t know what we would say. It would remind us of our own mortality and our own fears; and we don’t want to do that, so we exclude them. AIDS patients even more so. This makes a painful, life-threatening condition more painful and more threatening. Christ’s mission was to bring back into community, into relationships, those who suffered its exclusion for whatever reason—and he didn’t mind why. He had table service with prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, anybody! Anybody was welcome. He was criticized for this. He was violating the very ideas of holiness, as they were taught in his particular time and place—and that assures us that he really meant it and that it was essential to his mission. Well, if it was essential to his mission, it’s essential to our mission. We cannot be healthy without companionship.

Fourthly, drive out demons. Now here modern society is in almost total denial concerning the power of evil to take over people’s lives. Psychologists and criminologists want to tell us that all kinds of illness and wickedness are simply the result of some imbalance in the chemistry of the brain. A certain amount of skepticism is called for in regard to these kinds of statements or evaluations. Don’t forget, these are the same people that brought us “religion as neurosis,” that turns out to be totally false. The fact is our
minds and our behavior can be seriously affected by evil. We read about people, perfectly normal people, who suddenly kill their children or commit a brutal murder or kill themselves—or all three. Do you really think that’s from an imbalance in some chemical in the brain? I would say that’s highly unlikely. We see people controlled by religious fanaticism who wage unwinnable battles, blowing themselves up and many other people. That’s an imbalance in the chemistry of their brain? We meet people enslaved by addictions; and it’s true physical substances can become habit-forming, but enslavement is something deeper. The power of evil is real. Christ’s teaching is this: he has the power to drive out these evils, and he has given that power to his Church, to you—you have the power through him!

If we take a moment then to reflect on the mission statement Jesus gave us, his Church, we could say that in some regards we are definitely continuing the work that he gave us. However, in other areas we are not too involved. Too often Christians feel helpless; but if the kingdom of heaven is at hand, how can we be helpless? Often Christians feel victimized, and in some regards we may be; but St. Paul asks, “If God is for us, who is against us?” That’s supposed to put things in perspective. Too often we are tempted to see faith as a series of beliefs with no teeth in them, and surely with no power. That is not what Christ thought or taught or believed himself.

He saw faith as a mighty power that could uproot anything in the way of growth and wholeness and wholesomeness and holiness—all of which are more or less the same thing. He saw faith as something that could move mountains if they were in the way of vision or truth or life—even faith the size of a mustard seed, which means very, very small. We don’t need more faith; we just need to use faith. Christ expected his apostles and those who follow them to change the conditions in which people live. That’s what uprooting the sycamore is about, or moving the mountain. Some of his expectations are not yet fulfilled. As Church, we have an agenda awaiting us.
“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

This is a phrase that is often misunderstood. People think it is some sort of very rigid, merciless idea. It isn’t. People often contrast the so-called God of the Old Testament with the God of the New Testament, and they think the God of the Old Testament is somehow very judgmental, but the God of the New Testament is merciful. That’s not true either.

The God of the Old Testament is very merciful. This is a statement of mercy because what actually went on in the ancient world is that if you poked someone’s eye out, well, they probably would cut your head off. The exaggerated vengeance was the rule of the day. It still is in some places on earth where people take a terrible toll for a slight offense. So this says, no, don’t ever take more than was given; don’t ever require a greater recompense than you suffered. “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

Then Jesus takes that, which is already merciful, and he says, “But I go even farther.” He says, “Offer no resistance to one who is evil.” Why is that? Is this because Jesus really is some sort of a pacifist? Often he is understood that way, but that isn’t quite true. The real issue is the power of evil. Jesus’ view is if you fight evil, you will become evil. He believed in the power of evil to convert, to spoil, to tar. So he says, “Just stay away altogether.” Don’t confront people who are evil. Their evil will get into you. You can see how this happens. When you confront hatred, you become hateful. When you confront anger, you become angry. So gradually evil can take over your heart and your soul. He believed in that. He believed in what we call the possession of unclean spirits. Well, evil comes in many forms. Anger is an unclean spirit. Hatred is an unclean spirit, and
there are all kinds of others. So his point is keep your distance—keep your distance. It
isn’t that he was a pacifist. It was more that he was a realist about the power of evil to
corrupt through wounding because we are very vulnerable people. So we have to
keep that in mind when he is speaking.

He says, “When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other to him as
well.” I think this is a matter of hyperbole, yes. But nonetheless, it is part of the same idea
of don’t become enraged and don’t become motivated by desire to get back at
people. It will ruin you; it will destroy you from inside.

Then the rest of this is really about being generous because, again, Jesus’ point of
view is we don’t really own anything. The rich are to be almost pitied because their
riches own them. So live freely and give freely, and you will enjoy life!
“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.”

Very often Jesus’ remarks are not taken very seriously or thought about. This is a continuation of the teaching of yesterday, where Jesus says, “Do not resist the evil one.” Jesus was not a pacifist in the normal sense of the word. He totally eschewed violence, but not for the reasons people normally do. He was not delicate. He was not a flower child. But he believed that there was in human life constantly a contest between good and evil, and that evil had a way of insinuating itself into the heart so if you start to fight evil, like your enemy, for example, the evil itself in your enemy will very possibly take you over, and you will become just like your enemy. This is a kind of conversion. So he was very aware of this.

He did in a sense fight evil, but he didn’t fight evil directly: hate for hate, anger for anger. Rather, he tried to overcome evil, in fact, effectively did overcome evil with his love, which is a power also, which also can insinuate itself into the soul. But it’s very different in quality. They are not really two equal forces; they are unequal. Love is very subtle. It requires the working together of the mind and the will, the understanding and the choice. Evil isn’t—even isn’t subtle. It doesn’t need anything working together. You could say it’s reactional or mechanical in nature.

Therefore, the battle between good and evil is really a battle between two different levels of existence: a divine level or a devilish level, you might say; a level where we
really are children of our heavenly Father, where we deliberately love because we choose to, not in reaction to what people do for us—that’s what he means. That’s why he loved his persecutors. That’s why he loved those who assailed him and abandoned him and tortured him—because he chose to, not because they were loveable. He was not a romantic. He was a realist, but he understood the nature of love. God loves because God is love; he chooses to love. He is not going to allow other people or other forces to change him.

Thus Jesus, being Son of God and faithful Son, chose to live that way in his human nature. It caused a great deal of suffering because human nature is not actually oriented toward this kind of love. It is created as a potential for it, but it isn’t oriented toward it. It is oriented toward self-love. So we have to overcome our orientations in order to do this—in order to live as true children of our heavenly Father. He, after all, blesses everybody—good and evil. He makes the sun rise on the bad and the good. He doesn’t have a little shadow cast on the bad. No, everyone gets the sun, whether they deserve it or not. He has the rain fall on the just and the unjust. It’s not just the lawns of the just that are green, and when it is raining everyone’s lawn is green. When it is draught everyone’s lawn is brown. He does not distinguish his goodness. His judgment is something else again for the end of time, but for now he blesses everyone. If we want to be like him, we have to be like him—by choice, by design, by strategy, by thought: understanding and even plotting daily how we are going to do this. Those who cave-in to evil simply are letting other people choose for them what they shall be.
In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words.”

One of my earliest recollections as a boy was going to church and hearing people pray the rosary, and it seemed that their goal was to get done as fast as possible. I couldn’t even tell what the words of the rosary were. This is really babbling on.

Jesus’ idea is when you pray, number one, you have to know to whom you are praying. The answer to that is your Father, your Daddy in heaven, your Abba in heaven, who knows already everything; so you don’t have to convince him, and you don’t have to inform him. So many people pray in order either to inform God or to convince God, to move his mind or his will. Jesus says, “That’s not why you pray.”

Someone said that the actual prayer here, the Our Father, if you really understood every phrase as he intended it, that’s all you would need to know. That’s the entire gospel in miniature. I think that’s true.

But the basics are this: we have to know to whom we pray; we have to realize that God’s will toward us is already perfect and just and good. We have to know that when we enter into prayer we are entering into a relationship in which we need to listen as much as we speak. You might ask yourself this: when you pray are you listening half the time? We have to realize when we pray we have to desire what God desires. That means we have to take on God’s priorities, here expressed in terms like “kingdom” and “will.” We have to want God’s kingdom and God’s will to be done, not our kingdom and our will. This itself requires a conversion because by nature we are self-centered. So
we have to bring ourselves not to want what I think is good for me, but what God knows to be good for me and for everyone.

This is the whole point of this prayer, at least that’s the beginning, and it really follows through. We pray for what we need, yes, but within the context of what God wants, what God is trying to do, not just for me, but for all because we are all connected. We cannot, for example, be forgiven if we are not willing to forgive because we all belong to the same body. The same life has to flow through all the members. This, therefore, is a great challenge; to really pray as Jesus taught us is a great challenge.
Finding Life as You Seek It

Funeral Bernadine L. Horozinski Thursday, June 16, 2005 Wis 3:1-6, 9; Rom 6:3-9; Jn 5:24-29 (Gratitude for life)

As we come to bury a loved one, it’s important that we reflect on the meaning of life and therefore the meaning of death.

There is a story about a man who was working along the side of a road in a village in a secluded mountain area. One day a stranger passed into town and he asked the man, “Well, what kind of people are living in this village?” And he said, “What kind of people lived in the place you came from?” And he said, “Oh, they were very warm and generous and kind and very loving. They would give you the shirt off their back. They were good neighbors.” He said, “The same kind of people live here.” A couple days later, he was working along the side of the road and another stranger came up to him and said, “What kind of people live in this village?” He said, “Well, what kind of people lived where you came from?” He said, “Oh, they were horrible. They were mean, nasty, selfish, narrow, bigoted.” He said, “The same kind of people live here.”

That village is the world. **What we find is what we look for.** Jesus says, “Seek and you shall find.” He is speaking not only about the presence of God, but about the presence of all goodness in the world. Really, life is an enterprise in which we are supposed to find whatever we can of God’s goodness so that our lives can be full of gratitude.

We come to our last day on earth; we come to a point where we can now really be full of gratitude for life. We can be grateful for all the wonderful people we have met, and we need to be able to let go of all the hurts and all the wrongs that we have suffered, because if we are not able to let go of those things, they will hold us back from the full
enjoyment of eternity. So we believe that we do not stop growing as we proceed from this earth, but indeed need cleansing and continued growth in the grace and the love of God and, therefore, in the ability to forgive and to let go. But it is the greatest of all shames if we simply wait until the very end of our lives to be with the business of life.

That is very possible. We could just distract ourselves every day with the routines of making a living and rearing a family, and miss the whole point of what life is for!

So in the honor of our dead and beloved Bernadine, I invite you the make a commitment to live life more consciously each day, looking for the goodness of the Lord among his people, looking for the blessings that God has placed in his creation and willing to advance the quality of life in whatever way you can by being the best possible person you can be, and leaving behind some kind of residue that has improved life on this earth. Then you will receive from the Lord this great welcome, “Come into the inheritance prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”
And if the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness be.”

This is a series of sayings, which are not rather obvious on the surface; that is, the meaning is not obvious on the surface. What does Jesus mean, “If the light in you is darkness”? Well, he is always drawing comparisons with what we can understand. We do understand that if we can see well, then our world is full of light and we know where we are going; but we also know that if we cannot see well, we are in trouble. So this is a comparison.

When it comes to where we are really going in life, it’s not a matter of outward space. The earth is round; and if we kept traveling, we would end up where we started. Life is not about traveling to different countries; it’s about moving to different spaces within. It’s about learning how to pay attention. In reference to this, St. Teresa of Avila said that our souls are like a large mansion with beautiful rooms full of light, tapestries, splendid furniture, beautiful paintings—and we spend most of our time in the basement, in the cellar! That reflects this type of thinking. We spend time in darkness, but there is light. We have to recognize what we are supposed to be doing in life. What is, after all, the lamp of the soul? The lamp of the soul is the light, which enlightens everyone, the light which came into the world in the person of Jesus, the light which is, in fact, God. We need God to show us where we need to go to enlighten the slums and the dangerous neighborhoods that we have to avoid because of their high crime rate. Those are places within us that drag us down, that mug us, that wound us, that cause us to become all beat up. We need to learn how to avoid those places and dwell in the gardens and the fine rooms of our house. We can learn this, but we have to look for the light. We have to pray to the Light. We have to learn how to depend upon the Light.
“Brothers and sisters, are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

This is a rhetorical question St. Paul is asking; but he asks it because in his day, as in our day, people lived, as we live, in a culture that denies death. It’s almost a natural human response to the mystery of it to avoid it, to not think about it. Paul’s point is this: whereas a lot of people talk about the afterlife, he is saying, “Well, no, don’t you understand Baptism is already into death because that’s what real life is, the eternal life that we experience with our death?” Or putting it another way, the eternal life that begins with our Baptism but is somehow brought into greater force and focus in our death so that our death is truly a beginning not an end, only the end of a phase. So we now, according to St. Paul, should think of our present days as a prelude to something else—no afterlife then, but pre-life now!

Admittedly, this is a stretch for our normal way of thinking. We could say we are brainwashed by a culture and a way of thinking and a way of living that just doesn’t think this way. Does it mean we cannot? No, it does not. It does not mean that we cannot; it means it’s simply very difficult. Another analogy that might be more ancient or more traditional is to say that we are in danger of falling asleep in regard to the reality of our faith, sleepwalking through life, as it were, dreaming instead of really seeing and living and acting on the truth.

So as we come to bury Leonard, we praise the Lord for his great life and for the life of this family. But we also pray that we will have an even richer understanding and
gratitude for life, and not only life in these days, which as I said is really just a prelude to something else, but to life as Leonard now knows it in Christ. We have here the Paschal candle. It reminds us that our faith begins with the resurrection of Christ. That candle was lit for the first time at the Easter Vigil, at nightfall on the evening before Easter, to represent the light that has come into the world. But admittedly, the light of this candle is faint, and the light of our faith is faint. One day it will blaze. We believe that this is our destiny in Christ.

So as we think fondly of Leonard, it’s important that we nurture our sense of gratitude for what God gives us at every moment, and to try to stay awake to all the possibilities that God has put into every moment of our day, and recognize that this is not all there is. We are moving on to reality, a reality that began for us in our Baptism, that will be brought to the full in due time.
“Sufficient for a day is its own evil.”

Jesus is getting to a very important point in regard to anxiety. Most of it is worthless. Most of it is useless. Where does it come from? It really comes from our desires; our desires make us anxious. We don’t worry about our real needs. We worry about our desires, which always go beyond anything we need.

Now going beyond what we need is not necessarily evil. But if it makes us miserable, it is evil; and therefore we become our own victims. That’s what Jesus is pointing out. We become our own victims.

Thus we see our society today is an exact mirror image of this gospel. Only, unfortunately, many of the pagans believe themselves to be Christians; but they don’t live it out in their sense of gratitude and dependence upon God—gratitude toward and dependence upon God. “Your heavenly Father knows you need these things. Will he not provide?”

Now, of course, that could be taken very naively by people who might then decide not to go to work at all. That would be, of course, not being dependent and grateful; that would be tempting God. So God does require us to do something. But then we have to adjust our desires to what we actually can do.

One thing that propels our society is getting desires way ahead of our capacity to provide, and so people live in debt all the time. This is foolishness. Almost all families today have two adults working to support the lifestyle the people want. What happens when one loses a job? If they are living on the edge and every penny is going for bills and
to pay debts, then you are in a terrible fix when someone loses a job. And that is going to happen—you can bet on it! But why don’t we bet on it? We don’t save. We are not a saving country. We live foolishly, and we create our own problems by not disciplining our desires. That’s what this is about.

There is a story I heard of a woman who traveled to India. There was a very poor village there. The people were so poor they lived in shacks and not one had a kitchen. They probably didn’t have tap water either! When it was suppertime everyone came out into the street and they cooked their supper on a fire they made in the street—everyone up and down the street. What struck her was the utter joy and happiness of all these people. They had next to nothing, but they were eating. She found out that the women in that town had only one sari, but they looked very elegant. So what do we really need to be happy?
So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

There is no doubt that fear is one of the most prominent emotions in human experience. Fear dominates many people’s lives. I do not speak of the character flaw that we could call “cowardice.” I am not speaking of the personality trait we could call “timidity.” I mean deep-seated fear—a feeling that can either paralyze, or motivate the most dastardly deeds: murder or anything! This is what Jesus is talking about, a fear that is really an absence of trust, an absence of confidence in the goodness of life itself—a lack of confidence in the goodness of life itself! A powerful negative factor in the lives of millions of people! And it need not be.

In this particular context, Jesus does not say, “Fear is useless,” but he did on another occasion; you perhaps remember that. Here he says, “Be afraid of him who can destroy body and soul.” There is a peril in modernizing Jesus. Today many people put on him their own concerns and ignore the ones he actually had. This is an actual, personal concern Jesus of Nazareth had: that one may lose the whole life of body and soul. This is the idea of damnation. Jesus believed in the possibility.

The idea of damnation in Christian tradition became wrongly connected to the idea of a vengeful God. Then as Christians read their Bibles more diligently, they realized that there was no vengeful God, but rather they found that the Bible, especially the New Testament, abounds in affirmations about God’s mercy and God’s love and God’s forgiveness. Then they falsely deduced that they can forget about God’s judgment. But Jesus saw no contradiction in believing in an all-merciful Father on the one hand, and, at the same time, believing in the possibility that human beings can throw their entire lives away, losing eternal life with God. Pope John Paul II stated that Catholics may believe that no one has ever been lost. You may believe that. You may hope and pray that no one ever will be lost, and he encouraged that. But he says what we cannot believe is that there is no possibility of rejecting God freely. That is our freedom as human beings, and God will not take it away. This possibility is what Jesus says we should fear: our own capacity to destroy ourselves totally.
The second point is that’s all you should fear. **That is the only thing worth fearing.** Nothing else is worth fearing. For the most part we probably don’t think much about our eternal welfare. We just place ourselves, perhaps, in God’s hands. But **we allow our worldly conditions to throw us into a panic.** According to Jesus, that’s not reasonable. Of course it’s scary to learn that you have cancer, or that you are going to be laid off, or that your spouse is divorcing you. Jesus was no naïve Pollyanna, but he simply did not believe that the ordinary fears that drive people’s lives, that control the stock market, the economy and politics, are really substantial.

**How many of our fears are really rooted in the fear of death?** The Letter to the Hebrews says, “The devil kept the world in bondage by the fear of death.” But Christ did not believe in death as something to be feared. It is nothing to be feared. Whatever we fear connected to the fear of death is useless!

So we might ask ourselves:

- Does fear make decisions for us?
- Do we think of God as far away, distant, or uninterested in our own personal needs, or do we surrender our whole lives to God in trust?
- After making a good faith effort, do we let go of the results? It is not up to us to control life. It is not up to us to control other people, and it is not even up to us to control our own situations.
- Are we afraid to fail?
- And correspondingly, **are we grateful to God and to others for all of the blessings we have received, or do we think somehow that we have done everything by ourselves?** Fear is somehow often connected to a kind of pride. None of us pulls ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We rely on other people; we rely on the graces and the gifts we have received. If we are full of gratitude, we will be sharing those gifts with other people, and we will be extending ourselves to them in their moments of need. That’s how we live out faith—although it is very unpopular today.

**Fear certainly can run a person’s life.** But once we become aware of this, we can decide otherwise.
“You hypocrite, remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your bother’s eye.”

The word “hypocrite” is usually misunderstood when used in the gospels. It does not mean someone who clearly and deliberately does one thing while claiming to believe another. *Hypocrite* is simply the Greek word for “actor.” The hypocrisy which Jesus accuses people of is very unconscious. People do not know they are simply acting a role. That’s the point. They have a beam in their eye. They don’t see themselves at all. They can see their brother’s problems and faults, but they don’t see their own. They simply don’t have the ability to regard themselves. This is the hypocrisy of which Jesus speaks.

It is directly related to the first reading where Abraham is called to be a blessing. The fundamental idea in the Bible is that Abraham and his descendants, both physical and descendents in faith, are called to be a blessing. That is the fundamental vocation: to be a blessing to others. Well, how can you be a blessing to others? First and foremost by becoming conscious of oneself and living life deliberately, thereby being a good example, leading by example, not criticizing other people, but criticizing oneself so that one becomes a mirror of the divine nature in which we are created—images of God.

Jesus was very well aware of all the foibles and flaws in human beings, but he also believed in our capacity to be like God, if only we could see clearly what the problem is. Take the beam out of your eye. Become conscious of yourself. Don’t worry about other people. *Lead them by your own shining example of what God is like.* This is evangelizing. This is living out your vocation. This is blessing others with your presence, with your example, with your works. Abraham was called for this purpose. The very purpose of Israel was this. The purpose of the Church is the same. Sadly, we often miss this message.
“How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

This is one of those sayings in the New Testament attributed to Jesus that may well be a purely human observation as opposed to a divine revelation. There is a difference. Most of what we would consider divine revelation, and all Scripture is inspired, but not all Scripture is revelation, occurs in the fourth gospel in very solemn statements. But in the synoptic gospels it is very often the human nature and the human understanding of Jesus speaking, often touched by the love of the Father, but not necessarily teaching revealed truth. This is a distinction we have to keep.

Pope John Paul made this very distinction in regard to this very topic in one of his very prominent encyclicals. It has to do with the possibility that human beings can lead their lives right to destruction. The pope said that we must believe it is possible. We can follow the path to damnation. We are free to do so. This is not because God is vengeful much less because God is contemptuous of human beings. The later view is found in Jonathan Edwards’ famous sermon: Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, where he says that God is so contemptuous of sinners. That’s not true. God is not contemptuous of anything he has created, nor is he really vengeful. “Vengeance is mine,” saith the Lord,” means that it isn’t our role to balance the scales of justice. That’s God’s role. But avenging evil and being vengeful are two different things. Thus the pope says that we may believe that no one, in fact, has ever been lost. It’s not contrary to faith. It’s not necessarily true, but it’s not contrary to faith.

Secondly, the pope said that we should pray that no one is ever lost. He said that is a very noble desire to pray for. It doesn’t mean no one ever will be lost; it just means it is a noble desire. By that he means that it’s a good wish for us to have in our hearts. When we wish this way and hope this way and desire this, that is wholesome for us. What would be the opposite? Hoping people are lost? Would that be wholesome? Desiring people to lose the lives of their souls? That would not be wholesome. So the pope says, no, pray for
it, but don’t imagine that it is therefore impossible to lose your soul. It is possible.

Not because God is evil, not because God is vengeful, not because God lacks any love, mercy, or compassion, but because we are free. We are free to do what we want. God is not going to restrict our freedom just because we choose badly. That would not be freedom.

So here Jesus is the human observer of the human situation, and he is saying, “Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction.” That is true, and it seems like those who enter through it are many—and it does! That observation is not unique. Just look around. It seems that’s true. God’s ways, of course, are not our ways; and he may have many ways of bringing people back freely, gently, compassionately. We don’t know.

This brings us back to the Law and the Prophets, and what’s it about? Again, six hundred thirty-six different stipulations in the written Law, ten thousand in the oral law—Jesus says that it all comes down to one thing. “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.” Is that so difficult?
Looking over the prayers preserved from the early Church I have often been struck by an ever recurring prayer to preserve us from a sudden death. It seems there was a constant wish and desire of early Christian believers not to die suddenly, but to have the opportunity to prepare for their death.

This contrasts sometimes with the way modern-day people think. I was in Denmark once, and one of the gentlemen shared with us how he wished he could die in a plane crash. That was rather disconcerting to quite a few of us because he was the tour director. He did not have any faith. He did not believe in God, and he thought when he died he would be dead and gone and that was it. That was not the belief of the early Church, or the present one either.

We believe life is a process and death is a process, and the two of them are conjoined, in fact, part of the same process. Death can become our friend when we face it and don’t run away from it, but the fear of death can become, as it were, our jailor, keeping us all cramped and imprisoned—as fear can do. The goal of faith is to live not in fear, but in trust. But trust also involves a certain amount of commitment. God wants us to trust in God, but God also wants us to commit ourselves to carry out life, to live. Living is a mission. Living is a vocation—and yes, it is optional! There are those who never really live even though they walk and talk, but they are not alive, and they make no contributions to life, perhaps because they are so afraid. We need to look at fear, and especially the fear of death. All the fears that paralyze us are related to the fear of death. Those fears that motivate short-term thinking are motivated by the fear of death. This is a prison. We can be free of it, and God wants us to be free of it.

At the beginning of Mass I sprinkled the remains of Wanda with the holy water that recalls her Baptism. Baptism is our entrance into new life. We call it “rebirth,” but we mustn’t think of it as magic; more, we could think of it as God’s pledge to us of life to the full and life to the infinite, because if we think of life as the uncreated, mysterious existence that gives birth to everything else, that uncreated existence that gives birth to everything else is eternal; and the meaning of Jesus’ words is to offer that eternal life
to all who believe in him, which means all who trust in him, which means by all who live by his way. Nobody is reborn in a moment. That is a fallacy of bad theology. We are reborn in a lifetime of trusting in God and finding meaning in this gift we have been given. Everyone has pains, and everyone has pleasures. Everyone has sicknesses, and everyone has forms of health and well-being. Everything is given to everybody in different degrees, but no life is bereft of the basic spark that is God’s presence. We need to look for God’s meaning and purpose in every day.

I personally did not know Wanda, but your presence here is testimony to her having touched you. That is our calling also; that is part of our commitment—to touch people so that we leave something behind, if nothing more than a good memory of what life can be, which is an encouragement. In our dark hours—we shall all have them—it is these encouragements that will speak to us. It is very important that we keep in mind that no one is expendable; no one is useless, and no one is so bad that God will reject him if he or she comes to him in faith. “And I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me.” That, indeed, is the vocation of each of us: it is to find the will of the one who sent us and to return to him having completed the work that he gave us to accomplish.
“When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”

It is very important to keep in mind what authority really is. It is not a matter of merely copying. That’s what the scribes always did. They copied what they had received, and they handed it on rather faithfully. Some people think that’s what authority is in the Church: simply handing on what one receives. Not exactly!

**Having authority means being in touch with the author.** In the first part Jesus talks about people who come to him and they say, “Well, we prophesied in your name. We did miracles in your name. We exercised demons in your name.” He says, “I didn’t know you.” Is that not the role of the Church? Of course it is: healing the sick, raising the dead, liberating people from every form of evil—that is the role of the Church, bringing life where there was no life—that’s true. But what’s that for? That’s not the goal itself. That’s the mission, not the goal!

**The goal is knowledge of God.** Knowledge of God comes through knowledge of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Father, and who in his humanity shows us the way to the Father. So when he says, “I did not know you,” he meant I did not know you and you did not know me! We were not really in any kind of relationship. We did not grow in any kind of intimacy. That’s the goal, really—intimacy with God—nothing less! We are freed from our demons so that we can grow in intimacy with God. We are healed of our sicknesses so that we can grow in intimacy with God. We are given miracles so that we
will know God and his will for us, his bounty, his blessings, his good-will. **Everything is to clear a path for knowledge of God.**

But too often people miss the point. They get tied up somehow in some side issue, often having to do with enjoying life right now, but not getting to know God. The scribes themselves were always handing on their tradition. In itself that can be good, but it’s not the goal.

**So Jesus taught with authority, because he knew the author; he knew the Father, and he shared that knowledge with those who wanted it.**
“But they answered her, ‘There is no one among your relatives who has this name.’”

The naming of John the Baptist was a very important event. In the ancient world the individual was not very important. The clan or the family or the tribe determined what a person was, the status that a person had. The names given to children followed the tradition of a clan or a tribe or a family. Thus, even we have such names as “Shoemaker,” meaning a family of shoemakers.

But in the Old Testament, at various points God chose someone for a very special task and gave that person a very special name. That naming was itself indicative of a very direct calling, what we call “vocation.” In the early Church the belief was that everyone baptized received a calling. So even though culture didn’t change much at first or reflect this idea at all—cobblers still had children who became cobblers, in other words—nonetheless, in the Christian Church the idea was each person had a name, a very specific name. That’s why we name children in the Baptism rite itself. It reflects the unique calling each individual has. But this didn’t necessarily translate into the culture—only a little bit.

Nowadays we have a different situation. No longer do children follow in the footsteps of their parents. They are quite free to be whatever they want to be, and that’s good. They are given names today which are often totally unique, not at all in the family. That indicates a modern tendency to really honor individuality and uniqueness and give children a great, wide berth in determining what they become. And that’s all well and
good, but there is a problem. **Having no moorings in the past, children often don’t know who they are.** The idea of a Christian vocation has not been well groomed into children. **The idea that we each have a very special calling from God: that has not been well formed in God’s people.** We have the tradition, but we don’t have the idea too well. And this is a problem.

Emil Durkheim, the founder of sociology, said that the very characteristic of modern society is that **people are adrift.** They are adrift because they don’t know what they are supposed to be. They don’t know who they are. **Originally Baptism was supposed to be a form of identity, and the identification is with Christ as an individual member of his body sharing some very unique purpose, interdependent.** St. Paul said something like because an eye cannot hear it is not less dignified. We all need each other, and that’s our identity in Christ. We all have a vocation—not to be identified with our profession, necessarily, or our occupation, but a broader vocation to be Christ in the world. John the Baptist was the beginning of this idea for the Christian Church.
“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

At the root of Jesus’ message this morning is a paradox. A paradox may seem like a contradiction, or worse, a mind game, but it is neither. A paradox expresses a truth that is very hard for our minds to grasp, so, as with a parable, we have to work at it.

Jesus’ point here is that many people, if not most people, miss the point of life. In order to see what he is talking about we have to step back a minute from our very busy lives. You know, it is often said that modern life is so busy: people are running from one thing to the next; they don’t have time for thought. They don’t have time for prayer. They don’t have time for church. I wonder if that gets the right order? Maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe we are running away from what’s really important, from confrontation with meaning, and so we fill our lives up with all this activity and commotion. You might think about that.

To see the significance of what Jesus is talking about, we need to look at ourselves, if possible, objectively. First of all, we are thrown into life without asking to be born. That’s a fact. Life comes not with directions but with powerful drives that we cannot avoid. For example, we have to eat. We need comfort and shelter. We seek security by nature’s own requirement, but—this is a very important point—meaning is optional. Nature does not require us to seek meaning or purpose in life. And that’s exactly what Jesus is focusing on, not what nature impels us to do, but what God desires us to be—that’s different. All the drives we have are not human invention; they are dictated to us by our instincts, and they are created by God. However, the true purpose of our lives is not simply living successfully, following all the drives we happen to have. That’s not a successful life from Christ’s point of view.

God’s purpose for us and the road to God, to communion with God, is different from merely surviving or succeeding or accomplishing or achieving. These are the goals our culture tells us are so important, but our culture itself is a product of our drives and instincts, mixed with the intelligence that God gives us, but not necessarily anything
else. This results in the fact that sometimes finding God in life means and requires ignoring or leaving behind all other goals, including pleasing other people and living by their values. At the very least, following God’s way in life means putting God above all else, and that can actually be a harrowing experience. What does it really mean to put God above all else?

In a sense it’s like marriage. No one wants to be married to someone who considers marriage one of several very important commitments. For marriage to be worth the sacrifice it takes, it has to be number one priority for both partners; otherwise it simply isn’t worth it. In our Church we teach that marriage is a sacrament because—this is very important—because committed relationships, the commitment of marriage, does not detract from putting God number one in life. That’s why it’s a sacrament. In other words, marriage can be right inside of our commitment to God as number one priority. That’s not true of every other commitment. It’s true only of marriage.

Well, I shouldn’t say only of marriage because loving neighbor as much as ourselves, again, does not detract from loving God with our whole heart, mind, and soul, which point Jesus made. That’s a point Jesus made very clearly when the rich young man asked him what was the greatest law. He gave him the greatest law, and then added loving neighbor as yourself as coequal. This is not obvious. We take it for granted, but it isn’t obvious.

On the other hand, self-love and self-will often take away from our commitment to God—easily! Self-love and self-will easily distract us from commitment to God. It is very necessary for us to see exactly how this happens, how our lives can be derailed by our very own egos. Otherwise the result will be that we will be caught up in nature and will live by our drives and will live by the goals our culture gives us—and then we will be a slave, not a freeborn child of God. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”
In this morning’s first reading we have a very interesting story, and the crux of it is in this paragraph: “Indeed, I have singled him”—that’s Abraham—“out that he may direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord may carry into effect for Abraham the promises he made about him.”

Now we need some scale here. This story of Abraham is written around 1000 B.C., around the time of David. That’s when the Book of Genesis was written—its first part. It wasn’t finished really until the exile in the sixth century B.C., but the first part was written then. Sodom and Gomorrah were among five cities that were destroyed by earthquakes around 3000 B.C. So the distance between that event and this author’s life is approximately the same as the distance between us and the birth of Christ, so it’s rather a long period of time. Abraham lived around 1700 B.C., so around the same distance between us and, let’s say, St. Thomas Aquinas—oh, that might be slightly farther by a few years. So we are talking about three very different periods of time, and they are all being telescoped together. This is part of the creativity, you might say, of the author, that the author is taking Abraham who lived in 1700 B.C., talking about an event that took place thousands of years before him, at least 1500, 1600 years before him, and so on, and talking about an event, the background of which is this: that people of the ancient world thought that when something evil happened it was divine intervention. The basic law of Deuteronomy is if you are just and your city is just and your tribe is just, you will prosper; but if you are unjust and your city is unjust and your tribe is unjust, you will be destroyed. That’s the background of the story.

But the point that the author is making is that Abraham is interceding for his neighbors—not only for his own people, but for his neighbors. Why? Because his role is to be a blessing for everybody. What the author wants the people of God to understand is that their role in life is not simply to be a blessing for themselves or to receive blessings from the Lord, but to be a blessing—to be a blessing for their neighbors. They are to intercede in prayer for the welfare and the good of other
people around them, who are in this case deserving, that is, righteous. That’s why this sort of bargaining goes on. “Well, but if there are fifty? What if there are forty-nine? What if there are forty-five? What if there are twenty,” and so on? That’s a little bit humorous; it’s intended to be. But the point is that God cannot be seen, the author cannot see God, as destroying the innocent; it’s simply not acceptable.

Now if we go to the time of Christ, we see that Christ didn’t accept this premise in the first place: that when bad things happen, it is because of punishment. He said that God’s judgement will be manifested at the end of time. It will happen; there is no doubt about it, but it will wait until the end of time. Meanwhile, the tares and the wheat grow together in ways that are beyond our comprehension; good and bad are together. Meanwhile, God is blessing everybody, even the evil! That’s why he says, “The rain falls on the just and the unjust; the sun shines on the good and the bad.” That’s very different from Deuteromistic history.

That’s very different from the prophetic interpretation of life, which Jesus received as a Jew. He didn’t believe in all he was given. He revised it. So those little aphorisms are very poignant because they indicate that Jesus’ thinking is changing the theology, if you will, the teaching, that he received; and he is delivering a new one. In this one, God is blessing everybody. There will be a separation between good and evil at the end of time; that’s the sheep and the goats story. But meanwhile, everyone gets blessed, and he will come and intercede not only for the just, like Abraham, but he will even intercede for the unjust; and he will become the savior of even the unjust—so indiscriminate is the mercy of God! It will stop at nothing, if people only recognize the importance of the moment and turn to God in repentance!

So we see in our Bible we have a long history, and it involves many different points of view, which are not all acceptable to Christ. He uses them, however, and our Church uses them to make a point for those who believe in Christ to see the great contrast between what people used to believe or what was the teaching of the Law, versus what Jesus himself really believed—to convince us of the gracious mercy of God and of God’s willingness to work for the good of all, even the unjust, and to bring salvation to all. And it’s an encouragement to the believers, the followers of Christ, to further this through their own prayers and intercessions—and especially for the unjust!
Don’t Crystallize    Thirteenth Week in Ordinary Time    Tuesday, June 28, 2005
8:30 a.m.  Gen 19:15-29; Mt 8:23-27   (St. Irenaeus)   (Move to our future)

“But Lot’s wife looked back, and she was turned into a pillar of salt.”

You will recall from yesterday, we talked about the author of the Book of Genesis being very distant from the events being talked about. They were as distant from this author as the birth of Christ is to us. The point of the author is to tell some stories about that area, but now with a new point: how God and God’s work intervenes. Yesterday it was the idea that Abraham, who represents now really the chosen people—Abraham and the Abrahamic people are meant to be intercessors preserving life and being a blessing to all around.

Today it’s a story of Lot’s wife. Now Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt. What is salt? Salt is a crystal. Now crystals are in some respects like life; and they could fool us into thinking they are alive, but they are really not. They grow—that’s true, but then they stop growing. Once they stop growing nothing ever happens. So to crystallize means to become totally stagnant. This is something that can happen in human life. Human life in terms of our spirituality has great potential for growth, but it is not something that will go on regardless of any possible thing. We can put dampers on our own spiritual growth. We can actually crystallize. Why? Because we look back. We have to look forward in life. God is a horizon in our future.

The Bible is constantly trying to tell people to look toward the future, to look toward what God is planning and the purposes of God, which are not yet in evidence. They are only intimated here and there, so we have to keep moving onward. When we look backward we are really jeopardizing our own growth. The past is the past. Jesus wants to
assure his disciples that we can be free of the past. It does not have to dominate our life. The whole idea of the absolution in the sacrament of Reconciliation: “I absolve you”—to absolve means “to cut away.” So the whole idea is that we can leave behind our past and move to our future, and that God’s work is always renewing us, recreating us.

This is a power that God has that he gives to us as well: to be renewed, to be recreated.

You see, the role of the angels is always to lead and guide to safety. Yes, the world indeed is a very dangerous place. There are quakes and there are volcanoes all around us, but we are not unaccompanied—we are not unaccompanied. We have to learn how to listen to the guidance of God through his holy angels and through his holy messengers.

So it’s about listening and moving forward—not stopping and looking back! That is the worst thing we can do because then we will stop our own development. We will crystallize. That’s a possibility. I think a rare one, but, nonetheless, it is possible. The author of the Book of Genesis was very gifted—besides inspired was also very poetic and gifted in a natural, human way—and provides us with these rich teachings in a very, in my opinion, very fascinating manner, context.
“Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’?”

Well, what do you think? What is easier? That’s the question Jesus asked the Pharisees. The answer is it’s easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven”—isn’t it? It is.

The point is that they were protesting that Jesus was taking upon himself authority that only God had, and Jesus was agreeing with them—he was! But even more so, he had the authority to tell people to get up and walk. If he had authority to tell people to get up and walk, then all the more so did he have authority to tell people their sins were forgiven.

So this is a question of authority, and who has the right to speak for God? Jesus was very willing to say, “I do. I speak for God.” Not for reasons that later theology would say, but, rather, because he had a personal knowledge in his own heart of what the Father really wants. There are few in the history of the world who could say that. He is not the only person who ever had a sense of the Father’s will—that’s true. But he surely had the most intimate sense of the Father’s will; and, therefore, he was not afraid to speak it.

The sad point is that this was not welcomed—this was not welcomed! And I wonder how often it is welcomed among people even who believe themselves to be believers, who believe themselves to be servants of God? But are they really willing to listen to God’s word, especially when it goes against the grain of what they think?

Now the teachers of the Law were not evil people, but they harbored evil thoughts. They harbored evil thoughts because of their faith, because of precisely what they believed and how they believed it. This continues to this day. People harbor evil thoughts, and even do evil things because of their faith. Jesus himself was actually rejected because of the faith that certain people had. So, besides having faith, we need to have faith that really corresponds to the heart of the Father. That’s what Jesus brings to light in this gospel reading.
We have in Scripture, as it were, a sort of battle between mercy and sacrifice. Jesus says, “Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice.’”

Going all the way back to Abraham, we have the call based on what? God’s mercy. He chooses Abraham, and he chooses him to be a blessing, not only to himself, but to all his neighbors insofar as they are capable of receiving the blessing, willing to receive the blessing. Throughout the whole story of salvation as it unfolds, it’s always God offering mercy. For what reason? For no reason. Mercy has no reason. God loves because God is love. Of its nature it’s gratuitous, which is where we get the word “grace.” Grace means something gratuitous, something that is for no reason. That’s mercy. That’s true love, in the New Testament agape, in the Old Testament hesed—it’s mercy. It has no meaning other than it’s God’s will; it’s God’s will to be godly, so he is.

He does not react to people. He initiates. Furthermore, he wants his followers to live the same way, to initiate blessings, not because someone is deserving, but because one wants to do it in response to God’s gift to them. So Jesus says, “Give as you have received.”

What is sacrifice about? Well, that is something very different, a more human tendency. It’s not bad. The word “sacrifice” actually means “to declare holy” or “to make holy.” It begins with food. We bless our food in thanks, in gratitude. That’s good; it’s not bad to be grateful. God never said it was bad to be grateful. He is aware of how good it is to be grateful, but that’s not the whole thing. Grateful for what? Can our sacrifices really represent a deep gratitude for life itself, which is mercy?

In a way sacrifice can start to work in a different way. We can think because we have given up something to the Lord we now in a sense have him in our debt, or because we have given to the Lord something we are perhaps better than others, or closer to God than others, or more deserving than others, or more meritorious. And that’s what this is about. Go and learn the meaning of the words, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.”
Reluctance to Change Thirteenth Week in Ordinary Time Saturday, July 2, 2005 8:00 a.m.  Gen 27:1-5, 15-29;  Mt 9:14-17  (Blessed Virgin Mary)  (New wine)

“Rather, they pour new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.”

The meaning of today’s encounter between the disciples of John and Jesus is clearly how people deal with new ideas. Jesus brought new ideas into his tradition. He spoke with authority, not like the scribes. The scribes never brought any new ideas. They simply continued to hand on what they had received. There was absolutely no creativity at work.

Now with the Pharisees there was creativity at work. They actually did think about the Law, and they applied it in all kinds of different ways, but not ways in which Jesus quite often approved. With the Pharisee it was almost the opposite problem. They laid aside the law of God and replaced it with a mere human interpretation, a mere human tradition.

Jesus was different from both the scribes and the Pharisees. Unlike the scribes he introduced new practices and ideas, but unlike the Pharisees he focused on the original intent of the tradition, of the Torah. How could he do that? He could do that only because he knew the heart of the Father. However, his very claim to know the heart of the Father itself is an insult, so to speak, to many others who believed that they knew the will of God because they had studied the Law and all the scholars of the Law. So Jesus’ life was insulting to people who thought they already knew what God wanted.

