

# FEBRUARY

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Monday, February 1, 2016

(Lec. 323)

1) 2 Samuel 15:13-14,  
30; 16:5-13

2) Mark 5:1-20

MONDAY OF  
FOURTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Do we speak words of harm or of healing?

Words do have power. Many of us can think of a time when someone said something cruel to us. We may still squirm a little at the sting of them. Many of us also can think of a time when someone said something kind or loving to us. Those words, and the memory of them, are like a warm balm, a sweet fragrance that calms us and enfolds us.

Not long ago, while working with a young couple during their first session of marriage preparation, we were discussing people in their lives who modeled love. The young man shared a story of his teenage years. He was angry at his stepmother and yelled, "I hate you." She stood very still, facing him, and calmly said, "That may be, but I love you and no matter how you feel about me, I always will." This young man learned a valuable lesson, not only about love, but about freedom and personal responsibility for the words he uses.

Just as Abishai, the servant of David, wanted to kill Shimei for cursing the king, the stepmother could have used a sharp tongue and cut this young man down. Instead, she chose to respond to words of harm with words of healing – of love. If we reflect on our daily lives and take inventory of our conversations, we more than likely can think of times when we leveled words of harm instead of healing and love. We probably also can think of times when we used words of healing instead of words of harm. Like King David, we can exercise prudence instead of a swift reactionary response. David chose to look for how God was active in Shimei's verbal exchange. Where is God at work in our verbal exchanges? Are we taking the time to discern and cooperate with God's work through words of love?

Today's Gospel similarly demonstrates the power of words of love. We see this as Jesus, upon entering the territory of the Gerasenes, encounters a man who was possessed by a host of demons. Upon encountering the man, Jesus asks the demons that were possessing him their name. They respond, *Legion is my name. There are many of us.* Jesus orders the demons to leave the man. The man was then healed and freed of the demons that were possessing and oppressing him. The Gospel states, *Then the man went off and began to proclaim in the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him; and all were amazed.* Words of healing and love foster healing and love in others.

Jesus' death on the cross is a supreme word of love. Shortly, we will come forward to receive holy Communion, in which we truly receive Jesus' body, blood, soul and divinity. We are nourished and strengthened by Jesus himself in holy Communion so that we may grow in our love for him, and be strengthened to live our faith more fully, particularly by speaking words of love. Beyond this, the effects of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross are made present as well – namely, forgiveness of sins that we might live out our call as his disciples to foster healing and peace in the world.

Tuesday, February 2, 2016

(Lec. 524)

1) Malachi 3:1-4

2) Hebrews 2:14-18

3) Luke 2:22-40 or 2:22-32

Gospel related: **CCC** 149, 529, 575, 583, 587, 618, 695, 711, 713

**THE PRESENTATION  
OF THE LORD  
-FEAST**

FOCUS: God makes himself present to us through Jesus, restoring right order to our lives and opening our hearts to love God and others.

Today we celebrate the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple in Jerusalem, a feast occurring forty days after Christmas. It concludes the Christmas cycle in the liturgical year. As with Christmas and the Epiphany, it carries the theme of light shining in the darkness and the entrance of God's presence among his people, symbolized by Jerusalem's Temple.

At this point, forty days after Christmas, we turn to prepare for the forty days of Lent. The two seasons urge the practice and attitude of giving – gift-giving during Christmas and almsgiving during Lent.

When we give a present, we make ourselves present to another in a symbol of closeness, friendship and intimacy. It is, therefore, much more than simply a costly bauble or a lovely work of art. Our presence is far more valuable than a material object.

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple by Mary and Joseph carries with it more than the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law. It is God's present to us, the giving of his presence to us in Jesus Christ. God does this out of pure love for us, not because we merited it or earned it, not because it is owed to us. God gives us this gift freely, in order to overcome the separation that resulted from our sin.

Soon we will enter the season of Lent. Here again, our holy mother Church brings the notion of self-gift to our attention, this time through self-sacrifice, caring for others and almsgiving. The idea is not to simply toss a few dollars toward the poor and then be done with them. Certainly that was not the idea at Christmas either. We don't give presents simply to discharge our duty, or relieve ourselves of an obligation, or quiet our conscience by exchanging something of equal value. Both at Christmas, and now, our Church asks everything of us – total gift, complete love, the giving of our presence to others.

Our Lenten practices of prayer, penance and almsgiving are rooted in the notion that we are estranged from God and others. Sin is another word for separation, alienation and estrangement. It means we are torn away and distant from each other. We feel out of touch with what really matters in life – out of touch with our faith, and distant from God.

Almsgiving, penance and prayer attack the roots of our estrangement and isolation on two different fronts. First, they allow us to respond to God our Father, who comes to us in Christ. Along with Simeon in the Temple, we can take him into our arms and exult that the long, terrible darkness of estrangement is over.

Second, the practice of almsgiving can help us overcome the feeling that we are out of touch with the world around us. It allows us to stand next to our brothers and sisters who have been victimized by human sin and alienation. To experience hunger during Lent, for instance, allows us to identify with the hungry. To cut back on our spending and simplify our lives allows us to stand with those who have nothing to spend. Our Lenten practices allow us to be present to Christ, who in his own poverty became present to us in our needs.

The only thing that stands in the way, of course, is our pride. We can overcome that obstacle when we admit our needs and our spiritual impoverishment, and confess our sins. Then we are able to become personally present again to God and those around us. That is the gift God offers us on this feast of the Presentation of the Lord.

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Wednesday, February 3, 2016

(Lec. 325)

1) 2 Samuel 24:2, 9-17

2) Mark 6:1-6

WEDNESDAY OF  
FOURTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(Opt. Mem. Saint Blaise,  
Bishop and Martyr;  
Saint Ansgar, Bishop)

Gospel related: **CCC** 500, 699, 2610 **CSDC** 259

FOCUS: Pride makes life more difficult for us and for others. Embrace humility.

A simple definition of humility is to acknowledge that God is God and I am not. A corresponding definition of pride would be acting as if I am God or that God has no effect on my life.

Today's readings provide two clear examples of pride. In the first reading from Samuel, David conducts a census of his people, a prideful expression of his belief that he controls them.

Only after he recognizes his sin and incurs God's punishment does David realize the truth. The people belong to God, not him. They are his flock. David is merely their shepherd.

In the Gospel from Saint Mark, the people of Nazareth presume in their pride to know Jesus' true identity. He is the carpenter who is Mary's son. His relatives are their neighbors. Why should Jesus put himself forward as their teacher?

In the first reading, David shows pride by ignoring God's commands and by choosing to govern according to his liking. In the Gospel, the people of Nazareth refuse to allow God to be God.

And the effects of this pride? Some seventy thousand Israelites die in a three-day plague because of David's sin. The people of Nazareth experience very few of the wonders that Jesus worked in other towns.

Throughout the Bible and in these two readings in particular, God tries to convince us that life will be better for us when we live in humility and abandon our pride.

Granted, the ongoing effects of Adam and Eve's first prideful sin make this difficult for us. But the grace of God that always is present to us and offered to us in special ways in prayer and the sacraments empowers us to embrace this vision of life here and now.

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Thursday, February 4, 2016

(Lec. 326)

1) 1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12

2) Mark 6:7-13

Gospel related: **CCC** 765, 1506, 1511, 1673

THURSDAY OF  
FOURTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: As Jesus sent out the apostles, God commissions each of us to share our faith in community with others.

In today's Gospel, we hear about how Jesus summoned the Twelve and sent them out into the world. The account is not just about something that happened long ago; it also applies to our lives today. God, you see, is sending us.

