

January

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Cycle C Year II

Friday, January 1, 2016
(Lec. 18)

- 1) Numbers 6:22-27
- 2) Galatians 4:4-7
- 3) Luke 2:16-21

**THE OCTAVE DAY
OF THE NATIVITY
OF THE LORD;
SOLEMNITY OF MARY,
THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD
- SOLEMNITY**
(Holy Day of Obligation in USA)

Gospel related: **CCC** 486, 525, 527, 2599

FOCUS: Mary, Mother of God, is our mother as well.

Today's solemnity honors Mary as the Mother of God. This title derives from the fact that Mary was the mother of Jesus who was both fully human and fully divine. It also highlights the important role that Mary has played, and continues to play, in God's plan of salvation. Specifically, by living her life in perfect fidelity to the will of God and saying yes to God's request to become the mother of his Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus, was born into the world.

After Jesus was born, Mary lovingly cared for him, and once he reached adulthood she became his first disciple. And then when the earthly course of her life was finished, she was assumed body and soul into heaven, where she now reigns as Queen of heaven and earth. She also is our spiritual mother who continually intercedes for us, that we might be strengthened to resist temptation and grow in our faith and love for her Son, Jesus.

Now I would like to turn our attention to today's reading from the Gospel of Luke to see what insights we might glean to help us grow in our devotion to our Blessed Mother, and grow in our love for Jesus. In the Gospel, we heard that Mary treasured all that had taken place, reflecting on them in her heart.

Some translations use the word "pondered" when describing Mary's reaction to the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Perhaps she recalled the visit from the angel Gabriel who told Mary she would bear a child, who would be called *holy, the Son of God*. Did she ponder the meaning of the words of Elizabeth, proclaiming her *blessed among women and mother of my Lord*? (Lk 1:42-43) We can imagine that Joseph shared with Mary the messages he had received concerning their marriage and child. What joy must have filled the hearts of Mary and Joseph as the shepherds told of the angels who proclaimed the birth of the Savior.

The joy Mary experienced in being faithful and obedient to God's will, regardless of the personal cost, can be seen in her words to her cousin Elizabeth: *My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit finds joy in God my savior ... God who is mighty has done great things for me, holy is his name* (Lk 1:46-49). In short, the blessing of God was upon Mary from the very moment of her conception, so that she could fulfill the unique and special role God had chosen her to play in his plan of salvation.

Bringing this back to ourselves, as we begin this new calendar year and honor Mary as the Mother of God, it seems appropriate to make some spiritual resolutions to work on keeping throughout 2016. One resolution that should top our list is to ensure we are setting aside at

least ten minutes to spend in prayer each day. Spending time in prayer is non-negotiable if we are serious about growing in our love for the Lord and allowing his peace to reign more fully in our hearts. And if you are already doing this, I invite you to set aside an additional five or ten minutes for prayer as it will only change your life for the better.

Another spiritual resolution is to strive to grow in our devotion for the Blessed Mother. She is a powerful intercessor, and the more we sincerely ask her to intercede on our behalf, the stronger our faith will become. Another way we honor our Blessed Mother, and come to live as a more faithful follower of Jesus, is by imitating her example. Mary's life, lived in perfect conformity to the will of God, makes her the example par excellence of what it means to live as disciple of her Son, Jesus.

My friends, as we set these spiritual resolutions, let us grow in our faith which will, in turn, bring Christ's love and peace to reign more fully in our hearts. Then, little by little, one heart at a time, Christ's kingdom of love and peace will ultimately reign in the hearts of all people.

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Saturday, January 2, 2016
(Lec. 205)
1) 1 John 2:22-28
2) John 1:19-28

SATURDAY
CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY
(OBL. MEM.
Saint Basil the Great
and Saint Gregory Nazianzen,
Bishops and Doctors
of the Church)

Gospel related: **CCC** 575, 613, 719

FOCUS: The example of our lives should give a credible and effective witness that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Savior of the world.