Even the disciples of John were confused by Jesus. They were confused because even John followed the Torah very strictly and all the practices of the Torah, including the work of fasting. That’s one of the works of Torah—fasting. The three greatest are fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. We can see Jesus’ disciples did not follow in this practice of Torah. We can only guess why. It seems it just wasn’t that important to Jesus. He says, “Well, later on they will have to do that, but now it’s not really a big thing.”
Then he gets down to the idea of the new wine and the old skins. In ancient times wine was held in skins, and new skins always smelled bad. You can figure out why. Skins are from animals. Fresh skins smell. They retain the smell of the animal. So people tried to put new wine into old skins to avoid the awful smells, but that backfired, because old skins have a life just so long and eventually they burst. So it wasn’t really a good strategy. It really wasn’t a very good idea using these old skins. No, bite the bullet. **Put the new wine into the new wineskins—and wait!**

**How do we cut corners in regard to God?** How do we try to accommodate the word of God to life as we know it already? Jesus comes as the Incarnate Word of God and he is really trying to turn his world upside-down because his world is actually upside-down—he wants to turn it right side up. He wants to straighten people out. He wants to enlighten people, illumine their minds. They are resisting. “Well, wait a minute. We already know the Torah. We already practice this. We don’t need this. We didn’t need that.” **This is the great deception that we already have what we need, so we don’t have to listen.** Our prayers can become all talking: talking, talking to God; telling God what we need; trying to get God’s attention; trying to convince God of what our needs are—all of which is unnecessary since God already knows what our needs are. He needs no information. We can’t change his will anyway. It’s benevolent to the extreme in the first place.

What we have to do is **listen to God and let God change us,** because we are standing on our heads and he wants us to stand on our feet. It is our great tendency not to want to do this, just like people do not want to put new wine into new skins and have to wait for everything to be ready. **We are impatient, and we don’t want to change.** Or if we want to change, we want to change just a little bit, like a little, new piece of cloth on an old cloak; but that’s not going to work. **God wants transformation of the whole.**
“Stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

As we come to bury Edna, it’s very important that we reflect not only on the meaning of her life for us personally, but also on the meaning of life, including our own. Jesus’ ministry was all about extending to people the offer from God for God’s own life, which means eternal life, a life that does not limit itself to the human body, but only uses the human body for a period of time. It’s capable of life quite beyond this planet, indeed, the source of life on this planet, the eternal life and Spirit of God.

Now Jesus had a hard time teaching people, even though they were religious people, the true meaning of life—getting through his message—so he often taught in parables, which are full of symbolism. In today’s parable we have ten virgins. Virginity is a symbol of purity, of morality, of being unsullied by the lusts and greed of the world. His point is virginity alone is not sufficient in order to experience the true meaning and purpose of life, which is meeting the bridegroom. According to Christ the purpose of life is for the individual soul to be brought together with the bridegroom, who is God—a deep and profound communion of intimacy and love.

Now the foolish virgins are many in our world. People believe that the goal of religious life is simply being unsullied by the lusts and greed of the world, in other words, being more or less moral, being a “good person” in the modern idiom. You hear a lot of people, if you talk to them, and they are willing to share about their own personal view of themselves, they will tell you they are a good person. Jesus’ point is that really isn’t the point.

The wise virgins were not only good, but they were wise, and their wisdom was their realization, their understanding, that life involves waiting. They understood that something is going on even while we wait. That is not a common insight. We don’t want to wait. We are very impatient. Look at the way people drive on the roads! Of course, not you, I know; but think about everybody else, how they drive! Or how are people in the store when there are long queues of shoppers? Or how about our personal relations with other people? How are we filled with patience or impatience? Jesus’ point
is in our relation with God we need to recognize the role of waiting, that as time passes something is going on that is unperceivable to our own rather crude senses.

If we are going to be wise people, we have to realize how life has meaning even when it doesn’t seem so. We may want to get results. We may want to see results in regard to faith and the spiritual world just like everything else, but it doesn’t work that way! Indeed, the results only come when we are willing not to see them, when we are willing to wait, when we are willing to surrender our anger and our impatience and our demands and even our expectations to a power beyond ourselves—indeed, to the bridegroom: God who will come when it’s right, when the time is ripe, not when we want it, but when the time is ripe. This means that every moment of our lives is really full, I may even say pregnant, with meaning and purpose. In this way even the wise virgins are pregnant with their expectation and their preparation. They have the oil. They are ready to serve when the bridegroom comes. The foolish nod off without being ready!

Now Jesus told parables like this so that we might appreciate more deeply our daily lives. They may seem very insignificant. We may seem to ourselves like very poor people. Not only poor in the worldly sense, but poor even in the spiritual sense. But if we are willing to wait on the Lord, it is the Lord who will fulfill his purposes in creating us in the first place.

As we gather here this morning we celebrate that Edna’s purpose has now been completed. She has now entered into death, a death into which she was baptized many years ago. Baptism itself is a pledge of rebirth. We cannot be fully reborn until we die. We have different ways of experiencing the Lord prior to death, but we do not actually enter fully into our Baptism until the day of our death. Now we celebrate Edna having entered into her Baptism. So we have the baptismal candle signifying the resurrection of Christ and the pall signifying the purity that God gives her, the virginity that is important. The virginity of the story is not ours; it’s God’s. He covers us with his purity, as that pall covers the casket. This is God’s work, his grace. So we might keep in mind that every day is very important. Every day is to be lived realizing that one day the bridegroom will knock. “Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”
Choose an Easy Yoke

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/A July 3, 2005
5:00 p.m. Zec 9:9-10; Rom 8:9, 11-13; Mt 11:25-30 (Openness to God)

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”

There is no doubt that life contains many burdens. Indeed, life without burdens is inconceivable because survival itself is a burden. The question the gospel asks us is:

Are our burdens merely the burdens that come with life? It would seem not. It seems very odd that the advancement of human learning and technology has gone to making life more complicated and difficult. Does that make sense?

We know that two hundred years ago people in this country had no indoor plumbing, no tap water, no electric washers for clothes or dishes, no ease of transportation; and yet by almost all measures life back then was more simple. Why should this be? Should not all the conveniences of advanced technological culture make life easier for us, give us more time with our families, allow us to pursue our spiritual and higher interests at a leisurely pace, give us longer vacations and more holidays? Have you ever heard anyone promise you these things? But they have not arrived. Why? It seems people today have to work more, are less secure, and have no time for the pursuit of what we might call “higher interests.” That’s at least what they often say.

Today’s gospel addresses exactly this problem. Being wise and learned in our society does not include knowing God in a personal way, and all the advantages that that kind of knowledge affords one. Although survival may be a burden, we create unnecessary burdens by yoking ourselves to excessive and unrealistic desires. People can always sell us something: some ideal, some idea, a bigger house, a better car, a better
this, a bigger that—always and always and on and on and on. It never stops. In other words, greater and greater expectations create greater and greater burdens.

But where do they come from? Ourselves. They don’t come from life itself. Survival does not require it. They don’t come from God.

Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, my burden light.” A yoke is a collar for a draft animal. Usually a strong animal was yoked to a weak one. This phrase, “My yoke is easy,” implies that serving Christ gives us the lighter load. He will do the heavy hauling. That’s what he means. We will have a yoke, but it will be relatively light. But on the other hand, if we choose to live on our own terms, pursue our own goals, do our own thing, our yoke will be hard and our burden heavy. The increasing burdens of modern life are not the products of technology or science or the advances in learning. They are really tied to our choices and our values. The gospel is calling on us to reflect on those choices and values. Making the right choice does not require worldly wisdom or great education. It does require openness to God.
“But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Dare we accuse Jesus of cynicism? Probably not, but he was skeptical of what he meant by faith. What is faith? Well, it’s lots of different things. It begins with trust, and it has to move to gratitude. Sometimes people tell me, “I don’t go to church anymore because I don’t get anything out of it.” I am always embarrassed when someone actually says that because worship is not about getting something. That’s a very self-centered, egotistical way of looking at life.

Worship is the moment in which we go beyond what I get and what I want for the good of something greater. Without that there is no worship. Worship is motivated by trust and gratitude. Without trust and gratitude we really don’t worship God in Spirit and truth. We might worship “God” according to some idea we have of our own, but it isn’t really Spirit and truth, because we begin from the wrong place.

We have to start with who we are. We are God’s creatures. We are dependent upon God, and if we choose, we trust in God. If we choose to trust in God, that has to lead to gratitude for the many blessings which we can’t help but notice, unless something is terribly wrong with our perceptions. Albeit, many of us do have serious burdens. But even in spite of the most serious burdens, life itself is a tremendous gift that in itself requires gratitude. Gratitude is the basis for sacrifice.

If you think about it, we are talking not only about our life of faith. We are also talking about the origins of our country: a group of people who were trusting in God. They understood God very differently. Thomas Jefferson was not a Christian. He was a Deist, but he trusted in God, and he believed in the goodness and, he might say, rationality of God and, therefore, of the reasonableness of the divine law. Therefore, he knew that any arbitrary exercise of authority had to be false and, indeed, wicked and villainous; and he said so, and he stood up for what he believed because trust leads to gratitude and then to conviction. Our country was founded by men of conviction and women of conviction. They trusted and they were grateful, and they were willing to
live and to put their life on their convictions, and therefore they were willing to sacrifice. Because their cause was just, they did succeed.

Now is this an event in the past, merely of interest occasionally, or do we live this event in our common life? I would suggest we need to live in this event and recognize our collective and common responsibility for the continuing welfare of our nation. God does not control events, but God does help people who are open to God, and therefore he does influence the events of life for those who are willing to be influenced.

Do we get weary because our prayers are not answered? In the story of the Unjust Judge, even the unjust judge eventually listened to this woman because she was such a pain. Perhaps we don’t think of this as very pious, but we could become a pain praying for what is needed. Jesus made that very clear, that what we need to start with is not our own personal needs, but the needs of the world, the kingdom of God, the will of God to be done on earth. That’s priority number one. Most of our needs would be taken care of if the kingdom of God came and the will of God were done on earth. In fact, I think all of them would be, including our sicknesses. We would be taken up in the healing power of the kingdom, as happened in the life and ministry of Jesus.

So do we come together to get something? I hope not. I hope we come together motivated by trust in God, gratitude, and conviction and, therefore, willingness to live this life of conviction, not only as an individual but in the body of Christ, of whom we are all members, and with the sense that in spite of all the trials and through all the trials, both that we personally suffer—if you want to use that word—endure and through our nation’s trials and sufferings, we can learn and we must learn to respect God, first and foremost, to trust God, first and foremost, to listen to the will and the justice of God, first and foremost, and to put as the greatest priority the respect for that, and to make sure that all those in authority are under the authority of God. Then we can, indeed, be a beacon, which is what our Founding Fathers wanted us to be. But as John Adams pointed out, this great experiment—he didn’t use that word, but it is a great experiment—this republic cannot survive without a moral people. That’s worthy of meditation on this Day of Independence.
Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Jesus Heals All Issues** Fourteenth Week in Ordinary Time Tuesday, July 5, 2005 7:00 a.m. Gen 32:23-33; Mt 9:32-38 (St. Anthony Mary Zaccaria) (Take everything to Christ in prayer)

“But the Pharisees said, ‘He drives out demons by the prince of demons.’”

It is very dangerous to think too much about evil. It’s actually irrational, and therefore we cannot understand it. **We do confront evil in our lives.** What the gospel proclaims is that Christ always has the power to overcome every kind of evil, every kind of illness, every kind of disease, **no matter what its source**—and that we have to keep in mind.

Now what are evil spirits? Actually, I don’t know; and as far as I can tell, no one does. **Is there something about the spiritual dimension that can be affected by evil?** Yes, certainly there is, and this is what is referred to as the “demonic.” There is something to it.

However, in the history of the Church it has often been exaggerated and over-employed. For example, many forms of mental illness have been assumed to be demonic. Heresy was thought in many cases to be demonic. In terms of etymology, the word “diabolical and the word “schizoid” mean the same thing—divided. **We do experience divisions,** and they may be caused by some spirit, some unclean spirit; or they may be caused by something else. It isn’t really possible to diagnose all this.

The point of the gospel is **Jesus heals! Jesus liberates! Jesus delivers!** That’s what we have to keep in mind.

During the middle ages there were church people who authorized torture and burned people at the stake for their own good. They thought, well, they have evil spirits, and spirits don’t like pain, so if we torture them, the spirits will leave! If that doesn’t work, we will burn them, and then the spirits will definitely leave! And then that will save their souls! So they were doing all this with a distorted sense of helping people.

Now this continues in small ways today when people help others with their misdirected prayers or counsel or advice or other forms of help. **We have to be careful.** The point the gospel makes is that—once again, for the third time I am saying this—Christ can deal with all issues! **We can take everything to Christ in prayer.** When we do that, good things will happen.
“Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.”

Now what is St. Paul talking about? Well, he is talking about the aging process. Some of us may be so young, that we are not interested in the aging process—but just wait! Sooner or later, we all age. It can be very discouraging, although St. Paul says he is not discouraged. But it can be discouraging if we live by our senses: as we watch our capacities diminish, as we notice our minds slipping. As we notice our capacities diminishing, it can be very discouraging—not to mention the pains!

St. Paul says, “While this is going on, however, something else is going on inwardly. He talks about it “being renewed day by day.” Now this inner renewal of our inner being is not sensible. We cannot feel it. We cannot see it. We cannot touch it or taste it with our ordinary perceptions. But we can come to experience it by slowing down, by being more reflective. And this is the great treasure that St. Paul is talking about. He says that he carries it around in an earthen vessel.

The treasure is life itself. The life that God gives us is not limited to the human body. That is our belief. When we enter into a relation with Christ, we are given a pledge of eternal life. That’s the meaning of Baptism. I sprinkled the body of Mary with the water from the font because this is a pledge of eternal life, a life not bound by the body. St. Paul in his life of faith and prayer was aware that that life was actually growing in him in spite of the decline of his physical prowess, in spite of the diminishing of his physical abilities and mental abilities, because our mind insofar as it is connected to our brain belongs to our body. But there is another mind that is our spirit that is very conscious—that can grow into consciousness, anyway—that is connected to the life of the soul. We can become aware of this when we are quiet, when we begin to be reflective, when we pray in a contemplative way—listening, not talking!

The young by nature are anxious and eager. They have plans, and that’s all good and proper. But there comes a point to realize that whatever we have done with our plans and however much we have fulfilled or not our ambitions in life, there is a time for resting. This itself is part of our growth, and it is part of living. And that’s what St. Paul is talking about.

In regard to the body he says, “For this momentary light affliction.” Well, I don’t know that we would always call our suffering “momentary light affliction.” That’s a bit of an exaggeration. But in regard to what comes after: “is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” He would say in faith that applies to people suffering from cancer: cancer of the pancreas, or cancer of the brain, or cancer of any part of the body—however awful it is! He would call it a “light affliction” in comparison to
the “eternal weight of glory,” which is actually incomparable! But we are, after all, bound by the limitations of our minds and our words and our ability to verbalize. “As we look not to what is seen,” which is really what we spend most of our life focused on, mesmerized by—“but to what is unseen,” and for many what is unreal and nonexistent at all! But for those who have eyes of faith it is even more important, incomparably more important, than what is seen.

Now does this make any sense to the young? Probably very little, but the older we get the more sense we can make of this. If we are believers, that’s precisely the opportunity that aging opens up for us. So for St. Paul he would not look at this whole process of aging and declining as “what a tragedy” or “what a shame.” He is saying, “What an opportunity!” What an opportunity for a growth that is unimaginable by the ordinary, carnal imagination, the ordinary imagination locked to the senses.

“For what is seen is transitory.” It is not only transitory in a relative sense, that is, when we pass away it’s gone for us; but it is transitory in an absolute sense. In four and a half billion years the earth will no longer be. We are sure of that. The sun will have its fuel spent. It’s a fact. Now you might say, “Well, that’s a long time.” Yes, it is. It’s still, nonetheless, an absolute horizon for the life of the earth. Whether we take care of it or we don’t take care of it, it will not outlast its own sun. That should affect the way we think about life. It should be a reminder and a teacher that everything we are seeing is transitory, and everything we are doing is transitory. We need to pull back a little bit to focus on what is not transitory.

“So as we come to bury a beloved woman, a friend, a mother, a sister, an aunt, it’s very important that we use this occasion, not only to thank the Lord for Mary’s short life, for the gift it was for each of us, but also to renew our own commitment to live for what is eternal and to focus on what is not transitory—for the praise and honor of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
“As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, drive out demons.”

Wherever Jesus went he spoke in sign. This is the remote origin of our sacramental system. Signs speak, but they speak a language that requires participation on behalf of the interpreter. In fact, words also speak in such a way that the interpreter has to be involved, but not so obviously.

Now when Jesus sent out his disciples, he sent them to continue his work, to expand his work. It always has to do with the same thing: bringing real life to earth. But this presupposes that we understand that there isn’t real life yet, or that what we see as life or experience as life is simply an intimation of something much richer, much fuller, much more inclusive. So he says, “Cure the sick.” Why? Because sickness viciates true life, true abundant life, and therefore the kingdom of God takes away that viciation and moves true abundance into people’s experience.

“Raise the dead.” Of course, this is not referring to people in the grave, but to people who are living without life. People who have no faith have no meaning. People who have no hope have nowhere to go. People who do not know true love are not really alive. “Raise the dead.” That is a fundamental mission for the Church.

“Cleanse the lepers.” Of course, this does not refer to leprosy exclusively; but it’s referring rather to anything that excludes people from life, from social life. We are social animals. We need each other. All those people on the margins of society are lepers.
It is not the intent of God to allow some people to be marginalized, pushed aside. It is God’s intent to bring all together. “Cleanse the lepers.”

“Drive out demons.” Of course, at the root of all human problems is really sin. **Sin is a grave disorder**, a grave distortion, a grave abuse, of our own good powers and good facilities and good energies. Evil really can take over people’s lives, but **in the presence of the kingdom of God evil has no chance**. So Jesus authorizes and empowers his Church to expel evil, especially in its forms that dominate people’s lives, that run their lives for them, that possess them and addict them and control them. In the face of the kingdom, these powers have no stand.

Now we continue in the path of the disciples if we are authentic Christian people. We also have this **very same mission**. Perhaps we need to **focus first on ourselves** to bring the fullness of the kingdom into our own sphere of influence before we can touch anyone else. That’s how Jesus worked. He worked first with his disciples in their own lives, and **then he led them out to touch others**.
We can see why the family wanted this gospel reading, because this really does describe the faith of Leslie. She did come to the Lord in her labors and her burdens, and she did discover how to be meek and humble of heart. She was for all of us a blessing.

In the second reading, according to St. Paul, all parts of life show us something of God. He says: “Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” That is also a way Leslie showed us the word of God, because her outer self was wasting away, but her inner self was growing. Now we have to be very aware that this is not possible for just a few people. It’s possible for all of us. Part of the meaning of Christian witness is that when we see Christ in others, that is meant to draw us to the same Christ.

What does St. Paul mean when he talks about our outer self wasting away? Well, this is the aging process. Whether or not we have cancer, whether or not we have congestive heart failure, whether or not we have some other serious illness, we waste away—eventually. I have been advised by several people not to get old. The alternative is early death. There is no other alternative! We will all die. Dying is part of life. Aging is part of life.

When we are young, we want to be old. We want to have the freedom and the independence we perceive that grownups have. We don’t know all the problems grownups have. So we live in this fool’s paradise we call “childhood.” When we arrive at adulthood, then we discover what life is really like: all the burdens, all the responsibilities—oh, yes, and the freedom too. Gradually those burdens weigh us down. The major burdens that weigh us down are not financial problems or sickness or family squabbles, but gravity. Gravity weighs us down, literally. As we age we shrink. We slow down. We find it more difficult to breathe. We are “wasting away,” in St. Paul’s words—outwardly.

But his point is inwardly this is not a shame or a tragedy or something we would be well without. It’s a challenge and an opportunity. One we can take relief, but an opportunity, nonetheless, to grow in spirit and to prepare to meet God face to face by becoming more like him now, by realizing there is no point in waiting for the transforming power of grace to remove all of the clouding and all of the rust that has covered over the image of God at the core of every human being.

So even cancer can be a blessing in this sense. It can be an opportunity for us to become more Christ-like, more compassionate and merciful and loving and forgiving. St. Paul says, “In comparison, these are momentary light afflictions.” He is comparing it to—what? “The eternal weight of glory.” The weight of glory does not weigh us down. The weight of glory lifts us up and fills us with life and light, and really God, and makes us God, because that’s the whole idea of transformation. That’s the whole idea of
Jesus, Son of God, not “deeming equality with God something to be grasped, but, rather, emptying himself,” becoming human so we can become—what? Divine, like him, full of life, full of love, an eternal life, an eternal love.

That’s the very pledge of our Baptism. That’s why when we brought the casket of Leslie into our church I sprinkled it with the holy water. We covered it with the pall, that is really symbolic of the baptismal clothing that speaks of innocence. The innocence is not our innocence; it’s God’s innocence. He gives it to us as a gift. With that gift he gives us a pledge of living with him for all eternity, which is really not time on and on and on—it’s beyond time. It’s the life of God before time, outside of time. This is God’s great plan. It’s beyond imagination, but it is our faith. So if we have this faith, and we live this faith, as Leslie did, then our inner self is being renewed day by day. As we get older and older and weaker and weaker, our inner self is being renewed.

In order to experience this in any way, even lightly or slightly, through an intimation, we have to look not to what is seen, but to what is unseen. This takes some doing. It takes slowing down. It takes quiet inside and outside. It takes willingness to listen. So often, even when we pray, we are talking. What are we doing? Informing God? There is nothing we can tell him that he doesn’t know. What are we trying to do? Convince God? His goodness is far greater than ours. We can’t convince him to be any better or any more benevolent or beneficent than he already is. So what are we doing? We are filling up our own minds with our own thoughts, instead of listening to God’s thoughts. But if we quiet down and if we let go of our fears and we let go of our anxieties and we really enter into a trusting relationship with God, we can listen and we can hear and we can see the unseen and sense the life within us growing as, indeed, the outer life shrinks.

St. Paul ends up: “For what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal.” Leslie now is with the unseen. But she is now more real than she ever was. We need to pray that one day we also shall be with her and with our Lord in eternity.
“And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.”

Jesus was not naïve. He knew that the world is full of hostile forces. He did not say that it was pointless to be afraid, but his point is that it’s pointless to be afraid of suicide bombers or terrorists because all they can kill is the body. If you want to be afraid, in fact, you should be afraid of the one who can kill the soul.

How does the soul die? How is the soul killed? Usually over a period of time. It loses its ability to trust. It loses its ability to hope. It loses its ability to love. It loses its compassion. It loses its mercy. It becomes disconnected, disconnected from its source of life in God. Of course, it can’t become totally disconnected or it would totally disappear. But the part of the soul that is voluntary, willful—that part—can become disconnected, consciously disconnected, from its source of life and being. And when it becomes disconnected from its source of life and being, it becomes disconnected from all the other parts of the creation of which it is a part. Again, this disconnection is only partial because life itself depends upon God, and God doesn’t disconnect it.

But grace and harmony and peace all depend upon our response, our reception. A gift is no gift if its not received. A soul that lives outside the harmony and the peace and the grace of God is dying or dead. Whatever promotes that dying and death we should fear! When we really think about it very deeply, we realize that nothing and no one can kill that soul without our cooperation. So we should fear our capacity to cooperate with true mortal sin, the sin that kills the life of God within us—that we should fear!
“To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

At first listening, this statement may be off-putting. It sounds like the same old saw: “The rich get richer; the poor get poorer.” It seems manifestly unfair. But, after all, this saying is placed within the context of a teaching on parables. It was Jesus trying to explain that if you want to understand anything, you have to work at it. The truth is not evident. Toward that end he preaches in this provocative and necessarily and deliberately ambiguous way. Our choice is either to delve into it or to forget about it altogether. There is no simple way of understanding it.

So what is the wealth that is being discussed here? Those who have shall receive more; those who have not, shall lose the little they have. It is referring to knowledge, the knowledge of the mystery of the kingdom of God. If we think about it, we realize that, of course, knowledge is progressive. Nobody begins in the fifth grade! We have to begin in the first grade, and then go to the second, then the third and the fourth and the fifth, because in knowledge we build on the past. Step-by-step we grow from little to great. Jesus is saying: Just so does our ability to live in the kingdom of God. It does not come in a momentous flash, as people often wish it did. They want God to rush into their lives and bring them the fullness of the kingdom. It doesn’t happen that way. The kingdom advances progressively step-by-step within each of us.

Now you may say, “What about St. Paul? He was converted in a moment!” Well, not really. St. Paul’s life was a life of constant dedication to God. What changed in him suddenly was his perception of who God is when he heard a voice say, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He suddenly realized that God was in the people he was persecuting. But his dedication to God was an ongoing matter of growth. And conversion for all of us is an ongoing matter of growth! We change our minds and we
change our hearts gradually, as God allows us to see and as God enables us to do differently.

Toward this very point Jesus uses the image of a seed. Now a seed is potential for something, but not too remarkable in itself. Have you ever seen a collection of seeds? I doubt it. You may admire a majestic oak tree, but probably not have the same feeling toward an acorn. What if someone came up to you and said, “Look at this magnificent acorn! Isn’t it marvelous?” You might say, “Are you feeling all right?” And that person might say, “Oh, but it could become a majestic oak tree!” Yes, it could, but it probably won’t. **When we are talking about seeds we are talking about something that might become, and it requires all kinds of conditions.** It has to be planted. It has to be watered. It has to have the right place to grow, and a lot of time has to pass.

Jesus is making the point: same with you. **It’s the same with people.** People have to be planted in the right place. They have to be watered and nurtured, and a lot of time is required for our potential to come out. The main difference between you and an acorn or between people and an acorn is that with us the various factors all have to do with our character. The planting, the nurturing—that’s all about our character. It’s not a matter of luck. It’s not a matter of chance. It’s not random. **It’s a matter of choice.** Each of us determines whether the evil one will steal away our potential for good: to become a godly being, a noble and majestic creation. Each of us determines whether tribulations or persecutions, anxieties or worldly allurements will divert us from our path to God.

And then finally, the point Jesus makes is: In spite of all those who fail to live up to their potential, their potential to become divine, nonetheless, there will be an abundant harvest. No need to worry about that! **There will be an abundant harvest, and you can be part of it if you want to!** It doesn’t matter what other people do. It doesn’t matter what other people choose. You can choose to be part of the harvest, and the wise will keep their eyes on the prize!
“Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth.”

This statement may be startling until we realize that Jesus is not talking to the crowds. He is not speaking to the people. He is speaking privately to the apostles. That’s how this whole thing begins: “Jesus said to his apostles.” It’s clear that Jesus spoke one way to his apostles and another way to the people. To the people he spoke in parables. That required that they would try to figure out what he was talking about. To his disciples he is more direct. He is revealing here a strategy.

He is saying, “I have not come to bring peace, but the sword.” What sword is he talking about? The sword of discrimination. There is a way that we could probably be at peace by not anyone saying anything. Sometimes that’s what you want in your families. You just want the kids to be quiet. But that isn’t peace. It may be peace for you for a while, but that isn’t true peace.

Peace has to be based upon truth. So Jesus brings the sword of discrimination: that we can actually tell the difference between truth and falsity. What kind of peace would there be if it’s all based upon compromise, compromising the truth, accepting just part of it to suit everybody? That is not real peace. Peace is an inward thing, and actually that is the kind of peace Jesus brings. He says, “I do bring peace, but not the peace that the world gives.” So he is saying here he is not coming to bring the kind of peace where everyone gets along and everyone smiles more or less in a plastic way; nobody gets on anyone’s nerves; nobody says what’s on his or her mind; everyone walks on eggshells.
That’s **the peace of the world. It’s based on compromise. It’s based on fear.** Jesus is not praying for that peace.

The peace he brings is very different. **It’s an inward peace that comes from knowing God.** But that kind of peace is also the sword, the sword of discrimination, the sword that will divide father from son. **If the son wants to know God and the father doesn’t, then the two cannot be in any true peace.** Any kind of peace that would prevail would be phony, false, hypocritical. And the same with the relation between a mother and a daughter. If the mother really wants the truth of Christ, but her daughter doesn’t care, they cannot live in true harmony. It would be totally fraudulent. So **there is a time to speak, to call a spade a spade, to be truthful and honest, even if it is divisive.** If people cannot live with the truth, then they cannot live. That’s the point of this.

That’s what Jesus explained to his apostles. **He is not telling this to the people. They are not ready to take it.** They would never understand it. But the apostles are supposed to be able to figure this out. **Since you are here this morning, you are getting the inner circle’s teaching from the twelve, the strategy Jesus uses to bring God to the world.**
“But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

As I mentioned before, there is a great peril in modernizing Jesus and taking in only what we like or what appeals to us in the person and message of Jesus. The result usually is that Jesus is very kind, very loving, very forgiving, but never cross or angry—but that’s not the true case.

Jesus was very angry at different times of his ministry. For example, he drove out the moneychangers from the Temple. Here he is condemning not the Temple or its rulers, but actually ordinary people. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!” These reproaches should not be underestimated. Jesus was angry, and he was angry with people rejecting him and his message. He did many great works, and he expected a response. God does many great works, and God expects a response! That’s point number one.

Point number two, I might add, it doesn’t say here, but it says elsewhere that in some places Jesus could not even work his works, he could not do his miracles, because of the lack of faith—the lack of faith not being the absence of faith, but a disbelief, a contrary, hostile spirit toward him.

Point number three, and this is most important, probably, is that he does not do anything about his anger. He relegates all justice to God and to the Last Judgment. That is essential to understanding Christ and his idea of justice and mercy. He relegates all punishment and all judgment to the end moment of time, to the Last Judgment. He doesn’t say, “Things will go well with you.’ No, he says, “Things will go ill with you, but at the end.” Meanwhile, there is time for change. There is time and opportunity for repentance all the way up to that last moment. No one understands the teachings of Christ if they don’t understand that. On the one hand, he really did believe in judgment. He did believe that the evil would be separated from the good. He did believe that evil would be punished, but not until the end of all time. Meanwhile, there is always opportunity for metanoia, for change of heart, for turning around and coming to God.
“For my yoke is easy and my burden light.”

For whatever reason, this particular gospel passage has not been well accepted in the history of our faith. Going back to the time of Christ, Jesus’ own religion was not a light burden. It was a heavy burden. There were literally thousands of requirements to live a righteous life, and Jesus did not find God in that—he did not! He argued all the time with the leaders and teachers of his own religion. The New Testament is full of those confrontations.

Not only that, one of the central pieces of his religion was the Sabbath rest. In fact, Sabbath means rest—sabbat. His idea of sabbat was very different from theirs as well. Indeed, one wonders if he ever healed on any day of the week except the Sabbath, because this idea of resting and activity were not opposite. His idea of the activity of God is completing the creation and bringing healing and wholeness to what he has begun. So his idea of resting is not inactivity. It’s activity, and you can even speak of a yoke. A yoke, of course, is for oxen. But his point is it’s still an easy burden, a light burden. Why? Because in his view, God is the one who is doing the work. All God is asking for is a little cooperation, a little assistance. That’s his view.

Prayer is not for you to get God to support your agenda. Prayer is not for you to get God to do what you want. Prayer is not for you to bring God’s attention on issues that he would otherwise be unaware of. But prayer is a time for you to be influenced and guided and directed by God. When you allow yourself to be guided and directed by God, he is doing the pulling in the yoke, and you are just assisting a little bit. Why? For whatever reason, God’s inscrutable plan is for us to share in his work. But this is not burdensome because he does the major pulling. Just like when you have two oxen, one big and one small, we are the small ox just doing a little work. God is the big ox doing most of the work. So therefore he can say honestly, “Take my yoke and learn from me, and you will find rest.” It seems like a contradiction, but it isn’t. You take God’s yoke and you will rest because he is going to do the pulling, because “My yoke is easy and my burden light.”
“For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”

During most of our lives we can be confused about certain basic facts. When a close friend dies sometimes a door opens and we start to see things much more clearly. What may appear to be a contradiction turns out not to be.

We live for many years believing that death is a negation of life, the opposite of living. What St. Paul is realizing is that through the Lordship of Christ he has discovered that indeed life and death are not opposites. They are different phases of a single reality that finds its culmination beyond our sight, for which reason he has said in another letter: “We live by faith, not by sight.” We live by faith because the real meaning and purpose of life is not evident to our sight. We have to probe it with our hearts, and we have to seek the purpose of life. Here he is talking about how Christ died and lived—or I should put it this way: he lived, died, and came to life. He lived, died, and came to life; and that is a pattern for us as well. We live, we die, we come to life!

He is speaking, of course, of the resurrection from the dead, whose meaning is the very basis of our Baptism. That is the reason why I sprinkled the body, the casket, of Carl with the water from the font. That is why we have the Pascal candle, to remind us that the cornerstone of our faith is the resurrection of the dead. Christ was raised; so shall we be.

Toward this end St. Paul says, “We shall give an accounting of ourselves to God.” Now again, in our narrow thinking we might think this is bad news, that God is going to hold us to a very strict account, and he is going to be very severe, and we are going to come up very
short! But this is not the point. The point is that God has come into our lives in Christ precisely to free us to make the most of the gift God has given us, and that gift is not meager! We are each an image and likeness of God, and God doesn’t make anything lacking in beauty or goodness or truth.

The way the world works we often get caught up in very negative addictions and habits of both thought and feeling and even addiction. But we need not stay caught up in those. We can be freed, which is what redemption is. Redemption is the work of God in our lives freeing us to be godly—images and likenesses that really reflect the radiance of God. That is the promise of Baptism. This is our faith. This is the faith of St. Paul. This is the faith of the Church. So we proclaim it with confidence, and we try to let it guide and direct the time we all have left before we die and come to life, so that when we give an accounting it might be an accounting we are very proud of and happy about.
“And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it on the last day.”

Shakespeare once said, “All’s well that end’s well.” This gospel is saying something similar. We cannot know the true condition of our being, of our lives, apart from the way they end up. **This is talking about how things end up on the last day.**

**I will raise up those who trust.** This is very important. It’s very personal. There is a lot of talk today about faith and belief and culture wars, and I believe that sometimes the very simple idea of faith is lost in all these controversies.

I do a lot of reading in different fields, and one thing that I am constantly aware of is how very intelligent people, very learned people, **lose their way because they have become so vehemently attached to some particular point of view.** Now theoretically both faith and for that matter science are **not supposed to be attached to a point of view.** This is talking about **an openness, a trust of God.** Science theoretically is open to whatever evidence shows itself. But if you actually look beneath the surface, we find that people in the name of God or in the name of religion or in the name of science or in the name of law or something else are very vehemently holding onto something. But that is not trusting, and that is not the way.

Jesus says, “I am the way. I am the truth.” This is **identifying truth with a personal relationship with God.** To enter into Christ means to see God as Christ sees God and to know God as Father. To enter into Christ means to abide in the Holy Spirit of God, which is a way of experiencing life, because the Holy Spirit is the Lord and the giver of life. This is not a matter, necessarily, of strong quote “beliefs,” if by beliefs we mean statements. It’s something much stronger and much more personal and much more direct. It is a living trust in God through Christ, because our belief is that God, who is mysterious and whom we cannot know through our human reason—we can only guess at this or that—but **God has come to us.**

The gospel good news is that God has come to us in Christ, and not only in Christ because Christ is the light that enlightens everyone. So even before God came to us
embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, the light of God, the **Word of God, was always and is always enlightening those who want to be enlightened.** But the question is: **Do we want to be enlightened?** If we are going to hold onto our truth, if we are going to hold onto our beliefs, **we might not be very open to the truth,** which saints and mystics through the ages have always said surprises us whenever it really dawns upon us, whenever we really experience enlightenment. So this is about that.

It is about living because of this trust with an **utter confidence.** Life is all about ups and downs. Life is all about lots of challenges. Now we could eschew all this. We could think the whole thing is horrible. Why do we have to go through so many **problems**? Why do we have to have so many conflicts? We could also look at this as an **opportunity** for growth with great confidence that through all of these ups and downs, through all of these challenges, **God is going to teach us something.** And mainly, I think, he is going to teach us how to trust in him, how to contribute what we can, but also to trust in his guidance and direction and love, because Jesus says here, “It is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me.”

We believe that in **Baptism** we are really given to the **Father.** He **adopts us as his own.** Now we already are his own in the sense of all creation is God’s—that’s true. But this is more than simply being a creature. This is now being a **child of God and an heir to God’s own life.** That’s what the promise of Baptism is: they will be heirs of the eternal life of God. That doesn’t mean we simply live on and on and on and on. It means we live in God who is eternal. This itself should be something that helps us in our daily choices. If we have confidence that God is with us, that God has adopted us, that we belong to God, this should be something that **leads us day by day with a confident assurance that all things are going to work out for those who love God.** Keep in mind “All’s well that ends well.”
Today we are celebrating Marie and Ed’s fiftieth anniversary; they are going to have a party afterwards—you are all invited!

I would like to reflect on the opening prayer of today’s Mass. We do pray all the time. We have beautiful prayers, but I don’t know if they sink in! What are we praying for as a Church? What is the role of the Blessed Mother as model of the Church? We use that expression. It’s a central idea, but what does it mean? The Fathers of the Church always talked about Mary as the model of the Church, but what does that mean? Listen to this prayer.

“Lord God, you have shown us in the Blessed Virgin Mary a model of sublime love and profound humility; grant that your Church may be like her, obedient to your command of love, so that by giving itself wholeheartedly to seeking your glory and to serving others it may stand before all peoples as the sacrament of your love.”

Now that itself is a very noble desire and wish, but it will not become a reality until we make it our own. It has not been the way the Church has often presented itself: profoundly humble. What does it mean to be profoundly humble? The Blessed Mother was profoundly humble. It means she walked on the earth. She was of the earth. She did not glide over the people’s heads.

“Grant your Church may be like her.” This is what we need. We need to be a humble Church that walks on the earth. We are living on this earth with all of God’s children, many of whom do not know him at all. The question is: Will they be even intrigued by our presence? Is there anything about us that will draw them to know who God is?

Many people speak of God, but the God they speak of is not the God of revelation—maybe of their personal revelation, their private revelation, but not the God of Jesus Christ, not the God that the Blessed Mother knew and served! This we have to be aware of. Idolatry is not a thing of the past. Idolatry is fundamental to human life and human culture. It’s full of idolatry. The question is: Will anyone ever know the real God because of our witness? Will we attract people to God? After all, we claim we
believe in God, the real God, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Christ, 
the God the Blessed Mother served. Well, our lives should give some evidence of that.

The Church can do that by being obedient to God’s command of love, so that giving 
itself wholeheartedly to seeking God’s glory—seeking God’s glory, not our glory or 
the glory of the institution or the glory of our identity as Christians or Catholics. That is 
not the point. That has often been the point, but ought not to be the point. The point is 
God’s glory.

“And to serving others”—serving others, not ruling others, not even teaching others, 
although teaching is a form of service, not controlling others, not dictating to others— 
serving others! That’s our prayer.

“It may stand before all peoples as the sacrament of your love.” That is the Church’s 
most profound desire. But it cannot ever be fulfilled unless it’s our desire, each 
individually, and as a parish, and as a diocese. We have to profoundly desire to be a 
sacrament of God’s love, not in the sentimental sense, not in the romantic sense, but in 
the true sense of agapic love, love that serves and love that accepts people without 
condition.

Now that is also the very basis of the sacrament of Matrimony—same thing. It is to be 
a sacrament of love. It is to reflect these very desires to serve others and to work for the 
glory of God.

So as we come together we pray for Marie and Ed and for their marriage. We pray for 
all the married couples in our parish, and we pray for our parish as a whole that we will 
be truly a sign of God’s presence, and that we will be a fulfillment of the Church’s 
own prayer.
Prayer Changes Us

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Prayer Changes Us  

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/A  

July 17, 2005  

7:00 a.m.

Wis 12:13, 16-19;  
Rom 8:26-27;  
Mt 13:24-43  

(Problems are opportunities to yield to God)

““The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings.”

This text is taken from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Both the Letter to the Romans and the Gospel of Matthew, the second and third readings this morning, ask us to focus our attention on the Church. This does not mean the institution. It does not mean our buildings or our staff. It does not mean St. Peter’s in Rome or the pope. It means the community of believers here and everywhere in the whole world joined together in communion by the Holy Spirit.

The readings point out a fact we all know but often may not allude to, that the Church, meaning the faithful, meaning ourselves, has many problems. The Church Jesus is talking about and the Church he died for is small in reference to the world. Do we think in those terms? He is acknowledging that the Church is small, like a mustard seed. It’s all mixed up in the world, just like yeast is mixed up in a lump of dough. Can you take a lump of dough apart and find the yeast? No you can’t. The Church is being infiltrated with evil—that’s what this parable is about—just as a field of wheat can fall prey to weeds. It’s just as easy for the Church to become infiltrated with evil as for weeds to grow in your garden—and that’s very easy!

But, of course, the underlying message is: not to worry—not to worry. Its smallness will not stop its growth. Its invisibility will not deny its influence. You cannot take dough apart and find the yeast, but you can see what the yeast is doing. And the infiltration of evil will not overcome it.
To all this St. Paul adds: weakness is actually better than strength. Some people call this insight “counter intuitive.” It means it goes against common sense. But he is saying it’s true anyway: weakness is better than strength, because in our weakness nothing less than the Spirit of God comes to our aid. We don’t know how to pray—no problem! The Spirit intercedes for us. The Spirit speaks in us and prays in us through inexpressible groanings. St. Paul says we do not know what to pray for or how to pray. That’s absolutely true. Maybe we should stop using words altogether and just groan. The Spirit intercedes with inexpressible groanings. Thus, in spite of our weaknesses, disorders, or problems, God is at work—provided, of course, we allow him to be at work. We do have to give him permission to enter into our area, into our personal domain, for we are free beings. As I have said many times, God never forces himself into our presence, into our souls.

So all of these problems, disorders, or weaknesses are just another example, another time, another chance, for us to trust in God, to let God, in fact, pray in us the prayer we don’t know how to make. These are just more chances to realize that holiness means yielding to God and letting God accomplish what God wants to accomplish. In other words, it means that we let God use us; we don’t try to use God. Prayer changes us; prayer does not change God!
At first reading it may seem that there is very little similarity between the first reading from the Book of Exodus and the second reading from the gospel, but if we look more closely we will see they closely parallel each other.

The point of the first reading is that Moses spoke to God and listened to God and received meaning and direction and guidance, but the vast majority of people did not. All they heard was thunder. All they saw was lightning and smoke—not very informative—not very informative!

In the gospel it is a very similar situation. The vast majority of the people stand on the outside. Jesus explains only to the inner circle of disciples the true meaning of the kingdom. The rest are excluded, not by divine election, but by their own obtuseness. They hear, but they don’t listen; they look, but they don’t see.

I am afraid the situation is simply part of human nature—in its present condition, anyway. We often are shown things, but we don’t see them. We are told things, but we don’t listen.