Jesus sent his apostles out in vulnerability. In today's Gospel, Saint Mark tells us: He instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick – *no food, no sack, no money in their belts*. Jesus was born among us humbly and powerless, in a stable. He died among us, naked and powerless, nailed to a cross. The apostles were to live in that same vulnerability, that poverty of resources, to make it clear to all that their accomplishments are due to God's activity, not theirs. We, like the apostles, must go to those around us in humility, in the simplicity of one such as Saint Francis of Assisi. The only power we have is the power of love. Our message is not ours – it is God's.

All of us together are the body of Christ. That is why the apostles were charged to spend time with those to whom they were sent. They were to live in solidarity with their hosts. Ours is not an imperialistic religion; ours is a religion of offering and sharing. In humility and in solidarity, we offer what our faith has given us.

This requires staying power. Jesus told his apostles to stay with those they met. They were not to go from place to place. They were to remain committed to their mission, committed to those whom they encountered.

As we reach out to others in humility, we need to find strength in our community of faith. We do not belong to a "me and Jesus" religion; we belong to a "we and Jesus" family of faith. I am not saved because I have chosen Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I am saved because Jesus, my Lord and Savior, has chosen me. In baptism, he has given me a name. In confirmation, he has given you and me a purpose and a commission. Like the disciples who were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and sent out into the world, you and I have been filled with that same Holy Spirit. We are sent out into our surrounding world. We are sent to work together and give effective witness to the Gospel by the example of our lives, and, when the opportunity presents itself, to share our faith with others.

Each one of us here in our communion of faith is special to God. We have a divine, God-given purpose. We can bring good news to others.

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Friday, February 5, 2016  
(Lec. 327)  
1) Sirach 47:2-11  
2) Mark 6:14-29

FRIDAY OF  
FOURTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(OBL. MEM. Saint Agatha,  
Virgin and Martyr)

Gospel related: **CCC** 523

FOCUS: Each of us must make the choice over and over again throughout our lives to walk in the way of the Lord.

Today's readings may seem unconnected, and yet they are both stories about kings – one good and the other evil. The Book of Sirach gives a short summary of the life and times of David, the second king of Israel. David's first priority in life was God. Even as a young man facing Goliath, David invoked the power of the Lord. He was a great warrior, a spiritual leader and a passionate man. It is precisely these passions that proved problematic for David to overcome. Despite the grave nature of his sins, however, he was forgiven and he continued to love and worship God throughout his life.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear Mark's account of the death of John the Baptist, which brings another king into the spotlight – Herod, who could rightly be described as David's polar opposite.

Herod, who had married his brother's wife, was *perplexed* by John, *yet he liked to listen to him*. At his birthday party, Herod's stepdaughter danced for the king and his guests. Herod was so pleased, he offered her anything she wanted. On behalf of her mother, who had a score to settle with the prophet, the daughter asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod granted her request. We are left, then, with the tale of two kings and their choices.

Although David sinned grievously on a number of occasions, he repented and was forgiven by the Lord. Upon being forgiven, David then grew in his love for the Lord and became a good ruler and shepherd to the Israelites. These conclusions are based on Scripture and tradition, which both clearly affirm that David was a brave king who sincerely loved God and sought to be his faithful servant.

Herod, on the other hand, could not overcome his pride and a desire to save face before his friends and family, despite his curiosity and interest in the message of John the Baptist.

Like both of these kings we hear about today, we also must choose how we are going to lead our lives. Are we going to walk in God's way of love, or lead our lives according to our selfish and sinful desires?

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Saturday, February 6, 2016  
(Lec. 328)

- 1) 1 Kings 3:4-13
- 2) Mark 6:30-34

SATURDAY OF  
FOURTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(OBL. MEM. Saint Paul Miki  
and Companions, Martyrs)

FOCUS: The example of Jesus teaches us that living as one of his disciples requires placing the needs of others before our own.

Today's readings shine a light on two qualities – the wisdom of Solomon and the compassion of Jesus – which we must always seek if we want to be faithful to God and walk in his ways. In today's reading from the first book of Kings, we hear Solomon recalling the faithfulness of his father, David. Solomon's request to God offers us a wonderful example of what we should ask of God when we turn to him in prayer. Solomon asks for an understanding heart so that he may, in his words, *judge your people to discern between good and evil*. God grants his request.

The Bible tells us that Solomon is one of the wisest men who ever lived. Today, we still speak of and pray for “the wisdom of Solomon.” Let us not forget to ask our Lord for wisdom when we turn to him in prayer – wisdom to help us live more faithfully as disciples of Jesus.

In today's Gospel account, Jesus and his disciples are exhausted. So Jesus leads them to a desert place so they might rest and be rejuvenated to continue on with their mission.

When the crowds find them, however, Jesus is moved with pity because they have no shepherd. He sets aside his intention to go with his disciples to a place of rest, and begins teaching and ministering to the crowds.

The example of Jesus' compassion in today's Gospel makes it clear that, although we need to set aside times of prayer and rest so that we can give our best for the Lord each day, we also must be ever-ready to set our plans and needs aside to tend to the needs of others. Perhaps compassion for us may take the form of visiting a sick friend in the hospital when we had our heart set on a quiet walk in the woods.

Today's Gospel, then, invites reflection on the humanity of Jesus and the unceasing compassion of God. Let us strive every day to be compassionate to others as our God is compassionate toward us, and let us pray, as Solomon did, for *an understanding heart*.

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## SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2016

(Lec. 75)

- 1) Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8
  - 2) 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 or 15:3-8, 11
  - 3) Luke 5:1-11
- Gospel related: **CCC 208**

## FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

**FOCUS:** Christianity demands that we make a leap of faith, letting go of the security of this life and placing our lives totally into the hands of Jesus.

Every now and then the circus comes to town. One of the most amazing acts is always the trapeze artists. Beyond the timing, courage and physical strength of these artists, it's hard not to contemplate the deep confidence and trust they have in one another that allows them to abandon one swinging bar to cling to another person.

The same courage, strength and trust it takes for a trapeze artist to let go of that first bar is required of a Christian. Christians must abandon the secure things of this world and, with total trust, reach out and unite their lives to Jesus.

The disciples display this type of trust in today's Gospel. After fishing all night and being frustrated because they caught nothing, they wash their nets and are ready to go home. At the word of the passing preacher, Jesus, they lower their nets again. After the miraculous catch, they are called to abandon it all – family, livelihood and the catch of fish – to follow him. They let go of their secure lives and follow Jesus.

We see the same courage, strength and trust of a trapeze artist in Saint Paul. He abandons his staunch persecution of the Church and his Pharisaic ways. He becomes not only a Christian, but the boldest preacher of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

How did the disciples find that courage? For them, it was not a leap of faith into thin air. It was a leap of faith toward Jesus' outstretched hand. These disciples put their faith in Jesus. If we are going to make this same leap of faith, we must know Jesus, believe in him and place our trust in him. Like the disciples, we must place our lives into his hands.

Faith enables us to let go. We have to let go of our doubts so as to believe. We have to let go of the need to control life and give it to God. We have to let go of our sins and grab onto God's mercy. We have to abandon feelings of unworthiness and let God purify us through his mercy. We must leave behind anything that holds us back, do the best that we can, and then put our lives into the hands of God.

Monday, February 8, 2016

(Lec. 329)

1) 1 Kings 8:1-7, 9-13

2) Mark 6:53-56

MONDAY OF

FIFTH WEEK

IN ORDINARY TIME

(Opt. Mem.)

Saint Jerome Emiliani;

Saint Josephine Bakhita, Virgin)

Gospel related: **CCC** 1504

FOCUS: In God's kingdom, power is used to serve, and the only glory to be sought is that of giving glory to God.