Modern means of communication such as Facebook, Foursquare and Twitter can be a powerful way for people to share their experiences of a new restaurant. Still, nothing can make or break that restaurant's success or failure like good old-fashioned word of mouth. If the restaurant is good, people will tell their friends and they in turn will tell others, exponentially helping the restaurant to succeed. If people have bad experiences, they, too, will tell their friends, making it next-to-impossible for the restaurant to succeed.

Similarly, for the Gospel message to be spread and take root in the lives of people in today's world, people need to encounter those who are living authentic Christian lives of love and service. They need to encounter people who are leading lives in accord with the teachings of Jesus.

This reality is affirmed by the testimony of John the Baptist in today's Gospel. When asked if he was the promised Messiah, John humbly stated that he was not. When asked if he was a prophet, John humbly refused to claim any title or position. Rather, he stated that he was preparing the way for one who was far greater than he, one whose sandal straps he was not worthy to untie. Many who traveled to the desert to see and hear John never came to understand the point of his ministry – preparing the way for the promised Messiah and Savior of the world – because their hearts were hardened.

Others who hungered for truth and the fulfillment of God's promise to bring salvation to his people understood the meaning and purpose of John the Baptist's ministry. After Jesus was baptized by John and began his public ministry, they could place their faith in Jesus and be saved. In short, John was effective in preparing the way for Jesus and pointing others to him because he truly loved God, and was faithful and obedient to what God asked him to do.

In applying this to ourselves, if we want our lives to bear good fruit for the Gospel, then – quite simply – we need to live what we believe, day in and day out. This will have an impact on those we encounter throughout our daily lives. Perhaps it will pique their curiosity about why we live the way we do. It may even lead them to ask why we live in such a way. When such an opportunity arises, we need to seize it. We need to share what we believe so that others may come to know the joy, peace and salvation we have found in Jesus.

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 3, 2016

(Lec. 20)

1) Isaiah 60:1-6

2) Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

3) Matthew 2:1-12

Gospel related: **CCC** 439, 486, 528, 724

**THE EPIPHANY
OF THE LORD
- SOLEMNITY**

FOCUS: God's light shines upon us all.

We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage. The explanation of the Magi seems so simple and straightforward. But, like most aspects of our salvation history, there is more to the story.

We do not know exactly where these men began their journey. We do not know how long or how far they traveled, but we believe they were not Jews or Romans. They did not come to pay homage to their own newborn king, but the king of the Jews. The Jews were a subjected people. Why would they make such a journey, bringing such extravagant gifts?

The Magi were believed to be astrologers who studied the sky and stars. If the star was bright enough for them to follow, was it not visible in Jerusalem, as well? Had nobody there noticed it and wondered about it? They knew Scripture, and would have been familiar with the passage we heard in today's first reading. Certainly, they could have put together the same explanation of a new Jewish king. But Herod, who was alert to any threat against his reign, was, apparently, ignorant of the birth and its implications.

These are interesting questions, but the answers would not really help us to see the significance of the visit of the Magi. In fact, such contradictions may help us notice the varying wonderful and mysterious ways that God worked and continues to work to bring about our salvation.

The Jews, the chosen people of God, nearly missed what they had been anticipating for centuries. They were, for all intents and purposes, blind to the birth of the Savior; foreigners, though, were not only aware, but took action to honor him.

The star was there for all to see. But only those who were open to its meaning were blessed with seeing who and what it represented. The account of the Magi helps us see that Jesus was born to be more than the king of the Jews. He came to draw all people to himself and to redeem all of humankind. The mission of Jesus has no political or geographic boundaries, as we heard so eloquently in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Today, let us thank God for all he has done to open the doors of heaven for us. His love knows no boundaries. Let us do our part in announcing that good news to those who have not yet seen the light. Let the love of God shine in us and, like the star of Bethlehem, lead others to Jesus.