It takes a deeply seeking heart to really listen and to see what is, after all, manifest revelation. Once we begin this process, we can grow. Those who have, will receive more. But if we don’t begin this process, then the little we think we have will just go away. We cannot build anything on falseness. When we filter everything through our own point of view, there is something false there. We have to be willing to let go in order to hear, to see, to listen, to behold.
Seek God in Love, Not Fear    Memorial for St. Mary Magdalene    Friday, July 22, 2005
7:00 a.m.    Sng 3:1-4b;    Jn 20:1-2, 11-18    (An opportunity in our culture)

“On my bed at night I sought him whom my heart loves—I sought him but I did not find him.”

We live in a world, in a culture, for better or for worse. Some things about our culture actually may aid the fundamental purpose of living, and parts of our culture will actually hinder our basic reason for living.

Now in contrast to the present time, in the past people often respected God because they believed that God was actually making choices every day that affected them. For example, if it rained, they believed that God was choosing at that very moment to make it rain. Or if there was a drought, they thought that God had created that drought. In other words, they did not distinguish between a supernatural act of God and the natural flow of nature; so they might respect God without loving God.

Now today we live, in contrast, in a culture that doesn’t believe that God is doing anything! Some people don’t even believe there is a God at all because they focus only on the secondary causes. As we understand more about what makes it rain or what makes flowers grow or how conception occurs or what genes do, people say, “Well, we don’t need God any more.”

Now there may be something good in this, because now there is only one reason to seek God, and that reason is for the sake of love. That’s what this Song of Songs is about. “On my bed at night I sought him whom my heart loves—I sought him but I did not find him.” If you read the New Testament very carefully, we see that it’s often talking about seeking. That’s very different from simply respecting God because we are afraid of
him, but rather seeking God with our hearts; seeking God, the desire of our souls. This is a theme we see constantly in the lives of the saints, and **it needs to be a theme in our own lives—not respecting what we fear, but rather loving what we seek**, and recognizing that only God can fill the vast, infinite space of our souls; and that indeed is why we have been created.

So there is a benefit for us living at this particular time in history. But we might have one caution. **There is another aspect of our culture that is dangerous, and that is simply the belief, the assumption, the expectation, that whatever we desire will be ours. Well, that may not be true.** Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and the door shall be opened.
Years ago when I was visiting in San Diego, I took a tour of the Animal Park in Escondido, and one thing that I found rather remarkable was these sheep from the Middle East. When I looked at them, I thought to myself, well, they look like goats! In fact, how would one distinguish these sheep from goats? And I thought of this gospel reading, about the Son of Man discriminating between sheep and goats and separating them: one on his right and one on his left. Consulting some zoologists I have learned, however, that although these sheep look like goats, they don’t act like goats. There is a big difference between the behavior of sheep and goats. Sheep crop the grass. If you had any grass in your lawn, you could have a sheep and it would keep it nice and trim. But if you had a goat, the goat would not keep it nice and trim. It would rip it up, because when goats eat grass, the same food as sheep eat, they rip out the roots; therefore, they ruin all kinds of things.

Now this Jesus intended as a metaphor for human behavior. Some human beings come into this earth and they feed themselves and they care for themselves in such a way that they don’t destroy the earth or its bounty. They allow it to continue to grow and be useful to others, whereas other people come into this earth and they take what they need in such a way that they ruin the earth and its bounty so that no one else can ever use it. This is the difference between sheep and goats.

Jesus is saying that at the end of the world the Son of Man will divide all the nations of the earth one by one, person by person, into one of two categories. Either one lives with some sense of other people, the needs of other people, the rights of other people, and thereby lives in a righteous way, or one lives with no concern for other people, like a goat wrecking and destroying everything that lies outside of one’s own possessions and domain.
Now I believe that Jesus told this story because we need to know that there is a point to life in which all people are held accountable. Not only is it important for people to know that they are accountable in regard to their own moral life, but actually, I believe, that a free nation, a country of laws, needs people to know that they are accountable to something beyond the police and the courts and the lawmakers of their own particular country. Good order and the common good, which is really a blessing of the kingdom of heaven, does not really come from us. It is a gift from God. We cannot produce it by our good laws, but laws can reflect it. They can or they may not. Our courts cannot establish justice, but they can reflect it. Our police, our officers of government, cannot create of themselves good order; but they can reflect it. This means that ultimately good order depends upon a sense of the transcendent. Good government and good life depends upon a sense of the transcendent. That is the nature of sheep—not literally, but in this metaphor.

Now Frank was the kind of person who thought about other people. He was simple in his own way. He didn’t take what he didn’t need, and he was very willing to share with people worse off than himself. He was never wealthy. He was not a man of power. He was not a man of influence in the ordinary sense. But he was a man of power and he was a man of influence in this parish, and he did many good things. This parish is much blessed, has been much blessed, by Frank Lunga: by his presence, by his love, by his service, by his dedication.

One of the greatest problems today, in my judgment, is that people think that individuals like Frank cannot make much difference. This is a way they have of getting out of being responsible and accountable themselves. They just imagine that what they do isn’t going to matter, but it does. Frank was a witness to the gospel, to this gospel in particular. We all can learn from him.
Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.”

Political life in our country today and throughout the world is riven between various parties and factions, often seen as a contest between conservatism and liberalism—however people define that. According to many self-important pundits, the whole history of the earth hangs in the balance. Whoever wins the cultural wars will determine the future of our planet. Sometimes the Church itself is subject to the same kinds of tensions and, we might say, exaggerations as well.

Christ, on the other hand, was not concerned with cultural wars or, for that matter, with culture itself. He was concerned with something much deeper, grander, and more important than culture. He was concerned about something he called the “kingdom of heaven.” Now the kingdom of heaven does not mean something “elsewhere,” or “at some other time.” He is speaking about a present reality, present both in terms of place and time. And he is very concerned! He is concerned about people’s willingness and ability to perceive it and their willingness to enter into it. This kingdom of heaven, as it’s called, concerns life on earth, but is not bound in any way by the earth or its concerns. It affects morality, but it is much more than a mere morality. It exceeds all forms of law and norm. It is concerned with religion and religious behavior, but many religions have nothing to do with it. Jesus, although a great teacher, chooses not to clearly define what it is. He chooses not to clarify or describe in detail what he is talking about. It’s something people have to learn through their own experience, but he does stress its absolute importance—its absolute importance!

These three parables that he tells in today’s selection follow certain themes that may seem odd—perhaps they should seem odd! The first is that the value of the kingdom is such that one ought to risk everything to obtain it. Now this may be the language of business or the language of commerce, but it isn’t the thinking of business! Ask yourself: What merchant would ever invest all his capital in one pearl? It’s really absurd. Just so, the kingdom is just that kind of reality that requires this sort of absurd risking,
investment, involvement. Or who would ever put one’s entire capital into buying one field? Not a smart broker—never! But just so, the kingdom of heaven is just such a treasure that it requires this total commitment.

The point Jesus is making, of course, is that the kingdom, once we do discover it—and we have to discover it; we have to find it; nobody can give it to us; nobody can really describe it for us. We have to find it. But once we do find it, that itself puts an unreasonable demand on us! He wonders: Are people going to really respond to this unreasonable demand?—that, incidentally, is proportionate to the unreasonable love God has for his people, for his creation, the unreasonable love that the shepherd has for that one sheep. It’s the same kind of unreasonableness that is being discussed. Or will we decide to diversify: put a little bit of attention, a little bit of importance, on what we discover, but hedge our bets? According to Christ, that is not going to work!

Secondly, although the kingdom is certainly present in this present age at this present time, in this very place, it is nonetheless buried and disguised and is at a beginning stage. Therefore, it calls for “venture capitalism”! Again, a willingness to take risks!

At the end of time, Jesus makes very clear; God will separate the good from the evil, the wicked from the righteous—but not now. Now the kingdom is all a hodge-podge, just like a net is dragged through the sea. That’s the way the kingdom is in this world at this time. Some people are sincere; some people are not sincere. Some people will persevere; some people will not persevere. The point is: it’s not our problem. No one here has been appointed, no one on earth has been appointed to separate the good from the bad. It’s not the Church’s job. It’s not the pope’s job. It’s not the bishops’ job or theologians’ job or anybody’s job to separate good from evil. Separating the good from the evil is the work of God. Redemption is God’s work, and judgment is God’s work.

What is crucial for the listeners of these parables is to find the kingdom, and then to spare nothing in acquiring it: to risk everything, but to worry about nothing; to be concerned about our own commitment, but not to be concerned about anybody else’s commitment. This is the way for a scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven.
Prayer Leads to Transformation
Feast of St. James, apostle  Monday, July 25, 2005
7:00 a.m.  2 Cor 4:7-15;  Mt 20:20-28  (A slow process)

This gospel passage is a beautiful passage on the topic of prayer and the related issue of transformation. When we come to the Lord in prayer, if we are truly open, we become transformed—not necessarily all at once. Our lives have to go through certain stages. We cannot skip over these stages. So everything at its proper time, but we do undergo transformations.

However, in this relationship of prayer we are supposed to listen as well as speak. The mother of the sons of Zebedee did not know how to listen. She heard Jesus announce the kingdom, and she assumed he meant something very different from what he meant. We have to be careful at our own praying that we don’t jump to conclusions and make assumptions about the will of God based on something that has really nothing to do with God at all.

We are born into the world with certain assumptions. I shouldn’t say that—we pick them up as we live in this world. Don’t forget the great temptation in the garden of Eden: to know good and evil. We really don’t know good and evil. God has to teach us good and evil. That’s part of our growing process. We often shrink from things that are good, and we want things that are not good. Only God can teach us what is truly good for us—stage by stage, step by step—as we slowly grow toward the kingdom. On the way, of course, we can be waylaid by various forces, including our own ego, our own egoism, our own pride.

Now the apostles, who were very close to Jesus, were not free from this. They were very indignant. Of course, what caused their indignation was the same thing that
caused James and John and their mother to push them forward: a very false idea of what it means to be first. As we pray for our success in the Lord and our attainment of all the good things God wants for us, we have to be careful of misunderstanding what that means. Ultimately, wanting to be first is fine, according to Jesus. He was not like the Buddha that said to just stop wanting. No, he says to go ahead and want, want the best, want the greatest; but then be willing to learn what it really means. He himself incorporated this idea, that to be the greatest means to be the servant of all. That is his life and his example.
“His disciples approached him and said, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.’”

In the New Testament, and sometimes throughout the Bible, metaphors are used in different ways. They are used and reused. Now this metaphor of the seed could refer, and sometimes refers, to the gospel. The gospel is a message planted in people. It grows or it doesn’t. That’s one way of looking at the seed.

In this particular section, the seed is not the gospel. The seed is a metaphor for people. We might think about that. It is a rather profound idea that everyone is a seed. Seeds grow and germinate and become something very different from a seed. So what we observe in ourselves is not our true nature anymore than you could say the true nature of an acorn is to be an acorn. No, the true nature of an acorn is really an oak tree locked inside. So our true nature is locked inside. It isn’t really manifest yet.

Now, of course, acorns have no choice but to develop into oak trees, if they develop at all; and isn’t a matter of choice for them. But for human beings it’s a matter of choice. We can choose to be children of God or, according to this reading, we can choose to be children of the evil one. We can choose to allow the powers of good to manifest themselves in us and to bear fruit, or we can choose otherwise.

A life of self-centeredness is really a life in which we are developing into a child of the devil. If you study when Jesus uses that expression, it’s very specific: people who live by lies, who aren’t open to the truth. Deception is the key to understanding what the evil one does. The evil one deceives. The evil one is the father of lies. So truth is from
God. Truth is God; God is truth. **Jesus is talking about how we can develop truthfully, honestly, authentically.** Another word for this is humbly, since **humility is an aspect of truth.**

Today we celebrate the memorial of Joachim and Anne, the parents of Mary, the grandparents of Jesus. They were humble people, truthful people. Why did God choose Mary or Joachim or Anne or anybody else? Because they were humble. They were often flawed. I’m not saying Joachim and Anne were flawed. But many of the people in the stories of the Scripture were flawed people. But they had one thing going for them: they were honest. David was very flawed, but he admitted he was flawed. So this is the important thing: honesty, authenticity, truthfulness.

**Hypocrisy** is the other side. It’s pretending. That leads nowhere. Many forms of holiness are hypocritical. They are pretentious. They are false. **Falseness leads nowhere.**

**Truthfulness leads to the development and elaboration of what is within us.** What is within us by God’s own choice is the image of God. **Every one of us is created as the image of God.** It is our work on earth to **make sure that that truthful seed, that truthful image, sprouts and grows**—it is not supplanted by anything else.
As we read from the Book of Exodus, we might get nothing out of it unless we take into consideration what it’s really talking about. It is not written by a nineteenth, twentieth, or twenty-first century historian! It’s purpose is not to talk about what happened as much as it is trying to talk about the experience of God that the people of God had centuries before Christ.

Now this book, Exodus—the word means “exit.” Exiting is fundamental to a spiritual life. If we are ever to experience God deeply, we have to make a separation from the world as we are born into it. The Hebrews were born into Egypt. They had to leave Egypt in order to experience God. That’s the first principle of the Book of Exodus.

Secondly, there is a great deal of wandering going on, not necessarily forty years; that’s just a long time, a lot of years. If you think of forty years in terms of a person’s life, it means a large part, a great part, of a person’s life is wandering. This is not simply a statement about something that happened thousands of years ago. It’s a statement about us. In our lives a great deal of our life, a large portion of our life, is spiritual wandering.

Thirdly, God was with them in all points, but they were frequently quite unaware—frequently unaware! In this particular story it talks to us in a rather bizarre way about a cloud that would settle over the tent of meeting. Now the point is this: that in wandering in life—and life is a journey, so it requires wandering—we have to be aware of the guidance that is given to us. If we are not aware of the guidance, we won’t know
the difference between our need to stay put and our need to get going. That’s what the cloud told them. When the cloud settled over the tent, it meant stay put.

Now what really did happen and how they interpreted this, I do not know. But the meaning is at times in order to follow God you have to stay put. At other times in order to follow God you have to get going. You have to break camp and move. Sometimes when it is time to move, we don’t want to move; we want to stay put. Sometimes when we should stay put, when we need to stay put, we don’t want to stay put; we want to go. But when we go when we are supposed to stay put, we just go in circles. Actually, if you ever look at a map in which the journey of the Israelites is described or put in points, it is actually a big circle! They wandered in a circle for forty years.

That is a metaphor for our experience. The important thing is to learn from each point how God is directing us, and to what point and to what goal God directs us.

Sometimes they saw fire at night. Sometimes we see fire at night, but then we forget about it when we awake.

In the Greek Church, when we read the word of God, especially the gospel, the priest begins by saying, “Wisdom, be attentive.”
“Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.”

The Christian Church has always recognized the virtue of hospitality. It is also important to note that the Christian Church has always recognized the importance of work. So this story should not be taken to mean that prayer is better than work, which some people have said.

But hospitality has two sides to it. First of all there are the details of meals and beverages when one is entertaining someone. But much more important is being present to that person. That’s the better part of hospitality. We need to keep that in mind as we work in life. Yes, our job is important; but the better part is to be available. This is an openness of the heart. This is where Christian work becomes Christian. This is where Christian work becomes evangelization, when there is an openness. If there is no openness, there is no message. Sometimes our speakers have picked up radio signals. Well, they are still there, but we have shielded the wires so they won’t pick them up. When we are really open, we unshield our own wires and we pick up the message that is coming from another person; and we are able to communicate and share. That’s the better part of work. We have to keep that in mind.

The other part is Martha tended to get going without thinking and preparing. That’s why she was anxious about many things. Our work will not be fruitful in a deep spiritual way if we begin it without preparation, because without preparation naturally the concerns of the world make us anxious. However, when we begin with a certain kind of prayerful preparation, we can proceed without undue anxiety, letting the Lord be with us consciously.
This morning’s reading from the Book of Leviticus may not strike you as being very relevant, but it witnesses to the requirements of justice, which run throughout the Old and the New Testaments. It is true that the requirements of justice are tempered with mercy and comfort in the Old Testament and transcended by the requirements of transformation in the New Testament, but they cannot be ignored.

God requires people to live in justice. The idea here is that in the beginning God apportioned to every tribe a certain amount of property. That property became their inheritance through all generations. They could sell it, but it was only a lease. It was not fee-simple, what we call “fee-simple” in modern law. They could not actually sever their relationship to it because God had given it; God gave them the relationship to the land. So on the year after the Jubilee you could lease your property for forty-nine years, ten years later for thirty-nine, ten years after that for twenty-nine years. But you could only lease it; you could not get rid of it. The reason for this is very simple. Some people are simply better than others at business. They are more aggressive. They are more successful. And some people just have better luck. However, that does not mean that some people should be allowed to accumulate everything they can and pass it on to their heirs forever and ever and ever. This says there has to be a check brought in so that the aggressive will not rule the world. We should not think of that as archaic!
Jesus’ Lens of Abundance  Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/A   July 31, 2005
5:00 p.m.   Is 55:1-3;   Rom 8:35, 37-39;   Mt 14:13-21 (Our role in something new)

“Jesus said to them, ‘There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves.’”

We all know that food is central to life: we depend upon it. Food is also basic to worship. Imagine yourself living in the tail end of the last ice age. There were no farms. There were no flocks, so to speak, only herds of wild animals on the tundra. Capturing a reindeer or some other animal related to the deer family was the only source of nourishment. Imagine the feelings of a tribe or a group whose scouts and hunters were successful at landing such a beast. Then you understand the meaning of the word “gratitude” in its most basic sense and therefore the word “Eucharist,” that we use for our meal here—the same basic thinking, meaning, feeling.

Now people in the ancient times thanked God and praised God in a ritual way. This is the beginning of what we call “sacrifice.” It means making holy, rendering holy, or dedicating to the holy. They would cook the meat, but they would acknowledge that this was a gift from God. And as they praised and thanked God for the gift, they also asked for another one when that one was gone. So the basic parts of prayer and sacrifice go that far back and are that simple. We need to eat. Food is a gift. When we receive the gift, we are grateful, but we are also emboldened to petition for more, because we are totally dependent upon God. That in a nutshell is primitive religion.

In some respects we don’t need to improve on it much. We need to realize its authentic truthfulness and spirit. Well, Jesus did. As a member of a religion that had become very developed and had elaborated all kinds of other religious practices, he was often trying to call people back to the original intention, intent, meaning, and purpose of these various rituals and ceremonies.

Related to this whole idea, expressed in the Law and the Prophets that Jesus learned as a young lad, was the idea that God had created earth in order to produce abundance for everybody. The Law of Jubilee was a way in which everyone was given a certain portion of land and could not even sell it. They could only lease it away for the maximum of fifty years. Why? It belonged to them and their posterity. They couldn’t really get rid of it forever. They could only lease it away temporarily. God wills for all people to prosper as a fundamental principle in the Law and the Prophets. Jesus did not argue with that. He accepted that. When people are hungry, according to the Bible, those who have food are required to share in compassion: “‘Be holy as I am holy,’ saith the Lord.” That’s the Book of Leviticus. God is compassion, so be compassionate as I am compassionate, saith the Lord. That’s a gloss on the first text.

Now we know in our world today, as well as throughout time, periodic starvation does happen. It’s a tragedy, but it does happen. It happens because of the ravages of nature, as today in Niger, where especially children are dying in the hundreds of thousands because...
of a drought that has lasted for a great, long time. However, **persistent want and grinding poverty is an offense against the divine order.** That is a basic principle of Torah. Jesus learned this from his mother and his foster father. No one has ever disputed this in the tradition of Abraham. For this reason, for example, almsgiving was always a very noble and holy work of the Torah. **Alleviating hunger and poverty are not only a matter of charity, but really a matter of justice.**

Today’s story reflects just such a concern. People are hungry, and there does not seem to be enough food to feed them all. The disciples come up with the harebrained suggestion: “Send them away. Let them go to the villages.” Well, what are they going to do in the villages? They didn’t have restaurants! It was late in the day. Jesus says, “Don’t send them away. Feed them yourselves. Give them something.” They said, “We don’t have enough. What are two fish and five loaves for so many?” But the real question is: What is enough? That’s what this parable is asking. What is enough? You have to ask it for yourself in our own lives. **What is enough for you?** When do you have enough? If you don’t ask that question, you are not really following Christ. **You have to ask that question. What is enough?**

The disciples, like most of us, were looking at life through the lens of scarcity. It’s a trap. **The lens of scarcity is a trap. It goes against the word of God.** Jesus did not look at life through the lens of scarcity. He looked at life through the word of God and the lens of abundance. This is faith. It’s not only prayer; it’s faith. It’s more than prayer. It’s an operative belief that God is providing—not has, but is now providing for all. It is belief in the living God, not in a watchmaker that made the universe centuries ago or millennia ago or eons ago, but a God who is now providing. That is Jesus’ faith. That is Christian faith. This means that we have to use what we have and recognize “with God are all possibilities.” That may seem a little overconfident, but Jesus said it. “With God are all possibilities.” That’s a profound thought.

Now we see Jesus did not fabricate a meal out of thin air, and Jesus did not turn stones into bread! In fact, that’s what the devil tempted him to do, if you recall after his baptism. No, he relied on the offerings that someone presented to him, little though they seemed to be, because of his belief in God. This is meant to convince those who were there and those who hear the story that God does not establish his kingdom without human participation. We are not called on to be passive recipients of divine favors or what we might call miracles. In fact, the coming of Jesus is a new stage in the history of the world, a gathering of people to participate with God in something new—the **kingdom of God,** which is much greater than the original creation itself, and contains much more profound blessings for human life than the original creation itself.

From this point of view, we have to come to the conclusion that the **world cannot change until we change.** The world is a mess—that’s true. It is not going to change by some sort of intervention from above. God is the source of all goodness—that’s true. It’s already here. It’s among us. It’s in us. It’s part of what we are. **We are the blessing, the greatest blessing God has produced. Now are we going to straighten out, so to speak, the world, bringing peace and harmony and sufficiency to all?** That’s Jesus’ plan.
That’s the kingdom plan. We have to realize that if we don’t let go of our barley loaves and our little fish, God will have nothing to work with, because that’s his plan: to involve us in the creation of something new, a new creation, the kingdom of heaven—not somewhere else, not some time else, but now! All that God does he does in the ever-present now. There is no past or future for God. Indeed, Christ speaks volumes in his gestures, and he brings together what no one may put asunder: worship, gratitude, justice, and mercy. It is this we celebrate at the breaking of the bread and the gathering of the fragments.
Today we have the story of Jesus walking on the waters, and I believe it’s itself a metaphor. Once I did a study of this at Loyola, and the teacher thought I was crazy—so take that into consideration when you are listening to what I am saying.

What does it mean to walk on water? In my view this is a metaphor for being aware of oneself in one’s sensations, emotions, and desires. We are driven, human life is driven, animated, you might say, by the principle, the soul, the human soul, that provides us experience. We do experience all kinds of things—basically three: sensation, emotion, desire—but without usually any sense of our being aware of ourselves doing this, so we become our experience. We become our fear. We become our pain. We become our pleasure. We become our desire. This is natural; it’s the state of affairs that we are born into. This is what I believe St. Paul calls the “flesh.” It’s a state without self-awareness. It’s a condition without being aware of oneself.

What I think walking on the water refers to is another possibility: that we actually can be aware of ourselves. Being aware of ourselves raises us above the waves and the turmoil of our sensations, which include our pains and our pleasures, our desires and our emotions. Jesus is trying to say, “Well, you can do this too.” This is something that has to be a willful desire, choice, decision that we make in life. It has to be preceded by or accompanied with prayer. Where was Jesus coming from? He was coming from prayer. That’s why he could do this. The point I think that the gospel is trying to make is that even Jesus had to pray, or he would have been tossed about as well in the same experiences that tossed about the disciples.
“Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.”

Theology is subject to fashion, just like clothes or architecture. The fashion of the last few years has been to tone down statements like this in the gospel because allegedly they lead to anti-Semitism or are the cause of some traditional, historic anti-Semitism. Well, that’s one interpretation. I think it is the wrong one, or a wrong one!

What Jesus is saying has nothing to do with Jews in particular but, rather, with religious leadership. Religious leadership can be the blind leading the blind, whether you are talking about Jews, Catholics, Methodists, Muslims, whatever! It is not only possible, but it is actually often the case where religious leadership is the blind leading the blind.

Now in this case, when we have the blind leading the blind, the fault lies with both the blind and the blind! That’s Jesus’ point. If the blind are leading the blind, it’s the fault of both of them. Part of our responsibility is discernment. That word comes up from time to time, the sword of discrimination. Remember Jesus talking about the sword that divides father from son and mother from daughter. That’s the sword of discrimination. We are expected to wield the sword of discrimination. We are supposed to know the difference between a blind leader and one with vision.

In the Old Testament Miriam didn’t know the difference between a true prophet and a false one, not that there necessarily was a Miriam, I don’t know, but that’s the story about this situation that can exist where people don’t know—don’t know the difference between a true leader and a bad one! They don’t know the difference between someone
who is really talking to them from God and someone who is just babbling nonsense. This is not simply historically relevant; it’s relevant right now.

There are people today who are just babbling ideas that have nothing to do with God at all, but a lot of people are following devotedly. This is something Jesus is talking about here. He says, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.” This is not anti-Semitism. This is speaking about religion that is not really rooted in God. There is lots of it, and it has many different labels. People use all kinds of different ways of rationalizing it. But this remains—the word of God.
When we experience a death, certain doors are opened in our souls. But when we experience a death of a child, this also pushes certain buttons within us that are often dusty from misuse or nonuse, buttons that question, buttons that confuse. For centuries the wisest of men and women have questioned what they call the “problem of evil,” by which they really mean the problem of **why do the innocent suffer**, and no one is more innocent than a child. Jesus remarked that sometimes children understand things adults don’t. “I praise you, Lord, Father of heaven and earth, because you have revealed to the merest children what you have hidden from the learned and the clever.”

Now you may consider William Shakespeare learned and clever, but he wasn’t really learned at all. He was ridiculed in his own day because of his lack of education, but he had **deep spiritual insights into reality**. One thing he said was, “All’s well that ends well.” That is not meant to be a glib end to a play. That is a profound insight into life. All is well that ends well. Our problem is we don’t see how things are ending, the whole picture. **We only know our little part**, and not all of that. So we become confused. We cannot answer the problem in words of why do the innocent suffer, but we do know this: that **God entered into our life as the innocent one who also bore suffering**, not to answer the question, but to enter into the mystery, because life is a mystery we have to live; it is not a problem we can solve and explain.

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, is remarking that in his opinion **what we suffer now in the present time is nothing as compared to the glory to be revealed**. He is looking at the bigger picture. He is looking at life through the lens of Christ himself, the Christ who came and bore all the sufferings of life.

But we could say more even than St. Paul as more particularly about little Maeve. Here was a girl who was born with a weak heart and many problems ensued. But what did she do? She **bravely fought for life**. I think we need to look at that because sometimes we think our bravery or our courage or our ability to endure is something that comes from us that we have made up or talked ourselves into. It isn’t. We are born with it. In this way Maeve is a very special revelation, although all life is a revelation of a kind, but Maeve a special one—and other children like her who suffer so much—because she is revealing to us something about ourselves, our true fiber, our true strength that is inborn.

We might make as a goal for our own lives that we have the same kind of courage that Maeve showed instinctively, naturally. The real problem is, **as we grow older we talk ourselves out of the instinctive blessings and strengths that we have**. We need to think about that. Maeve can be our teacher.
Something else—it is also my experience over a long period of time, my observations of life as a priest, that the suffering of others can produce a remarkable response in other people, a heroic willingness to serve, a truly graced compassion, in which human beings actually become just like God in their ability to suffer with and support and embrace. That is exactly what God does for all of humanity in Christ.

Paula and Aaron found themselves doing that for their daughter. That called forth from them something they didn’t know they had—I’ll bet! And that’s another gift. It’s a gift of divinizing because, as the Fathers of the Church teach, God becomes human so that we can become divine. The essence of divinity is compassion, which is literally “suffering with.”

As we look around our world, we can see many ills. The answer to all of them is compassion. Compassion is an energy that comes from God, that actually created us and brings all things together. It heals all wounds in the wholeness of time, not at any one particular second, but in the wholeness of time. In this way the world is better for Maeve having been here. She has brought compassion to a greater intensity in the lives of certain people. We should not despise this service that she has offered.

All of this goes beyond human reason as ordinary sense, and surely what modern people call “rationality.” But there are choices we make in life, how we look at life. St. Paul chose to look at life through the lens of Christ and to see present situations and problems and evils and difficulties as nothing in comparison to the glory that would come. Most modern people don’t look at things that way. Charles Darwin, for example, looked at life as nothing but a cruel hoax. We choose ourselves how we look at life, and in that itself we are making a statement about who we shall become.

Maeve can help us all become the very greatest person we can. So we come grateful to her, and we acknowledge that our gratitude is tinged with other conflicting emotions: grief, sorrow, anger, relief—they are all part of life. They are all okay as long as over all of them we put on love, and we let compassion form us in the Spirit of Christ.

So our hearts go out to Paula and Aaron on this day, and hopefully next week and next month and for a long time, that they never feel alone, and that what you have expressed by coming here this morning you may live out in friendship and support and love.
Growth Requires Movement

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Growth Requires Movement  Eighteenth Week in Ordinary Time  Thursday, August 4, 2005  7:00 a.m.  Nm 20:1-13; Mt 16:13-23  (St. John Mary Vianney)
(Separation from the comfort of bondage)

This morning we may take a moment to reflect on the reading from the Book of Numbers. This is part of what is called the “murmuring tradition.” Murmuring is an old word for griping, the tradition of griping that is recorded in the Old Testament; there is quite a bit of it.

The origin of the griping, of course, is looking back. The whole story of Exodus is a story of separation: God separates the people from their original place, Egypt. Egypt symbolizes a life of bondage, and yet also, oddly, a life of comfort. Comfort and bondage go together; often we don’t see this. The real reason people don’t break away from what binds them, what enslaves them, is that it gives them a certain comfort. Therefore the first rule of redemption is separation or departure. Literally that is what Exodus means; it means “departure, separation, get away from what enslaves you, what binds you, what controls you.”

We see here, however, there is a great deal of resistance to this idea of separation. “Oh, if we were only back, we would have all that wonderful food; we would have all this; we would have all that.” So people can be very comfortable in their bondage, but it’s still not good for them. We are not put on earth to be comfortable. We are put on earth to grow. Growing requires movement, and it has got to be a movement away from all the things that enslave us, not only substances, as we might talk about physical addictions, but behaviors and feelings and emotions and thoughts that are fundamentally negative and controlling and uninformed and unenlightened. But people don’t necessarily welcome this at all. That’s where the griping traditions come in. So they complain.
Moses is not free from that either. He complains. He doesn’t complain about the food. He doesn’t complain about the journey. He **complains about the people that he is leading**: “God, why did you give me these people? What did I ever do to you to deserve this kind of a job?” The same negativity, just on a different level!

So the result is here that **God is angry**. Now we shouldn’t think of this as God being angry at their griping as much as angry **at their lack of appreciation of the importance of what’s going on**: their journeying, their leaving Egypt, the help he was giving them toward something far better called the “promised land”—not necessarily to be identified merely with a geographical place.

At the end it says, “Because you were not faithful to me in showing forth my sanctity before the children of Israel, you shall not lead this community into the land I will give them.” This was a punishment of Moses himself. How was he unfaithful? It doesn’t really say. Maybe it was because he joined in the griping himself.

So in our lives, in our journeys to the Lord, we have to realize sometimes **we do have to separate, and that is not comfortable**; that is not pleasurable, but we are not here for comfort and pleasure. **We are here for growth and development.** We have to keep in mind that **we are on our way somewhere else.** This is not our home.
“Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

The sad thing is there are only some who see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom before they taste death—would that all could! But this experience is not simply a matter of gift or grace; it is also a matter of what are we prepared for. I spoke recently of the theme of separation, the whole idea of the Exodus: separating from life as it is given to us, recognizing that we are on a journey to somewhere else—that “where” not necessarily being geographical. You could say we are on a journey to somewhere else in ourselves. That somewhere else Jesus calls the “kingdom.”

Some take the journey; some don’t. Some listen to the Lord and allow him to direct them, waiting when they are supposed to wait, moving when they are supposed to move, pitching camp when they are supposed to pitch camp, breaking camp when they are supposed to break camp—other people, no. They don’t listen. They don’t follow. They stay where it is comfortable. They move when it is uncomfortable. They are not listening to the voice of the Lord; therefore, they never see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. They don’t prepare themselves to see it, and, unfortunately, maybe this is the majority who don’t prepare themselves, who don’t live in this separation.

Now we have the whole Old Testament telling about how people don’t stay kosher; they don’t maintain separation from the impure, unjust, and disordered world around them, the world of the nations: the Goyim. It is very difficult to live in the world and not be of it. Jesus says that it’s like dying! If you want to follow him, that’s really what you have to do. You have to actually “deny yourself, take up your cross”—the cross, don’t forget, is an instrument of execution—“and follow me.” Those who do, eventually come to see.
There are a few points that we might make as we reflect on this story of the Transfiguration of Christ.

The first is that the apostles were delighted when they saw the vision of God’s glory shining through the body of Christ. But they were terrified when they heard the voice of God speak to them. It is not because the voice said anything terrifying! But this reflects something ambivalent within the human heart: we are drawn to God and yet afraid; we are fascinated by the presence of God and yet fear.

Precisely what was the message of the voice? It was: “Listen to him.” Listening is so important, but that’s what we don’t want! We want to see! Now St. Paul reflecting on the life of faith says, “We don’t walk by sight. We walk by faith.” Faith requires listening. It may not be so fascinating. It may be more challenging or frightening, but it’s very important to listen to the voice of God.

Now the second point is that it was not really Jesus who changed on the mountain. The glory of God was always within him; in fact, he is Light from Light. What changed was the perception of the disciples. Suddenly their eyes were unveiled and they saw into reality. They saw what had always been true, but what their own—what we call “our normal senses”—do not pick up. We have to keep this in mind: our senses don’t pick up reality. What we see, what we hear, what we touch, what we feel, is shallow and superficial in contrast to the depth of reality—the second point.

The third point is that this same glory shines in the soul of every person who is living in sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace is defined as being in the state pleasing to God.
That’s what the voice said: “This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased.” But God is well pleased in all people, in all his children, when they abide in sanctifying grace. Of course, abiding in sanctifying grace and pleasing God is the same thing. It requires an openness to what God wants, to God’s will, to God’s purpose, to God’s plan, and therefore to God’s voice.

We go through life and we are unaware of the beauty that shines through the living saints around us and within ourselves, too. These little stories are given to us so that our eyes also may be opened.
“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

We have heard this story many times, the story of Jesus walking on the water; however, I am afraid we miss the point more often than not. The evangelist is not concerned about the literal meaning of Jesus walking on water. Is it possible? Yes, it has been recorded in many times and places where saints and shamans can levitate. But that’s not important. It was not important to the evangelist. He wants to tell us something much more practical. He is giving us a teaching on faith and prayer, and that’s where we need to focus.

The first point is that Jesus has gone up on the mountain, again, symbolic of a higher place in himself. In each of us there are high places and low places, places where we are closer to God and more aware of ourselves and the creation, and we are part of the whole, and other places where we are small and isolated and petty and evil. Jesus went up to the high place, to the mountain, to pray, to be with the Father. That’s where he was.

The disciples, meanwhile, are in a boat. The important point is they were not praying. It’s not because one cannot pray in a boat, but they weren’t. They weren’t praying in the boat, and because they were not praying in the boat they became tossed about by all the currents in the water. This represents exactly our lives a great deal of the time. We are tossed about by our emotions, our sensations, our desires, our experiences. We become our pain. We become our fear, and then there’s no one home.

Well, Jesus was home on the high place in prayer with the Father. He approached the disciples. The point the evangelist is making is Jesus’ ability to be in the presence of the Father is not something unique to him. It’s something he shares with all of his sisters and brothers. He says to Peter, “Peter, you can come to me. You too can walk above the waves and the turmoils of life.” Peter believed him at first. At first Peter gets up and moves toward Jesus unassailed by the currents and the winds. But then he thought, O my God, this is ridiculous! How could this be happening? This is impossible! So he sank.

It is very easy for us to forget the real reason why God came into our world in the person of Jesus. As the Fathers of the Church always say: “God became human so that human beings could become divine”—not losing our humanity, but living our humanity to the full: having experiences, but not being run by them; experiencing sensations and emotions and pleasures and pains, but not controlled by them. This is what Jesus offered to Peter, but Peter sank. Jesus says, “Why did you have so little faith? Why did you doubt?” It all starts with faith, but it has to go beyond even faith. It has to go to prayer. Prayer without faith is useless, but faith without prayer won’t take us very far, as we see with poor Peter. If you excuse the pun, even his faith petered out!
Now this is a teaching that reflects what St. Paul refers to when he calls our experience the “flesh.” Some people think that sounds horrible, but it means a life without awareness of who we are. **We are created to be images of God, not driven by life, but driving life; not beset in a sea of troubles, but rising above them; walking, as it were, above the turmoil.** This is a possibility given to us in Christ. **It requires faith and prayer.** We have to keep in mind even Jesus, Son though he was, had to pray! That’s what this gospel is trying to tell us: **even Jesus had to pray!**

We do not understand our need for prayer. We think we are praying when we say a prayer: “Hail Mary, Our Father.” That isn’t necessarily praying. **Prayer is being in the presence of God: quietly, serenely, listening as much as talking.** Jesus said, “When you pray, don’t rattle on like the pagans.” What does that mean? It means not listening. **Half of your prayer time should be listening,** like Elijah. Elijah found God in a gentle, soft whisper. We often think God is in the rending of the rocks. God is not in the rending of the rocks or the acts of nature all around us, which Elijah discovered. God is in the quiet whisper. We have to learn to **listen attentively to hear the voice, which will not shout.** That’s what Isaiah said about the Messiah. “He shall come. A bruised reed he shall not break. A smoldering wick he shall not quench. Not shouting out.” So we have to listen: breathing and waiting. We have to wait because God isn’t interested in our schedule. God lives outside of time. We may feel pressed by time, but God is not pressed by time. We may feel we have to do all kinds of things in a short period of time, but that has nothing to do with reality. **We have to learn how to wait: listen, breathe—wait!**

Now nature does not require us to do this. There is absolutely no reason why you have to do any of this. It’s a pure option. Nature does not require any faith. Nature does not require any prayer. You can throw it away and still live in this world, and maybe thrive in a certain sense. But you will never discover the purpose for your existence, and you will never attain the true reason for your being created. **Nothing can force anybody to pray**—even fear. Regardless of what you have heard about men in foxholes, even war does not require prayer.

But, on the other hand, nature is so created by God so that **those who seek do find**—not the very second they seek. We have to spend a lifetime seeking, but we will find. **Those who knock, do find the door opened**—not at the first knock. **God rewards persistence in prayer.** So we spend a lifetime knocking, the door opens eventually. Those who seek, do find. It is the very nature of the creation itself that it does respond to prayer. But we have to keep in mind how important it is to pray, and to **put discipline into our lives, and real time in our week for the Lord.**
Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Dominic. St. Dominic was probably one of the two or three most notable men of the Church in the entire Middle Ages. He was born in the twelfth century, which was not exactly a very pleasant time for Christianity in general, for the Church. In the East, Islam was growing at a terrific rate, pressing in on former Christian lands and peoples, despoiling them and converting them to Islam. Around this time, or slightly before, all of North Africa disappeared from Christendom. Spain had been occupied for a long time, although in Dominic’s day already Christians were pushing more to the south. France had already been invaded by Islam.

Worst of all, within Europe itself there was a very strong and violent heresy known as Albigensianism, which was life-denying. Albigensianism was a form of Christianity that denied the goodness of life on earth. It was a “pie in the sky” type of religion. It believed only in the goodness of heaven, not the goodness of earth. It promoted abortion. It promoted suicide. It discouraged childbirth. It was completely anti-life.

Dominic made it his basic vocation in life or his basic mission in life to convert the Albigensians. And how did he do it? He went about it by being a joyful person, first and foremost. After all, Christianity is all about the good news—the good news—the goodness of life. If we are going to be ambassadors of Christ, we have to be people who believe in the goodness of life. That was his basic logic. He was very much like St. Francis of Assisi, although much more intellectual. He was a man of joy. That’s how the people of his time thought of him. Others wanted to join with him; so he formed an order, a community, that became known as the “Dominicans.” Actually, he called them the “Order of Friars Preachers.” But first and foremost, they preached with the way they lived: simplicity and joy. That is something we might keep in mind if we want to be ambassadors and missionaries and evangelists in an age that is also marked with anti-life beliefs.
“Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Like many of Jesus’ sayings, this has been often misinterpreted, especially by those who think it means that, for example, learning is of no use, or who think it means that being childish is desirable, or worse, that no growth is really expected. That is, of course, not the meaning of this text. The key is found later on: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones.” What’s behind this is a belief that God is identified with power, and this is one of the greatest problems in the history of our world; going way back centuries, God is identified with power. This, Jesus is saying, is wrong.

Even in his own religion it was often this way. That is one reason why the Jewish people were so confused and so beside themselves with the condition in which they, the chosen people, were dominated by a foreign power. How could this be—how could this be? If God is power, how could a foreign power, not God, actually rule over them, the chosen ones? They never could figure this out. They produced all kinds of literature, the general point of which is: well, it’s just for a moment; it’s just for a time; it’s a trial; it’s a test. But Jesus’ answer is very different. God is not identified with power in the first place. God did not give Rome the power to dominate Palestine. It isn’t from God in the first place. God is not in charge of the world. Human beings are in charge of the world. Human beings have free will. Going back to the Book of Genesis, God gave Adam dominion over the earth—that’s power. As it were, God has surrendered dominion to mankind, and, of course, it has been abused.
Jesus has come now from God, but in the human nature, to set things right, to be that man who is really acceptable to God, to be that man who is completely childlike in innocence, who is completely childlike in obedience—not to other people, but to God—to be that man who is completely open to God’s will in a way that simply is not earthly. That’s what the kingdom of heaven is about. It’s about the rule that does not come from power, in the ordinary sense, the rule of God that comes in some other way, the way Jesus himself manifests it. We can only come into that power, that rule, that reign, if we let everything else go.
“So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart.”

Jesus knew that telling stories about God was a sticky business. He had been brought up in a tradition that forbade graven images. Graven images mean images in stone or in wood. But graven images in stone or wood are only half the problem. Underlying that problem, the problem of idolatry, are mental images, which are like graven ones because we become so used to a way of thinking, so unwilling to think differently about what really matters. So we can actually commit idolatry in a mental sense, worshipping images of God that aren’t really true, pictures of God that are not really revelatory.