The glory of God is evident in today's first reading. In a dramatic way, God makes his almighty presence known. The Israelites knew that God alone deserves to be glorified.

The glory of God also is evident in the healings we heard about in today's Gospel. Jesus uses his divine power to heal those in need.

These healings are a sign of God's kingdom – a kingdom unlike that of Solomon. In today's readings, we witness the kingdom, the power and the glory that belong properly to God the Holy Spirit, God the Son and God the Father.

Soon we will pray the Our Father. We'll recite it together shortly before we receive Jesus in holy Communion. When we say the Lord's Prayer, let's recall the readings we have just heard proclaimed. Call to mind the glory that was manifest in our first reading. Remember the power that Jesus showed in today's Gospel. Ask God for the strength to be diligent in our efforts to help build up his kingdom on earth, understanding that its fulfillment will occur in God's time, and when Jesus returns in glory.

The people in today's reading from Mark's Gospel were described as longing to touch the tassel of Jesus' cloak. Just to brush up against his clothing is enough for them. They're confident in his power to heal them. Do we sometimes wish we had that type of access to Jesus' cloak?

We have access to Jesus which the people of his day could not have imagined. We can unite ourselves to Jesus in holy Communion. We can receive the special graces he gives us in this most holy sacrament. While beholding his glory – his body, blood, soul and divinity – we can accept the power he offers us to resist temptation, to love our neighbor, to help build up God's kingdom on earth. Sometimes it's easy to take for granted the treasure we have in the Eucharist. We get distracted, let our minds wander toward the busyness of life. Today, when approaching the altar, take a moment to thank Jesus for the glorious gift of himself.

Tuesday, February 9, 2016

(Lec. 330)

1) 1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30

2) Mark 7:1-13

Gospel related: **CCC** 581, 2196, 2218, 2247

TUESDAY OF  
FIFTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

**FOCUS:** We are called to keep the traditions of our faith out of a sincere desire to grow in our knowledge and love for the Lord.

In today's Gospel, the Pharisees ask Jesus why his disciples don't observe the traditional ritual cleansing before they eat. Rather than answer their question, Jesus chastises them for their hypocrisy. He tells them that they neglect the commandments of God in favor of human tradition. He goes on to accuse them of using that tradition for their own benefit rather than for the glory of God.

It's easy to fall into that trap. We all do it from time to time. After all, it's much easier to go through the motions of our faith and check our religious "duties" off our spiritual checklist than it is to focus on the challenge of living as a disciple of Christ each and every day. Today's Gospel reminds us of the danger that checklist can pose to our soul.

When we fall into the habits of faith without growing in holiness, we can become a kind of "spiritual robot," who does the right things without any real emotional commitment. Perhaps we've fallen into that mindset because of the distractions of life. Perhaps we've put up a wall between us and God to protect ourselves from the vulnerability an intimate relationship with God would require. Perhaps we're mad at God and don't have the courage to admit it.

Regardless of the reason, we are not called to be people who go through the motions with regard to our faith, but to be people who are lovers of Christ. And a lover does not remain at a distance. A lover is so fully consumed with love that they can't remain separate from the one they love. Our challenge is to let our love for Christ fully consume us so that we will never be separate from him. If we use the traditions of our faith to bring us closer to Christ and to grow in love for him, then we are living like the disciples of Jesus. If we don't, we fall into the trap of merely spinning our wheels and close ourselves off from the graces and blessings that come from living as true and authentic disciples of Jesus.

Wednesday, February 10, 2016

**ASH WEDNESDAY**

(Lec. 219)

1) Joel 2:12-18

2) 2 Corinthians 5:20—6:2

3) Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Gospel related: **CCC** 575, 1063, 1430, 1434, 1693, 1753, 1969, 2447, 2608, 2655, 2691, 2792

**FOCUS:** Today we begin the season of Lent, a time in which we try to unite ourselves more closely to the Lord Jesus Christ as we journey toward his passion, death and resurrection.

Just now we heard the Old Testament prophet Joel proclaim:

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; proclaim a fast; call an assembly; gather the people. Notify the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, and the infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom quit his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, "Spare, O Lord, your people, and make not your heritage a reproach, with the nations ruling over them! Why should they say among the peoples, "Where is their God?"*

Down through our human history, this call to inner conversion has been heard time and again. It means taking the path of a conversion that is neither superficial nor transient, but a spiritual journey that reaches the deepest place of our self. The heart, in fact, is the seat of our sentiments, the center from which our decisions and our attitudes mature. "Return to me with all your heart" is the summons. As we all know so well, that is a challenge. Upon what are our hearts set?

This is repeated in the message of today's Gospel. Jesus rereads the three works of mercy prescribed by the Mosaic law: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Over time, these prescriptions have been disfigured by the rust of external formalism, or even morphed into a sign of spiritual superiority. Jesus highlights the antidotes to our common temptations in the three works of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Jesus invites us to do these works without ostentation, and to trust only in the reward of the Father, *who sees in secret*.

Keep in mind today and throughout Lent that the Lord never ceases to have mercy on us, and desires to offer us his forgiveness yet again, inviting us to return to him with a new heart, purified from evil, to take part in his resurrected joy.

With this awareness, let us again begin our Lenten journey. May our mother, Mary, sustain us and strengthen us in our spiritual battle against sin and accompany us in this holy time, so that we might come together to celebrate Christ's resurrection at the Easter Vigil.

In a few moments, you will receive ashes on your forehead and hear the words: *You are dust and to dust you shall return* (Gen 3:19) or, repeating Jesus' exhortation: *Repent and believe in the Gospel* (Mk 1:15). Both statements remind us of the truth of human existence: We are limited creatures, sinners ever in need of repentance and conversion. How important it is to listen and to welcome this reminder in our time! The call to conversion is a push to return to the arms of God, our tender and merciful Father. In doing so, let us trust him and entrust ourselves to him in our daily decisions and actions.

Thursday, February 11, 2016

(Lec. 220)

1) Deuteronomy 30:15-20

2) Luke 9:22-25

Gospel related: **CCC** 1435

THURSDAY AFTER

ASH WEDNESDAY

(Opt. Mem. Our Lady  
of Lourdes)

FOCUS: We are called to follow Christ in freedom and in love.

We live in a world where best-selling authors and self-help “gurus” promise us happiness and success – if only we follow their secrets on how to influence others, get what we want, negotiate successfully; in other words, get others to bend to our will. It is striking, then, to see how God deals with us. He alone has true authority over us, but, in his graciousness, has given us free will. Out of love for us, he allows us to use this gift with incredible freedom – even to make choices that may separate us from him forever.

In the readings today, God invites us to follow him, to obey his law, to take up our cross. He calls us to conversion, but as an invitation, not a command. He allows us to make the decision. As we move through Lent to the glory and joy of Easter, we must pass through Good Friday; we must encounter the cross. We are faced, then, with a choice. Do we take up our cross in order to follow Jesus, or do we back away? In the time of Christ, the cross symbolized shame and disgrace, and it still can arouse a sense of revulsion in us today. Who wants to carry a cross? But there is no other way. Christ did not arbitrarily choose to put the cross in our path. He simply stated a truth – that anyone who follows him will experience what he experienced.

During Lent, many churches pray the Stations of the Cross. Reflect on how the crowd reacted to Jesus as he made his way to Calvary. He was mocked and abused. The same crowd that praised him on Palm Sunday treated him as an object of contempt. If we decide to follow Christ, the “crowd” today will treat us in the same way. Living as a disciple of Christ often means that we must reject the easy or popular way. We are called to love God and love our neighbor, which means denying our selfishness and popular notions of happiness and success. Instead of viewing the cross as a punishment, we should imitate our Savior and embrace it with love.

Friday, February 12, 2016  
(Lec. 221)

FRIDAY AFTER  
ASH WEDNESDAY

- 1) Isaiah 58:1-9a
- 2) Matthew 9:14-15

FOCUS: In our bridegroom's absence, we must fast with sincere, loving hearts.

Lent is an important time of the year for us because it focuses on two vital aspects of our inner faith lives, repentance and renewal. A greater emphasis is placed on prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Since many of us pray and give at other times during the year, fasting is probably the most noticeable change we are asked to make during Lent. Fasting can be a powerful spiritual exercise and a way to express our repentance. Today's readings teach us how to fast in ways acceptable to God, and tell us when it is appropriate.

In our reading from Isaiah, the Lord's people fast, but they lack sincerity. Their fast ends in quarrelling and treating each other badly. This is not what God wants. Instead, he tells them to help those who face injustice and oppression, give bread to the hungry, give shelter to the oppressed and homeless, and clothe the naked. *This, he says, is the fasting that I wish.*

In the first letter of Peter, we learn that love, expressed through the charity and mercy we extend to others, covers a *multitude of sins* (4:8). And as our first reading today points out, this is how our *light shall break forth like the dawn* and our wounds *shall quickly be healed*.

In today's Gospel, followers of John the Baptist question Jesus about why he and his disciples do not fast. Jesus answers that just as wedding guests wouldn't mourn while a bridegroom is with them, his disciples shouldn't mourn while he is in their presence. When the bridegroom is taken away, then they will fast. We are now in the period when Jesus is not visibly present to us, and so we fast.

Jesus' words are powerful. They express his intimate relationship with the Church – a bridegroom, who loves us as his bride. His wisdom echoes a passage from Ecclesiastes (3:14): *There is an appointed time for everything ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.* We fast as we mourn Christ's passion, and we will dance at his resurrection. Now, let us recall the paschal mystery as we prepare to celebrate the Eucharist.

Saturday, February 13, 2016  
(Lec. 222)

1) Isaiah 58:9b-14

2) Luke 5:27-32

Gospel related: **CCC 588**

SATURDAY AFTER  
ASH WEDNESDAY

**FOCUS:** We are called to drop everything and follow Jesus – to be repentant sinners seeking to do God's will.

What would possess Levi, in today's Gospel, to leave behind his tax collecting and follow Jesus? His position gave him financial means that others did not have. At the same time, however, tax collectors were greatly resented by their fellow citizens. I imagine that Levi knew he was a sinner. I imagine he was not self-righteous.

Jesus said he came for sinners, for people who knew they needed saving. But not everyone is open to Jesus' call. And why not? Some of us feel so unworthy that we can't believe God would love us, while others among us feel so proud of our own righteousness that we don't realize we need saving.

Jesus calls us, each of us. There is a bit of Levi in all of us. We may not be tax collectors, performing a public function that others resent. But we have what Saint Paul calls a thorn in the flesh, reminding us that we are weak and we need forgiveness.

In our reading from the prophet Isaiah, we are reminded to be obedient, and have a humble disposition.

His message calls us to place our neighbor and our God above our own interests. The Ten Commandments are structured around love of God and neighbor. The first three commandments tell us to keep holy the Sabbath, to not use God's name in vain, to have no other God but the Lord. The other seven commandments concern our relationship to others, beginning with our parents and extending to our neighbor. In the Gospel, Jesus sums up the law by telling us to love God and to love others.

This takes humility. If I know I am poor in spirit, then I will be able to identify with the poor and feed them. If I know that I am a sinner in need of forgiveness, I always will hold God who has forgiven me in high regard.

Let us pray for the humility to place the needs of others before our own. Let us pray also that we keep holy the Lord's Day by giving our best to him each day and following his will rather than our own.

## SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2016

(Lec. 24)

1) Deuteronomy 26:4-10

2) Romans 10:8-13

3) Luke 4:1-13

Gospel related: **CCC** 538, 695, 2096, 2119, 2855 **CSDC** 175, 379

## FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

FOCUS: *You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve.*

Even Jesus was tempted to sin. Sometimes it is easy to think of Jesus as being so pure and innocent that he was detached from the possibility of sin – but we remember that he is fully human, in all things but sin. In the desert, Jesus was just as human as the rest of us. He was tempted by bodily desires. He was tempted by power. He was tempted by the desire to amaze others.

If Jesus wanted to turn a stone into bread, he could have. Jesus turned water into wine to help friends celebrate a marriage – but he did not use this power to satisfy himself.

Jesus is certainly entitled to hold power over all the nations of the earth – and how we wish he would! Yet he empowers us to choose to honor him. Jesus does not force our devotion through power or amazement – he honors our freedom. During Holy Week, we will read the Passion narrative, where Jesus reminds Pontius Pilate that his power comes from God. He honors our freedom to the point of accepting torture and death on a cross.

So what does this story have to do with us, especially on this first Sunday of Lent? Often, our temptations stem from sin and selfishness manifested in a sense of entitlement. We feel entitled to rich food and other bodily pleasures, and we often have the means to get what we want. Yet during Lent, we are called to fast and abstain. Even when it is not Lent, we are called at least to moderation. Beyond that, we can follow Jesus and use our gifts to satisfy the needs of others for food, safe water, basic health care and shelter. We, too, can move from entitlement to moderation, and then to service.

In our families and workplaces, we often feel entitled to force our opinions, beliefs, and way of doing things onto others. We may “know better” than our children or spouses, our coworkers or employees. Yet how often does this sense of entitlement cause a strain on marriages and relationships with children when we give orders instead of loving suggestions? When we impinge on the freedom of others, we can become like dictators who are served, not loved. We are called to let go of a sense of entitlement so we may give of ourselves more generously in service to others, and so that others can be free to share their gifts and talents as well.

In this first week of Lent, let us examine how our personal lives and relationships might be colored by a sense of entitlement. When we identify those temptations, we can ask God to help us offer to others what we ourselves desire.



Monday, February 15, 2016

(Lec. 224)

1) Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18

2) Matthew 25:31-46

Gospel related: **CCC** 331, 544, 598, 671, 678, 679, 1033, 1034, 1038, 1373, 1397, 1503, 1825, 1932, 2443, 2447, 2449, 2463, 2831 **CSDC** 57, 58, 183, 265, 403

MONDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: Living as a disciple of Jesus requires that we sincerely love and care for our neighbor, especially the least of those in our midst.

In our reading from Leviticus, we hear God's instructions to the Israelites regarding their relationships with others. These instructions were given through Moses during the people's forty years of wandering in the desert. God provided the Israelites with a vision for life that would guide them in the years ahead, so that on entering the promised land, they might live in love and unity with God and one another, and be a source of blessing to the world.

These instructions are summed up by the commandment, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. Imagine a community where this commandment is held in the highest regard and practiced with the greatest care. This is God's vision for human relations.

The commandment to love your neighbor as yourself comes from the mind and heart of God. Self-giving love is the essence of God, since he is a communion of three persons: Father, Son and Spirit. Following the instructions and commands of God with regard to love of neighbor is one important way in which we imitate God and share his love with others. Indeed, at the beginning of today's reading, God tells Moses to tell the people, *Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy*.

Loving our neighbor is not only an important way for us to imitate God and demonstrate our faith and love for him. It is also an essential element of living as a disciple of Jesus – a fundamental criterion Jesus will use to determine whether we are found worthy to enter eternal life in heaven. This reality is made clear in today's Gospel, with Jesus speaking of the sheep and the goats. He explains that those who genuinely and sincerely strive to love and care for others – especially the least in their midst – will be judged worthy of coming to share eternal life in heaven. Those who don't exercise love and care for their neighbor, especially the least in their midst, face the prospect of eternal condemnation and separation from God.