Yet we have to use something. Jesus used images, for example, of Daddy. He said that was a good one. What other ones does Jesus use? If you notice, he is very cautious about hinting or intimating something that might prove wrong in the long run or that people could misunderstand easily.

So here he is talking about a parable. He is not really saying God is this master. But he is saying there is one aspect of this master’s behavior that is fitting. But it does not actually reveal God’s nature so much as it reveals something about the whole creation, which is really the point anyway. We have to learn how to live in this world. We have to learn how to behave. We have to learn how to choose. We have to learn what real values are. That’s what matters.

He is saying that here is a way of thinking about God in which God will not grant forgiveness to people who themselves will not be forgiving. He says that just like this,
God is this way. God is love. God is compassion. That’s even in the Old Testament:

“God is compassion and mercy.” But Jesus’ point is this: yes, God is compassionate and merciful; however, to know compassion and mercy, you have to be open to compassion and mercy, you have to be willing to practice compassion and mercy. You can’t have it for yourself and not want to share it, of its very nature—of its very nature!

Jesus is really trying to get people to think about who God is, about what kind of world we are living in. What, therefore, are the kinds of choices we have to make in order to open ourselves to this kingdom, which is nothing but the rule of God himself? So he really leaves us with a question.
In today’s first reading from the Book of Joshua, we have Joshua reminding the people of the story that has created them. In a sense people are created by stories. When we are forgetful of our story, our society disintegrates. Observe yourself today!

Do modern-day Americans have a good sense of what made them Americans, a good sense of the Revolutionary War, its beginnings, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and so on? Not really, and that’s a very serious problem.

Well, there was a problem back at the time of Joshua as well. People were forgetting what made them who they were. The story of the Exodus is the story that creates Israel as a covenanted people, a people dear to God, a people chosen. At the root, however, there is the story really of liberation from bondage, yes; but also it’s a story of refugees, refugees seeking a home, refugees seeking shelter. The point is that God promised precisely that: shelter and a home, the so-called “Promised Land.”

Now, ironically, the Promised Land had been recently vacated. This is a fact that has been uncovered by modern-day archeology, and it is not unique to that part of the world. The Mayans also from time to time simply abandoned their cities and went back to the land, or even disappeared altogether. This has happened at various times. Well, this happened at precisely this time in what we call modern-day “Israel.” At the time of Christ it was called “Judea.” People just abandoned their cities, and so the Israelites just walked in. That’s why it says here: “I gave you a land you had not tilled and cities that you had not built to dwell in; you have eaten of vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.” You may take that literally. That’s actually what happened. They walked right
in and took over someone else’s land: cities and farmland. What happened to the other people, we do not know. In one place it says that the Lord drove them out with hornets. I’m not sure you should take that literally, but they did leave.

The point the sacred author is trying to say is that there is a lesson here for us, namely, that land is a gift—land is a gift—but it’s a gift from God. It’s not really there for the taking. It doesn’t belong to the strongest. In principle it belongs to God, who apportions it. That word is actually used: “And I apportion Seir to Esau.” That’s the idea. We need to live somewhere, and the Lord apportions some land for everybody. But the point is it belongs to the Lord. It’s not ours.

Secondly, refugees need to go somewhere; and since the Lord is their protector, he provides. We have to keep that in mind as well. Sometimes we have a proprietary attitude toward “our own land.” Well, who gave it to us? How did it become ours? We have to think about this from a spiritual, theological point of view. We have to keep in mind that refugees belong also to the same Lord. This is meant as an instruction to remind people where they come from and who they are.
“The disciples rebuked them, but Jesus said, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’”

There is a great deal of difference in regard to the attitude that we can take toward children. We can see the disciples, for example, considered children to be a nuisance—and we can so regard them. In fact, in certain cases they can be a nuisance. But Jesus’ point is quite different. Rather than looking at children as adults who haven’t made it yet, who haven’t been formed yet, who haven’t been trained yet, who haven’t been taught yet, Jesus looks at adults as children who have lost something. So it’s a different mentality.

“The kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” What is he saying? He is saying that all of the potential that God has put into humanity belongs at the very beginning. This, of course, assaults our pride to some degree, because we might want to think that our success and our attainment, and our ability even, is due to our own labor or work or skill or training or practice or sweat. But, in fact, no matter what we do, it would count for nothing if we didn’t have the potential to do it. I could spend all day long playing a violin; and I can assure you, it would never amount to anything! The potential must be already there. All we do is develop it.

So we have to respect where the potential comes from. It is indeed a gift from God. Every single child from the moment of conception has this gift or these composite gifts that make up an individual person. So in one sense a child is almost luckier, if you want to use that word, than an adult because a child still has so much potential and has made fewer mistakes and committed fewer sins, or none at all. That’s Jesus’ perspective. We might think about it ourselves, and how that would affect our society if we respected more the potential in the very beginning. If we respected the potential in the smallest being, we would also respect the responsibilities that we all have for the good of the whole, and we would respect the rights of even the weakest among us.
There are certain fundamental beliefs that define for us what it means to be Christian. One of them is belief that God became human in Christ, but perhaps we don’t think too much about what that really means to become human.

True, Christ was without sin; but what is sin? Usually we lump together all imperfections and all flaws and all limitations into the same bag we call “sin,” but that isn’t correct. Christ was without sin, because to sin means to go against God; and he was God—that would have been impossible! That does not mean he did not have to learn. It does not mean he never erred. It does not mean he did not have limitations. He did—he must have! In fact, if Jesus had no limitations, then the nature he had was not really human—and this is not acceptable to our beliefs.

One of the consequences of human nature is that we grow up in a specific culture at a specific time, and we are influenced by that. So we are limited! Everyone, including Christ, including the Blessed Mother—who were Jewish. There has never been an exception to this rule. Human beings are limited by the very way they grow up, the place and the time.

Matthew says, “Jesus grew in wisdom and knowledge before God and man.” Today in this gospel story we see him growing. Like all Jews at that time, Jesus grew up with a great disregard for the Canaanites—and they called them “dogs.” In no way is that an endearing expression! It is very clear from today’s story that Jesus had no intention of helping this dog of a Canaanite woman. Her daughter was sick—too bad! “I am not sent to her. I am sent only to my people”—“my people”—“the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” That is what we call “prejudice.” And yes, Jesus grew up with prejudice!
That’s part of being human. It’s part of being limited. We all grow up in a particular culture. Cultures have particular ways of looking at themselves, at itself, at life, and at other people who do not belong to that culture. Substitute ethnic group, language group—it doesn’t matter; we are all limited in how we look at life.

However, it is also evident in this reading that Jesus did not allow his prejudices to prevent him from growing: he indeed changed his mind. That’s what you see him doing here: he changed his mind. He went from “no” to “yes.”

Now Jesus taught his disciples: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” We often don’t understand that either. To be perfect means to grow towards something. Cardinal Newman said, “To be perfect means to have changed often.” This “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” is a dynamic mandate to constantly grow toward something very different from what you start out as. Even Jesus had to do that. Here he reflects on a course of action, a choice he made, a “no” he gave to a request—and he changed his mind. This is progress. This is growth. This is becoming perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, not something static, but something dynamic.

If we want to grow to perfection, we have to look at our own blind spots. We have to have them. It’s impossible to be human and not have them—impossible! So we have to look: Where are our own blind spots? Where, in other words, does God call us to change our minds, to go from a “no” to a “yes,” or maybe from a “yes” to a “no”—whatever? We have to see our limitations precisely as English-speaking Americans of the twenty-first century, and how does that influence our choices in a way that obstructs the will of God: the universality of divine love and compassion, the universality of divine law with its duties and obligations? That’s the question. It is not a sin to be prejudiced, but it is a sin to be willfully blind and to refuse to change.
God’s Standard for Living  Twentieth Week in Ordinary Time  Friday, August 19, 2005  7:30 p.m.  Ru 1:1, 3-6, 14b-16, 22;  Mt 22:34-40 (Healing Mass)  
(Fulfilled only in Christ)  

“The whole Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments.”

Recently I was listening to a lecture, and I heard something I never heard before or thought about. It relates directly to this gospel reading. According to C.S. Lewis, a great author and apologist for the Christian faith, most people have a basic idea of a higher power—not everybody. There are atheists in the world; they don’t have an idea of a higher power, but most people have some idea of a higher power or powers, and most people have an idea of an objective moral standard—most people do. Even people who claim to be relativists actually have a sense of a moral standard because whenever they are offended they feel they are totally right in feeling offended, but that would make no sense if they were really relativists. For example, if you are driving down the road and someone cuts in front of you, well, maybe he or she doesn’t see anything wrong with that—why should you be angry? That’s his reasoning.

But he said, even though most people have these two basic ideas, they rarely put them together. Naturally speaking, reason, he said, doesn’t put the two together. I never thought about this. That’s the point, of course, of the Old Testament: that there is one God, Creator of all things, heaven and earth; and that very same God is also the author of the moral law—the lawgiver. This is pretty important because it’s a revelation. God doesn’t reveal things that aren’t important. One could say, perhaps oversimplifying, that that is the major point of the whole Old Testament: that the Creator has actually given a law so that we would know who we are and how we are supposed to act.

The consequence of this is, of course, that then the Creator, who created everything, has expectations of his creation, especially the human part made in his own image. And that’s what the law is going to detail: What are the expectations of the Creator? What is the true objective nature of the standard that we all sense exists? We all know that laws passed by human beings are not the ultimate. We all know that. We all know that courts make mistakes. Well, we must be judging against some standard, even if it’s a vague one.

Now God defines the standard in the law he gives to his people. That’s the background of today’s little dialogue between Jesus and these people, these students or scholars or pupils. Actually the proper word is “pupil.” They are in training. They are pupils of the Law. The point is this: all the laws of the Old Testament—there are over six hundred of them, six hundred thirty-six, I believe, if you counted every one of them, plus all the interpretations, of which the teachers of the Law kept adding to and adding to by way of refining and clarifying—all of that Jesus says can be boiled down into two very simple things. “Love God with your whole heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.”
The first is a quotation from the Book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, very famous in the history of the Jewish people. In fact, Jewish men wore this written on a scroll on their forehead in a little box. It was called the Shema, because that’s the first word: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is God, the Lord alone. Him you shall love with your whole heart, mind, and soul.” Well, that seemed simple enough. The second is from the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 19. There are lots of laws from the Book of Leviticus. This is the one Jesus chose to put on the same par as the Shema, the watchword of Israel. In this Jesus was being totally unique and creative saying something no one ever said before. **Loving your neighbor with your whole heart, mind, and soul is just as important as loving God. Loving God with your whole heart, mind, and soul is just as important as loving your neighbor as yourself.**

But the problem is this—and they knew it, and Jesus knew it, and you know it—we don’t! We never do! **We never love God with our whole heart, mind, and soul.** Why? Because we don’t have a whole heart. We don’t have a whole mind, and we don’t have a whole soul. **We are fractured!** We are fragmented! We are distracted! Our attention is diverted! Our intention is divided! We are compromised! We are compartmentalized! There is a little bit of us over here, and a little bit of us over there, and a little more over here, a little more over there.

**We try to love people, but we surely never love them as much as we love ourselves.** Ask yourself this question—ask yourself this question: If it came to a situation where either you or your neighbor could be saved from harm or death or injury and you had to make the choice, how long would the debate last? How long would the debate last? It wouldn’t last at all! There would be no debate. You would save yourself, and your neighbor would go. That’s the way it is. We do not love our neighbors as ourselves. There are exceptions to this, of course; and they are well-known and widely publicized, precisely because they are so rare. Even in most cases of great heroism, the hero doesn’t really know for sure that he or she will die—not too often. **Usually if it’s for sure that somebody is going to die, it won’t be you if you can help it.** What about the law of God—what about the law of God? That’s the point. **Jesus is summarizing the whole Law, but he does it in such a way that we can’t do it!** We can’t follow this! No one ever has. The point Jesus is making with his life is that really doesn’t matter anymore.

These pupils were somewhat prideful, or I should say, perhaps better, “self-righteous.” Self-righteousness comes when we think we have the truth. If we have the truth, if I have the truth, then I have to give it to you. And if you don’t want to take it from me, well, then you are in big trouble because then you can’t have it because I have it! And if your version of the truth is different from mine, then you are wrong. That’s self-righteousness. Now **when we think that we own the truth or have the truth rather than the truth has us, which is more correct, we can become self-righteous.**

**Jesus** was not self-righteous because he never said he had the truth. He said he was the Truth! “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life.” Now some Bible scholars say, “Oh, but that couldn’t be a real quotation. That’s not the exact words he used.” Well,
maybe it isn’t, but it does reflect the way he lived. That is how he lived. **He lived as the Way. He lived as the Truth. He was the measure of what he did.** He and he alone lived out this law. He loved God with his whole heart and his whole mind and his whole soul because **he alone possesses a whole heart, a whole mind, and a whole soul.** He was not in any way distracted or diverted from his goal in life.

And of course, it created enmity with the world; and he ended up nailed to a cross because **when you love God with your whole heart, mind, and soul, you die!** And this is one thing we have to get used to: we are going to die! **We are all going to die.** We don’t know when, and God doesn’t want us to know when, but we are all going to die. Unless we are willing to accept that, we are not following Christ. He said, **“If anyone wants to be my disciple, let him pick up his cross.”** Now the cross is an instrument of execution—the cross is an instrument of execution. Don’t forget that! If we want to follow Christ, we have to accept death. It may not be on a cross, but we have to begin with the beginning. We have to accept death.

That’s why we are baptized. **We are baptized into death.** The very rite that makes us Christian people is the very rite that introduces us into death. This is not macabre. This is not weird. It is not even sad, because **we enter death with Christ.** We are not alone. A believer does not die alone. Sometimes people say, “Oh, we will have to stay with so and so as they get ready to leave this earth.” Well, you may or may not be with so and so as he or she gets ready to leave this earth, but if that person is a believer, Christ is there. That’s the meaning of Baptism. We die with Christ. Our death is a fulfillment of all that we are created for, which cannot ever completely flower on this planet—it cannot! So that we have to realize right away: if we want to follow Christ, we have to accept the cross. We have to accept death. We have to enter into Baptism. We have to realize that **the real fulfillment of God’s plan and God’s purpose for each one of us will only come at that point when we enter into the Light, the “Light from Light,” who is “God from God, true God from true God.”** This is our faith.

Once we realize this, then we can live a new life because **God frees us from our pitiful agenda,** our pitiful, little purposes in life, our goals—whatever they are, however we make them up. God frees us to live. Whereas the fulfillment of God’s promises cannot take place on this planet, the freedom can begin here. We can be truly free, even now, **as we accept the Way, which is Christ—his way of living, his way of putting the Father first, his way of living in the Spirit.** When we start living that way, all kinds of unusual things might very well happen in us and through us. We might find strange and wonderful powers at work in our hands as we lay them on others, or we may not. That’s up to God. We may find that through us or through our intercession people’s hearts change, are moved. We might find that our own bodies take on a new life, a new vitality, a new power, a new ease—we may. It’s up to God, of course. The point is: we are not really following Christ until we have surrendered to the all-encompassing love of God that bodily was on the cross and that sacramentally remains with us on the altar, as we renew in an unbloody way the gift of Christ to the Father on Calvary. In this way day-by-day, step-by-step, we live out our Baptism.
But so many Christian people don’t live out their Baptism. They have never entered in the first place into any conscious decision to follow Christ or to take up their cross. They have never done it. They have never chosen it. They think that life is just about following some rules. Well, here are some rules, and you can’t follow them! And they are the whole Law and the Prophets. Or they think life is about being good—according to who’s standard of goodness, yours or God’s? You can’t measure up to God’s standard of goodness. Again, that doesn’t matter if you surrender everything you are and have to God. And that’s what faith leads us to: not just believing that this is true or that is true, but actually giving God our hearts, our minds—however broken they are—our souls, our bodies, our lives, our relationships—broken, fractured! Give them to God. We don’t even know what they are for. God has the power and the will to mend and to heal all things and to restore the creation according to his intention. This is not “mind over matter.” This is not the “power of positive thinking.” This is the power of the Holy Spirit that is alive in people who surrender their lives to the Father through Christ.

The real problem in life is not that we want so many things. The problem is we don’t want enough. We don’t want the real thing, who is God. Our desires are too small. We are too easily placated and too easily pleased, and that is not pleasing to God. God wants for us what we have never imagined. That’s what St. Paul says in Corinthians, I believe: “Eye has not seen, the mind has not imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.” When we surrender to God, we are also surrendering to God’s desire for us, which is beyond all understanding, beyond all compromise, beyond all bargaining—the ultimate gift!

I don’t know why you came here tonight, and you might not either, but God does. Let us pray right now with bowed heads that the reason why the Lord has led each person here tonight will be fulfilled in his presence.
“But who do you say that I am?”

None of us likes to be put on the spot. When someone does put us on the spot, we probably resent it and maybe even consider that person rather rude. Well, in that case we would have to consider Jesus rather rude in today’s story, because he really puts Peter right on the spot! He says, “Who do you say that I am?” And mind you, it wasn’t only Peter; it was all the disciples with him that he was putting on the spot.

Sometimes we might not think a lot about what it means to confess faith. We have instruction classes for children and adults, and often these are in question and answer format, which may or may not be helpful. Sometimes it answers questions you haven’t had yet. And yet people do tend to have the same questions, so it might be helpful for some people. But there is one problem with catechesis as it is traditionally practiced in our Church. It leaves the impression that truth is something “out there somewhere,” whereas truth “out there somewhere” is really not going to be something that lives within us. It’s not going to be something that makes us free, as Jesus says, “The truth will make us free.” He doesn’t mean truth in a book. He doesn’t mean the answer to a question. He means a different kind of truth, a truth that one can confess, that one lives by. That kind of truth can make you free.

That is the kind of truth he is getting at in today’s gospel dialogue. He is asking the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” When he is doing that, he is asking them to make a commitment. Perhaps we don’t understand the role of commitments in our lives. Every day we are making choices about what we believe, whether we recognize this or not. When we decide what we believe about God, about life, about work, about people, about marriage, about sex, about anything, that in turn determines who we become. That’s really important. We are born into this world as pure potential: we decide what kind of person we become. Our beliefs are very important because along the way they shape who we become. So we determine who we become precisely by determining what we believe.
Now sometimes when we decide what we believe, our decision is very weak or uncertain. In that case our commitment to the truth in that is very weak as well and uncertain. The result will be weak and uncertain. On the other hand, if our commitment to truth or to a belief is really sound, comes from the depths of our souls, is firm, then our commitment is also equally sound and firm and from the depths of our souls; and that will really change the way we live.

It would seem today that people have a hard time committing themselves to any truth or any belief in a strong and powerful way. Many people dither. They play with beliefs. They even play with God. They go to seeker services week after week, month after month, year after year. That’s playing! They may believe in morality in a general vague sort of way, but they are really not committed to any particular way of living it out. They may believe in the golden rule, especially when they feel offended, but they may not practice the golden rule when it’s inconvenient. It is also true that the young are often confused by the teachers they get at universities, who are often very slick but shallow, who preach a sort of agnosticism that is an open door to whatever you want.

Jesus’ point in this gospel is: Not deciding is not an option; being vague is not an option, and relying on the opinion of others is not an option. In fact, he begins this with a question: “What do other people say? What are other people saying about the Son of Man? Who is the Son of Man?” Why does he ask that question? Well, to get it out of the way. The truth is what other people say is meaningless. The decisions you make about God, about life, about such things as marriage and family and work and money, these decisions have consequences. Do you want to suffer the consequences of other people’s decisions? If not, you better make your own and stand by them and realize what the consequences are going to be.

So Christ is pushing, pushing his disciples: Make up your mind. What do you think? Jesus believed that the world was so structured that those who seek always find. “Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and the door shall be opened.” Those who are perpetually seeking are not serious. People who are always putting their questions on the back burner are not serious. They are wasting valuable time. When we postpone basic decisions about life too long, we may end up dead without ever having decided. That
would be truly a tragedy because it doesn’t have to happen. We don’t have to waste our
live away in indecisiveness, but people do.

Peter was not a tragic figure. He was weak. He was flawed. He erred. He sinned. But
he wasn’t a tragic figure because he affirmed what he saw in Christ. He affirmed that it
is Christ who is the anointed of God. That’s what Messiah means. “You are the Messiah.
You are the Christ. You are anointed by God. You are the one we have been waiting for.
You are the one whom God has sent into the world.” That affirmation is very important.
It means two things. It means God really wants us. God has come into the world looking
for us and wanting our hearts, wanting our love. It’s not true he came for nothing; he
came for us, like a shepherd would look for a lost sheep. He spent himself totally on the
cross, pouring his love out, holding nothing back, in order to gain our love in return. This
is the only way to God—through the cross of Christ and through the love that he has
poured out. That alone enables us to love God in return and to love others as God
does, and to love ourselves as God does, and therefore to love our neighbors as
ourselves. Only through the cross of Christ can that happen.

The second point is Christ also not only shows us the true nature of God, he also
shows us our true nature—all the way back in the beginning of the history of the
Israelite people, they knew that God had created humanity in the image and the likeness
of God. But they didn’t know what God looked like, so they didn’t know what they were
supposed to be either! In Christ we do. We know the nature of God, and we know our
own nature when we look into him. Again, without Christ we do not know even why we
are here.

So there is a lot in this question: “Who do you say that I am?” In Christ we discover
who God is and in Christ we discover who we are. Without him we founder in this
world in the millions of opinions all around us. So Christ asks you this morning: “Who
do you say that I am?”
Learning from the Teacher  

Twenty-first Week in Ordinary Time  
Monday, 
August 22, 2005  
8:30 a.m.  
1 Thes 1:1-5, 8b-10;  
Mt 23:13-22  
(The Lord)

I find if we read Scripture with an open mind, we find Jesus is often himself involved in certain inner conflicts. First of all, he grows up as a Jew, and therefore he has Jewish, what we might call, “sensitivities” or “prejudices.” He tells the Syrophoenician woman: “It is not right to give what is holy to dogs.” That’s a prejudicial statement, but yet does not stay put in his prejudices. He becomes in some cases quite angry with what he is being told or what he hears from his teachers. You can see him distrust and then taking off on a different approach.

Today he is quite angry with what are established principles, you might say, in the oral teaching of his day. Distinctions, you might call them; some might call them pettifogging. The point is that Jesus didn’t stay put. He didn’t simply accept what he was told, but he allowed something to go on within his own mind and heart. At one point he told the rabbis, “Call no man rabbi. No one is your teacher. You only have one teacher.” This is something he was learning. He was learning that the Father was teaching him in his daily life. He was learning that people who are called teachers sometimes get in the way of the teacher, because they really don’t know how to cut into the core of the issue.

Now most of these teachings have to do with moral teachings. That’s really what the Law is about. It’s about how to live, the moral code. But sometimes, according to this, he is saying: Well, you are not teaching really how to live morally. You are just making distinctions. Sometimes we do that. We don’t really get to the core of what we should be doing as believers. We don’t really believe we have a teacher. We think we have to rely on some authorities—whatever they are. It says in one place, “Jesus spoke with authority, not like the scribes.” Well, scribes are people who just repeat what they hear. Jesus spoke with authority because he integrated everything. He spoke from a true place within himself. He wasn’t happy just to repeat what he heard. It had to make sense to him, and then it had meaning. But when it had meaning it conflicted with what other people thought, even his so-called “superiors.”
So Jesus’ life was a life of conflict quite often. We have to understand that if we are going to be followers of Christ, **our lives are going to have conflicts inward and outward.** The main thing is **we have to have integrity.** Things have to make sense to us. We have to be willing to speak the truth as we understand it without thinking that it is the last word! I think that’s where that statement, “Call no man rabbi”—no one has the last word. There is a teacher who can teach all of us, and we can learn from each other, but no one has the last word. God has the last word. We have to keep that in mind. So we are always growing. **We are growing as individuals, and we are growing as a Church.** We can’t think of truth as a frozen something, a frozen concept, a frozen idea, “this is it.” No, there is no “it.”

We are all trying to understand a mystery and we are living in mystery. **That mystery has obligated us.** This is all about being obligated. The covenant that God made with his people was a matter of obligation. Yes, we are obliged. Why? Because **God liberated people from slavery only in order to allow them to live a free, full human life, but you can’t do that without morality.** That’s what is so wrong with our society. Relativism is no morality at all. Of course, no one really believes in it except when it is convenient. When someone cuts in front of them on the road, they are very upset and offended; but why should they be if they really are relativists? They might say, “Well, that person apparently doesn’t believe that manners are important”—but no one says that. We feel right to be offended by other people only because we have a deep sense that there is a standard.

The whole covenant of Sinai is about that standard being elaborated for a whole society so that **a whole society can really take on the image and likeness of God** in which all human beings are created. This is what Jesus is talking about here. He is saying that you are not teaching how people can really become images of God. You are just making legalistic distinctions so that they can feel righteous, but end up doing what they want. That can be something we do in organized religion. **We can make people feel righteous while letting them do what they want.** That is not our role. **The role of a community of faith is to hold up the highest ideals, the highest standards, God’s own standards, and encourage people to do their best to follow them.** So “call no man rabbi”—and no woman rabbi—or teacher. We have only one teacher. It’s the Lord.
“Blind Pharisee, cleanse first the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean.”

When we hear these diatribes against the Pharisees and scribes, it’s important that we don’t think that this is really just about Jews or just about Jewish Pharisees and Jewish scribes. It’s about the Pharisee and the scribe that could be any of us, because what he is really scoring here is not some quality of Judaism, but rather a quality of human nature, how we can become blind even if we are in a position of guidance. Being in a position of guidance does not give us sight. So it applies primarily to people in positions of teaching and authority and parenting, so it’s something we all need to be aware of.

There are several points he makes. First of all, I will recall to you that a scribe is someone who simply repeats what he hears. Jesus spoke with authority, not like the scribes. For Jesus it was important that he integrate his knowledge of God with life as he understood it and lived it. So he was speaking out of a lived experience. He wasn’t repeating what he heard. He wasn’t quoting the Bible, but he was speaking the word of God because he was the Word of God. The word of God was being integrated into everything he knew and lived.

Second of all, he points out how he uses the word “hypocrite.” Now hypocrite in modern English does not convey what this really conveys. This word means “actor”—actor. Actors play roles. Being a teacher is a role. Being a parent is a role. Being a priest is a role. His point here is that when you exercise a role like this, it’s necessary that you do so; however you should not be playing at it! That’s a very deep and serious
point. It’s related to the outside of the cup and the inside. “Do as I say, not as I do,” people say. Why? Well, because I know what is right, but I don’t practice it. That’s a conscious admission. The hypocrite doesn’t even admit it! The hypocrite doesn’t even see, because he is blind. He doesn’t even see that his inner life is out of sync with his outer life. He doesn’t see that his words are out of sync with his actions. He doesn’t see that he is straining a gnat while swallowing a camel.

It’s a matter of proportion. It’s a matter of gravity. To avoid being hypocrites we really have to become people who look inside and who are honest and sincere in looking inside. We have to see our own emptiness, and we have to ask God to fill it. We have to see our own weaknesses, and we have to confess them to God and ask him to strengthen us. If we are really trying to do this, if we are really walking the walk, then we are not hypocrites, even if we are flawed. But if we blind ourselves to all these, then we are just like this—and then woe to us!
We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope.”

We have to keep in mind that when we speak of life and death and God we are speaking about things we know very little about. Sometimes because we know so little about these great mysteries we may have unfounded fears and anxieties, or even depressions.

St. Paul found this to be true in one of the early communities that he founded. He is writing to them about this problem—unfounded anxieties. In this peculiar case they believe that those who died before the return of Christ would be at a great disadvantage and maybe might not even be included in the resurrection of the just. He was writing to put their fears and anxieties to rest. We might look at them and think, how foolish! How could anyone believe that those who die before the return of Christ would not be included?

But in our own way we also have ways of excluding people, ourselves sometimes, others, or family, from the great love of God and his redeeming purpose. St. Paul is simply using logic here. He is saying that God came for all. We have to keep that in mind. God has a great plan, which he himself has formed and which he himself is promoting. We are learning every day about that plan. Two thousands years of Christian life has shown us that God did not intend to bring the world to an end quickly, as even St. Paul thought. It is we who have to adjust to God, not the other way around.

We have to always keep in mind the basics, that God created the world out of love, and no other reason. God’s love is totally inclusive. The only people who could ever fall outside of God’s love are those who choose to run away from God’s love. From that point of view, we could say that God is still not going to end the world very soon because his love still has a long way to come in our own hearts, in the hearts of other people we know, and obviously in the world itself. But, at the same time, this is not simply something we are going to now stand around and wait for, but the whole point of the gospel we are called on to be part of. We have been called. We are not only called to participate in the plans of God, we are called to facilitate and to work with and to cooperate with the plan of God. That’s the real reason we are on earth.

From that point of view, everything that happens to us has to fit into this plan. It doesn’t mean God causes everything that happens to us, not at all. We are free creatures. We make choices. There is a certain autonomy to the laws of nature, but nonetheless everything that happens is all part of the divine providence that has called us to life. Nothing that can happen will stop the divine providence from completing its work. The only thing that can stop the divine providence from completing its work is our own disbelief, our disregard for God, our refusal to accept infinite love.
Now infinite love has a hard time getting into us because we are so finite. So we have to look at this as a long process that begins at our Baptism, in which we are given a pledge, a promise, not from the Church, but from God, that we will be born again, that we will be begotten from above with the life that is not earthly, that is not physical or limited in any physical sense. Now the fulfillment of that promise only comes when we enter into the ground itself, all of which is foreseen by the rite of Baptism itself.

That’s why St. Paul talks here about not grieving like those who have no hope. Of course we grieve whenever anyone close to us dies or even moves away, but not like those who have no hope because we are on the way somewhere. We are on the way to new life, to share in the eternity of God. That eternal life is a great gift given to us even in our brokenness. St. Paul, in 2 Corinthians, refers to it as a treasure that we carry about in earthen vessels. There would be no day in our entire calendar that would be a waste if we kept in mind that we are carrying a treasure in earthen vessels. Now no matter how boring or insignificant the day might seem by some other standard, nonetheless, it has this significance that we are carrying a treasure in earthen vessels.

Now Florence’s earthen vessel is no longer of use to her, so we are honoring it with Christian burial. But she remains in Christ, united to him for the first time in her Baptism, which we remembered with the water from the font. Nurtured as she was frequently at the table of the Lord, feeding on the body and the blood of Christ, she now is really at the true banquet. A banquet is a symbol of abundance. We have to keep in mind that God intends for us an abundant life, of once again I quote St. Paul: “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has the mind of man ever imagined.”

Yet these truths of our faith we often forget about as we allow the pressures of life to oppress us, and the speed of life to hurry us on. We are in danger of missing the whole point. So a time like this could be a very holy moment, where the Lord calls us back to attention to who we are, why we are here, and to be filled with gratitude for people like Florence who reminded us in her goodness, in her kindness, of the goodness and kindness of the Lord. How might we honor her memory better than by being our own ambassadors of the Lord to others?
“Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Stay awake!’”

Now this gospel reading may cause us some puzzlement, because staying awake has three different meanings. The first, physically, doesn’t make too much sense. We can’t stay awake all the time physically. We need our rest; we need our sleep. According to doctors, eight hours a night is very healthful. So Jesus is not talking about being sleep deprived. In fact, people who are sleep deprived aren’t awake anyway. They are never awake. They are never asleep; they are never awake. They are dragged out, unable to concentrate and be attentive.

A second meaning of staying awake means to be attentive—to be attentive—psychologically sharp, focused. Well, that’s not exactly possible either. We can’t be focused all the time. It’s physically and psychologically and mentally impossible. We can focus for just so long, and then our minds drift.

But there is another way analogous to these two meanings that is meant here. Staying awake—if we could think of, especially the second meaning, being focused, and keep in mind that the gospel itself is a message about life. There is a truth in the gospel message. We cannot be focused psychologically on it at all times, but it can be— Constantly informing who we are. In that way we will be spiritually awake. We will constantly be in touch with the message of the gospel.

The point being that when we make decisions that are completely detached from the gospel, with no focus or no connection to the gospel, we are really then spiritually asleep. And then that’s a very deep slumber. In that case we can be despoiled. Someone
can take away all that we have. Of course, that’s Jesus’ view of the devil. Jesus believed in a devil, and he believed in the devil as a thief, who would take away everything that we have a right to, including peace of mind, a sense of purpose, dignity, and a sense of being on the road to happiness, and many other qualities that belong to a child of God.

The devil can take all those things away, but not if we stay awake in the sense that every time we make a decision we consult God. We can! There may be tiny, little decisions day-to-day that aren’t that important: whether you have vanilla ice cream or chocolate ice cream for dessert. That’s not really very important—but important decisions. Where are you going to spend your time? What choice of entertainment are you going to make? How are you going to spend your money? Those are very important decisions. They can be in connection to the gospel, or we could just forget about the gospel and in a sleepy way dream away. In that case we will lose everything we have.

Finally, Jesus talks about the master. Now the master is not necessarily God. Maybe the master is who we really are. Maybe we are really created to be master of ourselves, but haven’t achieved that yet. We have not achieved a masterly control over all of who we are. Maybe that’s what we are moving toward. Meanwhile, we should at least act like good stewards. A good steward obeys the master. If the master is created in the image and likeness of God, the good steward will make every effort to please the image of God within, or else that is not a good steward! Who is it, after all, who abuses us the most? That’s a question at the end of this gospel.
“Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

This gospel follows yesterday’s, and it is on the same theme of spiritual awakening and awareness. You will recall that this is simply based analogously on the idea of being physically awake, but not the same thing. It is also analogous to psychological alertness, but not the same thing. It means to live in such a way that the gospel message is always a part of decisions and choices.

Now one of the aspects of life that we have to face is waiting. Life is a process. It’s a process of which we are not in charge. We do not control it. One thing we all have to learn is how to wait. We wait on the Lord. We wait for the bridegroom. We may think we know when the bridegroom should be coming, but we don’t. It’s not according to our schedule. It’s not when we are ready that the bridegroom comes. The bridegroom comes when the bridegroom is ready. So waiting is a very essential issue.

But waiting is not purely passive. Waiting doesn’t mean doing nothing. There is a wise way of waiting and a foolish way of waiting. A wise way of waiting is to wait with preparedness, the extra flask of oil. That’s looking ahead. That’s preparing for the duration. For a bridesmaid to go to a feast with just the oil in the lamp is very foolish. There is no foresight there. There is no preparation there.

The point here is that God does require foresight and preparation because there is such a thing as being excluded from the feast. It sounds rather harsh really—it sounds rather harsh. But more is required than simply passivity. More is required than simply not being tainted by the world. That’s the image of the foolish virgin, untainted by the world, but untainted to the degree that there is no sense at all of what one needs to do. So more than pure innocence is required to be wise and to be prepared to enter into the feast.
“After a long time, the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them.”

Today’s reading follows the story of the ten virgins, and it follows logically in the train of that thought. You will recall there were ten virgins: five wise, five foolish. All were virgins. All were unsullied by life. All had kept themselves pure. But five foolish virgins were excluded from the banquet because they were improvident, because they had no foresight, because they did not provide what they had been asked to provide, which was light. They did not bring extra oil, and so their lamps went out; that made them useless.

Today another story along the same vein: a man is thrown into the outer darkness to weep and gnash his teeth. Why? Because he did not fulfill the task he was given, which was very vague. He was not given an exact order. But rather, his master had shared his master’s money with him, his wealth. A talent is worth about, let’s say, a thousand dollars. He gave him a thousand dollars to work with, and he did nothing. Now he had less ability than the others—that’s true, but that’s no excuse.

How easy it is for us to pretend that we just can’t do any more. We just can’t make anything of our lives because we are so lacking in ability. That is no excuse! God has given everyone riches according to his or her ability. God expects something in life more than simply keeping yourself pure. This is about doing something, making a contribution—and it’s absolutely required! There is no way anyone can enter into the kingdom of God without making a contribution in the period of trial. If we focus on

Contributing according to Abilities
just staying clean, or if we focus on just not violating any major laws or commandments, we will never fulfill our vocation.

Now what is our vocation? That’s not clear. That’s not defined. But what is defined is that we are required to produce something for God, according to our ability, and according to what God has given us. This is not an option. Now we have to think about:

- Where are we investing our time?
- Where are we investing our abilities?
- Where are we investing what we have to work with, our capital?

That’s the question. Then realize that some day all of us, every human person, every creature of God, will have to render an account. That is fundamental to Christ’s teachings. It is not exactly an easy doctrine. Jesus wasn’t about teaching easy doctrines. He was about freeing us to really be children of God, coheirs with him to eternal life. So it is up to us to find our way to satisfy God. It’s not God’s job to satisfy us.
“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Both the gospel and the epistle of this evening’s liturgy focus on the central paradox in Christian faith: the paradox that losing is finding and saving is losing. Now people normally don’t like paradoxes, perhaps especially religious people because religious people are looking for comfort quite often, more so than challenge. Paradoxes are challenging. They force us to think, and they don’t give us any comfortable or easy answers.

That’s exactly Jesus’ purpose in today’s gospel; it is to challenge his followers to try to attain the greatest possible happiness and purpose in life. Again, we could put this in another way: death is gain; life is loss. Of course, words can be used in many different ways. That’s part of all religious language, and we have to be able to think flexibly. What is life, after all? What do we mean by life? What is living? The meaning remains unclear because words alone cannot convey the deep mystery that is revealed in faith. There will be times in your life when the truth of this word will make itself felt. Some day this will happen. Some loss will cause you to think that life is all over; there is no more reason to live. This message, if you remember it, will give you food and show you the way, and help you to realize that life is just beginning. Indeed, on your deathbed life is just beginning—this is true! If death is gain and life is loss, it follows.

Alternatively, when we achieve some great success in life we are often tempted to feel smug and superior to others. We have attained what they haven’t. We have rights to what they don’t. This radically separates us from others, also sisters and brothers of Christ. This message should bring us back to reality. The cost of gaining the world can be to forfeit life. Is any success worth it?
This whole gospel is about **discrimination** or also called “**discernment.**” True life is **not what it appears to be.** Spiritual discernment is about sifting and straining our experience to discover the real thing. Meanwhile, we have a strong natural tendency well evolved in our human nature, well established as an instinct, to conform to the world around us. **It is comfortable to conform.** One can be well accepted if one conforms to the world, meaning the family, the business, society—whatever. The cost is great, however. It means we have to live by values and goals of someone else. Some people call this the “herd instinct.” Christ is warning his followers of its deadly attraction.

In a sense this means that nature and God part the ways. **In following Christ, denying oneself is somehow unnatural.** Indeed, it is somewhat unnatural! Refusing to conform to the world around us feels unnatural. St. Paul believed it was, and that’s where he got the idea that the world is headed for destruction, which means the world severed from God’s purpose, living its own autonomous life with its own goals—that is headed for destruction. But believers have a different destiny, if they follow through. That’s why in the second reading we hear St. Paul say, **“Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”** This follows his negative prohibition: “Do not conform yourselves to this age.” After all, human beings are not dumb animals. Conforming takes no brains, and no discernment!

**To discern, to weigh, to evaluate, and to judge is actually to bring spiritual values and morality into the world.** It isn’t there until someone brings it. That’s the job of believers. **That’s the vocation of the faithful.** This task can be carried out only by the image and likeness of God. No other creature can do it. Biologists tell us that we are ninety-eight per cent chimpanzee. True enough, genetically. Christ is not concerned about our genetics. He is concerned about something that transcends biology: the spiritual nature and the **battle between good and evil**, which is a spiritual battle and cannot be fought with guns or swords. It is Christ’s desire, and the reason for his speaking in today’s reading, to equip his followers for a victorious outcome of this battle in their lives.
Recognize the Higher Power

Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist

Monday, August 29, 2005  8:30 a.m.  Jer 1:17-19;  Mk 6:17-29  (God’s law over human law)

The focal point of today’s story is really Herod, not John the Baptist. Herod was a man drawn to the word of God, but not drawn that much. In that way he really reflects a lot of people. *A lot of people are drawn to the word of God, but they don’t like what it would require of them, what changes it would create in their lives if they were to listen to the word of God.*

Herod was a man of power, and he thought he could do what he wanted. Oddly enough, he felt bound by his own word more than by something higher. This is real corruption. It is said there is great honor among the Mafia, but it’s an honor like this. It has to do with what I said, what I promise—that’s the highest law; there is nothing higher! *When we get to a state where our rulers don’t recognize a higher law, we are in real big trouble.* That’s the trouble Galilee was in.

So we can reflect on our own time, and how we need to recognize that there is *something higher.* Herod wouldn’t go back on his own oath, but he felt perfectly capable of taking another person’s life. There are people who think today that the freedom that is granted in our Constitution is the highest possible value, but that is something given by human beings and interpreted by human beings. When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence he went to a higher power: inalienable rights. *There is a difference between inalienable rights given by God and the rights granted by law.*

*When we confuse these two, we are in dire straights.* For that reason, I would say, we are in dire straights!
This morning we celebrate the Mass of the Holy Spirit, and in the Opening Prayer we prayed that the Holy Spirit would lead us to all truth. Now, boys and girls, we mean that literally. We pray for the Holy Spirit to lead us to all truth—all truth—not just religious truth, not just truth about the Bible—all truth! It is a fundamental belief of the Catholic Faith that there is only one truth—one God, one truth.

But there are two avenues that we get the truth, two avenues through which we get information. One avenue is—what? What is one avenue? How do we learn? Through our senses—right? Our sight, our hearing, our nose—do you learn anything through your nose? Yes, of course you learn things through smell—don’t you? For example, you learn that the potatoes are burning! Right? You better learn that! You learn that there is a fire so you can get out of the house—right? So you learn through your nose, through your ears, through your sight. What else? You learn through feeling, touch. Of course you do. You learn through touch. What else? Any other senses? You learn through your lips? Taste, oh yes, taste, you learn through taste, certainly. Through your tongue. You learn through taste. So those are avenues we have of learning. In modern times we have developed so many aids to those senses that we have microscopes and telescopes and floating space stations and enormous cyclotrons that just let us know more and more about the world. But it’s all about one truth—one truth. The truth of God and the truth of God’s creation is all one. We learn through our senses.

There is another way we can learn not through our senses, although even this involves the senses, but the origin is not in the world. What would that be? Larry? Yes, in Church, through the Spirit. The Spirit is a way we have of learning. For example, today Christ was working with people. Now it’s true they were seeing him and listening to him—that’s true, but what they were seeing and listening to wasn’t something that normally happens in their experience, so it was what we call “revelation.” So it’s the Holy Spirit aiding them to see things and to hear things that ordinarily people don’t see and hear, not in so many words, but in some deeper sense. This is what we call the “mystery of faith.” So we have information coming through our senses from the world and we have information coming from the Spirit directly from God. They are all one truth because there is only one God who created everything. Okay?