May we strive this day and every day to pour ourselves out in love and service to our neighbor, so that we might imitate God, show forth our faith and love for God, know the blessings that come from living in love and unity with God and loving others, and ultimately one day come to enjoy perfect happiness in heaven.

Tuesday, February 16, 2016

(Lec. 225)

1) Isaiah 55:10-11

2) Matthew 6:7-15

Gospel related: **CCC** 268, 443, 1165, 1969, 2608, 2632, 2659, 2668, 2736, 2759, 2776, 2792, 2841, 2845 **CSDC** 492

TUESDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: The *Our Father* is one of the few prayers that speaks universally to all of humankind.

Today's Gospel reading from Saint Matthew includes one of the most well-loved, well-known prayers of all time. It is recited with only minor variations in liturgies and in private by every Christian, no matter their denomination. The prayer is familiar to all who call themselves Christians, and even to many who make no such claim.

Why is that? So many people in our Catholic Church have devoted their lives to working for the restoration of Christian unity – and many Protestants as well. Even non-Christians participate to some degree in this search for unity, poring over spiritual nuances, theological details, to find points of common accord. Yet it is here within the lines of the Lord's Prayer, so familiar to all, that we come closest to actual unity. Why?

Much attention has been given to the phrase *Our Father*, which signifies *all* of us – believers and non-believers alike. God is the Father of the most hard-core atheist as much as the most devout Christian. We could stop right there in our search for an explanation of the universality of the Lord's Prayer. But let's go a little further, to the words that follow "Our Father." What do these words say by *not* saying something else?

"Who art in Heaven" means that we're not addressing our earthly fathers, but another Father, who is supreme over us and over our earthly fathers as well, the Father of us all. "Thy kingdom come" – not mine, not my family's, not my country's or my political party's idea of the kingdom. "Thy will be done" – not mine, not ours or theirs. "...on earth as it is in heaven." This last part may be the most important, for this is where we acknowledge that the Father's will is *not* being done here on earth. Thus we should be united in seeking to do our Father's will. That may be the main reason the *Our Father* is one of the most universal and beloved of all prayers.

Wednesday, February 17, 2016

(Lec. 226)

1) Jonah 3:1-10

2) Luke 11:29-32

WEDNESDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK OF LENT  
(Opt. Mem. The Seven  
Holy Founders  
of the Servite Order)

FOCUS: Every day, we are given signs of God's presence.

During World War II, Irena Sendler, along with several other Polish women, were determined to help their Jewish neighbors survive the Warsaw ghettos. With great risk to themselves, they removed twenty-five hundred Jewish children from the ghettos and kept them in their homes until the children were placed in orphanages. One woman asked Irena to guarantee her child's safety; otherwise, she would not let her child go. Irena told her that she would love to promise that her child would survive, but that was impossible. So many variables existed and a small mistake could tip off the Nazis.

Give me a sign. Signs and guarantees go hand in hand. We ask for signs to guarantee that we are going in the right direction. If we are aware of our surroundings, however, then we don't need to ask for additional signs to find our way. As in the case of the mother in the story, the signs indicated that staying in the ghetto would not be life-giving to her child. The mother could see that people were starving to death on the streets. It did not take long for those left in the ghetto to understand what being "relocated" really meant, as well. For that mother, it would take blind faith and raw courage to let her child go.

In today's Gospel, God asks us for the same thing. We have been given all the signs we need. Do we have the courage to trust that God has the best in store for us? Do we have the faith to believe that God is with us, even when things go wrong? God asks us, as he asked the people of Nineveh, to repent and be saved. The people of Nineveh heard and repented. Will we?

Jesus healed people of their physical ailments and their sins, thereby freeing them. He continues to call us to repentance, healing and freeing us. Jesus asks us to love everyone. He brings us life. *These* are our signs. Miracles are nice, but if we are conscious each day, we will see the signs of God's saving power all around us.

Thursday, February 18, 2016  
(Lec. 227)

THURSDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

- 1) Esther C:12, 14-16, 23-25
- 2) Matthew 7:7-12

Gospel related: **CCC** 1789, 1970, 2609, 2821 **CSDC** 20

FOCUS: Our relationship with God is built up by prayer.

In this Lenten season, we look to deepen our relationship with God – to realize that everything we have springs from God's goodness. During this season, we may choose to make a sacrifice or attend weekday Masses. We also need to use this season to deepen our relationship with God, taking time to be with him at church and at home. We can pray more, read more Scripture, attend Mass – anything that allows us to talk to God and, perhaps more importantly, hear God talking to us.

Today Jesus tells us to ask, to seek and to knock at the door, so when it opens we can find what God has in mind for us. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus encourages us to pray – to look to God in all things.

The last line of today's Gospel gives us some "food for thought." The Golden Rule is given to us by Jesus as a guide to how we should treat others. Relationships are reciprocal. Our relationship with God is reciprocal in a sense. If we want God to grant us what we need, we have to approach him in prayer. Without prayer, there is no relationship with God. We need to treat God in the same way we want God to treat us. Speak his name with reverence. Keep his commandments. Be willing to sacrifice something for others. This is the highest law that Jesus gives us. May we continue to grow in our relationship with Jesus during this Lenten season, so we may be prepared to share in the joy of Easter.

Friday, February 19, 2016

(Lec. 228)

1) Ezekiel 18:21-28

2) Matthew 5:20-26

Gospel related: **CCC** 678, 1034, 1424, 2054, 2257, 2262, 2302, 2608, 2792, 2841, 2845

FRIDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: Today's disciples of Jesus are ready to seek and offer forgiveness.

We have heard the old adage, "Let bygones be bygones." A loose translation might be, "don't hold onto your hurts from the past; live in the present and open your heart to all the goodness it holds."

Sounds like good advice, right? For today's disciple of Jesus, however, even more is expected. In the Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples: *If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother.* It is so important for the disciples to both seek and give forgiveness that they must do so even before sharing in prayer or worship.

Of course, it is not easy to admit a mistake or let go of how we have been hurt. When we have hurt another, our minds want to blame the other person. We tell ourselves that we would not have reacted the way we did if the other person had not provoked us. It may make sense, but this is not the way of Jesus.

Likewise, we might take a certain satisfaction from holding onto a hurt, and letting it simmer into a resentment that can create a sense of superiority over another. We might say, "Well, no matter what I have done, at least I'm not like that thoughtless, insensitive person." Again, while understandable, this is not the way of Jesus.

Rather, we are to freely give and freely receive forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean that we forget what we have done or what has been done to us, but that we refuse to allow past mistakes and hurts to define us. Through forgiveness, the power of the past is diminished as the promise of the present unfolds.

And where do we always find God? We find God in the "now," in the present moment. Lent offers us this challenge: to look into our hearts, even before we worship or pray, and discern if any unspoken apology needs to be expressed. Similarly, determine if any resentments are buried in our hearts. If so, in the now of Lent, we are asked to let go of them, freeing others and ourselves from such burdens.

To be forgiving, to seek forgiveness ... this is the path of peace. And where there is peace, there is God.

Saturday, February 20, 2016

(Lec. 229)

1) Deuteronomy 26:16-19

2) Matthew 5:43-48

Gospel related: **CCC** 443, 1693, 1825, 1933, 1968, 2013, 2054, 2262, 2303, 2608, 2828, 2842, 2844 **CSDC** 40

SATURDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: The teaching and example of Jesus reveal to us the fullness of what true and authentic love of God and neighbor entails.