In our school we are going to put it all together. So don’t ever think that, well, this subject is important, but that subject is not important. They are all important! You can get something out of everything, and you put it together because you have only—how many minds do you have? One mind, so everything has to go together in that one mind. Everything you learn is for one purpose: for you to be the best, fullest, wisest, holiest, most intelligent child of God you can be! Of course, all of our gifts are given not just for our own good, but for other people’s good too. We learn that, too, in school: how to use our gifts for something other than our own profit. We use them for our
own profit, but for more than our own profit. So I want you to have this idea that when you are studying you are doing the work of God. You are doing the work of God because that’s what God wants you to do now. It’s your job, your vocation, now to study and to learn!

Mathematics—where does mathematics come from? Did human beings invent mathematics? No, we couldn’t have invented it! We discovered it. And where did it come from? Where did it come from? Where did math come from? Mathematics came from the mind of God! Where else would it come from? No, not from the 1970’s. It came from way before the 1970’s. Before the universe was created, there had to be all the mathematics we use in the universe. That’s what you are going to learn in science: how you can use mathematics to describe what goes on in the world. That itself is a revelation of a sort, but it’s a revelation you get from nature through your own reason. You don’t even need God’s word to tell you this. You can figure it out yourself. Here is all the math. Where did it come from? You can deduce it came from some mind that is eternal, that existed before the universe—there you have it! Your reason is finding God through mathematics in the world. So everything is about God—everything!

History is about God, too, in a different way, because in history what do we learn? We learn that people and nations and cultures that actually follow righteousness and work for the common good thrive and prosper. That’s a fact! We also learn that nations and cultures and people who don’t care about the common good, who do not work for justice, eventually collapse. That’s a fact. You can learn it in history. It’s not a revelation. It’s a deduction. Through our senses we can figure it out. But it’s true, and it goes in accord with, it agrees with completely, what the Bible tells us. It’s the same thing. The Bible tells us that in so many words; but even without the Bible we could figure it out, although it might take some more time. So there is never any conflict between what the Bible tells us, if we understand it rightly, and what we learn through our senses and deduce by reason. So two sources of information, one reason, one understanding, one truth, one God—you get it? So whatever we do in school, we are doing it for God’s sake. Okay?

Now what about playing? Do you think God wants you to play? Yes or no? Yes, I think so. If you are good Catholics you believe God wants you to play. My mother was brought up by a very strict Methodist grandmother, “Primitive Methodist”—that’s what they called it. That meant no playing. She was not allowed to have dolls. She was not allowed to play with her friends. Later on, she was not allowed to play cards. See, no playing. It was considered bad. She didn’t like that. That’s why she became a Catholic. She said, “Well, at least now I can go to card parties.” So God wants you to play too. Why? Well, you have to. Actually, in Latin the word for playing and going to school is the same word: ludere. Ludere is “to play” and ludere is “to go to school.” Now put that together. Well, of course, in some sense it is play. You are involved in play all the time, and you can learn from play. The thing is: you had better think about playing in terms of being fair and being considerate of other people. Play doesn’t mean a time to forget everything. It means a time to remember everything and to put into practice the principles we teach. Right? So we don’t forget about that when we play; we
remember that when we play. Okay? We do have a good time. We are supposed to—right, Johnny? But we are not supposed to play in the street—right? That’s not a good place to play.

Now St. Augustine said—in regard to study, of course, you could say this; he said it in regard to other things too—“When you work, work as if everything depends on you.” That’s a good idea. **When you study, study like you really have to learn everything and everything depends on you.** But then **“When you pray, pray as if everything depends on God.”** That’s not a bad idea. Work hard, but then let go. When you come to the Lord, really seek his will and seek his help because, to be honest with you, **prayer really can make our minds very quiet, and the more quiet you are the more you actually can do.** Ask your parents. If they are under a lot of pressure and tension, can they do well? No, it’s harder. So when you are relaxed, you can do better, so **pray before you study and pray before you have a test,** and you will do better. Okay? Very good!

Now did you have a question over here? This young man, I saw a hand. Did you have a question? Oh, you forgot. Okay, that’s all right. Now let us pray together.
“When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything, and followed him.”

Now you may wonder why Jesus had this preference for fishermen. Not all of his followers were fishermen, but many were. There is a very big parallel between fishing for a living and the work of gathering people together.

First of all, commercial fishing is actually a dangerous job. It requires being able to ride out all kinds of storms. It’s also a very iffy job. There are times of great success and times of great failure. There is no way to predict where the fish are going to be. There is no way to predict one’s income. One has to live day-by-day. One is subject to the powers of nature, forces of nature, for good and for ill.

This way there is a certain suitableness of commercial fishermen to the work of Christ, because in a similar way those who are called to the apostolate, those who are called to the mission, the Church, have a job that can be very dangerous. Representatives of Christ are not always welcome because of Christ. They are sometimes hated because of Christ. That is something often we do not quite appreciate, living as we do in a Catholic community, in a more or less Christian world or country, however questionable that might be. Being a representative of Christ can be very dangerous, even in this country in certain places, and in the world surely. There is no way to predict who is going to listen and who is not going to listen, who is going to be open and who is not going to be open. That’s beyond the ken of any minister or missionary or apostle. There are times when things are very good and there are times when things are very bad. One has to live day-by-day, not knowing, never knowing, how things are going to turn out.

Now to some degree Jesus extended this invitation, this mission, this vocation, to be fishers of men to all of his followers, not only his twelve. So to some degree these factors apply to all believers, but in a special way to some believers. So we need to pray that the Lord will call the right kind of fishermen to the task of bringing his good news to the world.
“And no one who has been drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’”

What Jesus is talking about today is the natural resistance people have to change. **People don’t like change.** Young people don’t know this. They have nothing to change from, so they seem more adaptable. But even young people can be inured to some particular way of living or some particular comfort, like a blanket, and don’t want to let go. Well, we all have our blankets that we drag through life.

Many traditions and customs of a religious nature are that type of a blanket. They give us comfort; they make us feel good. Jesus’ point is, well, that’s not really what this is about. **The word of God does not come primarily to comfort people.** It may also comfort people. The prophets noted that, especially Isaiah; but that is not the primary purpose of prophecy. It’s really to shake people up and to get people to move and change their minds and think. This is not easy. As I say, it only seems easy to the young because they haven’t decided anything, so they have nothing really to change. But once we set on a course, whatever it is, it’s hard to change that course.

Now he uses a few images. “No one,” he says, “sews a new patch on an old garment.” The image is clear, the meaning perhaps not. We often try to do that in our own spiritual lives. We try to take the word of the Lord and apply it to one little part of our life, one little segment that may be hurting or wounded or troubled. But Jesus’ point is the word of God is addressed to the whole person, and it is an address of challenge and transformation. God sees us in need of a whole new garment, not just a patch on an old one.

With wineskins it’s a slightly different tack. New wine is put in new wineskins; but they do smell, so it takes a long time to let them mature, age. But we are not very patient either. On the one hand, we don’t want to change; but on the other hand, we are impatient with what we want: the new wine of God’s vineyard. So Jesus speaks these few words for our contemplation and reflection.
Love—a Human Choice!  

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time/A  
September 4, 2005  7:00 a.m.  Ez 33:7-9;  
Rom 13:8-10;  Mt 18:15-20  (Jesus our model for fulfilling God’s law)

“Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

People often wonder about God’s role in the world. Did God cause the tsunami? Did God cause the hurricane? These are not stupid questions, and their answers require knowledge of both theology and science. God is the creator of all things visible and invisible. We profess this every Sunday in our Creed. The laws of nature and the principles of mathematics that make order in the universe derive from the mind of God. The existence of order and harmony in the universe as a whole testifies to the priority of mind over matter, time and space. But the universe evolves as a living organism, according to these laws. Although we may not think about it, the magnificent mountains that we can admire and are really such a form of beauty, were formed in violent upheavals that were anything but pretty. In fact, for millions of years there was nothing quiet or tranquil about our planet. This is very easy for us to forget. The order and the harmony we depend upon on this planet are relatively recent, as is the arrival of human beings. Beneath the serenity of our world, the turbulent forces that shaped it are still at work; were they not, this would be a dead planet and we wouldn’t be here.

According to Scripture, according to our faith, the crown of God’s plan involves the human race created with the potential for right conduct, imagination and love. Humanity is the image of God and is free to follow God’s invitation or not: free to build or tear down, free to create or destroy. This is why morality is at the heart of the Bible’s idea of faith: how we choose and how we act determines the eventual
outcome of creation, not the laws of nature, not mathematics—human choice! That’s our faith. What Jesus brought into play was a revolutionary idea: that **holiness was more a matter of making a positive contribution than negative restraint.** Not all Christians have got this message.

In the Letter to the Romans, of which we read today, St. Paul is continuing the revolutionary thought of Jesus in regard to what God expects. Honoring God and worship have to be lived out in a positive way. **God expects his worshippers to live by the very standard disclosed in Christ.** Already in the Old Testament the Book of Leviticus said, “**Love your neighbor as yourself.**” That was one of over six hundred different laws. For Christ it was one of two laws that summarized, described, and included all that God really expects of his children. But, while simple to explain, **it is arduous in practice.** To love others, especially strangers, with the same regard and concern one has for oneself borders on the impossible. **It is not impossible, but it borders on the impossible! Nor is it really obvious what it means or what is required.**

- How can I love someone who doesn’t love me? We think of love as mutual.
- How can I love a stranger?
- How can I love someone who is hostile to me or who hates me or who is my enemy?

These are the questions that **a believer must ask. God will lead us to the answers.**

Minimally, we may do no harm, but surely this is not the fulfillment of the law. **Jesus did not simply avoid doing harm. He is our model.** He is our teacher. He is our standard. **Sincere searching of our hearts will lead us to God’s answer** and a commitment to love our neighbor as ourselves and thus to the fulfillment of God’s law.
“The Lord is compassionate toward all his works.”

All three readings including the psalm reflect today the wonderful good news of Christ that God not only loves the world, much more than that, God has established the human race as his home. He has made humanity his home. He has become one with the human race in order to extend to the human race his own divinity, his own deity.

The first reading said, “The fullness of deity resides in Christ.” This is not an abstract idea. This was a power that came out of him, as you heard in the gospel. A power came out of him that cured all who came.

Now our problem is being in touch with that power. His physical presence is no longer on earth. We believe he abides in his Church in the Spirit, but how do you touch the Spirit? Well, you don’t exactly touch the Spirit, but we can avail ourselves of the power of the Spirit. This is our work. We have to seek Christ today as they sought him then.

We many think, well, we have the sacraments—and we do. But when we come to the Lord are we really touching him? The efficacy of the sacraments, guaranteed, is that God can touch us, but can we touch him? That has to do with our openness and our disposition. This is what we have to look at.

“Everyone in the crowd sought to touch him because power came forth from him and healed them all.”
Today the gospel makes reference to the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is, of course, God, and God working and acting constantly in the life of the world, but often and almost always unnoticed! We can picture God the Father because we have fathers; or if we don’t know our fathers, we at least know what fathers are like. If we have a bad father, we can still imagine what a good father would be like. We can imagine Jesus because he was a man. We know what men are like; even if we don’t know real good men, we can imagine what a real good man would be like, and so we can imagine Jesus. But we can’t imagine what God the Spirit is. For this reason, my eighth grade teacher used to say, “The Spirit is the forgotten person of the Blessed Trinity.” In a certain way that’s very true.

When Mary was conceived, she was conceived without sin. She was not conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, but she remained untouched by sin through the power of the Holy Spirit. This was not because she didn’t need to be saved. It was because her salvation was already predestined, which is what St. Paul is referring to. All the great saints have come into the world already touched by God, if not at the very moment of their conception, very soon after. When God expects sainthood at a very early stage of a person’s life, it has to be incubated very early. So the goal of all of us is to be saints, but those who are saints early in life begin this formation very early through the power of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus was conceived in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, again, it was by the power of the Holy Spirit; the conception itself was not through the normal, natural means, but through the power of the Spirit.

Today as we gather for the Eucharist, it is the Holy Spirit that we call upon our altar. We would be eating mere bread and drinking mere wine were it not for the Holy Spirit who descends upon our altar at the request of the Church through the power of the
Sacrament of Orders, again, the result of the Holy Spirit descending upon the priest at ordination.

The Holy Spirit is God permeating everything! If we start realizing the constant presence of the Spirit, not as something outside of us, but as something that is within us, we will realize that we are constantly being invited by the grace of the Spirit. We are invited all the time to be God’s companions, to be God’s coworkers, to be an extension of the body of Christ in whatever time and space we happen to dwell in at that moment. It is the Holy Spirit who keeps all things together and connects every moment of history into the one plan of God.

The Spirit works in spite of our freedom and through our freedom. It is ultimately through the Spirit that we actually have freedom, freedom to serve God and be what we are created to be. In a certain kind of irony, the Blessed Mother’s birth was a birth into perfect freedom, which in some odd way—that means unexplainable way—she accepted, so that it was really her choice while also God’s grace. And so it is every time we accept grace from God. We are like the Blessed Mother being born into grace. It is God doing it; we are cooperating. But after all, we have been created to cooperate with God; so it’s not unnatural but, in fact, the only truly natural way to live. We might think about that!
Serving the Suffering       Twenty-third Week in Ordinary Time       Friday, 
September 9, 2005       7:00 a.m.       1 Tm 1:1-2, 12-14;       Lk 6:39-42       (St. Peter Claver) 
(Caring and working for justice)

Today we commemorate the memorial of St. Peter Claver. St. Peter Claver was the 
Mother Teresa of the seventeenth century. He worked in Cartagena, Columbia, that was 
something like the Calcutta of today, not as big; but it was the center of the slave trade. 
As you probably know, slaves were brought over from Africa in subhuman conditions. 
Many of them got sick on the way; and if they were too sick, they were just dumped 
when the ship arrived, wherever they could be dumped. Peter Claver spent his life 
caring for them. If possible, he brought them back to health. If not, he took care of them 
until they died.

The interesting thing about Peter Claver, and Mother Teresa, for that matter, is 
neither of them ever spoke out against the injustices that caused the problems that 
they were spending their life trying to heal. Now is this an example of blindness, or is 
this something else? I really don’t know. But sometimes the Lord calls on people to in the 
very moment exercise compassion, and to even spend themselves in the exercise of 
compassion. That doesn’t mean that’s all that’s needed, but some people are called to do 
that. So St. Peter is surely an example of spending oneself and really taking on what 
would otherwise be unnecessary suffering in order to serve those who suffer, identifying 
with the lowest classes and the poorest people.

But also we should think about how our world creates forms of suffering that are 
completely unnecessary, not only slavery but other ways in which we create inequities, 
inequalities, and deprivations that are fundamentally unjust and that a well-rounded 
understanding of the gospel would call on people also to speak out against, and to work 
for reform of society itself. So on the memorial of Peter Claver we might consider some 
of these points.
The first part of this gospel makes an observation that good people produce goodness and bad people produce badness, but then it goes into a deeper issue: **Where does goodness really come from in a person?** His answer is that I will show you the way if you want to know. **You have to build a life of goodness. Goodness is a matter of character. It’s a matter of virtue, and virtue is habitual.**

Now human imagination often thinks otherwise. It imagines that some heroic act will make a person good. One single heroic act may be laudable, but one act does not make a person laudable. That’s what Jesus is talking about. If you really want to be good, you have to build a life of goodness. If you want to build a life of goodness, **you have to start with the firm foundation.** Don’t forget the great temptation in the garden of Eden. It was to decide for oneself what was good and evil. The great human temptation is to make ourselves equal to God.

Only God knows what is good because God is the author of everything. **Things are good only insofar as they are used for what they are created for.** In a sense it is all relative. **It’s relative to God’s purpose,** not our purpose, not our wishes—God’s wishes! We have to learn what that is; **that’s the foundation.** Then once founding our house on this foundation, which is God’s word, God’s revelation, **God’s will, we have to build through our choices.** As we make choices, every one is another brick that is placed on this foundation, and we are creating a character that is good, that will produce goodness. So it’s a matter of the long haul. It’s not isolated acts of heroism, however laudable they may be. **It’s a matter of day after day making the choices that come from God, that are really responses to grace.**

Now when we talk about virtue, we talk about habitual ways of doing that. Habitually when we are referring to God or relating to God there are three ways in which we please God. We call those the virtues of faith, hope, love, meaning **habitually we trust in**
God—that’s faith. Habitually we hope in God, depending upon his promises and power. Habitually we love God, which means we return to him his attitude toward us, which includes love of all of his creation and the love of his will, which we recognize to be for our own best interest.

In regard to all the other issues in life that come to us, there are four fundamental virtues that we can build our house on. The first is shrewdness. Jesus often talks about shrewdness. It means knowing really what is appropriate in every case. It’s not so easy to grow this virtue, but it is possible through the grace of God. St. Thomas Aquinas says that God gives this virtue of shrewdness or prudence in Baptism. So it’s not a matter we have to learn only through our own experience. God gives us the gifts if we use them. If we don’t use them, then they remain almost non-gifts, or they are not gifts for us. We have to use them for them to be operative gifts.

Temperance. Temperance is a virtue by which we modify our desires: make sure they don’t run us, but we run them.

Fortitude—almost the opposite—that’s saying that we don’t allow our fears or our anxieties to obstruct what we have to do. We choose what we need to choose regardless of how we feel about it—fortitude.

So we have shrewdness or prudence. We have temperance, curbing our excessive desires. Fortitude—giving it oomph against our negative emotions. And justice is the fourth cardinal virtue, moral virtue. Justice means everything in its right place. Ultimately, only God knows what just is. If we follow God, we will learn how to give everyone his due and to live in harmony with the whole. That is justice.
“So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.”

Parables are a favorite tool in Jesus’ teaching style. They probe and they irritate, but most of all they challenge. Today’s parable is about forgiveness and its limits. At first one may think that Jesus is saying that forgiveness has no limits, but even seventy-seven times is not an infinite number of times. But that’s not really the point anyway.

The limits of forgiveness are conditions that belong to the nature of love itself, and even God cannot alter the conditions of love anymore than God can contradict himself. Love is of its nature relational and mutual; therefore, forgiveness is relational and mutual. A person can love another unrequitedly, that is, without the love returned. However, a person cannot experience love without being willing to love. Think about it! It’s a fact of life. You cannot experience love if you are not willing to love, otherwise love would be neither conscious nor relational and, therefore, not really human in the true sense.

We could take this story as a tableau in which each of us at different times is master, the first servant, or the second. The master has a vision of life. He has a big heart. Small things are not important. Hopefully, we aspire to this kind of mastery of self. The first slave, and he was a slave because he could be sold, the first slave is small, small-minded. He has no vision except of himself, of his needs and wants. What he owes is not important, but what others owe him is all-important. That is the nature of pettiness. Even when forgiven a huge debt he remains selfish and petty. He has been loved, but he doesn’t requite the love because he loves only himself, which is the center of his whole life. He is a sad loser. But nothing could be done, at least by anyone else. By focusing on what others owe him rather than on what others have given, he imprisons himself in endless misery and torment. There is one, and only one, door out of this prison; and he has already chosen not to take it. The second slave is merely a victim of the first, and in this story has no say.
Sometimes, hopefully, we are like the master: free, generous, and magnanimous. Sometimes, sadly, we are like the second slave and have to suffer the indignities that others heap upon us. But sometimes we may be like the first slave, the unforgiving one, who is, after all, the center of this parable. In so many ways most people are like him.

**When we keep accounts of all of our disappointments**, of who has let us down, of who has not come to our aid or done what we want, **we are creating a prison.** Starting with our birth, we have been thrown into life with people who have limited capacities to love and care for others. That’s another fact of life. No parent, no spouse, no child, is omnipotent. **Nobody can do everything we need them to do for us.** Some are better than others. Some families are more loving. But **when we hold onto debts, meaning feelings of being cheated or short-changed or owed something, we only torment ourselves.**

And not only do we torment ourselves with useless suffering, but **we push God away.** 1 John says: “God is love.” **Love is reciprocal. Love is mutual.** What Jesus showed on the cross was that although he had many enemies, none could force him to hate or resent or to will ill on them. This is our redemption from a small, barren soulscape.

Christ said, “All power in heaven and earth has been given to me, and I give it to you.” **This power that Jesus gives is a power to overcome all bitterness and resentment in spite of hate, rejection, and misfortune.** Indeed, these will come, but they do not have to overcome us. **Jesus died so that we can live a new life.** St. Paul says **that’s the meaning of Baptism. He feeds us in our new life in the Eucharist** with his own body and blood that was the price of our redemption. As we come this morning to receive this sacrament, **let us prepare well to receive the gift and the power it contains.**
There are many stories of healing in the New Testament, and they all teach us a different aspect of the healing process. In this particular one, we see that the person who was healed was not really the one who even requested healing, but it was requested by someone else. This has been called “intercessory prayer,” but the key to intercessory prayer is the faith of the intercessor, who in this case is the centurion. His faith is backed up with his works. It’s not a faith or works issue. He was a man of sincerity, and he really helped others, in particular people outside of his own, you might say, gambit. He was not a Jew, but he helped the Jews. He was a man of peace. Although a centurion, a military man, he helped the country he was occupying. He must have had wealth because he was able to build a synagogue, which is not an inconsiderable sort of project. But he now backed up his goodness, his sense of caring for other people, with a request and faith behind it. That’s why Jesus says, “I haven’t seen this kind of faith in Israel.” If you think about it, it is not very common. What he was saying is that Jesus had the power to simply order this healing.

So we have to keep in mind when we come to healing, we have to be well-disposed by this sense of God’s power to do whatever God wants, even at a distance. At healing services I am often a little bit upset by people who want to be prayed over by two or three different people. It’s like, well, what’s important here? Where is the faith here? Or they really insist on signs like, for example, resting in the Spirit, falling back. What is that all about? This is not about any of those things. It’s about trusting in the power of God.
This morning Jesus in a sense almost upbraids his disciples. He says, “Well, if you don’t understand this parable, how are you going to understand anything?”

Everybody has to start somewhere, so we are going to start with: What is a parable in the first place? When you heard the word “parable,” did anything come into your mind at all? What is a parable? What does that mean to you? Max, does it mean anything at all? Parable—does the word mean anything? Anybody? How about over here? Michael, what does parable mean? It’s used as a lesson—that’s true. Literally, parable means something very specific. It means an exaggeration. So it’s an exaggeration used as a lesson in the form of a story, which is usually a matter of comparing something to something else. So it’s an extended comparison, which is a form of poetry, you might say, or at least it uses poetic images. Okay, so that’s the first thing.

Jesus says, “Well I use these all the time, so you better understand what I am doing. I’m exaggerating something.” Sometimes your parents do that—don’t they? They exaggerate a little bit to get the point through. Maybe your teachers do too. It’s not subtle, necessarily, but it works. So it’s an exaggeration in the form of a story or a lesson and usually using comparisons.

In this particular case, what’s the basic comparison? Where does this come from? What lifestyle is the basis of this comparison? Is it about working in a bicycle factory? What’s the basis for this? Where does this take place—this story? In a gymnasium? You have to listen to the whole context? Where does this take place? Outdoors! Isn’t that the first thing? It’s outdoors! And who is doing something in this story? What is a sower? What’s another word for a sower? A farmer—a farmer. This is about a farmer—isn’t it? This is a story about a farmer, and Jesus is trying to say, “Well, when you want to talk about the kingdom of God, it’s like a farmer who goes out to plant his seeds.

Now in modern farms, what do farmers use to plant their seeds? Yes, but what do they use? What sort of machinery do they use? Big tractors! They plant the seeds and they drive them underneath the soil—don’t they? That way they don’t have to plow. Very modern. No erosion. So that’s modern times. But in the ancient days what did people do? They didn’t have modern equipment, so what did they do? They threw the seed. That’s what they did. So Jesus is talking about a farmer going out and throwing seeds all over the place!

Now is this a very efficient way to farm? No, it’s not efficient. The ancient world wasn’t efficient, so they would waste a lot. There is a lot of waste in this ancient system. Jesus’ point, however, is, yes, there is a lot of waste when it comes to what God does. God wastes a lot. It’s an odd idea, but you ought to think about it. God wastes a lot. In a sense, God is almost foolish; in fact, God is foolish! He is throwing seed everywhere!
He even throws seed where it can’t possibly grow! For example, can you grow grass on the street? Well, a footpath is like a street or a walk; and he throws it there too. There is no chance that it’s ever going to grow—is there? No, it can’t grow there. But see, this farmer is just so taken up with this job he is just throwing everything everywhere all over the place; and a lot of it is wasted, first of all, because some of it falls on a path just like this floor. Well, you couldn’t grow grass here—could you? Would it grow? No.

What other place does it fall? It doesn’t mention trees here. Where else? Among thorns, they are like brambles. So it gets in there, and does it grow? Yes, a little bit, but not for very long. What happens? Larry? It gets choked and it dies. And does that ever happen to the word of God? Oh, yes, it gets into people, but then it is choked. What choke it? What chokes the word of God in somebody? Chris? What chokes the word of God in somebody? That’s true—grievous sin, mortal sin, chokes the word of God. What else? Okay, indifference. What else? Mark? Well, I will read it to you what it really says what happens. It says, “They hear the word, but worldly anxiety”—what does that mean? Emily, what is anxiety, worldly anxiety? No, it’s not about passion for something. What is worldly anxiety? What’s another word for anxiety? Worry! Very good—worry. Some people worry, oh, does she like me? What am I going to wear tomorrow? What’s ever going to happen? Am I ever going to pass that test? Is my dad going to get that job he wants? Will I be able to go to Disneyland? Am I ever going to get to do what I want to do? Am I ever going to get better? Am I going to get over this terrible allergy I have? Those are anxieties. Jesus’ point is: if you worry too much, that’s going to choke—that’s going to choke—the word of God in you. The word of God is given for life, but if you are just going to worry all the time, what are you not doing? What are you not doing if you are going to worry all the time? You are not thinking of God or trusting God—right? That’s right; you are not trusting. If you are going to receive the word, you have to trust the word. Right, Peter? So this involves trust. Well, anxiety, worldly anxiety, is not trusting. It’s worrying about things: what I have or don’t have, or who likes me or doesn’t like me. That doesn’t matter. The word is more important than that.

What else happens to the seed? Besides the thorns that choke it, what other problems arise? It falls on rocky ground. Yes, it falls on rocky ground; and what happens to that? Charlie? It doesn’t grow—why? Why? Well, there is soil, but the soil can’t grow because of no—what? No, not no rain. There is not enough soil, so therefore the roots can’t take—right? The roots can’t take; that’s what happens. The roots can’t get down.

Now, again, sometimes we are like that. What does it mean when the roots don’t get down from the word of God? What are the roots of the word of God? That’s not an easy answer. I mean, I don’t expect you to know how to answer that. But just think about it for yourself for a moment. You have heard a lot of things. Has it taken root in you? Does it grow in you? Does it go down in you or does it just stay up in your head? There are a lot of things you are taught that are very rich and powerful ideas, but sometimes they just stay right in your head. They go in your ear; they sit in your brain, and they stay there forever. But that’s no good. If the word of God is to move you, it’s
got to have roots that go all the way down into your heart and all the way down into your belly. And if it takes root in your whole being, it can do something. It will actually start bearing fruit. But if it doesn’t, if it stays up there, it’s not going to bear any fruit. Some people turn religion into just a bunch of ideas, nice thoughts that they have occasionally, maybe once a month or once a week, but it doesn’t take root in them. So Jesus says, “Well, that can happen.” You know, God doesn’t take responsibility for that. Whose responsibility is it for it to take root? Who decides whether the roots take? The soil, and you are the soil! You are the soil. If you have rocks in your soil, you’ve got to get the rocks out to let the roots go down.

You have to be aware that you are the soil here. You are either a soil that is so hardened—which you aren’t. You are not like that. You are not so hardened that the word can’t get in. No, some people are, but you are not. But sometimes you could let anxieties take over your life, maybe for a short period of time or maybe for a long period of time, and stop trusting in God, or you could just not let it sink down. You could just let it not sink in at all. You could just, as it were, pass over and go out and play all the time—never praying—never praying, never making any room in yourself for this word of God. Then you could be the soil, the soil that’s so full of rocks nothing can grow. You don’t want to be like that, but it takes some action. You have to let the roots get down.

What else could happen to this? Oh, not only could we have worldly anxiety, but “the lure of riches”—the lure of riches. What does lure mean? What is lure? Is that a big word? It’s only four letters. The lure of riches—what does that mean? What’s another way of saying it? The desire to be rich—isn’t that what it means? The desire to be rich. Jesus is saying that the desire to be rich could actually take away from the word of God. Is that what he is saying? Is he? I think that’s what I hear. It can—it can. Rich people can be very Christian, but the lure of riches can take us away from more important things. You understand what Jesus is saying? It can happen. It does happen—the lure of riches.

What else? Craving—what does that word mean? Don’t look away. Craving. Come on, don’t you crave anything? Not even chocolate? Dark chocolate? Mmmm. You like it! You love it! You love it! Craving is loving something. Well, we do, we do crave things, but it can get out-of-hand. That’s the point. So be careful. Sometimes our craving, our desires, are for all kinds of things that we consume—and then we end up so full, there is no room for God or for love, really. There is no room for love. We don’t find God except through love. So if you are so full of what you are craving, there is no love in your life. And that word is the word of God—nothing, just a sound, worthless sound, meaningless. You see what Jesus is saying? Okay.

But then this is not bad news, of course, Clare. Jesus is not saying this so we will all be upset and worried all day—just the opposite. He says, “But those sown on rich soil will grow and it will be abundant.” So that’s what we focus on, the abundant promises of God—as long as we cooperate. We try to trust. We try to watch that we don’t get led astray by the lure of other things: temptations and desires. We trust in God; well, then we become a rich soil. It is amazing what God can do in the soil! If you look at a field of dirt, you would say, “What’s that? It’s a field of dirt!” But you put seed in that dirt and
wonderful things happen. It is a miracle, and it happens every day. We are living on a miraculous planet that is fertile, and you are part of it! You know what God says to Adam? “You are dirt. You have come from dirt; you will go back to dirt.” That’s kind of a metaphor, but it means you are capable of great fertility. If you let the word of God grow in you, a miracle will take place in your life. Your life will become a miraculous bed of life and fertility and growth, if you want it to—if you want it to. That is an opportunity that every single person has. That’s what this parable says. So that’s good news!

But, of course, it requires patience. That’s why Jesus likes the farmer thing. He likes to talk about farmers because farmers know patience. Modern people who don’t farm don’t know anything about patience. We are running, running, running every day. We expect everything done yesterday, and we are not patient. Well, part of this is we have to be patient with ourselves and patient with the people sitting next to us, because we have to have time for all of this to happen. This doesn’t happen overnight—does it? Does it? No, no, and not in one season either. The season of human life is long. We take a long time to grow. But be hopeful and patient with each other, with yourself. Great things are happening, if you let it—will happen if you let it. That’s a promise of this parable. And this is “the gospel of the Lord!”

Let us pray.
Today we celebrate the memorial of the Sorrowful Mother. It’s connected to yesterday’s feast of the Triumph of the Cross. The question is: **How does the Blessed Mother share in the redemption of the world?** The answer has to do with compassion and its nature.

Pain is physical and emotional. Suffering may not be physical at all, but it’s both emotional and spiritual. There is a difference between pain and suffering. We can speak of suffering as being redemptive, but not necessarily pain; in fact, pain in itself is not redemptive. Pain is simply a reaction of the nervous system to some disorder.

Suffering is different. Suffering has a spiritual quality because it partakes in the very nature of love itself. **When a person suffers because of another’s suffering, there is a unity there, and that unity is the highest form of love.** That unity can bring all things together. It is sometimes called “compassion.” It is the compassion of God that **motivated the incarnation in the first place:** God becoming one with humanity and taking on all of humanity’s baggage, so to speak, our wounded nature, our brokenness, our mortality, and even our sin. St. Paul makes that very clear: Jesus became sin. That is compassion.

Now the Blessed Mother is a human being, not a divine being, not an incarnate God. But the Blessed Mother in her humanity also shared in this through nothing other than love, which is compassion, which is shared suffering. It’s important that we don’t place the Blessed Mother on some sort of pedestal, which some people want to do: give her special titles and so on. We need to think of the **Blessed Mother** as the first disciple and
the Queen of Saints, meaning one of many, one of a multitude, in this way a leader of us that we are to follow in her way, her way of compassion.

It is, of course, God’s way. It’s God’s way of bringing about unity through freedom. Is there another way? We do not know. We know this is God’s chosen way to bring about unity among all people and indeed actually the entire creation—through compassion. The Blessed Mother understood this and lived it. It is through true love that suffering becomes redemptive.

St. Paul has that rather odd statement in Colossians: “We make up in our own suffering what is lacking in the suffering of Christ.” People ask, “Well, what could be lacking in the suffering of Christ?” But as long as there is anybody, anyone, who is not united to God in love, there is something lacking; and we can fill that up through our compassion because compassion really belongs to God. It is the Holy Spirit working through us. But we have to understand the Holy Spirit does not always work through us in signs and wonders. The Holy Spirit works through us by our willingness to suffer, and that is redemptive when it is truly motivated by love.
“For the love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains.”

The first thing we can say about this statement is that in one way it’s an exaggeration. The love of money is not the root of all evils, surely. There are hatreds and enmities that have nothing to do with the love of money.

However, there is a certain truth here if we look at it, because money in itself is nothing but an exchange mechanism for goods and services. However, goods and services lie on the basic physical level. They only apply to our physical needs and wants. They cannot exceed them. So the love of money is the love of the lowest level of our selfhood. It is the love of our material selfhood, which of course we should love, as it is part of us—but it is only part. But the word “love” applied to that is too strong. We need to love the whole including the physical, but not love the physical in itself, and that’s what the love of money really is. It’s the focusing of all our energy and all our desire to one very thin, shallow part of our selfhood, of our identity, as human beings and creatures of God, indeed, adopted children of God. So it is radically inappropriate—radically inappropriate—to love money or to love what money can buy, to love things, and to love service, the service we can buy for ourselves.

This is totally self-centered in a very crass way. If we allow ourselves to live in a self-centered and materialistic way, we are not combating the spiritual egoism that is the very essence of sin. Indeed, that’s what the trials of life are about. It’s about letting go of the domination of the egoism, of the self-centeredness. But indulging ourselves and
living on a material level does not do that; in fact, it promotes the continuation of self-centeredness. **It completely fails to take into consideration our full nature and our true reality.**

So though it is a certain sort of oversimplified statement, it is nonetheless true; at least there is enough truth in it to remember: “The love of money is the root of all evil.” Some people in their desire for it—just in their desire for it, whether they are rich or poor, it doesn’t matter—**the desire for money can cause a person to stray from the faith.** Why? Because the faith is about our true identity in God—“and pierce themselves with many pains,” sadly, vainly, but truly.
“And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat.’”

When Jesus told this parable, indeed when he told any of the parables, he was illustrating what we hear in the first reading from the prophet Isaiah, the statement: “My thoughts are not your thoughts; my ways are not your ways.” Indeed, our ideas and God’s ideas frequently clash, especially concerning what is fair and just. For example, no one would ever complain about being paid more than they earned. However, when the beneficiary is someone else, then it’s a different story.

Comparing ourselves to others is a practice that usually begins in childhood. Children can be so sensitive to perceived injustices—perceived injustices! How come she gets to go? How come he can? Why can’t I? And so on! And all you parents have heard these complaints over and over again. We may think it’s comical, but it really is sad, because underneath this, truly, if we were to face the facts, there is a lack of trust. When we complain about our parents as children, we do not trust them. We feel we are being cheated somehow.

This is just like Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden, when the serpent convinced them so easily that God really wasn’t on their side, that God was trying to hold something back. This is very sad when we fall into this trap, and we do—and not only when we are children! When we are grown up we fall into this trap. It is so easy to become suspicious of another’s intention, even when that other is someone who has helped us and nurtured us, even for years! That’s the case when children doubt their parents. That’s the case when we mistrust God. In this way parents have a share in God’s experience with his whole creation. If I could put it this way, now you know what God feels like! People are quick to doubt the fairness of God’s generosity. Either we perceive someone else as getting more than he or she deserves or we perceive we are getting less than we deserve.

Now the greatest gift of all is the gift of eternal life. There is no possible greater gift. This is exactly what God bestows in Christ. And this gift admits no comparisons. In other words, there is no more eternal. We can’t compare this gift to something else, or you can’t say, well, I want to have more eternal life than him, because I deserve more. That just doesn’t make sense. We are not thinking on a spiritual level when we are thinking like that. We are involved in comparisons which don’t belong to the spiritual order at all.
Now this gift of eternal life is earned and merited only by Jesus Christ himself. That is our faith. **Christ alone merited eternal life. But he graciously grants it to all those who cleave to him in faith.** In other words, only Jesus really “bore the burden of the day and the heat.” And the rest of us are those fortunate ones called into the pay line at the end of the day. **We benefit from Jesus’ work and Jesus’ suffering, his love and his gift of himself, which is his mercy.**

But this may not be our perception—**this may not be our perception!** We may say, which is easy to do, that everything is a gift, but *emotionally* feel burdened just like the workers in today’s parable. We may feel that we are the ones who are bearing the heat of the day, which is another way of saying **we may feel as if everything depends on us.** In that case, we are not living the gospel. That is not the gospel. That would not be gospel, because gospel means good news, and that wouldn’t be good news.

**If we find life burdensome, we need to come to Christ—not to the Church, not to the institution, not to a counseling center,** although those are all very well and good. We have to come to Christ. As risen Lord, he continues to guide and direct the lives of all those who cling to him in faith. He said, and I quote, **“Come to me all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you.”** He did not say come to the Church all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and the Church will refresh you. He did not say come to this or that doctor. He said, “Come to me.” **He is speaking of a personal relationship of faith!**

But sometimes we do not want to come, and, frankly, we do not want his gifts! And we don’t want his generosity either. **We want to be self-sufficient!** This is the primary effect of original sin in the human family, that we grow up willy-nilly wanting to be self-sufficient. And that is the source of an enormous amount of pain, which is, sadly, not redemptive. It is quite useless. Indeed, Isaiah was right: God’s ways are not our ways. Our ways are the ways of self-sufficiency. God does not ask for that. God does ask for our help. “My yoke is easy, my burden light.” Yes, help—**he wants us to help with his yoke.** It’s his yoke, not our yoke, but he does want us to share in the burden in the work of redemption—true. He does not want passive believers—true. **But he does not ask us to redeem ourselves—he does not ask us to redeem ourselves!**

We think about this far too seldom. In fact, **God wants to bestow graces on us that we turn away.** One of the great wonders of human life: why we turn away the graces of God! But we do, **because we want to be self-sufficient!** Ultimately, **God gives—pays us, if you will—the reward that Christ has earned and merited** by his life of love and service to the Father. And the second **great wonder is that Jesus is not complaining!**
"To anyone who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he seems to have will be taken away."

This text is located in a selection on light and sound, the light that is not hidden and the listening that we need to pay attention to. What Jesus is talking about is that the great problem in the world is not the lack of truth. The problem in the world is we don’t know how to listen or see the truth. It’s there; it always has been. People are not suffering because of a lack of information. They are suffering because they don’t know how to put it in right order. They don’t perceive important things as important and unimportant things as unimportant. They have everything mixed up. So he says, “Be careful how you hear.”

I am always hearing stories about what is going on at St. Joe’s that are very odd. So and so said to so and so, who said to so and so, who said to so and so, who said to so and so—and by that time it’s changed so much that it bears no similarity to the original report! Take care how you hear. You are responsible, actually, how you take in things. This is what this is about. We are responsible. How we see things, how we take them in, is our responsibility to get it right. If we believe every Tom, Dick, and Harry who talks to us, we are going to be deceived, and it will be our fault!

Jesus says, “I know mine, and mine know me.” He is speaking of his sheep. The sheep have the responsibility of knowing who the shepherd is. We can blame all kinds of things on bad leadership: in the Church, in the world, in government, in business—bad leaders, yes, but look at all the people who follow them! They are responsible for following the bad leaders. The bad leaders are responsible for their own wrong judgments; they are
responsible for their own mistakes, for their own errors, yes, but so are the people who follow them. Take care how you hear. We have to discern the truth. **It is our responsibility to discern the truth.** It is our responsibility to see the truth. It is not hidden.

Our problem is we don’t want to look closely enough. **We don’t want to examine ourselves, our viewpoints, our feelings, our prejudices.** We just take them the way they are; and then anything that fits into them, we accept. That’s not the way; that will lead us astray. When we are led astray, then we end up with no understanding. So that’s what this applies to. “To anyone who has, more will be given.” If we really have some understanding that is rooted in the truth, that is not simply a matter of our own prejudices or preferences or likes and dislikes, then we will get more. We will grow in understanding. But if we don’t have any in the first place, if we merely think we do, we will lose the little we think we have. It will be taken away.

So this is on the **responsibility of the sheep to discern the truth,** to see the light, and to take care of how we hear, so that the shepherd can lead, so the shepherd can rule, **so the shepherd can govern.** The shepherd cannot rule or govern or lead without discernment in the sheep.
Today we are talking about Jonah and the whale, and it’s probably true that this is a novel written partly for entertainment, but also for instruction. There are several types of this literature in the section of the Bible called “Writings,” in Hebrew, *Ketuvim*—the third section of the Old Testament.

Now the Book of Jonah is very interesting because in many ways it mirrors in a metaphorical way our own experience. **When we run away from God we end up in turbulence.** When we are in turbulence not only are we in turbulence, but **people around us are in turbulence.** This agitation in life creates a reaction, which is to **work all the harder**—rowing all the harder against the waves. **But this does no good.**

Now, I believe, many people today talk about how busy they are. I agree they are very busy, but why? In some respects, it seems to me, modern society is running away from God; and that running away itself creates turbulence. The turbulence itself then creates a reaction, which is to make people work all the harder. The real question is: **Are we doing God’s work?**

Now the whole idea of the **belly of the whale.** It’s, of course, again, a metaphor used by the New Testament to refer to Christ in the tomb. But even beyond that it is a **metaphor for quiet and for rest**—and, frankly, **for doing nothing!** If we really want to follow God, we have to have periods of total quiet in our lives. We have to be taken away from the turbulence. We have to be taken away from all of the activities of the world so that we can really be—**simply be!**
Now that is not easy! The whole idea of the belly of the whale is not supposed to be something attractive. It’s dark and confining. People do not want to be in a dark, confining place. But sometimes we have to be in a dark, confining place. In that darkness, in that confinement, we can actually undergo—and that’s the proper word, undergo—transformation. Indeed, what is a stomach? What is a belly but a laboratory for transformation whereby food is transformed?