Today, as we continue our Lenten journey, the teachings of Moses and Jesus guide us in what is necessary to walk in the ways of the Lord. In the first reading, we hear Moses calling on the Israelites to walk in the Lord's ways, to observe God's law and to listen to God's voice. While some might see the law as a simple list of dos and don'ts, Moses goes beyond that. He calls on the Israelites to listen in order to let God direct them in their daily lives, as they make small decisions and act on them. If they listen to God and follow in his ways, Moses promises that God will lift them up as an example to be praised by all nations. The Israelites were called – as we are called – to glorify God with their lives.

Loving our neighbor is one of the primary ways that Jesus teaches us to give glory to God and shine as a light before others, and help build up God's kingdom on earth. And as Jesus' example and teachings make clear, this is no easy task. It involves treating everyone we meet with kindness and respect, caring for the least in our midst and, as we hear in today's Gospel, loving one's enemy. A tall order to say the least. Clearly, Jesus wants more from us than simply loving those who love us. Although it is not easy, with the help of God's grace, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and with firm resolve, we can make daily progress in growing in our love for God, and in our ability to live out the different ways the Lord calls us to love and serve our neighbor.

My sisters and brothers, as we complete the first full week of Lent, let us walk in the ways of the Lord and listen to his voice. More specifically, let us take the time to listen and ask God what we might need to do in the weeks ahead to grow in our love for him and our ability to love and serve others.

## SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2016

(Lec. 27)

1) Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18

2) Philippians 3:17—4:1 or 3:20—4:1

3) Luke 9:28b-36

Gospel related: CCC 516, 554, 556, 659, 697, 1151, 2600, 2583

## SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

FOCUS: If we want to be transformed by Christ, we must be willing to pay the price.

We live in a time when excellence and perfection are much sought after when it comes to the things of this world, but can be ignored when it comes to our spiritual lives. For example, it is a great American goal to have a perfect body. But how many of those physically gorgeous people do you see every day?

The pursuit of perfection is likewise true with regard to our intellectual faculties. Getting an excellent education is quite laudable. Academic achievement comes at a high cost. But what of *moral* perfection – *moral* excellence? If our humanity is to be transfigured, and if Christ's transfiguration is an icon of that goal, then what do we need to do?

We find a great deal of conflict in this area. What sort of values are presented to our children? What images are put in front of their eyes? We are surrounded by people who seem to lack a moral compass.

Consider the main characters in today's Gospel account of the Transfiguration. Moses was engaged in a tremendous struggle to free his people from a pleasure principle. God brought them out of slavery in Egypt and gave them freedom. But they didn't want to carry the weight of freedom with all its burdensome moral choices. So they rebelled and wanted to return to the fleshpots of Egypt. They would have to live in slavery, but at least they would be more comfortable than they were out there in the desert. The freedom and life God wanted to give them was simply too costly, they felt.

Self-sacrifice and discipline are the price we pay for creativity, personal growth and transformation. The greatest of our artists, poets, musicians and moral leaders give testimony to that fact.

We increase our intellectual capacities only through self-sacrifice – times of study and difficult exams. Should we expect otherwise when it comes to moral and spiritual growth? Yet, we treat morality as if it should come naturally.

And if acting morally causes us great discomfort, embarrassment or even pain? Well, we sometimes opt for a quick fix that doesn't cost us anything when it comes to time and commitment of our energy.

The Transfiguration is meaningless if we do not understand the context: Jesus was about to suffer and die in order to release God's transforming power unto humanity. The whole of Christ's life is meaningless unless it points to the meaning of suffering. Of all the great founders of religions, only Jesus Christ enters into suffering, loss, pain and even death in order to lead us through it into the resurrection and a higher and better life. Transcendence comes only through death and resurrection. That's the guts of Christianity, a religion that goes way beyond simply being "nice."

As we move through Lent toward Easter, have courage. Make the hard decisions. Move away from merely being comfortable and embrace the cost of discipleship. There will, of course, be many Herods and Pilates to judge you and mock you. But, if you are in Christ, then you must live his life and enter into the cost of growth, transformation and transcendence. History shows us that this upward climb is the only way to achieve nobility, beauty and God-likeness.

It all depends upon what we really want, and the price we are willing to pay for it.



Monday, February 22, 2016

(Lec. 535)

1) 1 Peter 5:1-4

2) Matthew 16:13-19

Gospel related: **CCC** 153, 424, 440, 442, 552, 553, 586, 869, 881, 1444, 1969

**THE CHAIR  
of SAINT PETER  
the APOSTLE – FEAST**

**FOCUS:** The chair is a symbol of a bishop's role as shepherd of his diocese, a role of love and compassion.

Queen Elizabeth II's annual address to Parliament is referred to as the "Speech from the Throne." This is because she sits on the Royal Throne in the House of Commons – the "seat" of her power as the monarch of the United Kingdom. For centuries, thrones and chairs have been a symbol of power and authority.

The Latin word for chair is *cathedra*, used in the Church as a symbol of a bishop's authority as teacher, sanctifier and governor. The chair is located in the bishop's church, called the cathedral. As the bishop of Rome and successor of Saint Peter, the pope's chair is symbolic of his authority over all of the dioceses of the world as the successor of Saint Peter.

As Saint Peter writes in his first letter, this is not a ministry of power and lording over people, but one of a shepherd, a pastor. The bishop of Rome pastors the entire Church with a shepherd's care, just as each individual bishop is called to pastor the people of his diocese. This feast also recognizes the unity that the Church finds in the bishop of Rome.

Pope Francis has frequently remarked that the Church's shepherds must "smell like the sheep." They must be in such close contact with the sheep – the people of God – that they take on their "smell," their presence, their needs, their hopes. He has taken this on himself as a leader of the entire Church. He calls bishops and all church leaders to be like the Good Shepherd, who even lays down his life for his sheep (Jn 10:11).

Tuesday, February 23, 2016

(Lec. 231)

1) Isaiah 1:10, 16-20

2) Matthew 23:1-12

Gospel related: **CCC** 526, 2367

TUESDAY OF

SECOND WEEK OF LENT

(Opt. Mem. Saint Polycarp,

Bishop and Martyr)

**FOCUS:** When we let go of unwarranted pride and false humility, we become free to serve God and serve others.

We heard today's Gospel account end with these words: *The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*

When I was preparing my homily and read those words, my thoughts immediately turned to our Holy Father, Pope Francis.

For he, as the successor to Saint Peter and chief shepherd of the Church, offers us a wonderful example of what it means to lay down one's life day in and day out in humble love and service to others. He doesn't live in the papal apartment at the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican. Rather, he lives in a small suite in a hotel inside Vatican City. When he travels, he forgoes being driven in limousines, choosing vehicles an ordinary person would travel in, such as the small Fiat used during his recent visit to the United States. Pope Francis also makes it a point to spend time with and reach out to those in need by visiting prisons, hospitals and soup kitchens.

Sadly, we can think of many leaders in our world who lose touch with what their lives are to be about, and focus only on seeking power or prestige.

People who exalt themselves and put on airs do so either out of pride, thinking that they do not owe anything to anyone, including God, or out of deeply held personal insecurities. Either way, they close themselves off to God's saving and healing grace, mercy and love.

In his teaching about the Last Judgment, Jesus tells us: *Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the King will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me' (Mt 25: 37-40).*

While on the subject of putting on airs, we should give some attention to its opposite, namely, false humility. They are cut from the same cloth. Both ignore and abuse the gifts that God has given to us. Jesus dealt with false humility when he declared: *Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father (Mt 5:13-16).*

All that we have comes from God. All of the gifts he has given us are not for our own sake but for the sake of others.

If we can be truly humble, free of prideful arrogance and false humility, then we will be free to serve others as God would have us serve them. That is what Pope Francis is telling us, by both his actions and his words.

Wednesday, February 24, 2016

(Lec. 232)

1) Jeremiah 18:8-20

2) Matthew 20:17-28

Gospel related: **CCC** 440, 572, 601, 605, 622, 786, 2235 **CSDC** 379, 193

WEDNESDAY OF  
SECOND WEEK OF LENT

**FOCUS:** The season of Lent is a time for us to reflect upon our sinfulness, and our need for God's grace and mercy, so that we may grow in holiness.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew is repeated almost word for word in the Gospel of Mark. That means it has some importance and significance. But I must say I am a bit puzzled when I think of the event they describe.

In the first part, Jesus tells his disciples they will be going to Jerusalem, where he will be betrayed, turned over to the Roman authorities and crucified. It must have been profoundly shocking to his disciples. Then, like a strange interruption, the mother of the sons of Zebedee comes up to Jesus. Kneeling before him, she asks Jesus to command that her two sons, James and John, may sit one at his right hand and one at his left, in his kingdom.

Two powerful forces seem to be at play here. One is denial; the other is ambition.

Jesus' announcement about what was going to happen must have been a huge shock. Jesus, the Messiah, soon to be put to death? Impossible! Was this mother in total denial? Could be. I never cease to be amazed at how powerful denial can be. How often do we see examples of that phenomenon in the lives of people we know?

The other powerful drive is ambition. Ambition can be irrational, sweeping aside what a person would normally do. Like a powerful narcotic it can control a person's life, destroying all that is decent and good. Was the mother of James and John being governed by an overreaching ambition? Could be.

This leads me to realize once again just how wounded our human nature really is and how deeply we need the power of God in facing life's challenges. We probably need God's power more than we think we do.

Faith and trust in God's love and in his ways is vitally important for us, weakened as we are by the wounds of sin. We also need to commend ourselves to God's love and mercy, and rely upon him to be our strength. When we do this, we can continue to grow in holiness and give ourselves more fully in love and service to God and our neighbor, and one day perhaps be judged worthy of coming to share eternal life in heaven.

Thursday, February 25, 2016

(Lec. 233)

1) Jeremiah 17:5-10

2) Luke 16:19-31

Gospel related: **CCC** 336, 633, 1021, 1859, 2831

THURSDAY OF  
SECOND WEEK  
OF LENT

**FOCUS:** We must use the time we have been given to share the Gospel message before it is too late.

God gives us opportunities to help others with both their physical and spiritual needs. These opportunities are unique to each of us, tailored for our specific circumstances and gifts, but they have a time limit. Perhaps Jesus is inviting us to talk to that man on the corner with his cardboard sign. Maybe it is not money he needs, but a conversation, a home-cooked meal, anything to acknowledge that he is a human being. We cannot be like the rich man who ignored Lazarus at his doorstep. Every day he could have helped him, but other things occupied his time – his job, his family, his possessions. Only when it was too late did he realize his mistake.

More important even than caring for others' physical needs, Jesus wants us to address spiritual needs. After dying, the rich man wanted to reach out to his family, to save them from his fate. It is hard to believe they would not be persuaded by someone who had risen from the dead, but they would not know Lazarus, and could dismiss him as insane. If the rich man had been raised, they would know him, yes, but would they believe him?

We know that we are called to share the Gospel message with others. Jesus wants us to tell others how much he loves them. When we try to share God's love with friends and family, will they see us as alive with the Spirit of God, or spiritually dead? Do our actions reveal the love of God within us? Do we walk the walk, not just talk the talk? Would our friends and family be surprised to see us at daily Mass today? Does the rest of our day reveal that we have been to Mass and received Jesus in the Eucharist? Pondering these types of questions makes it seem as though it probably would not have helped for the rich man to visit his family, because his life did not match his message. He always ignored Lazarus, why would they believe him now?

If we truly love our friends and family, we want them to know God's love and reach heaven, just as the rich man wanted for his family. But our time is short. We do not know when it will be too late to share the Gospel with them. People move in and out of our lives all the time. We need to remember that life is short and eternity is not. Let us share God's love in our actions and words now, before it is too late.

Friday, February 26, 2016

(Lec. 234)

1) Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13a, 17b-28a

2) Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46

Gospel related: **CCC** 443, 755, 756

FRIDAY OF  
SECOND WEEK  
OF LENT

FOCUS: With grace and faith, our capacity for mercy and overcoming adversity is great.

Bad things happen to good people – that’s how a common saying goes. Unfortunate things happen to people who don’t deserve it, often by chance or happenstance, or because of the maliciousness or selfishness of others. In the first reading today, we see Joseph sold into slavery by his jealous brothers; in the Gospel, Jesus foretells his own rejection and death in a parable. He alludes to himself as *the stone that the builders rejected*. By the will and grace of God, though, a lot of good comes out of it.

How do we deal with bad things happening in our lives? How should we respond to mistreatment? We can look to the example of Joseph and Jesus for guidance. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, ends up in Egypt, and eventually lands a job as the king’s chief caretaker. When his brothers journey to Egypt many years later to obtain food during a famine, Joseph has every reason to be angry and to take revenge on them – but he doesn’t. As the second-most powerful leader in Egypt, he could have inflicted vengeance on his brothers. Instead, he treats them with kindness, and saves them and their families from starving.

Likewise, Jesus wishes no ill on the people who crucified him. On the contrary, he asks God the Father to forgive them. Not long before that, one of his disciples – who Jesus had declared the rock upon which he would build his Church – had denied him three times. The rest of the disciples, apart from John, had run off in cowardice and were nowhere to be seen as Jesus hung from the cross. But when the dust settles, following Jesus’ resurrection and his appearance to the disciples, all is forgiven.

Joseph’s forgiveness of his brothers eventually helped lead to the formation of the people of Israel, God’s chosen people. Similarly, Jesus’ forgiveness of the disciples freed them from sin and enabled them to do the work he had called them to – preaching and teaching the Gospel and guiding the Church in carrying on Christ’s saving mission.

In this spirit, Pope Saint John Paul II forgave the man who attempted to assassinate him. In our own lives, family members support and forgive relatives who work to get their lives on track after hurting them through alcoholism, drug use or crime. We see examples of destroyed friendships repaired, marriages on the brink of breakup rebuilt, even the deepest emotional wounds healed. All of this happens through the grace of God, of course. If we let our mercy blossom, like the mercy of Joseph and Jesus did, we are bound to see a great spiritual harvest.

Saturday, February 27, 2016

(Lec. 235)

1) Micah 7:14-15, 18-20

2) Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Gospel related: **CCC** 545, 589, 1423, 1439, 1468, 1700, 2795, 2839

SATURDAY OF  
SECOND WEEK  
OF LENT

FOCUS: We are called to share God's love and forgiveness with others.

A religion teacher was reviewing the parable of the prodigal son with her young students. She asked, "Who was unhappy that the younger son came home?" One thoughtful tyke replied, "The fatted calf." Of course, the expected answer was the older brother. He did not think it fair that his wayward younger brother was forgiven and his return celebrated. The father represents God the Father, who is always ready to forgive us with open arms. As Micah says in the first reading, God casts our sins into the sea. Homilies on this parable usually focus on the love the father has for his sinful son. But parables, like onions, have layers of meaning. Today let's draw a lesson from the angry good son.

Sibling rivalry is common. We find it already in the first family. Cain killed his brother Abel because God preferred Abel's sacrifice. Later, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery because he was his father's favorite. The Gospels recount how two apostles, the brothers James and John, argued about who would have the higher place in heaven. Children are sensitive to a parent's favoritism. They watch to see who gets the bigger piece of cake or the better toy. Adult children are no different. Often family members are estranged after a parent's will is read and one sibling inherits more.