So all of this, I do think, speaks to us of our present experience and of our frequent attempts to get away from God and to throw ourselves into all kinds of activities, which do no good. We need the peace and the quiet and the darkness and the confinement that leads to transformation, and it’s up to us to realize it.
“On this mountain he will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations; he will destroy death forever.”

This idea of a veil that covers all peoples may be a little bit difficult to get in touch with, to understand in a practical way. An acquaintance of mine spent six months in a monastery. It was a sabbatical that he wanted to, as it were, “get away from it all.” In this particular monastery there were no newspapers; there were no radios; there were no televisions. There was also no heat. It was very primitive. There was no meat. It was a very primitive monastery. But he did enjoy it; in fact, after six months, although physically very difficult, he was filled with a deep spirit of joy because he had no contact with anything but God, the Scriptures, the liturgy of the Church, and the community that he was living with.

After six months he left and he boarded a bus, and he said to himself, “Oh my God, what happened?” Since he hadn’t read a newspaper or seen television or heard a radio in six months, he had no idea what was going on. So he thought something terrible must have happened because these people are so sad! He was thinking about that for a while, and then he realized they are always like this. They are always sad. They don’t know the joy that I’ve just been experiencing by being with the Lord secluded and separated from the world. We live in a world where we are barraged constantly with bad news. You turn on the television, they don’t tell you all the wonderful things that happened in the world, but many wonderful things have, but you don’t hear about it. They tell you the horrible things: the latest hurricane or the latest tornado or war or crime. That’s what you hear about all the time. It’s no wonder that we are so sad and oftentimes depressed. It’s no wonder!

Now we do not have the luxury of going six months to a monastery. We have our responsibilities in the world, but we need to keep in mind that we have also heard the good news of Jesus Christ. We have to fill ourselves with that good news by remaining in some way in contact with it. We often do the opposite of what monasteries do. Instead of cutting ourselves off from the outside world and all the newspapers and magazines and radios and televisions, we cut ourselves off from the inner life of the Spirit. We cut ourselves off from the good news of Christ and the meaning of our Baptism, and we allow the world to cover us with this veil. That just deprives us of the joy that, in a sense, we have a right to because of God and because what God has done for us.

When you brought the body of your Mildred into this Church, I sprinkled it with the water from the font of Baptism. That is because the font of Baptism is the font of new life, of rebirth. The rebirth is not birth into something perishable, as is our first birth into this world from the womb of our mothers. This is a birth into the imperishable life of God, the eternal life of God. That’s what is symbolized by the water. That’s what is symbolized by the flame of this candle that was first lit during the Easter Vigil, when
we came to proclaim for the first time in this Church year the death and resurrection of Christ in a very visible ritual, when we celebrated the adult baptisms of our parish.

Isaiah prophesied that there would come a day when it would be said, “Behold our God, to whom we looked to save us!” Christians believe that day has come in Christ. We can behold our God. We can! And when we do, we will be filled with joy, and we will be able to live in this world, even with our responsibilities, without being depressed and dragged down into the sadness that belongs to those who do not know the good news of Jesus Christ.

So as we reflect on Mildred’s life, we need to be full of gratitude for all the good things. I am sure there were some bad things that happened to Mildred. Bad things happen to everybody. Good things happen to everybody. Bad things are not a sign that we are bad, and good things are not a sign that we are good. Good and bad happen to everyone. Jesus made that very clear in his teachings and in his own personal example. He said, “The sun shines on the good and the evil; the rain falls on the good and the bad.” In his own life he experienced tremendous evil, even though he did nothing but good for others. So that’s all of our experience—everybody.

But it’s also a fact that people in a psychological experiment, people who were told to take a diary and only write down good things fared much better physically and mentally. They had better blood pressure. They had better sense of self and better general feelings of wholeness after many weeks of this than those other two groups who were told either to write down everything that happened during the day or another group only bad things that happened. Those who wrote only bad things ended up very bad off physically and psychologically. That tells us the value and the power of filters. So we need to filter a little bit ourselves. If we cannot exclude all the bad news, we can at least include all the good news and focus on it and be grateful for it and think about it as often as possible.

As we think of Mildred’s life, think of the good things that happened to Mildred and the good things that came through Mildred to each of us, and render thanks to the Lord. To render thanks to the Lord is the best way to become ready for the next blessing that the Lord wishes to give us.
“Then it goes and brings back seven other spirits more wicked than itself who move in and dwell there, and the last condition of that man is worse than the first.”

Many of Jesus’ teachings about good and evil are counter-intuitive; that is, they go against what we seem to think is common sense. For example, people seem to think that they are free when they do whatever they want; but why do you want what you want? That’s really the question we have to ask. Why do we want what we want?

If we do not have dominion over what we want, we are not free. Something else is determining what we desire, and we are following that, whatever it is, and claim when we do that without constraint, we are free. Jesus’ point is, no, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, and they are truly free only when they are voluntarily, deliberately, consciously, living out the purpose of God for themselves, when they are obedient to the grace of God.

Now for this to take place, we need something stronger than ourselves to bind whatever it is that controls desires. And that’s the power of Christ himself. He comes to bind the strong man—the strong man is the one who controls us. These are figures of speech. Christ comes to control, to bind, all those things that determine for us already what we want, and, therefore, really frees us to be what God calls us to be. That’s true freedom. True freedom is found in simplicity and obedience to God. Then when we want what God wants and we do what we want, then we are free—but only then. When what we want is not what God wants, that it is not freedom, no matter what we think!
Before we get started this morning I would like to ask you: How many of you like this parable? I have been told many don’t like this parable. I am somewhat sympathetic.

Today it is often said that people want to believe in God or in Christ, but not belong to the Church or to any community or institution. Well, this parable is about belonging, but not to an institution. It’s about belonging to the kingdom of God. The problem of belonging and believing is not only one for Christians. Recently I read about some Buddhists who are very irate because, especially in the United States, a lot of young people claim to be Buddhists, but they don’t practice the Dharma and they don’t support the community. So practicing Buddhists resent this: How dare they claim to be one of us when they aren’t! This question is also raised among Jews, where orthodox rabbis are very upset by the fact that so many people claim to be Jewish, but they don’t practice Torah. So this is the background of this issue, of this question, of this teaching.

Jesus turns these problems right on their head. Belonging in God’s kingdom is not for Jesus a matter of practice. It’s not a matter of merit. It’s not even a matter of suitability. Belonging to the kingdom of God is the result of responding to an invitation; it’s that simple! Further, the invitation extends to everyone because the Aramaic word translated here as “many” means “everyone.”

This is profoundly unsettling to certain people for two reasons. First of all, how can bad people be invited along with the good? How is that right? Why should that be? Secondly, from a very different point of view, if bad people are supposed to be included with the good in this invitation, how come this one poor fellow without the wedding garment is thrown out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and grinding of teeth? How fair is that? Where is the mercy there? How is that just?

Well, it was just such questions that Jesus hoped to stimulate when he told this story, when he used this parable. We have to keep in mind he started this whole thing with the statement: “The kingdom of God may be likened.” So some aspects of this parable are like the kingdom, but not others. So it’s up to us, first of all, to find how is it like and how is it not like.

Jesus is aware that people are set on a good or bad path very early in life. At times we may not be aware of this ourselves. We are set on a path—good or bad—very early in life before we have gained mastery of self, and therefore any true responsibility. We throw that word “responsibility” around rather lightly. We talk about teaching children responsibility. Well, for small things, yes—but not for oneself. One can only be responsible for oneself when one grows in mastery of self, which takes a long time and the wherewithal to work with. In fact, it is very fortunate if one has the wherewithal to gain this mastery of self, and therefore true responsibility for oneself.
indeed. Jesus’ point in this parable is that God’s sense of justice is not limited to rewarding the fortunate further. The very meaning of life for Christ, for Jesus, is an opportunity extending to all to live with God eternally. This is the marriage feast, or the heavenly feast.

Now this requires some cooperation, yes—some cooperation. But the past doesn’t really matter. Why? All is forgiven! Jesus preached that over and over again—all is forgiven. He preached about forgiveness more than any other topic. But in the present moment, cooperation is required. It’s not a matter of one’s record. It’s not a matter of one’s past. It’s a matter of one’s willingness right here and now to cooperate. Are you ready? Are you willing? That’s the point. That’s the question.

It is doubtless that the wedding garment in today’s story represents the grace of God. In Baptism we say we “put on Christ.” That expression is used in the baptismal rite. It is used by St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians: “Put on Christ.” That’s the wedding garment. It’s not a matter of lifelong discipline. It’s not a matter of Dharma or Torah. It’s a matter of grace, the grace of God that we put on by cooperating with God. But it is not our power; it is not our doing. It’s God’s doing. That’s the meaning of grace. It’s what God does in us and through us and for us.

It does require surrendering that self-centered flesh that we inherit from Adam. It is the Church’s belief that our self-centeredness is inherited from Adam. It is not learned from the world. It’s not a matter of bad example. We inherit it, and by itself it will lead us away from God. So to put on Christ we have to surrender this self-centeredness, this self-love, this “me firstness,” that we are born into when we are born in the flesh.

Now the man in this story without the wedding garment is narcissistic. That means he prefers himself to God. That means the strongest force in his life is self-love. In this case, even grace cannot effect change. That’s what this parable means. For those who prefer themselves to God, grace cannot effect change: grace cannot transform, grace cannot sanctify, grace cannot justify. Indeed, Christ noted painfully the sad fact that while sins and flaws and failures in our past are no obstacle to divine life, many people deliberately and decidedly turn God away—and not just once but repeatedly, over and over again. That’s what this parable is about. The good news is that they shall not stop God’s glorious plans. The bad news is they will not be part of them.
“At the judgment the men of Nineveh will rise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here.”

There are quite a few negative statements Jesus makes about “this generation.” We have to be careful not to apply that either to the world in general, or to Judaism as an institution or tradition. In the first case the world itself is holy, touched by the hand of God. “God so loved the world, he sent his Son” to be it’s redeemer, to bring it salvation. **The world is holy, touched by God.** However, that doesn’t mean that people are holy. **People can be holy or not,** depending upon their choice. **Holiness depends upon submission to the will of God.**

Secondly, Jesus spoke often very negatively to the people around him, who happened to be Jews, but that doesn’t mean Judaism is evil or unholy, and this has often been the interpretation. No, he meant **these people, now,** that I am talking to. And it could be these people, now, in the year 2005 just as well, because **we all have free will and we all can choose whether we accept God or not.** So we mustn’t think in black and white terms about whether the world is good or bad. The world is actually good, but often full of people who are not good, who choose not to be holy, who choose not to surrender to God. The same is true of **institutions,** whether it be Judaism or Catholicism or Islam or anything else. **They are full of people who may or may not accept God and his will for them.**
Now the idea of “this generation.” It is true, however, that we are very much **influenced by the people around us**. We should be very keen to recognize this. So it is true that various periods of time are more or less willing collectively to be civilized, to act civilly, to care for the weak and the poor among them, to make laws that are just, to allocate resources fairly, and so on, more or less. And then we might judge our own time by that standard. **Are we, as a collective, really willing to serve God and surrender to his will, or do we want to have our own way?** Are we really concerned about, as a collective, the **common good**, or are we concerned about, each of us, **our own personal wishes and desires**? Those are good questions. Through them we might arrive at an evaluation of **this present age. Is it one that listens or doesn’t listen?**

Jesus picked one thing in particular to really object to. They asked for a sign. A **sign** means they are asking God to prove something. That itself is wicked. A **person seeking God does the seeking—doesn’t ask God to do the proving!**
“I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.”

I understand that Sophie was a gardener. Gardening is a very noble, earthy, and spiritual pastime. When the Book of Genesis talks about the creation of the human nature, the human beings, it says that God placed the first man in a garden. This is a very interesting idea because that means that God must be a gardener, because a garden is something that is taken care of. If you don’t take care of a garden, it’s not a garden anymore! A garden is the result of caring, nurturing, and waiting. If a gardener is impatient, he or she will ruin the plants that are planted. One has to be patient.

Here in the gospel we hear the testimony of Martha, who says, “I have come to believe that you are the one who is coming into the world.” This is a progressive action—coming to believe—hopefully a progressive action that we are involved in, which is something like gardening because it involves patience. It involves caring because the very nature of God is to care. Our purpose in life is to become transformed into a completely godlike being, therefore truly a gardener of all of God’s creation, one who cares for, nurtures, what God has made, and waits for what’s coming.

For gardeners the whole year is exciting to a point because every season brings a different surprise, you might say, a different form of life. If we look at our lives, it is also true. Every stage of our life brings something different. The crocuses of fall are not like the lilies of spring. They are different. They are hardier. In a sense, they are more
vibrant; they are less delicate, and that’s the way it should be. As we move into different stages and seasons of our lives, our love and our caring for God and for God’s creation, which includes, of course, all people, should become more mature, less delicate, less subject to being withered by a lack of nurture, sturdier, in some regards brighter.

Now there is something that is very unique to first love, just as there is something very unique to the first flowers of spring, but they don’t last. Crocuses last a long time. If we are gardeners of our lives, we will see in each season something very unique, and we will await it with great expectation and patience. We will recognize that it is not we who cause things to grow. We are not the authors of any life. We are not the authors of the lives of our children. They are gifts to us, just as our flowers in the garden are gifts to us. We are just there to care for them, as we are there to care for ourselves.

God is the author of life. If we listen to the word of God, we realize that God has plans that have only just begun, plans to bring us into his own eternal presence, the ever-present now of eternity. In our faith we believe that’s where Sophie is now—or rather than saying “where,” we should say that’s “how” she is now—with God in his ever-present moment. We need to nurture our own lives and the lives of all around us, caring and being grateful and waiting patiently for God’s continuing work.
Choose To Be Happy  Twenty-eighth Week in Ordinary Time  Tuesday, October 11, 2005  8:30 a.m.  Rom 1:16-25;  Lk 11:37-41  (All School Mass)  (Everything belongs to God.)

Boys and girls, when we try to teach you the teachings of Christ, we try to be simple; but sometimes we get too simple. It’s not that Jesus is complicated, but we are complicated. Our lives are complicated; the world is complicated, and sometimes we don’t apply the teachings of Jesus exactly as he perhaps would want us to. We think it is too beyond us; and maybe it is for some of you, but we need to try.

Now in the first reading St. Paul is talking about something very important. He is talking about how to live a good life, what he called a “life of righteousness,” also sometimes called a “life of justice.” He starts out by saying, “I’m not ashamed to tell you what I am going to tell you.” The reason he might think they might think he was ashamed is that what he is saying is going to be very, very different from what they expect to hear—very different. Sometimes the truth is different from what we expect.

Now when it comes to being just, the Jews had an idea that justice was already described in—what? Where would they learn about how to be just? In the—right, in the Scripture, particularly in the—Law. That’s the first third of the Old Testament. So in the Law. The Law says do this—then if you do it, then you are just. And Paul is saying, well, not really.

Now the Greeks were much wiser and more sophisticated, and they said, “Well, you figure out yourself what is just.” Of course, most people can’t, but the philosophers can, so we will ask the philosophers what is just and we will do whatever they say, and then we will be just. St. Paul says, “Well, no, it’s more simple than that.” So it is on the one hand more difficult, and on the other hand more simple—more difficult to understand, perhaps.

So what’s he talking about? He says, “Well, the real way to live a just life is to recognize that everything belongs to God in the first place.” Now that right away is not something people come to through their own light, that nothing really belongs to anybody, but God is the owner of everything! That didn’t ever occur to you—did it? I don’t think so. It never occurred to me! But that’s what St. Paul is saying—including even things like your time! You might think, well, I have so many hours in the day, and I have to go to school for—how many hours? Six hours in school. You know exactly how many hours! How many minutes is that? Never mind. Okay, so you know exactly how many hours. Then you go home; do you have any other responsibilities besides school? Practices! So you have a couple hours of that. Okay, what else? Practices and school—what else do you have to do? You have no chores at home? Sometimes you have chores at home, so that’s something else. What else? Homework—oh my gosh, homework! What else? What else do you have to do, Peter? You have to walk the dog—oh my gosh! There is no time left for you—right, Vince? No time left!
Well, St. Paul’s idea is, well, guess what? You are not being cheated by having to do all these things because you don’t really have any time at all because you didn’t make time! **You didn’t make time; you didn’t make yourself. God made you. Everything is a gift**—everything is a gift! Every minute of your day is a gift! So if God says, “I want you in school,” the just thing to do is to go to school—that’s just. You see? If God, through you mother, says, “Walk the dog,” then the just thing to do is walk the dog. That’s what God wants you to do. Do you understand? If you have homework, that’s what God expects of you. Do you understand? **So you are really pleasing God when you are doing what he asks you to do, which is to use the time you have for what is good.** But you don’t always know what that is. You might think, oh, what’s good is watching TV—that’s what I want to do. Yes, but that isn’t what time is for. Of course, God does want you to relax once in a while, and I don’t think your parents are going to allow you to collapse from exhaustion. They will make sure that you have time to rest, time to enjoy your life.

But the main thing is **we are supposed to enjoy all of what we are doing, including school, homework, practice—everything, because we recognize that when we are doing something good, we are serving God; that’s what God wants us to be doing.** So it’s not just what I want. It’s really what God wants that is important. **Then we are living in faith because what we are doing is trusting in something higher than ourselves.** When I say, “Well, this is what I want,” I am not trusting in anything higher than myself. I am the chief. And that is the fundamental problem with human beings. They want to be in charge. We want to be in charge. I want what I want! That’s a lot of people. That’s actually all of us by our nature, which is wounded—see wounded, warped, warped by original sin—I want what I want!

St. Paul is saying, “Well, the way to live justly, the way to live a righteous life is to live trusting that God knows what’s best, and that God will lead us. If we learn how to pray and listen, God will lead us to what we need to do, and therefore to total happiness—to total happiness. That doesn’t mean that God isn’t going to ask difficult things. Yes, in fact, for some people it may be difficult to get up in the morning and go to work; but we do have to make a contribution. Now for you, it’s school. Later on it will be something else, but we always have to make a contribution. So St. Paul says, “We live righteously when we live in faith.”

Then he says, “But a lot of people just ignore this.” They go their own way. They think their lives are their own. We see a lot of examples of this, an extreme example—where? Where do we see an extreme example of this right now today? In people who say, “I can take my life if I choose to”—legalized suicide! Now it is legal, is it not, in the state of Illinois to commit suicide—to kill yourself? Is it legal? Yes, yes, because all the legislators have decided that, well, after all, it’s their life. If they want to take it, that’s their business. But that’s not what God says! He says, **“Your life is mine. I created it. I’m caring for it. I will lead it and guide it, and it’s not yours. It’s not yours to do with as you choose.” So our bodies belong to God. We are consecrated! We are consecrated in Baptism to God’s service.**
Now that is not the way you ordinarily feel about yourself. You feel that: your life is yours; your body is yours; your feelings are yours. But they are only being lent to you. They really belong to God. That’s what we have to keep in mind.

Now what happens when people say, “Well, forget it. I’m going to do what I want to do”? What does St. Paul say about that? Well, he says, no; but what does he say God says about that? What does God do when people just say, “Well, I’m going to do what I want to do”? He said there: “He abandons them.” He abandons them. That’s kind of a strong word—isn’t it? Well, it’s very simple. Okay, you think you are smarter than me? Fine! Go ahead! You decide what to do with your life. We will see what a great gift you make of it! And what happens? People end up very unhappy. Everything is twisted and turned in their lives. Everything is a big upheaval. Why? Because there is no guidance. There is no direction.

So we choose—we choose—and we choose every day whether we are going to be happy or not. We choose whether we are going to be happy. We choose whether we are going to be joyful. It’s an inside job. You have to want to be joyful. You have to recognize that happiness doesn’t come from doing whatever occurs to you or whatever feels good. Happiness comes from something higher: obedience to God, making a contribution of your time and your talent to something purposeful. That’s what school is for now. Later on it will be something else. When we learn this lesson we really can be happy people. That’s, indeed, what God wants. He wants us to be happy. If you have not understood that, you have understood nothing. God wants his people to be happy. God wants his people to be filled with joy. If you are not, there is something wrong, You need to attend to that. You need to look at that. You need to talk to somebody about that, because God wants you to be happy.

Now let us pray.
In a sense there is a definite connection between the two readings this morning, although it may not be obvious. In the first reading St. Paul is referring to the relationship between justice, or righteousness, and faith. Now this is a very difficult connection for us to make. The Jews looked at righteousness or justice through the eyes of Torah. Torah is the law. It tells us what to do. When we do it, we are just. The Greeks looked at justice through the eyes of reason. Reason tells us what is right. When we do it, we are just.

St. Paul is saying, well, not really. Yes, in some way the law and reason will lead us to justice, but it isn’t simply doing what the law says or what reason says. It’s recognizing that everything belongs to God. If you recognize that everything belongs to God, including our bodies, our minds, our time, then the only way to relate to God justly is through faith, which means through dependence, through total trust, the way a child relates to a parent—of course, a parent who has proved himself or herself worthy of trust by caring for the child. Children are totally innocent and open and dependent on those who care for them. Well, St. Paul is saying that actually the only way to relate to God, is through faith, and that’s what justice is. If the law doesn’t lead to that and if reason doesn’t lead to that, there is something wrong with the law and there is something wrong with the reason. He is saying that, of course, people who don’t recognize this are perverted, and God has allowed them to be perverted.

Now in the gospel it’s a very similar topic. Pharisees are concerned with law, again, same issue; and Jesus calls that the “cleansing of the cup.” Jesus says, “What good is it to cleanse the outside of a cup when the inside is full of rapaciousness, desires, self-love and
self-will? What good is it if you are full inside of what is evil? In other words, you really are not oriented toward God in faith. You are not depending on God; you are depending on yourself. It’s all about me. That’s the dirt inside the cup.

Jesus says, “However, it will all become clean if you give alms.” Why? Because giving away what we have is purification of our self-centeredness. It cleanses the inside of the cup, and it is an expression of faith. It is a work of faith. Even the Torah said it was. A work of faith is almsgiving. Why? Because we are showing our dependence on God and not on self.
Today’s two readings give us a lot of food for thought and for reflection, especially given the many controversies that have arisen about faith and works since the Reformation.

You will recall yesterday’s gospel. Jesus said, “If you pay alms, all will be clean for you.” Almsgiving was one of the fundamental works of the Law, the Torah. So when he says, “If you give alms, all will be clean for you,” he is preaching what Luther called “works righteousness” or “justification by works.” So it’s not so simple. Luther had some good points, but it’s really much more complex.

**Jesus recommends the works of the Law to free us from our egoism.** It’s true it isn’t thereby that we become justified. We become justified really because of God’s grace, and that’s what Luther is trying to get at. But we do have to do something with the grace. That’s the point. We have to follow through. **It isn’t enough to receive. We have to be a conduit to grace.**

That’s what St. Paul is talking about in Romans. He is talking about judgment, the judgment of God. He says, “God will repay everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality through perseverance in good works, but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness.” **So we have to follow through with the grace God gives us,** and that’s the point.

Then, of course, in the gospel **Jesus is warning against being overly scrupulous about certain things.** The whole idea of scrupulosity is we focus on one little thing or two little things or three little things, but ignore bigger issues. All scrupulous people do
this. It is actually a moral fault. We focus on, as he points out here, “tithes of mint and of rue and of every garden herb, while paying no attention to judgment and to love for God.” So what Jesus is saying is that, yes, you need to follow through, bear fruit in the grace of God, but **focus on what’s really important.** Don’t let your mind be distracted by all kinds of distinctions. That’s why he says, “Woe to you scholars of Law,” because that’s what they were always doing: making millions of distinctions. Focus on what’s really important: loving God, trusting in God, and trusting God in all things, letting God direct our lives. **When we allow God to direct our lives, our lives will bear fruit for him in many good works.** We will **lose our self-centeredness**, and that itself will give glory to God.
“Yes, also to Gentiles, for God is one and will justify the circumcised on the basis of faith and the uncircumcised through faith.”

So everything comes down to faith, but what St. Paul means is not just faith in God in a sort of vague way. He is not speaking here of belief—he is not speaking of belief! He is not even speaking of trust in terms of trusting God. But he is talking about something much more specific. He is talking about actually belonging to Christ. That’s what faith means here: belonging to Christ.

His point is that the Law described exactly what God’s righteousness is like, and Jesus embodied it perfectly. So Jesus embodied in his entire way of living what God expects from people. He is the one, and the only one, who really ever did embody what God expects from his human creation, his creation of humanity. So St. Paul reasons that Jesus being the righteous one and the only one who has ever fulfilled the Law, the only way now to please God is to cleave to Jesus, to belong to Jesus, to become one with him in a deep union. That’s what he calls “faith.”

He believes this is made possible through the grace or the power of the Spirit that works in Baptism. Baptism brings someone who accepts Christ into a true unity with him so that everything that God sees in Jesus, God then sees in the believer—this belief not being mere belief, but ownership and membership in and belonging to Jesus. So that’s what he is talking about. So he says, “If you want to boast about anything, boast about nothing but Christ himself.” And then you become heirs to everything Christ is because you cling to him, you cleave to him, you belong to him. That’s his idea of faith.

Now he says this is true for everybody. It’s true for the Jew; it’s true for the Gentile. Again, repeating yesterday’s line, “God has no favorites.”
“Jesus began to speak, first to his disciples, “Beware of the leaven—that is, the hypocrisy—of the Pharisees.”

When speaking of hypocrisy we can become perhaps deceived into thinking that it is some sort of very deliberate and conscious ploy. The English word implies a certain sort of deliberation, some sort of conscious desire to deceive other people, but that’s not what Jesus means.

First of all, by leaven he means something that works without our seeing it, as yeast works in a lump of dough without seeing it. So he is saying, “Beware of something that can work in you without your noticing it.” That’s what this hypocrisy is. The word, of course, comes from the Greek word for “actor.” So it has to do with some sort of disjunction between what’s really going on on the stage of life, and what’s really going on inside the mind and heart.

These are not always in sync. In fact, most of the time they are not. For example, this morning the Opening Prayer: “Our hope is all in you.” Well, is it really? Is our hope really in God? We pray that God will protect us and guide us, that our hope be all in him; but it isn’t really! We are very self-reliant, and that’s where our anxieties come from.

That’s where our worries come from—our self-reliance. In fact, our culture is a culture of self-reliance, which has a good side to it. I mean it’s better to be somewhat self-reliant than actually depending on some other people, such as the government, for example. That would be even more foolish.
God’s point is we need to rely on him. That’s what real faith is about—God’s power to provide! This does not mean we don’t have to go to work. It does not mean we don’t ever have to do anything. It does not mean we have a right to sit around. But it means that our trust is in God, not in ourselves. And if we really lived that, we would have no anxieties—for ourselves, anyway. We might have anxieties for others. In fact, all concern for others is a form of anxiety, which is not necessarily bad. But anxieties about ourselves—those are useless, because they are a lack of hope. They are a lack of trust in the one who promises to provide for us. And that’s a leaven. It can work in us without our noticing it.

We say our prayers, but our hearts really aren’t on God. They are really on something else. So that’s what this is about. We have to be able to actually live our prayers and recognize when our prayers don’t really connect with what we do, or our prayers don’t connect with how we feel. Then that has to be the subject of our prayer.
“It was not through the law that the promise was made to Abraham and his descendants that he would inherit the world, but through the righteousness that comes from faith.”

Now in this Letter to the Romans St. Paul is talking a great deal about faith. We know that for the Reformation this became a cardinal issue, the role of faith often seen in opposition to the role of works; but we have to be careful about this. First of all, in the second chapter of Romans St. Paul already says at the very beginning of his letter that God will judge people on the basis of how they act; their behavior is the basis of their judgment. First the Jew then the Gentile will be condemned by the wrath of God if their behavior is deserving; but then again, first the Jew then the Gentile will be glorified by God if their behavior is deserving. So we cannot eliminate behavior from this scope of what pleases God or not.

But realizing that our behavior needs to please God, how do we achieve that right behavior? That’s where he gets into the role of faith, as opposed to not behavior but the works of the Law. That’s where the opposition is, not behavior in general, but the works of the Law in particular, even though Jesus himself often spoke in favor of the works of the Law, in particular, almsgiving. He said, “If you give alms, all will be clean,” speaking of the dirty cup, the inner muck that builds up in a person’s life of egoism. He says, “Give alms; all will be clean.” So Jesus believed in the goodness of the works of the Law, but, of course, within the right context and with the right motive and intention.

The right context and the right motive and the right intention is not a matter of gaining something that God owes us, but it’s something different. It is becoming utterly dependent upon God, which is what St. Paul means by faith. So by faith he doesn’t mean the act of saying, “I believe in God,” which in some cases is something I am doing on my own, which is, therefore, not faith! Faith means the grace that enables us to be
truly dependent upon God. And we may not even be able to articulate it. It’s not a matter of articulation. It’s not a matter of feeling either. It’s not what you say; it’s not what you feel, but it’s an enabled dependence upon God with trust that God will care for you and guide you and direct your life. That’s faith, and that’s the faith he is speaking of, the faith that is salvific.

Now within that faith, if God directs us to good works, then we perform them out of obedience. That is another aspect of faith—obedience. Faith is trust and faith is obedience to God. When and in what cases God has asked for certain works, then we would perform them, not so that we can look good to ourselves, not so that we can be proud of ourselves, but so that we are faithful and obedient children of God. That’s what St. Paul is talking about. So we have to put everything in the right context.

This leads then to a life that gives glory to God, because who is directing it? God is. So it’s very simple really. But it really requires we become like children in the sense that we become dependent upon God, and that we lose everything that is not childlike, like, for example, self-importance.

So he speaks then of Abraham: “He believed, hoping against hope, that he would become a father of many nations. Why? Because God promised it. So it’s not up to us to believe this; it’s up to us to believe what God has promised us. He has not told us we will be the father of many nations, but he has told us he will be with us all days, that all the hairs on our head have been counted.
“Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

We have heard this verse many times. It is one of the most oft-quoted verses in the New Testament; but I wonder if we really think about it, what it means, what Jesus was trying to say! It’s actually very subtle. Now Jesus’ opponents were not subtle. They were thinking in black and white terms, and Jesus was trying to take them beyond the simplicities of black and white.

First of all, the Romans weren’t all bad. They built some good roads. Their armies maintained the order, the peace, the so-called Pax Romana. This all took money. Jesus’ point is the recipients of these benefits owe the ones who provide it, even if they didn’t ask for it. So those people who think that taxes are somehow illegitimate or that the government is stealing what belongs to them will find no ally in Christ. He didn’t think that way.

On the other hand, Jesus’ opponents and Jesus himself were both quite well aware that Caesar demanded more than tax. The emperors of Rome considered themselves divine, and they wanted worship. This isn’t so strange if we keep in mind the human tendency to worship power. That is the root of paganism—the worship of power, the most common form of idolatry. Jesus did not go along with that! “Repay Caesar what belongs to Caesar,” and only that, is the meaning of his words. Give him no more! In other words, some demands of government are legitimate; some are not. It’s very crucial for a child of God to know the difference, to be able to discern. From Jesus’ viewpoint paying taxes is a duty. However, setting aside one’s moral principles out of a sense of loyalty is not! Jesus’ opponents erred by believing what is evil in part is totally evil. That’s wrong. That doesn’t allow for compromise. It isn’t subtle.

But today some of Jesus’ followers have gone to the opposite extreme. They believe that a legitimate government has the right to unquestioned loyalty, as if law should be the source of morality rather than the other way around. Jesus makes it very clear: our fundamental responsibility is to repay to God what belongs to God—and what does not?!
Today on the feast of St. Ignatius of Antioch, one of the first martyrs of the Church, the two readings fit very well. *Philippians* is talking about those who have made themselves enemies of the cross. He is talking about **believers who don’t want to suffer**, **believers who think life should be easy**.

Jesus is talking about the same thing, **foolish people who are really living for the present moment only**—and mind you, when they live for the present moment it’s not the present moment where they could be charitable, or the present moment where they could be just, or the present moment where they could serve God, but it’s the present moment where they could serve themselves, **enjoy life for themselves, and really ignore the purpose of living**.

Well, **martyrdom is all about witnessing to the purpose of life**. St. Ignatius himself carried it to a great extreme. He told his disciples that he just couldn’t wait to die. Well, that’s not necessary. We could wait to die, all right. But the point is he really did not want to cling to life in this world. He thought that for him if he stayed around, he would mess everything up; so he really wanted to die. Besides he thought that dying, especially by being arrested and executed for Christ, he would be **a great witness to Christ**, join in him. Plus he **longed for the true life of eternal life**, the true life of heaven.

We can have a **certain sort of heaven on earth** also, in this way, not by enjoying ourselves, but **by serving God now in the present moment**, finding ways to share God’s love and God’s justice and God’s mercy and God’s peace with other people. In this way we can spend our time very well. That is giving a living witness. So we can **witness to God not only by shedding our blood, but by rather shedding our self-importance** and our self-indulgence and our self-concern, and working for God’s purposes—a **living martyrdom**.
Boys and girls, when Jesus preached to the people he tried to speak in ways they would understand, at least sometimes he did, using examples from the life that they knew. That doesn’t help you a whole lot because you have a different kind of life.

Now today he is talking about harvest. Well, what does that mean? What’s a harvest? “Like the farmers pick corn”—that’s right—the farmers pick corn. What would happen if the farmers did not pick the corn? What would happen? They would starve, but what would happen to the corn? “It would rot”—correct. And the same with alfalfa, it would all waste away, and the wheat would just turn to seed and no one would have anything to eat, but, moreover, the wheat itself would be worthless. Right—isn’t that true?

Well, in a sense that’s what Jesus says is happening to people. He is saying, “Well, look, some people are not being harvested.” They are just wasting away; their lives are rotting away inside. It’s not a very nice thought—is it? But it’s true. Some people go to seed inside because—why? What’s missing? Joy. When people don’t have joy in their souls, they rot; they turn to seed. They may have children. They leave something behind, but it’s physical. The whole of them isn’t there any more; it’s eaten away. A very unpleasant thought, but a true one, which we need to deal with.

Now Jesus’ solution to this is we have to harvest. He came, he said to harvest people, souls, for the kingdom of joy. Now what does harvesting amount to? How do you harvest a person? I know how you harvest corn. Well, how do you harvest a person? A person is not really like a stalk. You don’t cut a person down. That’s not harvesting them—is it? No, so how do you harvest a person? Well, “treating them well” is one thing, yes. Well, yes, “making sure they have a happy life,” but how do you do that? How do you make sure people have a happy life? How do you communicate to them the good news? You have to—well, I just said it—you have to communicate to them. You have to talk to them about the truth. The only reason why anyone wastes away inside is that they don’t know the truth. The truth makes us free. The truth gives us life. So Jesus came for that purpose. He called that harvesting.

But he said, “I need helpers.” So he said, Pray to the harvest-master to send many hands to help me with the harvest. That is the original idea of a vocation. The original idea of vocation in the Christian gospel is helping Jesus harvest souls by sharing the good news of the kingdom.

But the point is he had a very special focus for his good news. **To whom was he addressing the good news, in particular?** Well, “everyone” would be right, but in particular. Especially out of everyone who might not get it at first? “**The poor**”—exactly—especially the poor! Now why wouldn’t the poor get the good news? Why wouldn’t they understand it originally? Why would it be hard for them? Any ideas? You may not know. It’s all right if you don’t. Yes, Sean? Well, “no one talks to them,” maybe. What else? “They couldn’t read”—that’s for sure. That’s for sure, too—“they couldn’t afford to go to school.” Oh, absolutely, “they couldn’t go to church.” What else? “They never hear the gospel.” Right, they never heard the gospel. They never heard the gospel, and, therefore, what did they believe? **They believed that somehow God wanted them to be poor and that God really didn’t care about them.** They looked around and they saw some people were very well off, and they figured, well, God liked the rich, but didn’t like the poor. You see? They had a very poor way of reasoning, but it was a common way. **Even the rich reasoned this way in Jesus’ day. He tried to correct this.** They thought, well, if you are well and you are healthy and you have money, God loves you; but if you are poor or you are sick or you are paralyzed, God doesn’t love you. It’s pretty simple, and that’s what they thought. And Jesus kept saying, “Wrong!”

Now when Jesus healed, often what day did he heal on? What day did he work most happily? Which day of the week? “Saturday.” Well, that was the Sabbath. You are right. You meant Sabbath—right? **He often wanted to work on the Sabbath,** which, of course, caused a lot of trouble—didn’t it? The leaders, the teachers, said that you must not do any work on the Sabbath. Jesus says, “Oh, but I especially want to work on the Sabbath, because I cannot rest”—that’s what Sabbath means, right—“I can’t rest as long as God’s people are suffering.”

And they said, “What are you talking about? God wants them to suffer. That’s why they are suffering.” Jesus said, “No, what goes on in the world is not God’s idea.” When he taught his disciples to pray, he said, “This is how you must pray: thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth.” Meaning—what? It is not being done now. Isn’t that right, Brian? Otherwise, why would we pray that way? So Jesus said, “**No, the way things are is not what God wants.**” God does not want the poor to be poor. He does not want the sick to be sick. **God wants everyone to have sufficiency, and God wants everyone to be healthy.**

So people said, “Well, then how come it is the way it is?” Jesus’ answer was that **God’s will has been undermined by evil or sin**, the work of darkness. So he said, “This world has been invaded by the enemy.” **The enemy is trying to defeat God, but will he succeed?** No, the enemy will never succeed, but meanwhile the enemy will try to succeed. What will be the last great apparent victory for the enemy? You don’t know? **What is the great apparent victory of the enemy in trying to defeat goodness?** Nick? What was the great apparent victory? Jack? **“The cross!”** That was an apparent victory. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, it seemed as if the enemy were finally victorious! I got him! He is dead! Right? Well, it was for—what—a few days? But Christ was raised from the dead. That’s the whole idea, that **Jesus raised from the dead now has defeated**
the one who put him on the cross, who was really the enemy and all the enemy’s allies.

So God wants allies to counteract the enemy’s allies. That’s what he is calling for in today’s gospel—workers—workers who will ally themselves, who will connect themselves with his work: harvesting souls, spreading good news, telling people that God does not want you to suffer or be sick or be poor. God wants you to thrive; however, on the way we have to accept the fact that the enemy does have power to, shall we say, obstruct God’s work—and that we have to work through.

That’s what the cross is all about. The cross is about the power of love to overcome all adversity and evil. Jesus is the way. He has led the way, but then we have to follow as well. So we can’t say, well, now that Jesus has done all this for me, Ryan, I can’t say, oh good, now I don’t have to suffer anymore. I know God does not want me to be sick. I know God does not want me to be poor. But I may have to suffer the attack of the enemy while we await the final end, which is called the “Last Judgment.” You see, Emily? It all makes sense. We are in process. We are on the way. We are on the move to this great, glorious kingdom of God.

Somebody has to tell the people who don’t know that life is really a wonderful opportunity to live with God in eternity and that God has not abandoned them, in spite of what they may think or in spite of their present condition. God has not abandoned them. They may have abandoned God. That’s possible—isn’t it, Megan? It’s possible we abandon God. It is not possible that God abandons us. You understand? Logical and true. More than logical—true! There are logical things that are not true—right, Bert? So that’s what the gospel is about. And that’s what Luke was about. Luke was about helping Christ, Jesus, spread the truth and the joy of the gospel.

Now some of you may be chosen also for this work of harvesting. Now you are all going to be called to do something for the Lord, but there is a special role of harvesting, of spreading joy in the world, by teaching and preaching and proclaiming and announcing and extending the mercy of God to others. It is not always easy. So Jesus said, “I am sending you”—this is pretty dire—he says, “I am sending you like lambs among”—what, Jeff? Lambs among, Matt? What did he say? “I am sending you out as lambs among”—what? Peter? “Wolves!” What happens to lambs when they go among wolves? Well, “they can get beat up” pretty bad! Right? So Jesus didn’t say, oh, if you follow me, your life is going to be really great! You are never going to have another bad day. Did he ever say that? No! Did he ever say you are never going to be sad? No. Did he ever say you will never have any pains? No. But he said, “If you follow me and you know the truth, your life will be full of joy anyway because you know of your final victory”—your final victory. That’s what really counts—how it all ends—right? How it all ends! So don’t be worried about chapter two when there are fifty-seven chapters or eighty-seven chapters or ninety-nine chapters in your life. Don’t worry about what happens in chapter two. You see? You understand this?
“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

St. Paul is dwelling on the nature of sin, which people imagine to be some kind of freedom to do as they please or do as they want. St. Paul says, “Oh, far from that.” Sin is of its nature self-destructive, and no one who really understood it would want it. So sin involves self-destruction and self-delusion. So “the wages of sin is death.” Sin leads to death, and of its nature it is the opposite of true freedom. In fact, it’s enslavement, so he used that word. He said that its freedom, if you want to think of it as freedom; it’s only “freedom from justice.”

It’s not freedom from the Law, because the Law is the Law. The Law directs what is good. Good and evil are not arbitrary, so you can’t be freed from the good in any objective sense. You could only be deluded into imagining something to be good which isn’t, and to pursue that is self-destructive. When we pursue this sort of life, we actually lose the freedom we imagine in our delusions we are enjoying, as we undermine our own health: mentally, spiritually, and even physically. Sin then becomes a form of slavery or addiction, and we become more and more helpless as it progresses.

So that’s why now he is reflecting on how Jesus has come to bring us true health and true freedom, but it’s freedom to serve. It’s freedom to do good. It’s freedom to work for justice, because the objective good is the objective good, and we cannot change it. The only freedom we can have is the freedom to desire what God desires and to do the good that God sees as good and knows to be good. That is freedom, and that is service of God. That is of its nature life-giving, upbuilding: mentally, spiritually, and even physically.
In this seventh chapter of the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul is talking about the experience of life we all have and ought to reflect upon. What he is speaking about is the lack of integrity, not in the normal sense. Whatever people ordinarily mean when they talk about a lack of integrity, they really mean a lack of character, a lack of moral principle. That’s not what integrity means. **Integrity means wholeness, integration, a unity of body, soul, and spirit**—that’s integrity.

St. Paul is pointing out that we don’t have this. This is the result of sin in our world, in our nature, in our existence. **Sin breaks down integrity.** So he says, “Well, what I really want to do, I don’t end up doing.” Why? “Well, because I’m not really in control of my entire being. There is a part of me that wants one thing, another part that wants something else.” That’s the lack of integrity. Another word is “discord” or “disharmony” within.

Now we need to see this. It’s not a division between body and spirit, not at all! There is no contest between body and spirit. Spirit runs body. Mind runs body. **It’s really within the mind itself, within the spirit itself, where we really are not one; we are not unified.** Jesus says, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” That’s exactly what St. Paul is talking about.