The older son at the return of his brother ought to have rejoiced as much as the father. But he lacked love. An old Jewish story teaches brotherly love. Two brothers were farmers. One brother had ten children; the other had none. The brother with no children felt sorry for his brother who had so many to feed. Each night he loaded wheat on a wagon and took it to his brother's barn. Meanwhile, the other brother felt sorry for his brother who in his old age would have no children to support him. Each night the brother with many children loaded wheat on a wagon and took it to his brother's barn. One night the brothers met midway, realized what was happening, and embraced.

Those of us with one or more siblings should avoid the green-eyed monster, love them in spite of their flaws, and, when necessary, forgive them. All of us have brothers and sisters in the family of God. When one of these repents, even on their deathbed, let's not begrudge them forgiveness but welcome them back. After all, this is what Jesus does whenever a sinner repents and begins to walk in his way of love. Jesus welcomes the sinner back, embracing her with his love and forgiveness, and guides her along the path that leads to eternal life in heaven.

This is why Jesus, in humble obedience to the will of his Father and out of love, freely chose to suffer and die: that we be freed from slavery to sin and death and walk in the light of God. May we continually seek, through our words and actions, to foster healing and reconciliation. And may we rejoice whenever a person repents, places their faith in Jesus and practices his teachings in their lives.

**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2016**

(Lec. 30)

- 1) Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15
- 2) 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12
- 3) Luke 13:1-9

**THIRD SUNDAY  
OF LENT**

**FOCUS:** We are to be open to the many and varied ways that God wants to work in and through us.

Each of us is familiar with at least one – if not several – of what we might call “God moments” in which God reveals himself in sacred Scripture. One of the most well-known was brought to life on the big screen in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments*. We find this profound God moment in today’s first reading from Exodus. Here we read of Moses’ encounter with God speaking to him from a burning bush that was not being consumed by the flames! Wouldn’t we give anything to witness such a profound God moment?

The reality is, my dear friends in Christ, when we witness the birth of a child or that child’s baptism we witness a most profound God moment. When we lovingly prepare a special meal for our family or serve the homeless a warm meal, we witness a most profound God moment.

We must not allow ourselves to think that all the God moments have passed by. These profound holy moments of God’s love intersecting our lives play out every day. We must be attentive. We must not grumble like an unbeliever, rather, we must till the soil and fertilize around the fig tree in hopes it will produce abundant fruit.

Lent is a time of tossing off whatever hinders us from being good fertilizer, that is, from being the nourishment someone in our life needs in order to find their way back to Christ. To do this, it is good to remember those who have been good fertilizer, good pruners, in our own lives. Think of that teacher, pastor, parent, neighbor or grandparent who brought holy moments – God moments – into our lives.

As believers in God’s unconditional love for us, we know all of God’s holy moments have not passed us by. Every time we gather for Mass, we celebrate one of the most profound God moments known to humankind, and are invited to partake in one of the most profound ways that God is present to us.

In this most Blessed Sacrament of holy Communion, Christ who is really and truly present nourishes us with the gift of himself. We come forward to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation, so that we may be drawn closer to him and then share his light and love with others by the witness of our lives.

Let us be open to the many and varied ways that God wants to work in and through us, so that others might experience God’s love for them in and through our actions.

## OPTIONAL HOMILY FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2016

(Lec. 28)

1) Exodus 17:3-7

2) Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

3) John 4:5-42 or 4:5-15, 19b-26, 39a, 40-42

Gospel related: **CCC** 439, 528, 544, 586, 606, 694, 728, 1137, 1179, 1999, 2557, 2560, 2561, 2652, 2611, 2824

FOCUS: Jesus gives us living water so that we will never again thirst.

Here we are at the midway point of our Lenten journey. Now is a good time to review these past three weeks and, if necessary, adjust our direction so that we stay on course with our efforts to fast, pray and give alms, all for the purpose of changing our hearts. Today's Scripture readings are taken from the Cycle A *Lectionary*, for the benefit of our catechumens who will be celebrating the first of three scrutinies today. Each scrutiny offers our catechumens the opportunity to prepare for the Easter sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. With each scrutiny, they will acknowledge their sins and their need for God's healing grace. They also will call on God to strengthen the virtues they already possess. As we pray with them today, we recognize our own strengths and weaknesses and also call on God's healing power.

One of the essential things necessary for a change of heart is found in today's first reading from Exodus: God's unconditional love for us. Having brought the Israelites out of Egypt from slavery to freedom, God continued to remain faithful to their plight in the desert. Here we find them fearful of dying of thirst along with their children and livestock. We may ask "Where is their faith in God?" He brought them out of bondage from the Egyptians. Won't he save them now? Yet, if we were in the same situation, would we be any more trusting than they were? Even when we forget to trust in God, God loves us unconditionally and is ever-willing to forgive. God will save us. God will give us hearts of flesh to replace our hearts of stone. We are invited – like our catechumens today – to admit our sins and our need for God's grace and mercy so we can turn our lives toward God.

Our change of heart is found in the communion of love of the blessed Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. We encounter God's unconditional love for us in the gift of Jesus, his only Son, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Today's passage from the Gospel of Saint John reveals the mystery of Jesus. He is the only begotten Son of God the Father, who offers us living water that wells up to eternal life in heaven.

Understanding this, let us pray today that we may open our hearts more fully to Jesus so he can quench the thirsts of our heart and soul. May that living water well up in us more and more, so that we may grow in holiness, abound in charity, and one day come to share eternal life in heaven. Jesus is the life-giving water that brings eternal life to those who thirst for him.



NOTE: The following readings may be used on any day this week, especially in Years B and C when the Gospel of the Samaritan Woman is not read on the Third Sunday of Lent: Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42 (Lec. 236)

Monday, February 29, 2016

(Lec. 237)

1) 2 Kings 5:1-15ab

2) Luke 4:24-30

MONDAY OF  
THIRD WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: The humility of Christ saved the world, and can continue to transform it into God's kingdom through us.

J.R.R. Tolkien's famous trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* is filled with larger-than-life characters – some good, some evil – who are dedicated to quests that involve the fate of Middle Earth, the fantasy world in which his books are set.

But it ends up being the hobbit Frodo who saves the world. In Middle Earth, hobbits are people who are short of stature, devoid of ambition and who seek no more than a quiet life close to home. They are overlooked by the greater races of elves and men. And if they are noticed at all, they are – literally and figuratively – looked down upon and called “halflings.”

The wise elf queen Galadriel, however, recognizes the greatness that can lie hidden in hobbits. “The time will soon come,” she says, “when hobbits will shape the fortunes of all.”

Tolkien wrote his novels very much out of his deep Catholic faith and the Catholic perspective through which he viewed the world. And so it should not be surprising that his stories echo themes found in Scripture.

Take today's first reading from Second Kings. It involves two kings – a conquering army general and a prophet of God. And yet the person who makes the difference in the story was a little girl, an Israelite who had been captured in battle by the general's army and lived as a slave in his household.

When the general, whose name was Naaman, contracted leprosy, it was the girl who suggested that he visit the prophet Elisha, whom she believed could cure him. And so it happened.

Likewise in today's Gospel, the people of Nazareth were enraged when Jesus suggested that the Gentiles, seen by the Jewish people as unworthy of God's notice, were equal in God's eyes to his chosen people.

Today's Scripture readings call us in this Lenten season to humility. Don't oversee greatness in people who you think are unimportant. And don't overestimate the greatness that you think lies within you and places you above others.

The humility of Christ saved the world, and can continue to build up God's kingdom of love and peace in the world through each of us.

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