But he also knows that **the solution is not from within us precisely because we are divided.** This is what is basically wrong with all Eastern forms of mysticism. They see this too, but they think the solution is somehow within us. St. Paul says, “Well, it can’t be.” We cannot solve our own problem. So he says, “Who will deliver me from this? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” **So it is God who comes to our rescue in the person of Christ to bring us that inner harmony and that inner integrity that comes together, of course, by our cooperation, by our participation—in what? In God’s will for us.** So every day we must choose what God wants us to choose. In that way we grow in integrity because it must be rooted in something beyond ourselves—the unity of God himself.
“The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not.”

St. Paul is reflecting on a reality that we all share in, but often unconsciously. It has to do with our lack of integrity. Now people talk about integrity today in a different way. When they talk about integrity they mean character. Integrity really means what St. Paul is talking about: everything working together—body, soul, spirit—unity.

St. Paul is admitting that in his personal life things do not work together. He makes an intention. He has a desire. It does not work out. What he intends does not happen. Now he has this image of sin working in his life, in his members, in his limbs, so to speak. But we have to admit that the sin of which he is speaking is not some force totally separate from us, but is also part of us, because our hearts are divided. So, yes, we want to do this good, but not that much! We also want this, and we also want that, and we want something else as well. In this division we do not worship God and love God with our whole heart, our whole mind, our whole soul, because we don’t have a whole heart, a whole mind, or a whole soul to love him with! We are bits and pieces—fragmented! That is our condition.

God knows very well our condition, and sent his very own Son, that is, the Word of God into the flesh to bring us to a new kind of life, a life of harmony and unity within, of singularity of purpose. For none of us, including St. Paul, does this come immediately or within a couple of years; but it is really the product of a lifelong struggle. This struggle is at the very basis of our lack of strength or our infirmity. We see, in fact, all kinds of things that are related as unrelated. That’s part of our being fractured. We don’t see that our own personal conditions are a reflection of the condition of the whole world and vice versa. We don’t see how our own choices either advance the cause of the kingdom of God or retard it in the whole, because we see everything as a little,
insignificant, unrelated detail. But there are no little, insignificant, unrelated details. Everything is related. **Everything is connected in the cosmic plan of God.**

Saints are simply those people whose hearts are so large that everything and everyone fits within them. They are not only willing to suffer for others, but they actually find joy in suffering for others because they aren’t really others. **The only other is God, and they are deeply connected to the heart of God.** And so love creates this enormous heart, this enormous soul, this enormous meeting place. **From that comes many of the miracles we observe of healing.**

**If we want to be healthy, we have to desire whole health.** We have to desire first and foremost to be spiritually healthy. We have to desire first and foremost to do God’s will and to **place God’s will at the very center of our minds.** And we have to surrender every other part of us and every other fraction to God. Then we have to observe our souls. Are we really making them welcome mats for others? Do we sense our place in the body of Christ? **Is our life an hospitable door showing the hospitality of God himself?** So we work toward unity and we work toward health. **Our own health can only be fulfilled in the unity of the body,** where there is freedom from all division and where the energy of the Holy Spirit permeates everything fully, **where the circulation that God intends within the human race flows unimpeded.**

We are here tonight to petition the Lord for this will of his to be done on earth as it is in heaven—for the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are here tonight to ask God to enable us to **surrender totally to him so that none of our thoughts or desires or words or actions obstruct his grace, either within ourselves or within others or half way around the world.** We are gathered tonight to open our hearts, our minds, our souls, to the presence of the Holy Spirit and to the power of the Holy Spirit. But for that to take any place at all we have to follow the advice of John the Baptist: “I must decrease so that he can increase.” This would seem to be impossible, but with God all things are possible.
“For the concern of the flesh is hostility toward God; it does not submit to the law of God, nor can it; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

This idea of pleasing God is a very important idea, but it is not one that we understand instinctively. We have to be taught what it means. What does it mean to please God, or, in the old terminology of the scholastics, to live in the state of sanctifying grace? What does that mean? It is really futile to understand this in terms of obeying laws—in the plural—following various rules. It’s something deeper than that. One follows the singular law of God when one is in the state of grace, not the other way around.

Now St. Paul says that the flesh—and this word means life not in the state of grace. That’s what the flesh means. Some people think flesh means the physical body or they think it has to do with sex—not really! It means physical existence as an end in itself. Now think about it. The world is full of people living in the flesh, because all they really care about is their own physical existence, including their survival, their wealth, their comfort, their pleasure, and all those things: their progeny, their families, their businesses, their health. But it’s all in the physical order; that’s the flesh.

Now St. Paul says, “The flesh of its nature is in hostility to God.” What does that mean? It’s not obvious what it means. It does not mean that God is hostile to it. It does not mean God does not want physical health or well-being or life or survival. God wants all these things. God is the creator of all things visible and invisible. What it means is that when we are only interested in our own existence, we are not interested in our purpose for being here on earth, because our purpose for being here on earth is not
simply to exist. It is to serve God. It is to become acquainted with God. It is to fulfill God’s will for us and work for his purposes, which is the kingdom of God. If all we care about is our own physical existence, we won’t be caring about that at all, and so we will be hostile to our purpose in life. That hostility is not something outside of us. It’s right in the middle, in the midst, of ourselves. It’s in the midst of our very nature and divides us. This is the reason why so many people are so alienated, confused, unhappy, lost, because the goal of their life in their own mind is not the goal of their life in God’s mind. They have created a horrible, irreconcilable problem. The fact that everyone around them is doing the same thing only allows them to sink into delusion about their problem. This is what St. Paul is talking about in this particular chapter of Romans, which, you might say, is his great work.

Now, of course, he says that the solution is “if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also.” He doesn’t here refer only to the resurrection from the dead. He means life even now in this world, but only through the Spirit of the one who raised Christ from the dead, faith in him—and that’s the meaning of Baptism. Through Baptism we have an opportunity for a new life, and that’s why it’s called the sacrament of “rebirth.” It’s not talking about rebirth in an emotional sense. It’s talking about rebirth in a being sense. A new being, a new life, is offered and given. It is our responsibility then as believers to nurture that life and to protect it against the other life, the life of the flesh that is hostile to God, and to live therefore in faith and dependence upon the one—the one who raised Jesus from the dead.
“The whole Law and Prophets depend on these two commandments.”

This gospel story is very short and sweet, and probably, from the standpoint of the man who asked the question, too short and too sweet! Jesus summarized everything in these two simple commandments, and said everything in the Law and the Prophets was based on them.

But in all honesty we would have to say that none of us really loves God with our whole heart, our whole mind, or our whole soul. The reason is, of course, that we don't do anything with our whole heart or our whole mind or our whole soul. We do not have this singularity of purpose for any task or any aim or any goal. We are divided. Part of us wants this; part of us wants that. We are constantly wondering about how much of our efforts we want to put into this task or that. Our hearts are divided among many different desires, which are conflicting, and therefore we are stymied and we dither to the point of aimlessness. Jesus knew it very well.

St. Paul alludes to something even more problematic in Chapter 7 of Romans. He says, “What I will to do, I do not do.” In other words, the greatest intentions of his mind end up not being acted upon. This is division in the very root of our being. Neither St. Paul nor Jesus allow the copout: “Well, I meant well.” Serving God is not a matter of good intentions alone. To love God or one's neighbor or oneself cannot be only an intention. Nor is it merely a human act. It is something actually beyond us. Jesus knew this full well.
Love is the universal source of all life. That is our faith, our belief. Nothing comes to be except by the desire of love itself. God is love and God is the creator. Love creates everything that is. “To love” means to be connected in a deep and spiritual way with God, with this universal source of all life and all being. To love with one's whole heart, soul, and mind means to surrender everything to God, allowing God to flow through us to others. This is only possible because God is the way God is. We only know it is possible through the revelation he has given us, most importantly in his Son, Jesus, and in his Spirit that abides in all people of good will.

The consequence of this is that there is no competition when it comes to true love. We can love God totally and love our neighbor with that same total love. Loving one person doesn't take away from loving another, if we understood what love is. Loving ourselves with the same total love we give to God is also possible because love is all-inclusive and all-embracing. Nothing is excluded from true love.

What is incompatible with love is self-importance or living by one's personal preferences of like and dislike: allowing one's attractions or repulsions to decide how one behaves toward people, saying what need not be said, or failing to speak when it's necessary to say something. All of these are a denial of love and negate our surrender to God.

This is all very simple, but it's not easy. It is very clear from the New Testament that this was Jesus' understanding of morality, and we need to ask ourselves: Is it also ours?
“There are six days when work should be done. Come on those days to be cured, not on the sabbath day.”

Now we could interpret this as very extreme legalism, but it’s more than that. Beneath this extreme legalism there is a belief that the work of God is complete, that God has rested on the sabbath day once and for all!

That is not Jesus’ idea. Jesus’ idea is that creation is ongoing. He works on the sabbath very often to make this point: the creation is not finished. We are not finished. We are an ongoing project, and we have to look at ourselves this way. We have to look at our incompleteness and recognize that God is still working to bring about what he wills in the world.

So it’s very well and good to have a rest on sabbath, and we don’t do that enough. Our society is too bound up with work—and not God’s work, incidentally—but our work, even our work at leisure.

That’s not the point Jesus is making. His point is that God is still at work, and that there’s no greater way to honor the sabbath than to do God’s work, which is restorative and salvific and redemptive and healing. This is indeed what God wants us to do.

In a certain way Jesus is the Sabbath of God. That is the point that Matthew makes in that long genealogy. The forty-ninth generation is Christ, the Sabbath of sabbaths. But in him, the perfect rest of God, we have nothing but activity. So in God’s eyes these are not opposites.
Today St. Paul is talking about the very important virtue of hope. **Hope, which is a virtue**—virtue meaning a habit, a chosen habit, a moral habit, if you will, a willful habit—**belongs to our emotional nature.** It’s very important that we recognize that we need moral habits—this is really a theological habit—we need good habits in our emotional nature. It isn’t as if our emotions are something purely neutral or merely subjective. **Emotions are very much a part of who we are, and if we are to be holy, we have to be emotionally holy.** And what he is speaking of here is an emotion, a higher emotion. It is a gift from God, and yet it belongs within the heart of a human person, not merely the thinking process of the human person.

Now what he says here is very interesting. He says, “**Now hope that sees for itself is not hope.**” So the very nature of hope is that **there is something unseen and therefore desired.** Now we can see this and verify it in our own everyday experience. For example, people might say they have a financial goal. A financial goal is something you hope for. If you already had your financial goal, you couldn’t hope for it. That’s what he is saying. **There is no hope that is seen. You don’t hope for something you have.** Hope of it’s nature is **moving beyond self.** That’s very important. That’s part of our transcendence, the capacity the human soul has to want to go beyond itself. So it’s **essential for our spiritual growth and development.**

“**But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance.**” Now this is true even in everyday secular matters. If you have a financial plan, it will never come about unless you wait with endurance. Waiting with endurance is absolutely essential in
If it’s essential in everyday matters, how much more essential is it when we come to waiting for the greatest of all possible results or goals—our salvation?

This is very important also: St. Paul makes it very clear that our salvation is something in the future. That’s why he says, “For in hope we were saved.” Now sometimes very enthusiastic, but misinformed, Christians will say, “Have you been saved?” That’s a very poor question from St. Paul’s viewpoint because we are saved in hope. It’s not yet. In order to achieve it, we have to wait with endurance. If we believe wrongly that we have been saved, we will not wait with endurance, and we will be misled. This will be very damaging for our spiritual life and for our ultimate salvation and redemption in Christ.

So this little paragraph is loaded. It would be very good for us to reflect upon it.
Faith in Jesus  Funeral  Geraldine B. Fassel  Thursday, October 27, 2005
Wis 1:13-14;  Phil 4:4-9;  Jn 14:1-6  (Making a real difference in our lives)

“You have faith in God; have faith also in me.”

Those who want to be Christian, who want to belong to the Church of Christ, need to think about what Jesus means here. “You have faith in God; have faith also in me.”

They are not the same. There are many people who believe in God, and have all the ideas about God. And that’s very well and good, but it’s also often very vague. After all, what do we know about God? What can we figure out through our own reason or through our own experience? What can we know, really? In fact, some people who believe in God are terrorists and do horrible, evil things—in the name of God! They believe in God, but their understanding of God is very, very different from Jesus’ understanding of God—that’s for sure! So while we want to express solidarity with all people of good will and all people who really believe in God in some way or another, whatever their particular viewpoint, and that solidarity is very good and wholesome, nonetheless, there is something more here.

“Have faith also in me.” What does it mean to have faith in Jesus? Now sometimes you hear people talk about having faith in Jesus, which is so very sentimental and gushy, and you really wonder what that could possibly mean! But this does mean something very specific: “Have faith also in me.” Jesus is the one. This is the gospel according to John. John’s Gospel in particular the focus is always on the Word of God, the message of God, embodied in Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of the message of God to us. It’s a message of love and acceptance and reconciliation. It’s a message of peace. It’s a message of forbearance. It’s a message of longsufferingness. It’s a message of endurance, which, are all different ways of saying “love.” It’s the embodiment of love—Jesus.
Now we might not know that about God through our own experience or figuring things out. I don’t really think we are that smart! So this makes a great deal of difference whether we just have faith in God or we actually have faith in Jesus as the embodiment of God’s own Word and message to us. **If we have faith in Jesus, that will change our lives in some very, very specific ways.** That’s what we have to think about. Nobody else can tell you exactly, but you have to think about it. **How does belief in Jesus affect the way I live, the way I treat people, the words I use, the way I spend my time, what I do with my money, what kind of company I keep?** Those are all very important questions. And if they have nothing to do with our faith, our faith is not going to have much to do with us. That’s something we need to face.

The death of a loved one is a very essential point of time because it usually makes us a little more open than usual to **thinking about what’s really important in life.** The introductory remarks were very flattering for Geraldine. Maybe you need to go home and write your own remarks about yourself. What should someone say about you? You have to be truthful. You can’t make up stuff. **If your faith in Jesus is real, it will influence the very way you think about who you are and how you want to leave your life as a legacy for others.**

Jesus speaks about going away; it’s a manner of speaking: Geraldine has gone away in one sense, in a manner of speaking. But in another way, we never go away. In Thomas’ confusion Jesus turned to a very important point. Thomas says, “We don’t know where you are going.” And Jesus says, “That isn’t the point, Thomas. It’s not where I am going. I am the way to go.” In other words, **in Jesus’ very life there is a path. Can we find it? In a sense the path is the goal. The way is the truth. The way is life.**

We trust in faith Geraldine has now found that life in fullness. The task for each of us is not yet complete!
“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

St. Paul is asking a rhetorical question here. The answer, of course, if we actually wanted to answer it, could be quite long! A lot of people could be against us! There are a lot of people against us. There are a lot of forces against us. There are a lot of issues against us, but his point is: What do they all matter?

His point is we have to put everything in perspective, and we have to remember every day in all of the circumstances that we meet that God sent his only Son into the world, did not exempt him in any way from all of the trials, tribulations, and sufferings of the world, precisely because God loves us. And that redemption is at hand. And that redemption is accomplished.

Although he is very well aware that it isn’t really totally accomplished because he talks about, in another text, in another paragraph, he talks about how we still are waiting for the fullness of redemption—yes, we are. We are groaning; in fact, he says, “All creation is groaning.” Yes, it is. But redemption is at hand, and God has really already accomplished in Christ what he intends to accomplish.

Now it is up to us to bring that redemption into full flower. It is in our own sufferings we make up what is lacking. He points that out in Colossians. So there is meaning in suffering. There is meaning in trials. There is meaning in challenges. But in the midst of those challenges and trials we have to keep in mind that we have already been saved in this sense: the work of God has been done. We are not complete, and even the work of God is not really complete, but it has been brought about in a very substantial way in Christ so that nothing can contradict it, nothing can take it away.

If that’s true, we need to rejoice in our troubles because they really afford us an opportunity to grow—and that’s something we as Christians have a hard time believing! We talk about “forgive and forget.” No, you don’t forgive and forget! You forgive and rejoice! You forgive with gratitude for the opportunity that every offense has given you to learn about love and forgiveness, to learn more about yourself, to learn more about God. So, “If God is for us, who is against us?”
Today we celebrate the feast of Simon and Jude, two apostles. What is noteworthy is we don’t know anything about them in particular—or any of the apostles, for that matter, except St. Peter, as far as the twelve go.

Now the importance is that there were twelve, not who they were. Why? Because there were twelve tribes of Israel, and so when Jesus called twelve individual disciples to surround him, he was summoning the tribes of Israel. This is about as messianic a message as you can get; of course, it’s in symbolic form. Jesus was always indirect about his claims.

Now, again, if you go through the New Testament and you read the names of the twelve, they are not always the same. This has led various commentators to try to say, “Oh, well, Nathaniel is the same as Bartholomew.” This is, however, not necessarily true at all. It could well be that there were always twelve, but they weren’t always the same twelve. So it’s the number that’s important because there were twelve and only twelve tribes of Israel. So Jesus is calling Israel to its fulfillment, to its redemption.

Now more specifically, in recent years St. Jude has become the patron of what people call “hopeless cases,” although that’s a rather poor name because nothing is hopeless. Nonetheless, it means extreme cases. Now this is very recent in the Western Church, this devotion to St. Jude. I think it might be an Eastern tradition that was brought West, maybe in the last century or so. Previously it was St. Sebastian who was the patron of hopeless cases, but now St. Jude.
The point is our Church in our history does select this apostle or that apostle for this or that cause. But that isn’t really what’s important. What is important is that Jesus chose them as a sign of the redemption of Israel, and that even now they continue their work. That is clearly the Church teaching. Even now Peter continues his role as chief apostle. Even now the twelve are interceding for the gathering of Israel and the gathering of all nations to the redemption God has in store for them.

In this way we see that the saints really do more of their work after they leave earth than before. That’s something we might keep in mind. The saints do more of their work after they leave earth. This should give us both a sense of hope and also a sense of humility. Everything is not depending on me. Everything is not depending on us. We are part of something much bigger. We are merely the tip of an iceberg. The tip is the visible Church here on earth. The iceberg, which is perhaps not the best symbol, but the iceberg is the universal, triumphant Church of Christ led by the twelve Jesus chose, ministered to by the saints, who have already attained perfect victory in Christ. We are in constant communion with them, and they with us. It might be a useful meditation to consider that when we are in prayer, we are first of all in the presence of God, but we are being ministered to by the saints and the apostles. If we are able to settle ourselves enough and quiet ourselves enough, we can sense their guidance and direction.
“I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you will not become wise in your own estimation: a hardening has come on Israel in part, until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and thus all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The deliverer will come out of Zion, he will turn away godlessness from Jacob; and this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’”

Now St. Paul says that he wishes that his brothers and sisters not be unaware of this mystery. For the most part of the history of the Christian Church, however, Christians have been unaware of this mystery—grossly unaware! If we think of the relationships between Christians and Jews over two thousands years, they are basically shameful, basically deplorable! Of course, fault belongs on both sides. But the mystery St. Paul is referring to has not been understood, not only not by the laity, but not by the clergy or the hierarchy either—for the most part.

What he is saying here is deeply paradoxical, and therefore many people just don’t get it. He is saying, on the one hand, the Jews have been made enemies of the gospel; but on the other hand, they have an irrevocable gift of election. Now people usually can’t figure this out. They get the half of it—oh, they are enemies of the gospel; they are not our brothers and sisters; they don’t belong in our community; they are not part of the Church. They get that part; they don’t get the other part! In regard to election they have an irrevocable gift—irrevocable! That means it can’t be taken back! God has chosen them. God doesn’t unchoose what he chooses! That’s what he is saying. He is saying that their enmity to the gospel is temporary; their election is permanent! This is not
the way Christians have traditionally understood their relationship to the Jews. But this is
the writing of St. Paul. His authority is incomparable.

So how do we understand this ourselves? We have to realize that the Jewish people
will eventually be brought into the fullness of redemption. Why? Because it’s God’s
will. Individuals may cop out. We are free to cop out. That’s true. But as a whole the
people chosen in the beginning will receive the redemption God has chosen for them.
But, meanwhile, their resistance to the gospel is for the good of the rest of the world,
because their understanding of election became too narrow. So while they resist, God is
using this opportunity to bring the entire world, all nations, into the gospel. The
ultimate goal is, of course, that all people, Gentile and Jewish, will together receive the
redemption that God wills, that God has wrought, actually, in Christ.

So we need to think about Jews and all other people, all nations, as our
potential—at least our potential—sisters and brothers in Christ. Whereas we do not
share the sacraments with them, we do share some faith. We do share faith in the one
God. Since we share faith in the one God, we have a great deal in common because it
isn’t even the one God of vagueness and of human imagination. It’s the one God who
revealed himself to Abraham, to Moses. So we do have a great deal in common.

Beyond that, we have to realize our role is to compete in goodness, to compete in
fidelity, to compete in hope, to compete in love. Those kinds of competition God
approves of. If we compete with the Jews and the Jews compete with the Muslims on
these topics, and we as well with the Muslims and the Muslims with us, this will become
a great movement in the Spirit of Christ for the good and for the ultimate redemption of
the world.
“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

There are two different ways of looking at moral and religious teachings. The first is to look at them as prescriptions: the way one ought to live, the way one must live, the way one shall live. That’s clearly the view of the scribes and the Pharisees. They knew the Law, and they were going to tell you what the Law was.

Jesus approaches this topic very differently. He is not so much concerned with the Law as with the Lawgiver. Knowing the Lawgiver, who is God, and therefore the nature he creates, Jesus is describing the way things actually are and the way things will work out, not because the Law says so, but because this is the way it is. The Law is supposed to reflect that reality, which it may or may not! Therefore, he has frequent conflicts with the teachers.

If we observe life, we can see what Jesus teaches is true. That’s the great benefit: we can observe the rightness of his teachings. We can see that life on earth is decidedly difficult. It is full of challenges and temptations and, from Jesus’ viewpoint, this is for a good reason. This life on earth is a trial; it’s a time where we decide who our allies are going to be, what our goals and purposes will be, whether they will follow God or oppose God.

In all these choices, the greatest temptation is to work for oneself, to serve oneself, rather than the common good, or what Jesus called the “kingdom of God,” or sometimes the “kingdom of heaven.” This very common strategy, to work for oneself, is, however, seriously flawed. What Jesus is saying in today’s teaching is that working for oneself and serving oneself will eventually lead to disaster. And this is true for everyone, whether they understand the issue or not, whether they are aware of the consequences or not, whether they even believe in God or not. It’s the way reality is. It’s the way God created it.

Two points specifically: Jesus is describing a world where there are certain consequences to decisions, whether or not people intend the consequences, or even...
understand what they are doing. A too simple emphasis on the rights of conscience may obscure this message. Some people fall into the substantial error of thinking that God holds them accountable only for the evil they intend or only for the good they deliberately avoid. This may be the way parents treat their children, but it is not the way God deals with the creation. Why? Because, as we read in the Book of Genesis, God gave Adam, which means the human race, dominion over the earth. Now children cannot exercise dominion, but adults do. What we choose or do not choose has consequences, whether they are foreseen or not. And because the world is so, because God has made the world in this way, many people are caught in lives of great distress and unhappiness. They are the cause of this, but they don’t realize it. They imagine their unhappiness is someone else’s fault, that happiness comes from some favorable circumstances or even maybe sheer luck. That is not Christ’s idea.

So he shows us that when we reach out in love to others, whatever our circumstances, whatever kind of luck we have in life, when we reach out to others, when we risk our comfort to serve those in need, the walls of unhappiness and alienation and estrangement come tumbling down. He is describing how things work. Putting others first is humbling oneself, and it will lead inexorably to exaltation, which means a share in divine glory—and nothing less! Jesus did not think that people would really grasp his words, so he lived it out in everything he did. His whole life is a map to exaltation, and it’s a map that leads us to service, to humbling ourselves, to putting others first.

If we believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead, then we believe in his exaltation. If we do not believe in his resurrection, we do not believe in his exaltation. This is what St. Paul was getting at when he said that everything depends on faith. If we believe in Jesus raised from the dead, then we need to live his life of humility and service. If we do not live in his humility and if we do not serve others, apparently we don’t believe in his resurrection!
Today Jesus is talking about something that is actually common, but he speaks in such a way that maybe we don’t connect. He is talking about the need for hospitality. **Of its nature hospitality cannot make distinctions.** A true welcome has to be a welcome for everybody; it can’t be a welcome for some people. That isn’t hospitality. So in a certain way we destroy hospitality by our way of thinking: Who should be invited? Who do we want to include? Whom do you want to exclude?

It goes the other way around, as well. When we get an invitation, well, can we render this person a sufficient gift to make this invitation worthwhile? In other words, you get a wedding invitation; oh, you think, well, now, how much do I have to give to the wedding couple so this will pay for my dinner? Well then, that wouldn’t be an invitation. So we are always titting for tatting.

Jesus’ point is you don’t do that. Part of this, of course, is **we have to be willing to accept graciously people’s gifts that we cannot repay.** We often don’t. We say, “Oh, no, no, I can’t accept your hospitality. Oh, no, no, I can't accept your gift,” meaning in our own mind we could never repay them. Jesus’ point is, well, in that case you are really rejecting the whole thing. Reject the gift; reject the giver!

Now all this always has a spiritual meaning. Who is the really great inviter of all time? It is God himself. **God is inviting people. But we don’t want to come to God as beggars.** We don’t want to admit our blindness and our lameness and our total helplessness. We want to come to God bringing him something. Well, we want to be dignified in his sight. **We want to be righteous in his sight.** We want to be worthy in his sight. And thereby, **we miss the whole point of the invitation!**
What Is a Saint?

Feast of All Saints  Tuesday, November 1, 2005  6:30 a.m.
Rev 7:2-4, 9-14;  1 Jn 3:1-3;  Mt 5:1-12a  (Cooperation and willingness to serve)

What we may want to think about today on the feast of All Saints is the question of: **What is a saint?** This is an important question because it’s very clear from the Scriptures that all believers are called to sainthood and that *becoming a saint is the fundamental reason for everyone’s being on earth.* No one is excluded from this.

Having said that, we then go back into the history of the Church and we see that sometimes the Church had a very narrow idea of sainthood which was not inclusive. For example, the first idea was martyrdom; the real saints were the martyrs, those who shed their blood for Christ. Well, this is very good, and definitely martyrs have always been a very powerful witness for Christ, but **we cannot limit sainthood to martyrdom.** In fact, this feast used to be called the “feast of All Martyrs,” so much focus was on martyrdom.

As time passed, the idea of sainthood changed from martyrdom to a sort of **perfection.** To be a saint was to be a person who was **flawless,** obedient in everything to God, free of all kinds of negative emotions and flaws of any kind. **Well, this is unrealistic.** Only Jesus and perhaps the Blessed Mother were saints of this kind, but the call to holiness is universal. So **we have to understand sainthood in a way that actually is practical.**

As the Church has grown in two thousand years, we recognize, first of all, that the end of the world is not proximate. The world is not ending tomorrow. Therefore, something more important than simply martyrdom is called for, namely, **the daily witness of work, the daily witness of contributing to the buildup of the kingdom of God through one’s good will and cooperation with grace.** That very simply is what sainthood is. It’s cooperating with grace. It’s **being whatever you are supposed to be at this very particular moment.** It is **rooted in God’s power,** not our own. But it is furthered by **our willingness to serve God in every kind of way:** simple and complicated, deep and not so deep.

So all of us are called to sainthood. **All of us are called to holiness, whatever that means for each of us. We have to find out and cooperate with the call we receive.**
Tonight we gather to honor our dead. We are also honoring the process of grieving.

Grieving is, or can be, a holy process that gives life and reflects the love and the energy of the Lord. Sometimes people do not honor grieving or they are afraid of it. They think it is based on their own weakness or lack of faith. This is not true. Sometimes people try in their well-meaning way to assuage grief. When my mother died, almost twenty years ago, some people wanted to help me out by saying, “Well, you know, she is in a better place.” I was not too fond of that comment. It was not helpful to me personally because it wasn’t her state or condition that caused our grief. It was our loss.

Loss can be very deep for two different reasons. The first is great love, and the second is great regret. In both cases we have to pay attention to them. In the first case, when our loss is very intense because of great love, this is a blessing pulling us closer to God and helping us focus on the promises of the Lord, which are for reunion and restoration of all that is good. When we feel deep grief because of love, the Lord is telling us that he indeed has been very close to us and that he shall remain close to us, even though now in a different way. This can renew our faith as well as our hope, and, in a different way, it can even increase our love of others.

The second possibility that we grieve deeply because of regret is a call for us to change our ways, or at least to take very careful stock of all of our relationships and to do all we can—and we cannot always do everything, but to do all we can—to live without regret, so that we will not be grieving for what we didn’t do or didn’t say or didn’t accomplish with another person. This is also mercy because God intends us to
constantly grow in life. It isn’t as if we have one chance and that’s it! But **every day is a new chance to serve God in others**, and to learn how to enjoy his presence in others, and to do the right thing, and to say the right thing—even if it’s difficult!

Through all these experiences God is helping us sense that we are a **communion**, not only all of those present in this building at this time, not only all those who gather together at Eucharist, but the **dead also are living in the presence of God, and we are one with them**. We need to **keep them in mind in our prayers**, not out of fear, but out of a desire that they **might live as fully as possible in God**.

So we continue with a **sense of gratitude** for all that has been, whether that has been really wonderful, joyful, and splendid, or whether it has been painful, regretful and difficult, **because whatever is, is an opportunity for us to become more like Christ**. So we commend to the Lord our loved ones.
November is the month when we celebrate the feast of two great saints named “Martin”: Martin de Porres today and Martin of Tours later on, November 11th. 

Martin de Porres comes from Lima, Peru. He was a friend of St. Rose of Lima. He was born of a mixed race family in poor circumstances. You know, sometimes mixed race families are the worst off because they are not accepted by anybody. The white people don’t like them, and the black people don’t like them. Martin grew up in this sort of twilight zone of social disgrace. And many people do, for many different reasons.

The point is that Martin did not allow this to sour his life or to embitter him. Rather, he turned the tables on his very negative circumstances, and he became a champion of all the other people who were being excluded, ignored, or rejected in the society he lived in. He was a simple man. He never accomplished great tasks by ordinary measurement, but he accomplished the greatest of all tasks—sainthood! We are talking about sainthood now in this November when we are talking about All Saints. Martin was a very simple fellow who really achieved great sanctity simply by loving people, accepting people, caring about people, and caring for people. It’s a matter of attitude.

That’s really what the gospel is talking about—attitude. How do we look at those who are excluded? Or how do we look at people who are really, after all, not so good, whose behavior isn’t the best? How do we regard them? Do we hold them at a distance because they are really not good enough to touch us, or do we welcome them to our table?
Shrewdness or Prudence

Thirty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Friday, November 4, 2005  7:00 a.m.  Rom 15:14-21;  Lk 16:1-8  (St. Charles Borromeo)

(Circumstances don’t determine happiness)

Yesterday we had the memorial of St. Martin, and I mentioned that he did not allow a life of poverty and social exclusion to embitter him. Well, today we have the memorial of St. Charles, who is the opposite. He did not allow a life of privilege and wealth to spoil him.

What we have to understand is no matter how we are born and whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, they can be a cause of great trouble, whether we imagine they are good or bad. That’s one of our first problems. We lack shrewdness. The children of light are not shrewd. Jesus is pointing that out in the gospel. We imagine that we know what are the best circumstances that we could have, and we imagine that they will make us happy. Well, never will any circumstances of any kind make us happy. Happiness is something that comes from inside. Wealth, privilege, opportunities, education, success, none of this can make a person happy. There are some people who will content themselves with externals, and that in itself is the most unshrewd, imprudent possible kind of choice because they will deprive themselves of anything of substance. But most people actually are shrewd enough to realize that they are not happy, even if the outward life is fine. Happiness is something we have to develop from within, and it requires a certain sort of shrewdness or prudence.

In today’s gospel reading this steward was unjust. He was going to be fired. But he used his injustice, he used his dishonesty, to make a place for himself. That’s what Jesus is admiring. We have to make a place for ourselves. How do you do that? He has shown the way that prudent children of the light could take, for example, helping the poor. If the poor are especially loved by God, then by helping them we are providing a place for ourselves. But very often the very people he calls the “children of the light” don’t seem to pay much attention to what they have to do in order to attain their own proper happiness. They are blithely unaware. If that applies to one of us, then we need to start paying attention.
“Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Whenever we hear a parable, there are two questions we should ask: to whom is the parable addressed and how does it feel? The present parable is addressed to disciples, not scribes and Pharisees as is often the case. How does this parable feel? Many think it feels constricted. It is the nature of Jesus’ teaching to flow back and forth from the widest most embracing inclusion to this more restrictive narrowing of the road and the gate. But we have to remember he is teaching his disciples and therefore requiring something of them.

Very often the gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ is a very comforting message, and very often it is a very healing message. But sometimes it’s a challenging message, and yet there are people who seem to be deaf to the challenge, almost as if God has no business requiring anything of them.

Jesus was very clear that God does place demands, and Jesus clarified to his disciples what these demands were. But he did it in a way that was metaphorical. He said, “My yoke is easy, my burden light.” But there is a yoke! Now what’s a yoke? A yoke is an instrument used for draft animals. Jesus’ point is, look, I have come to help you pull, but you have to help too. There is room for two heads in a yoke, usually two oxen: a stronger and a weaker. The whole idea of God becoming human is to share our lives with us, but not to do everything for us. “My yoke is easy, my burden light,” but there is a burden. So the beloved disciples of the Lord receive many gifts, but are expected to produce something. There are many parables about producing fruit, yielding something for the harvest, for the reaper, for the owner of the vineyard.

So we have to look closely at what are the actual words and terms used in Jesus’ metaphorical statements.

- First of all, “virgin.” This, of course, refers to innocence and purity.
- “Sleep” refers to our involvement with the world. It’s a term used often in spiritual literature. “To fall asleep” means to get so involved in something that you forget who you are. The world is not evil in itself, but if we get too involved...
in it, it can derail us from our primary purpose, which is living for God, serving his purposes.

- “Lamps.” Well, of course, lamps give light, and **giving light is a way of talking about witnessing to Christ**, especially by works of mercy.
- “Oil.” Of course, lamps need oil. So a lamp won’t work without fuel. It is useless to anyone just as a car without gas is useless. The question is, now, **what is fuel for the work of God?**

So on to the interpretation. First of all, **it is not enough to remain unsullied by life.** Some people think that’s what it means to be moral: “keep your nose clean,” don’t get involved in any kind of shady practices. Well, that’s not really enough. **God expects something else: the bearing of fruit or light.** We are called on, in fact, to be light-bearers in a sometimes very dark world; and sometimes if we are not the ones to shed light, no one will. You might say this is a way of talking about the fundamental Christian vocation.

Willy-nilly all of us get caught up in worldly affairs. We can’t help it. We are not secluded from life. We have our families. We have our businesses. We have to take care of them. But **in our taking care of life and in our doing our business, we need to remain equipped and prepared for the work God gives us.** Ultimately, it is Jesus who equips us through his love and through his sacrifice. **Through his resurrection from the dead, Jesus has equipped us to live as a light in the world.**

Now none of us can stay awake at all times. We get tired. We get overwhelmed. We become conflicted by the affairs of life. But **either we take seriously our life with Christ and incorporate into our weekly routines time for prayer, reflection, and worship, or in time our lights will go out—our lamps will run dry.** We will have nothing to give, and only the foolish will ignore this possibility!
“It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be
thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.”

People have become rather callous, it seems to me, in recent years about the issue of
effect. Jesus here is talking about bad example, also called “scandal.” Scandal is not a
juicy story you hear about. Scandal is actually causing someone to sin.

Now you might say that idea itself is rather odd. How can you cause someone else to
sin? Well, the presumption is that you are respected and the one you cause to sin is less
aware, less reasonable, less mature, than you are. You can imagine that even if you think
rather poorly of yourself, there is someone who looks up to you. There is someone who
says, “Well, I know she is a Catholic. I know he is a Catholic.” Even that is looking up to
a person in a certain way. So we have to realize that we are walking examples of
something. When we talk or act in such a way as to lead other people to disrespect God,
to disrespect themselves, to work against the will of God, we are scandalizing them; we
are causing them to sin; we are diminishing their worth.

We don’t diminish someone’s worth by outwardly attacking them. We diminish their
worth by inwardly deceiving them or corrupting them or leading them astray, so
that the diminishment comes with their own cooperation. That’s what the evil Jesus is
speaking about is, the evil of scandalizing. The other person is participating. That’s why
it’s really diminishing them. That’s why it’s really bringing them down. That’s why it’s
really sin. They are going along with it, but they are going along with it because of bad
effect example in someone they look up to. So this is a very sobering teaching. Of course, like
so many of Jesus’ teachings it is an exaggeration. But it’s something we should still take
to heart. It is better to have a millstone tied around your neck and be thrown into the sea
than to be the reason why someone else sins!
“But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who are in his possession experience it.”

We are reading from the Book of Wisdom, which is a very interesting book found in our Old Testament. It is not in the Jewish canon. It is not in a Protestant Bible. It was written around the third century B.C. in Alexandria, in the Greek language. That’s the reason it’s not found in the Jewish Bible, because everything in the Jewish Bible has to have been written in Hebrew. But it is part of the Old Testament because it’s part of the literature that the Church inherited from the Jewish Diaspora as the gospel spread through the network of Diaspora synagogues in the first and second centuries.

Now this reflection is very interesting because it’s always interesting to reflect on basics. Of course, we use mythology and we use metaphors and we use all kinds of images to discuss and to think about our nature, our history.

In this particular text the author is talking about envy. Now envy is one of the capital sins. But a capital sin is not a choice; it’s rather a defect of character. The mere fact that the Book of Wisdom starts talking about sin as a defect of character is already a development of theology. It’s simplistic to think of sin merely as some choice or some act. It’s deeper than that. It’s a defect of character. Here envy is a defect in which we feel sad at another’s happiness. So what’s there? Rivalry!

According to the Book of Genesis rivalry is the essence of sin, that the devil, again, whom Jesus calls the “father of lies,” convinced the first parents that God was not their friend, that no one could love them better than they could love themselves. That is the lie
where we get the “father of lies,” the greatest lie of all: nobody can love you better
than you can love yourself. Once we swallow that lie, there are lots of others. These
lies all create defects in our character.

We can swallow them at a very early age. It might seem sometimes we are born with
them. We can think about whether that’s possible or not; I don’t know, but at an early
age we swallow certain lies. The basic is: nobody can love you more than you can
love yourself. Out of that comes rivalry because God is not your friend, but your rival.
Your parents, no matter what they do for you, don’t really want the very best for you.
They are trying to hold you back from what you really should have or should be—so
distrust.

One sin builds on another. Envy builds on the alienation that develops from rivalry
when especially, for example, in a family, what is good for my brother is not good for
me, or what is good for my sister is not good for me, because we are not the same. We
are different. We are rivals. My happiness is most assured by myself. It cannot be given
or shared or produced by someone else.

These are lies that infect us and create a great deal of unhappiness and,
according to this, death itself. Well, in a sense it is death to believe all these lies. Life is
truth. It’s not ordinarily the way the think, but this book is trying to get us to think
differently about ourselves, about our lives, about God, about how we grew up, about
how we were formed, about how we aided or hurt our own growth. The Book of
Wisdom!
Fallacy of “If Only”  Funeral  Joseph Longo  Tuesday, November 8, 2005
Rev 21:1-5a, 6b-7;  Rom 6:3-9;  Jn 11:17-27  (God present in every situation)

“Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’”

So often there are figures in the New Testament who speak for us, who speak our thoughts and express our feelings. So it is with Martha. All of us at times have had this feeling: “if only,” if only something were different, if only God had done this or that, if only something other than what did happen happened.

Jesus’ point is that we need to find God in what is, and not to think about what could be or what might be or what should be. From this point of view, God is present in all matters. Whether we are present to God is a different matter altogether, but God is present in everything he has created. God is present in all of our lives at all times. So Martha’s expression is meant to be, you might say, an occasion for Jesus to help us see how things are the way they are because they need to be. Martha was implying that it would have been better for Lazarus not to have died.

We might think that about the death of a loved one or we might think that about something else that happens to us: it would have been better if this had not happened. God is in every event, and, however unfortunate or even evil, God can bring good from it.

In regard to life and death, Jesus assures her, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

When we cling consciously and deliberately to Christ in faith, we are already participating in some way in that resurrection, which means we have a right to live without fear of death, which means we have a right to live without undo anxiety, which
means we can live a free life and take each day as it is, knowing that we are being cared for right now. We are being loved right now, and right now life is being drawn out of our death. That is really our baptismal faith. That is the faith we have in Christ.

When we brought the body of Joe into the church, I sprinkled it with the water from the font of Baptism. **Baptism is the font of rebirth.** The birth we receive at Baptism does not pass away like the birth we receive from our mother’s womb. We are born to our mothers to pass away. **We are born to God never to pass away.** That is what Jesus means when he says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

In a moment like this it is important that we open our hearts to this message, that we don’t allow it to pass, because **we are very vulnerable during the burial of a dear person**, a dear friend, a brother, a father. So at this very tender and vulnerable moment, **we need to let God affirm us and assure us and lead us into a deeper faith.**
Today we read from the Book of Wisdom, and not too often do we hear from the Book of Wisdom—do we? Not too often. Now when you hear the word “Wisdom,” what comes into your mind? “Smartness”—okay, what else? “Knowledge. An old person.” Those are all very good answers. Any over here? Shannon? “Power”—that’s pretty good. “God. Guidance, generous. An owl”—oh, that’s good! “Greatness. Kindness. Albert Einstein. Joy. Jesus. Donuts”—that stumps me. “Having more friends than you want!” Wow! “Having faith in yourself. A thought.” Okay, that’s enough. You basically have the idea of wisdom, but I want to stress that wisdom is very practical. It is a form of knowledge. It probably will create more friends than you can handle. It is about God; it comes from God. It is also about knowledge. It’s also guidance for life. It’s all those things.

Now what this particular book is talking to us today about is something very important that we have to look at, even though we might not like to look at it, because sometimes we don’t like to look at what is perhaps wrong with us. But it says, “By the envy of the devil, death entered into the world.”

What is envy? Envy—what does that mean? “Like you are jealous.” Okay, what does that mean? What actually is envy? “Angry with someone because they have something you don’t?” Well, angry, maybe. “Wanting something?” All right that is thinking something is greater than what you already have. All of those are true to some extent. Envy is actually being sad because someone else is happy. That’s envy. It’s being sad because someone else is happy.

It says, “The devil was sad because human beings were happy.” Now what was that all about? We have to read a little bit about our Scripture. We go back to the story of the garden of Eden when God created humanity. This is a story, but it is a story that has a truth in it. When God created humanity he made human beings like himself.

Now what does that mean, Carl, when you hear that you are made in the image of God? What could that mean? That he has two eyes? Nose? No, what does that mean? Yes, well, what like God? Something like God, well, what would that be? Yes, but what is the image? “Love!” You can love. That’s correct. So love is a verb—right? It’s about doing something. It’s a choice—right? Love! You can love! You might think your little pet puppy loves you. Well, I have news for you! Your puppy has no choice! Your puppy is just acting under instinct. It does not love you. You can love or not. Love of its nature must be free. So that means you can give it or you can take it. You can receive it or you can refuse it. That’s what love is. Love is really a unity between two. When God created humanity, God created humanity capable of loving and with a union or a communion between himself and those early beings. That’s why the biblical author refers to this place as a garden. They don’t really mean a garden in the sense you have a
garden with roses in it. It means a place well-tended, well cared for, beautiful, of good form, full of life. That’s what earth is—see—made by God for a home for his beloved image, who can love or not.

Now what happens? Well, the devil is envious, meaning sad because of the good fortune and the blessings that these early people had. So what does the devil do? What is the devil, first of all? How did Jesus describe the devil? He gave him a certain name. Yes, he is bad. How bad is he? What does he do? What is his big job? “Make people mad and sad,” but how does he do that? No, not by torturing. Yes, but how does he take you away from God? What does he do? He lies! Jesus says that the devil is the liar, the “father of lies.” That’s how the devil takes us away from God. He lies to us. Now you either believe the lie or you don’t believe the lie. When you believe a lie, what is that called? It’s called swallowing.” We swallow lies or we spit them up.

Now this is what the garden of Eden story is about. It’s about how the devil comes in the form of a serpent and says to Eve, “Guess what, Eve, you actually are capable of being equal to God in every way, but God doesn’t really want you to be equal. God, in fact, doesn’t really want you to exercise your great potential. God really doesn’t want you to be happy. God wants you to be under his thumb, so I’ll tell you how to get really happy! Ignore what God told you! Totally disobey him! He told you not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Well, that means that he wants you to rely on him to tell you what’s good and bad. Forget it! Don’t listen to God at all. You can decide what’s good. Whatever is good for you is good; whatever is bad for you is bad. That’s all you have to know. God doesn’t have any knowledge you don’t have! So, go ahead—do whatever you want.” And that’s what Eve did. Eve was fooled. Eve was deceived. She swallowed the lie that God didn’t really care about her. This is the original sin.

Unfortunately, it passes down in every generation, and people always grow up with this doubt inside of them about God. Therefore, we grow up in a certain rivalry. We believe the lie. And the biggest lie is this: that nobody can love you more than you can love yourself. That’s the original lie: nobody can love you more than you can love yourself. So you have to doubt God. You must doubt God. And while you are at it, you must doubt everybody else, too. No matter how good your parents are to you, that doesn’t mean they want your best. That doesn’t mean they really care about you—not at all! They want to deprive you. They want to deprive you of all the fun you could have. That’s really what your parents are doing. They pretend to take care of you, but really they don’t want you to be happy, because the way to be happy is to do whatever you want. See? And your parents don’t want you to do whatever you want, so, therefore, they don’t care about you. So you are in rivalry with God and with your parents and with your brothers and with your sisters, because whatever they get, you don’t get. You see? So if they are praised, that’s something you don’t have. That deprives you. See? That’s what rivalry does. Whatever happens to anybody, if it’s not happening to you, it’s bad. That’s how the devil wants you to think, and it’s very easy to do so, because we have been twisted in the history of our human race—twisted by this original sin, this lie that we have swallowed.
And it produces all kinds of things. Envy is one of them. Envy is sadness because now there is good fortune, because, after all, if your brother gets to do something you don’t get to do, that’s bad for you. So you might as well hate him because he got what you didn’t. You see? That’s envy—sadness turned into hatred. Also it produces all kinds of other things like anxiety, because if you are a rival to everybody else, you ought to be very worried because how are you going to handle life? How can you take care of yourself? How can you provide yourself with everything you need? You see—all this is terrible! We have to worry every day.

What does God say? “Don’t worry. Trust—trust in me. Hope. I promise you things. Hope in my promises. Don’t be anxious. Don’t be anxious; hope in my promises. I will take care of you. I promise to take care of you.” But, of course, to hope in God’s promises presumes that you trust in God. But trusting in God is saying you really don’t think he is a rival. So then that is going against the devil. You see? That’s why you are always back and forth. Are you going to go with the devil’s ideas or are you going to go with God’s ideas? God says, “Don’t worry. I will take care of you. Just trust in me.”

Now Jesus shows us on the cross that trusting in God doesn’t mean we don’t suffer. So if that’s the way you understand trust, then you are wrong. That’s not the way it works. But in the long run, what happens to Christ? He is raised from the dead. So if you trust in God, you will be raised up to glory in Christ. Along the way, if you want to be happy, you have to keep this in mind. You have to keep in mind that you are not all by yourself and you are never alone. You have to keep in mind that when you feel very timid—when you feel very timid—when you feel afraid, you have to realize that fear is not necessary because—why? You are not alone!

Some people feel angry because of the world and it’s injustice. Well, some of that anger is well deserved, as Christ was angry sometimes too. But if anger starts to make you bitter inside, or worse, indifferent to what is really good and just, then it’s ruining you. But it all comes from that original lie. You are a rival to everybody else; and what you can’t do for yourself, can’t be done. So it’s against faith and it’s against hope and it’s against love—that rivalry!

We are all tempted in one way or another to fall into this. Each of us is a little different, but we all have the same weaknesses toward believing in this lie: that we are all on our own; we can’t trust in God; we can’t trust in our parents; and hoping in God is just a waste, and love is really what I do for myself.

That’s what this is about—the Book of Wisdom. It’s very practical to think about this because it’s going to have a lot to do with the way you deal with issues in life. “Issues,” by that I mean what happens—what happens to you, what happens to others? How do you take it? If you have ever noticed, you could be in a situation and a friend of yours could be in a situation, and both of you have a very different way of taking it. That’s a very important lesson to learn. A lot of the way you look at life has to do with you. You decide whether you put a good stamp or a bad stamp on the various things that happen in life. It’s your decision. And it starts with this lie, if you swallow it. The more
you swallow the lie, the more you will feel rivalry with others. **The more you feel rivalry with others, the more you will feel unhappy and alienated;** that means cut off from other people and, therefore, lonely and hapless and sad and unhappy and anxious and worried and afraid and angry.

Now all of us are like this sometimes. But we have to remember what God’s remedy is. **God’s remedy is his own Son, who came into the world to show us how to live with our disappointments, how to live with our fears, how to live with our anger, how to live with our anxieties, worries—how to give them to God, how to offer them to God.** That’s why most of the time we have Mass. Now we can’t have Mass today, but usually **we have Mass so that we can bring all of our needs to God and live a life of sacrifice.** That’s what that means. So it’s not the wine and the bread that’s important; it’s what you put in there: **your issues, your affairs, your experiences, your feelings.** That’s what you go to the Lord with. **That’s what you bring to the altar when you offer the Mass with the Church.** Okay?

So you may often feel that you are the only person in the world that ever has certain feelings. That’s not true. **Everyone has some feelings very similar.** We are all just a little different about which ones have priority or how they turn out. But **at the root of all of it is this inner child, creature of God, who is afraid to trust.**

You can believe that you are loved by God infinitely, which you are, in fact; and everyone is. But it won’t do you any good until you return the love; then you can experience it. **If you don’t return love, you can’t experience it. If you don’t return forgiveness, you can’t feel it.** So in that way God is like playing a game of tennis, and now the ball is being served into your court, and you have to respond somehow. You have to return the love, then you can feel it. If you don’t return it, you will never feel it.

That’s the Book of Wisdom. That’s what it is trying to say. This selection ends this way: **“Because grace and mercy are with his holy ones,”**—and that means you; you are his holy ones—“and his care is with his elect,”—his chosen—that’s you.
The Kingdom Is Relational  
Twenty-second Week in Ordinary Time  
Thursday, November 10, 2005  7:00 a.m.  
Wis 7:22b—8:1;  Lk 17:20-25  (St. Leo the Great)  
(Joined in Baptism)

“For behold, the kingdom of God is among you.”

Jesus was very well aware of the fact that many people, good people, seekers, didn’t often see what was right before them. And so it is there are still people—and we are probably those people sometimes—who are looking for the presence of God—not finding it, but seeking it, wondering when God is going to manifest himself, or how, or in what way! Jesus’ point is, well, God is already manifesting himself. But God doesn’t manifest himself in the way you might be expecting, and so miss it!

He says, “The kingdom of God is among you,” which means it is relational. Unless you are relating to others, you cannot know what the kingdom is about. It is discovered, it is revealed in relationships within the body of faith.

Baptism is all about being, in St. Paul’s words, grafted onto the stump, whose tree was cut down. He is referring, of course, to Christ in his death. Baptism is our being joined to that stump, which is Christ, to grow new life, as a grafting does grow new life and becomes a new tree, as it were. In this we share life with Christ, but we share life also with the other members of Christ. Again, in John’s Gospel, the vine and the branches, each branch sharing the same life, the life of the kingdom. We cannot be isolated from one another and know God—it won’t work! It is not God’s plan.

Even those unusual people who spend their lives away from the body, it seems, or away from society anyway, such as monks or hermits, become all the more close to the body and all the more united to the spirit of their brothers and sisters—more than those who are being constantly jostled by the physical manifestations of human life. So it’s not just about the physical. It’s about that which transcends the physical. But it is a relationship established in Christ. We are brought into it by Baptism, and we find God in that relationship and not without it.
“So it will be on the day the Son of Man is revealed.”

Jesus’ words today are talking about the actual completion of God’s purpose for life on earth. The point is while people live and make their living and do their business, that’s not the real reason why they are on earth. **Some people get lost in what they are doing.** It’s all life is about: eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building.

Now, indeed, we have to do these things. We have to eat. We have to plant. We have to build. But we have to keep in mind that while we are doing these things, **there is another purpose that transcends our own little purposes**, and we are called to serve that. So he says, “Well, take two women grinding meal together. One of them is aware of something more in life; the other one isn’t.” That’s the way it is, no matter what daily task. “Or two men in the field plowing. One is aware of something more; the other isn’t.”

And he says, “Remember Lot’s wife.” Well, Lot’s wife was the woman who looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Now salt is crystalline, and when something crystallizes it stops growing. Crystals are almost alive. They grow to a point, and then they stop. When the Bible talks about Lot’s wife turning into salt, it means that **it’s possible for our lives to stop growing.** And **that happens when we look back rather than look forward.** So Jesus is saying, “Look forward to the coming of the Son of Man. Look forward to God’s completion of his purpose, and be not only aware of it, but wait for it.” Be awaiting as perhaps a woman is waiting for delivery, or wait as one waits for something that one needs very much. Don’t forget about it. Don’t be distracted by what you have to do today.
Sharing Our Abilities for God’s Work

November 13, 2005  7:00 a.m.  Pro 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31;  1 Thes 5:1-6;  Mt 25:14-30  (Our time, our talents, our treasure)

“For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

When we listen to Jesus’ teachings it’s important that we, first of all, key into: Whom is he addressing? Is it the crowds, or the leaders, or in this case his disciples?

Here Jesus is addressing his disciples, and the important thing is he is trying to tell them something he may not share with others. He is telling them about God’s expectations, about how God expects to receive something in return for the many gifts he gives. This could be a turnoff to the crowds. Maybe completely misunderstood by religious leaders, but his disciples are supposed to understand this because, after all, the disciples are those who have received much. Jesus wants them to know that much is required from them. So we might ask ourselves:

- Am I aware of what I have received?
- How am I making a return to the Lord?

“There are many gifts,” St. Paul tells us, “but only one Lord.” Some gifts are material, including the ability to make money; other gifts are spiritual, like the ability to nurture other people or support others emotionally. The point Jesus is making is that whatever talents or abilities God has given us, we need to share them with God and God’s work. This means we need generosity. This means we have to include the needs of others in our circle of concern. It is a contradiction for a disciple to think that he or she can simply live for his own concerns or her own concerns or that of his or her family. For Christ that is not a possibility.
One of the mysteries that Jesus reveals about love and forgiveness is that in order to receive it or experience it, we have to be willing to share it. God loves us infinitely, but if we are not willing to love others, we will never feel that love. God is mercy and forgiveness, but if we are not willing to forgive, we will never experience forgiveness. This is why Jesus taught us to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others their trespasses.”

It is the same on the material level of life. When we start to give of our own profit, we incorporate our business into God’s business. This sanctifies our work. This gives a spiritual perspective to what is otherwise a mere material process. By giving to God and for God’s work, our daily financial situations become enveloped in something much greater than ourselves. In a similar way, when we give of our time, our time is sanctified—all of it. When we share our abilities with others, God is blessing the use of our abilities in other areas as well, because they are all motivated by the same love and generosity.
In the first reading from the Book of Maccabees, we hear a story about persecution. Of course, this story is repeated over and over again in the history of the people of God, both in Judaism and in Christianity. The idea of persecution comes down to this: Will the people chosen to be God’s own maintain their identity, or will they merge into the collective culture they are living in?

Now the society that existed in Palestine in this particular period, called the “Maccabean period,” around a hundred and fifty years before Christ or maybe a little longer—this society found that Jews were a threat, and, therefore, they wanted the Jews to conform to all of their basic thinking and practices.

There is always a very strong force in all societies to get people to conform. The whole point of the whole history of Scripture is God does not want people to conform. Obedience to God is not conformity. Conformity is almost a thoughtless process of being like everybody else and copying everybody else and imitating everybody else, and letting everybody else do your thinking for you. Obedience is resisting everybody else, the collective society, the culture, and recognizing in one’s own life a source of direction, a source of guidance, that is independent of society. This is, of course, the voice of God, the teaching of God, the Torah in Jewish terminology, the Christ in Christian terminology. But it is not of ourselves and does not spring from a human source.

Whenever we succumb to the temptation to forget about this, we lose the very essence of who we are. That’s what this whole thing is about. It’s about the fact that the great society did not want the Jews to be different. Now the actual battles they fought seem silly to us, about kosher foods or whatever. But the idea behind it is not silly. When we forget who we are, when we forget that it is God who has called us and God who directs us, then we have lost the very reason for our existence and our calling.
Refusing to Give Bad Example  Thirty-third Week in Ordinary Time  Tuesday, November 15, 2005  7:00 a.m.  2 Mac 6:18-31;  Lk 19:1-10  (St. Albert the Great)  (Honoring God comes first)

I would like to talk today for a few moments on the first reading from the Book of Maccabees. Now we have no true knowledge about the veracity of these stories in the Book of Maccabees. For all we know they are completely fictitious. But they do have a very strong moral point to them.

In today’s story, it is about a man who is martyred because he refused to give bad example. There is a very great point made that bad example is the appearance of doing wrong—not necessarily doing wrong itself.

Now we, as Christians, have to pass over the fact that the laws of the Jews do not apply to us and do not seem to be rooted in anything very objective, for example, the prohibition of pork. That is not something that we follow. And it seems almost trivial; but we have to forget that at the moment, to see the point. In the understanding of the Jewish people, pork is wrong; it’s wrong to eat it. God forbade them to eat it.

Now this man is told that he must eat pork in order to give honor to the government, to the reigning monarch. He says, “I will not.” Honoring God is more important than honoring man. Being loyal to God is more important than being loyal to the government. God comes first. Human society comes second. It has to do with priorities. So his friends have this diabolical suggestion: well, you could honor God secretly, but just pretend to honor the king. And the point of the story is, well, that would be just as bad. If we are to honor God, it has to be obvious to everybody or it isn’t really much honor!
These are very sad words that Jesus has for his own homeland capital. In some respects they may apply to ourselves. **Are we really aware of the time of our visitation? Do we realize what really makes for peace?**

“If this day you only knew what makes for peace.”

It would seem that many people of our nation believe peace is established through power, weapons, technology, money. This is the way to destruction. It has been proved time and time again in the history of the world. Not that peace comes through weakness either! But it comes through a **great dedication to justice. That was what Jerusalem was called to be.** The prophet said that the whole world would come to Jerusalem because people would perceive that they knew God.

There was a time when people looked to America with that same idea. It was a “light on the hill.” **Is it still shining?** That’s a question that as believers we need to answer.
The death of a loved one gives us an opportunity, opens a door, to reflect on life, and to see perhaps something that we don’t ordinarily see. For example, in this time of year we are experiencing autumn, the falling of the leaves and apparent death; that is, a leafless tree may appear to be dead. The life is simply receding for awhile.

In a similar way, when we come to bury our beloved, they appear to be dead, and they are to us in a superficial way, but in a different way they are alive now more than ever. That is the meaning of the candle that we burn at the head of the casket, our belief in the resurrection of the dead, our belief that Jesus came to share totally with us our lives, which include our pains, our suffering, and eventually our death, so that all of it could be redeemed and restored to the service of God.

As we reflect on life from this perspective, we see that there is every reason to be grateful. There is every reason to be grateful for the wonderful gifts that, not only we have received, but that we are. We are gifts from God. We are created in his own image to be with him even now, to live with him even now, to serve him even now. You might have heard the term “afterlife.” I don’t think there is any such thing. The term “afterlife” implies that this is the real thing and then there might be some addendum, something added later on. No, it’s the other way around. This is a vestibule of something far more alive, far more splendid.

This is a period of very great importance because it is in this period of life, in the here and the now, that we decide in our bodies how we shall serve God. That’s what the gospel is about. “Do not be amazed at this because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation.” In this way life is a time of decision. And all of us
have to decide somehow or another whether we will serve God, whether we will be of benefit to others, or whether we will simply use others for our own purposes.

Reflecting on that we can be very happy and thankful for a person like Dorothy, who in her own unique way has shown us the face of God, as does everyone who decides to serve God. Why? Because when we serve God, we become like God, and we become like God because we are already made in his image and likeness with that full potential.

That is why everything in life has meaning to it. That is why there is never a moment of our day that is really lost or wasted. We need to appreciate that—the precious value of every moment. In every moment, even if we are sitting in a car in a traffic snarl, we can be serving God. How? By praising his name, by recounting the many reasons we should be grateful just for being, for being alive, for being chosen to serve God, to hear his word, to be invited to his kingdom to share in his banquet. All those we anticipate in our daily routines in very small ways, but they are all very real if only we open up our minds enough to let in the light by which we can see.

In a few moments we will gather gifts on the altar and pray to the Father to send down his Spirit upon the gifts, that they will be hallowed, that they will be, in fact, consecrated into the body and the blood of Christ. In this way we can anticipate in a sacramental way the very moment Dorothy enjoys right now, the banquet of life, the riches of God’s splendor. Hopefully, renewed by this grace, we can return to life with more conviction and more joy and more willingness to live. In this way we will keep Dorothy’s memory alive, and we will honor her, who, after all, taught us this by example.
Today in the first reading, we read about the dedication of the Temple. In the second reading, we talk about Jesus throwing out the moneychangers from the same Temple. It is very interesting that the Bible itself has a very ambiguous attitude toward the Temple.

If you will recall, in the days of David, it was David who had the bright idea: let’s build a Temple. God did not like that idea. He sent the prophet Nathan to say, “You are going to build me a temple? Is it not I who provide for you?” So that’s the first thing to always keep in mind, that it is God who provides; it is not we who provide. When the Temple is something we are doing, it’s not quite right. The Temple is simply a place for worship, for prayer, for the Ark of the Covenant. But then, we can dedicate it to God, provided that we are not secluding our whole idea of prayer to that one place, as if only there do we pray, as if only there is God present. That would be wrong. So a temple can be holy or it cannot be so holy, depending upon our attitude toward it.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus is upset about something else: the misuse of the precincts for buying and selling. What was that all about? Well, it was about the sacrifices—it was about the sacrifices. What were they selling? They were selling the very animals that were to be sacrificed. Apparently they got a little carried away, again, with quantity. If one sacrifice is good, two are better. That’s the idea.

Jesus’ view is different. The essence is prayer itself. Prayer is ultimately a matter of our own inner attitude. What are we really giving to God, offering to God? The only real gift he wants is oneself. That’s the only thing we can really give him that he doesn’t already own—our own free will, our own dedication, our devotion. That’s the only thing he doesn’t already have, and that’s the only thing that will please him. This has to carry itself out outside the walls of the Temple in a life of obedience, moral responsibility, concern for the poor, respect for other people. If we segregate our life: in the Temple, out of the Temple, then that’s not pleasing either.

So this feast of the dedication of the Basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul in Rome is an opportunity for us to think about that. It’s an opportunity to think about our own temple: how we use it or abuse it, how we honor God or not?
Questions about the Unimaginable  

Thirty-third Week in Ordinary Time  
Saturday, November 19, 2005  
8:00 a.m.  
1 Mac 6:1-13;  
Lk 20:27-40 (Blessed Virgin Mary)  
(Capacity and limitations)

“And they no longer dared ask him anything.”

Well, that is not the goal, to no longer dare to ask anything! But we have to realize that our questions were never going to be answered according to the proportion of our own understanding. The very nature of the human mind, the human intellect, the human soul, is that it goes beyond all boundaries. That is because we are made in the image and likeness of God, and with God there are no boundaries. Our very capacity to question is itself a witness to our divine image, to our spiritual nature.

However, that does not mean that the answers to our questions will be fit for our own imagination or that they will be fit for our own concepts or ideas. Indeed, St. Paul remarked that “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has the imagination of anyone ever grasped what God has prepared for those who love him.” So we are dealing with the inconceivable and the unimaginable realities that are beyond our own conceptions. And we have to keep that in mind whenever we think about God and our future.
Terms of Last Judgment

Our Lord Jesus Christ the King/A Sunday, November 20, 2005 8:45 a.m. Ez 34:11-12, 15-17; 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Mt 25:31-46 (Put actions where your belief is)

Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?’

Visitors to Rome usually make a valiant effort to see the fresco of Michelangelo called “The Last Judgment.” Actually, throughout Europe there are such frescoes or murals in many of the churches. It is healthy to keep in mind that life is fleeting and at the end there will be an accounting. But few things in our modern society remind us of this. What is so important about this particular gospel selection is the actual terms of the judgment, in other words, for what we all must account.

The first point to note is that it’s not about faith, at least not about the idea of the notion of faith or belief or belief system or believing in God or holding onto some specific creed. It’s not about that! It’s not about what people think or what people feel, but it is about what people do.

In this Last Judgment tableau presented by Christ he is saying that what matters to God is that human beings see life as an opportunity to love and serve others gratuitously, that is, without any particular reason or any ulterior motive. Jesus noted, you will remember, that even the pagans love those who love them. There is no reward in that. Likewise, people will do extraordinary things for money, for fame, for recognition, for approval, for popularity—but this is not about any of those things. It is about responding to human need because it’s there. It’s that simple.

This leads to the inescapable conclusion that faith only matters if it flowers into action. It also follows that some people may flower into action without the formal, institutional, or cultural support of faith. In other words, it is possible for an agnostic or an atheist to please God by responding to God’s anonymous presence in the needy.

Meanwhile, a person of deep convictions who talks but does not act misses the whole opportunity of life. Keeping this in mind makes wisdom our constant companion.
God’s Sovereignty  Thirty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time  Monday, November 21, 2005  8:30 a.m.  Dn 1:1-6, 8-20;  Lk 21:1-4  (The Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary)  (Understanding kosher)

Now when you hear the story of Daniel in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar, you might get the idea that the Jews were supposed to be vegetarian. That’s not true; they weren’t really vegetarian. But they did have a strict idea that certain foods were appropriate and certain foods were not appropriate. That goes back to the idea that God created everything and knows what’s good for everybody. That’s basically the idea.

Now in certain areas they excluded certain forms of meat because they thought that the animals were inappropriate. Pigs, for example, they did not eat. The reason seems to be that pigs eat grain, but grain is human food, so that pigs are stealing from human beings; whereas cows eat grass, and human beings can’t eat grass, so they are welcome to the grass, and therefore they are quote “civilized.”

Now with fish, I am not quite sure why, but they objected to all shellfish. Is it because they found that some people could get sick easily from eating it? Perhaps. That could be another reason for banning pork as well, because pork can carry triconosis; so can bear. So maybe that’s why—partly. But behind it is the idea of order. There is an order to creation, and pigs violate the order by taking what doesn’t belong to them. They are thieving animals, so we don’t eat them. It’s almost like they are immoral; don’t put them on our table. That’s the idea.

So the early Christians were really torn in this regard: do we follow these laws or not? Peter, of course, wanted to follow them, but then he didn’t, and then he did. He vacillated. Paul is very clear about this. He says, “No, because this comes from the old Law, now in Christ we are free. So Christians have not had the idea of kosher, but the
idea behind it is still a good one, that we have to eat what’s good and not what is bad.

Now in regard to the origin of this whole idea is everything comes from God, and that we have to keep in mind. Food all comes from God. Gifts all come from God. The widow in this story in the Temple realized that her two coins came from God. She was donating them to God. Our time and our efforts are all from God. Everything we have to use is from God. The point is if we are kosher, we will donate our gifts to the Lord. When we do donate our gifts to the Lord, just like the widow, there will be plenty for us too. We don’t have to worry there won’t be enough left. That, of course, is the human temptation. The devil lies to us and says, “Oh, there won’t be enough for you. You better take care of yourself first. You have to worry; there is not enough. There is not enough for everybody.” Well, that’s not true. There is enough. There is abundance. God created an abundant world with food for everybody, with land for everybody.

Now how do we do this? How do we make sure that everyone gets their share? That’s our big project. That has to be recognizing the sovereignty of God first and foremost. We have the dominion. We make the choices, but God has the sovereignty. So we have to go to God and ask for God’s help in developing our lives, putting him always first in his plan.
Parables of the Kingdom  Thirty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time  Tuesday,
November 22, 2005  8:30 a.m.  Hos 2:16bc, 17cd, 21-22;  Mt 25:1-13  (St. Cecilia)
(All School Mass)  (Thirtieth Anniversary of Ordination)  (The kingdom of heaven
stole)

Well, good morning, boys and girls. Today we have the story of the Ten Virgins, and
we call that a “parable.” Can anyone remind me what a parable is? You can’t? Okay,
What about you? A story Jesus told, correct. Can you tell me anything about the nature of
a parable, since there are a lot of stories—right? What do all these stories have in
common? Cody? True, the goal is to teach people to love each other, correct. Carl, what
else about parables? Yes, Lauren, yes, they do; they teach everyone to be good. What else
about them? Andrew? They teach something, and usually by way of what? Exaggeration,
a little bit? Don’t they exaggerate a little bit? Is that right, Michael? Would you agree
with that? I think so.

Now what have you seen recently that reminds you of all kinds of parables? Johnny,
what have you seen recently that reminds you of all different kinds of parables? You
don’t know! Mmm, over here? Erin, what have you seen lately that reminds you of all
different kinds of parables? Look real hard. What? This, doesn’t this remind you of
parables? (Pointing to his stole) Look, what is that? What’s that the parable of? Gold,
well, what’s that the parable of, Charles? The buried treasure! Isn’t it? Yes, that’s the
buried treasure. What’s this the parable of? These are all parables of the kingdom. The
kingdom of God is like—what? What is that? A young child—right? What’s this one
about? Can you see what’s she is doing? How about over here, Bert? Baking. Well,
actually she is preparing dough, and what goes in the dough that makes it a parable of
the kingdom? A little bit of leaven, yeast. Right, John? What is this here? What is this a
parable of? What does that look like? You don’t know the word, do you? What is this a
parable of? Someone planting! We call it the parable of the Sower and the Seed. But you
are right; it is planting. You saw that didn’t you? You just don’t know the word “sower.”
You might say farmer. What about the back? What do you see on the back? Yes, a
shepherd, and what’s on one side? The sheep and the goats—good! What about over
here? What do we see here? Well, yes, corn and what? What is mixed in with the corn?
Well, corn is wheat—and then tares, weeds. It’s a mixing of the wheat and the weeds
or the corn and the weeds. What’s this? Llamas? Well, camels, usually. Okay, and what’s
that? What is this here? What does that look like? What does that look like? Like a
needle. And what about this little part of the needle? What is that called? What’s it called—that part of the needle—that little spot there? What’s it called? The eye
of the needle! So that’s the story of the camel and the eye of the needle. We will get to
explain that in a minute. Now what about over here? What do you see? A tree with birds.
What kind of tree? A regular tree, no. Maple, no. What kind of tree starts with a tiny
seed, then becomes huge and all the birds of the—Clare? What kind of tree? Mark? Who
said it? Did you say it? I heard it back there. Tim? Mustard seed! That’s the mustard
seed, and that’s the mustard tree. What about this? I will let you redeem yourselves.
Fishes, yes, fishes in a net. So that’s the parable of the dragnet. Right, the net that
gathers all kinds of things; you have to throw half of it out.
Okay, now I have to get to the other side before I run out of parables. I know the choir knows this, so I am going to avoid the choir. I am going to come over here. What’s this the parable of? You are close. The pearl, that is what comes out of an oyster—right? Pearl of great price. See, that’s the great price. Okay?

So now that we have named them all, what are they talking about? That’s what I want to know. Let’s start with the pearl of great price. What does that story tell us? Ryan? Pearl of great price. Can you remember the parable? If you don’t, just say so. But can you remember what it is all about? Anybody remember? Yes, it’s about God’s love, but it’s about something—what do you do with God’s love? It’s about finding God’s love—finding. See this is about finding. Mmm, what else? What other one is about finding? Well, this is about finding. So several of them are about finding. That’s a theme that goes through Jesus’ teachings all the time. In other words, we have to look for and find the love of God, the presence of God, the power of God, in life. In other words, it doesn’t come up to you and say, “Oh, my dear, Matt, may I have the next dance?” No, that’s not the way God comes to you. You have to look; you get it? And that’s what those two parables are about, about looking and finding. And then, Peter, when you find something, what do you do? Say, “Oh, good, I found it,” and then walk away? What do you do? You keep it! No, you have to do something more than keep it. You can’t just take it. You have to buy it. I mean, according to the parable. This one you have to sell everything you have to get it—right? This one, you have to buy the field so it’s yours. Do you get it? These are all difficult. You’ve got to think about it.

How about this one? What is the dragnet about—all the fishes and other stuff? Anybody go fishing around here? Are you a fisherman? Are you a fisherman? Do you do line fishing? What kind of fishing do you do? Not line fishing—do you do net fishing? What do you do? Line fishing. That won’t help us. Who does net fishing? I bet you don’t do it? Do you fish with a net? Do you? Tell me about it. Okay, well, that’s net fishing. Now when you catch all these fish, what do you do—take and eat all of them? Why? You don’t know why, but you throw some away—don’t you? Or do you throw them all away? If they are dead, you throw them away. That’s good. And if they are living, you might keep a couple—right? Anybody else have another experience of net fishing? Do you fish with a net? No. Did you want to ask something? So net fishing is all about though you get all kinds of stuff, but a lot of it you have to throw away. Well, that’s life too. Not everything in life is worthwhile. You have to be selective. You have to be selective as your net, namely, your life, is pulling through experience. You find things that are really worthwhile, but not everything is. So you have to be judicious. You have to learn how to throw away certain things, let go of certain things, get rid of certain things, because they are not helping you any. They are not going to feed you. They are just junk. If you hold onto every part of life, you are not going to be very happy. You have to learn to let go. There are lots of things you have to let go of, sometimes relationships that aren’t so good. Hurts—hurts you have to let go of because otherwise you will stop growing. You see this? So that’s the dragnet. That’s the story of the dragnet.
I don’t think we will get through all these. I want to talk about the camel. What is this camel about? The eye of the needle. What did Jesus say about the eye of the needle? It is easier for—what, Connor? Easier for a camel to pass through the eye of this needle—can you see how easy that would be? Is it very easy? No, it’s impossible—than what? Than for—what’s the rest of that statement? You don’t remember? John? It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for—Nicole, than for what? Than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom. So sometimes, you know, what we have holds us back. If you think of the camel, it’s kind of big. Sometimes we are kind of big, loaded down with stuff. Well, sometimes you have to let go of the stuff so you can get through the hole. Get it? That’s another parable of the kingdom.

Now, how about this one? This is the one about the dough. What’s that all about? Right, it’s a girl making something, but what’s it all about? William? Well, that’s the idea of the parable, true, but how does it work? This is about dough. Anybody make bread around here? You do? You make bread? You buy bread at the store—that’s what I thought. Anybody make bread? You make bread? Okay, tell me about it. Do you use yeast in your bread, or do you just let it sit on the counter until it gets sour? Do you make sourdough bread or do you make yeast bread? Yeast bread! So how do you do that? Oh, you have a machine—that’s the “hard” way! But preparing the dough is the same. If you want dough to rise, you have to have something in it. Either the natural enzymes have to sour, which is sourdough bread, or you have to add something that makes it move, an enzyme, which is called “yeast,” to make it rise. Right? Well, Jesus used that expression. How does that affect the kingdom? Why does Jesus talk about making dough and making bread? How does that relate to being part of the kingdom, Ryan? Matthew? Think! Dough rising slowly. Michael? It grows slowly and invisibly.

So in a similar way you are invisible in the world. Nobody knows you. Peter, maybe, when he is making a touchdown, but the rest of us, nobody ever notices us. You see? That’s life. We go by life; nobody even pays attention. That doesn’t mean you will not have a big impact. Nobody pays any attention to yeast in dough either, but it has a great impact as it grows from within. You see, you are inside the world, not to be a big splash, not to make a name for yourself; but you are in the world to be an influence from inside, to raise it up, to bring it life from inside. You can do that only because you are baptized in Christ.

Now all of these things are things I bring up today because we are talking about Thanksgiving. Sometimes when we talk about Thanksgiving we talk about all the things we have. Well, that could be dangerous! The things we have are maybe not what we should be so grateful for—maybe, just maybe; maybe we have too many things, like the camel. So you have to keep in mind the camel. It’s good if we have resources and we put them all to the searching for that pearl, buying the pearl, or buying the land that has the treasure.

But, ultimately, what’s great about life and what we need to be grateful for is the opportunity to become God, to enter into and to become one with God! That is something so stupendous that people don’t even talk about it, even if they believe in it.
What do you think we go up to the altar and receive the body and blood of Christ for? Because that shows we are one with God and one in a way that we become part of him and he becomes part of us, although the word “part” is the wrong word. We are united with God. Every one of you is an image and likeness of God, and that’s something you should be grateful for. God did not necessarily decide that you have blue eyes instead of brown eyes. God did not necessarily decide that you have black hair rather than red hair. God did not necessarily decide that you have white skin rather than dark skin. Those are incidentals. But God did determine who you are in his mind. You all have a name in his mind, and you are special to him. That’s the first thing you should be grateful for, that you have been born as a special creation of God, and we believe that every single person is a special creation of God. So maybe part of our nature evolved from other sources, but our essence is a direct creation of God. Our soul is a direct creation of God. Who we are, our identity, is a direct creation of God and a participation in God, an image of God—nothing less! So this is the first thing to be grateful for, that we are actually called into this terrific life.

The second thing to be grateful for, which you are going to think is really weird, is all the problems you have. You ought to think about how all the problems you have are a blessing. All the problems you have are a blessing because every single problem you have is an opportunity for God to enter into your life in a deeper way. You get out of the way; God gets in the way. That’s what St. John the Baptist said, “I decrease and Christ increases.” So every time you have a problem, every time someone hurts your feelings, every time you have a real issue that you feel you can’t manage, that’s perfect—perfect! Now get out of the way and let God get in there. See, it’s an opportunity. So much so that even when people hurt your feelings, you ought to be grateful to them, even though that might sound a little bit odd—and I know it does—I mean, I’m not stupid! But it’s an opportunity for you to learn about what love really is. Love isn’t really about loving people who love you. Love is about loving people who don’t love you, and when you do that, you are just like God because that’s what God does. God doesn’t just love people who love him—then he wouldn’t be God! You see? Now it might seem, oh, gee, that’s awfully hard. Well, yes, there are moments. I think your teachers will agree—there are moments in life that are very difficult! But in the long run we thank God for them too. That’s how we grow. So, it’s a wonderful life!

Now I’m very grateful myself because I have a ministry in the Church where I am allowed to become close to many people and serve them in the name of Christ. It may seem that I don’t get anything out of it. Well, in one sense I don’t, but in another sense I do! I get a lot out of it because I see people grow in their humanity, grow in their likeness to Christ. Just the other day someone said, “Oh, I want to thank you for helping our family five years ago. You really helped our family very much. We don’t ever forget you.” That’s something I’m grateful for, that I’ve had the opportunity to help people, to touch people—not with my wisdom, but with God’s wisdom; not with my love, but with God’s love. That’s what is really exciting and energizing, and that’s what really is humbling; and that’s what I am really grateful for.

So I want to thank all of you—I want to thank all of you for being parishioners because you are a gift to me. So thank you! And I mean that to all of you, even those of you who really are a little bit of a problem. You are all included in my thanks.
Well, I would like to wish everyone today a very happy Thanksgiving, and I only want to speak for a brief moment. One remark I would like to make is very serious, another a lighter one.

First I would like to say that it is easy when we look back on our lives to see all the great things that have happened and the wonderful experiences and be grateful. But one of the things that the saints teach us is that we need to also look at the very difficult moments in life and be grateful for them. Sometimes that might even seem crazy. But in speaking with many married people, especially when they have been married many years, what they fondly remember and treasure in their hearts is very often the struggles they had—whatever kind: financial, emotional, struggles with children, not being able to have children. Whatever it is often forged them together in a kind of unity that without those struggles they would not have.

We don’t always see this. What the Scripture makes very clear is that God never abandons us. So in our darkest, most dire moment God is in the midst. The reason, of course, why the world is the way it is, is that we have been created to be interdependent, but the world says, no, be independent. We are barraged constantly with this message of independence and “do your own thing” and “have it your way.” Of course, the world can’t work that way. It isn’t created that way. So we create all kinds of ills for ourselves. But when we reach the end of our rope, then we may be ready to accept help from God and from others. Then we realize our interdependence. Then we can open our hearts to the love of God, the mercy of God, and the love and mercy of each
other, as well. This is surely a blessed occasion that needs to be celebrated as well. So that’s my message today.

Then on a lighter note, I want to tell you a story that a priest told, who just passed away at a rich old age—I think, 89. He told this story that he was in a group of elderly folks sitting around the table, and although this may be hard to believe, they were all complaining about something! The first one said, “You know, my hand has such a tremor, I can’t even hold a cup of coffee!” And the next one said, “Well, my cataracts are so bad, I can’t even see my cup of coffee!” And the next one says, “Well, my arthritis is so terrible, I cannot turn my head to the right or the left.” And the next one says, “Well, my arthritis is so terrible, I am under pain medication 24 hours a day.” And the next one said, “Well, my heart medication is so strong, that I am dizzy most of the time.” And a woman spoke up and said, “Oh, but you are all forgetting we really have something to be grateful for, and we mustn’t forget it!” And they all looked at her and said, “What’s that?” She said, “Well, at least we can still all drive!”
“When their buds burst open, you see for yourselves and know that summer is now near; in the same way, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.”

It is one of Jesus’ constant themes that the kingdom of God is near. This means not in the distant future.

Now human beings have various tendencies because of their own personal traits. Some people tend to be living all the time in the future. They always think about what will happen or what might happen or what they are going to do, so the imagination is very important to them. Their thinking process is very important because they are always planning something, either planning what they are going to do or imagining what might happen to them. There is an enormous amount of literature that is written along these lines: science fiction, all kinds of things. All right, that is one kind of person.

Another kind of person is very much more dominated by their feelings or emotions, and they are more interested in the past: what happened for the better or for worse. They cling to the good memories of the past, and then they constantly relive all the traumas of the past.

Still others live in the present, but in a mindless sort of way, in a sensual way, enjoying every moment or suffering every moment, but not really living beyond the moment.

Jesus was trying to tell people that all these are three mistakes that constantly are being made. It is a mistake to live in the past, and he would not be happy with people
who have turned him into an historical fact. **He did not want to be an historical fact**
that people simply talk about or think about as something that happened in the past.

Jesus was trying to bring people into the present: realize what God is doing right now. On
the other hand, Jesus did not want people to live in the future either. Of course, he had a
positive attitude toward what God is planning, and he wanted people to **hope in the**
promise of God, **but not live in the future as opposed to the present**, not live with a
sense of foreboding surely of what was going to come about, nor to be preoccupied by
what I am going to do, but rather to wait upon the coming work of the Lord that is
already near and budding. That’s why he used this image of the budding of the plants, of
the trees.

So we need to live in the present moment, not in a sensual sense, but in an intuitive
sense of recognizing through spiritual insight what God is doing, to recognize the
budding of the kingdom, the presence of God’s work, the fruition of his promises, even in
our own present moment, not thinking that everything important has passed, nor thinking
that everything important is yet to come, but realizing that what is important is the very
moment in which we are living. It is pregnant with the presence of God.
I think this is a perfect time to celebrate a fiftieth anniversary, wedged as it is between Thanksgiving and Advent. In Thanksgiving we look back on our lives and we start to focus on the many blessings that we have received, that indeed we are. In Advent we look forward in anticipation of the greater blessings that God has in store for us in his salvific will. But Advent also brings to mind the Holy Family and their many travails, and I usually try to find a way in which a family celebrating an anniversary reminds me of the Holy Family. So I racked my brain! How do Vince and Mary remind me of the Holy Family? And then it occurred to me—obviously. In all the pictures of the Holy Family, Joseph is always much older than Mary. But, in fact, there are many ways in which we all reflect the life of the Holy Family because they struggled in ways that are hidden, and we all struggle in ways that are hidden.

In the second reading from the Letter to the Romans, John read to us about all the dangers and difficulties that will not prevail for those who have faith. But he named mostly physical things: the sword, famine, earthquake, etc. Those aren’t really the true problems that threaten marriage or family life. The true threats are more internal and secret, having to do with hidden forms of selfishness and rivalry, self-centeredness, independence. These spirits can tear apart family unity. And we all experience them to various degrees. The question is whether we will allow them to rend asunder our unity, or whether we will turn to God in faith and submission and ask for his help in staying together and overcoming our difficulties, in finding harmony and thus peace.
Vince and Mary have had their share of troubles, and they are together because what was most important to them was their love and their commitment, their fidelity and God. This is a very beautiful sign for all of us, and this is why in our Church we say Marriage is a sacrament; that is, it’s a sign of the presence of Christ; it’s a sign of the redeeming love of Christ; it’s a sign of the energy of the Spirit that we all can see and taste. It would be very phony if this sign were somehow too perfect. Then we wouldn’t really see it as a sign. We would see it as an anomaly. It’s a sign because it’s real.

So Mary and Vince, you have been a sign to us and you are a sign to us of the love of God and what it means to be faithful, what it means to be devoted, not only to God, but to each other and to your family. So for this we thank you and we praise the Lord, because it is the Lord who has made it possible.