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Monday, January 4, 2016
(Lec. 212)
1) 1 John 3:22—4:6
2) Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

MONDAY
CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY
(OBL. MEM.
Saint Elizabeth
Ann Seton, Religious)

Gospel related: **CCC** 1503, 1720, 1989

FOCUS: We look to the example of the saints as we strive to deepen our faith in Jesus and follow his commandment to love one another.

The reading from the first letter of Saint John begins with this command:

We should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us (3:23).

The task seems simple, but the reading warns against trusting the spirits of the world that seek to deceive us. The first letter of John was written to an early Christian community less than 100 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Even Christians in the early Church struggled with the question of how to follow God and not stumble in worldly ways.

One way the Church shows us how to believe in Jesus and love one another is through the example of the saints. When we see how others have come to believe and follow Jesus' example, it may become easier for us to imagine making similar faith-driven choices in our own lives.

Today is the memorial of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first native-born U.S. citizen to be canonized. Mother Seton was born shortly before the Revolutionary War. She married a businessman and adopted his seven younger siblings after the death of her father-in-law. She also raised five children of her own, all while being dedicated to ministries serving widows and orphans and the sick and dying. After her husband died, she experienced a conversion to the Catholic faith. She was comforted by the universal motherhood of the Virgin Mary, and drawn to receive the bread of life in the Eucharist. In her mid-thirties, she founded a religious order and the first free Catholic school in the United States, while continuing to care for her children.

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton is a wonderful example of following the path of Jesus as described in today's Gospel. In this passage from the fourth chapter of Matthew describing the early days of Jesus' ministry, Jesus teaches, preaches repentance and the coming of the kingdom of Heaven, and heals the sick and possessed.

Mother Seton worked tirelessly to serve the sick, poor and uneducated in her own community. God calls some people to missionary life far from home – but most of us are called to look around us, close to home, to teach others the good news of Jesus Christ. We are called to show mercy to the sick and suffering in our families and our communities. May the life of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton inspire us to love those around us.

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Tuesday, January 5, 2016
(Lec. 213)
1) 1 John 4:7-10
2) Mark 6:34-44

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY
TUESDAY
AFTER EPIPHANY
(OBL. MEM.
Saint John Neumann,
Bishop)

Gospel related: **CCC** 472

FOCUS: With God, miracles can happen when we dare to believe and share our faith with others.

Today's Gospel describes the first feeding of a multitude, after which baskets of food were left over. This event was recorded in all four Gospels. Two Gospels (Matthew and Mark) report a second feeding, with seven baskets left after four thousand had been fed. The fact that today's account was reported by all four Evangelists points to its great importance.

I asked myself, "Why is this account so important?" The task we face in our world is seemingly impossible. So many people hunger and thirst for what is decent, right and good. The hunger for peace in our world is almost palpable, and satisfying that hunger seems impossible. The feeding of the multitudes reported in the Gospels likewise was, in the eyes of the disciples, an impossible task.

When the disciples appealed to Jesus, he told them to take what they had and start feeding people. He didn't say: "Don't worry, step aside and I will take care of things myself." Rather, he instructed them to go and see how much food they had with them and feed the crowd. When the disciples brought the five loaves and two fish, Jesus multiplied them so that the large crowd was fed. Jesus wanted his disciples to learn that God can and does use all that one has to offer to accomplish wonders, and even miracles. No offering or gesture of kindness is insignificant.

At times, our lives feel unmanageable. We feel powerless over the difficulties and obstacles before us. What happens when we place ourselves and our lives into God's care? Obviously, wonderful and marvelous things can and do happen.

For confirmation of this truth, we need only turn to today's Gospel. We are called, like the disciples, to take what little we have and share it. By ourselves we can do nothing; but with God, miracles can happen. It's a matter of daring to believe, and doing what Jesus asks of us. Jesus is saying: "I'm not going to work *for* you, I'm going to work *through* you."

God uses all of our offerings, all of our gestures of kindness and love – even the seemingly small and insignificant – to accomplish wonders. We need only be willing to trust him and cooperate with his grace.

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Wednesday, January 6, 2016

(Lec. 214)

1) 1 John 4:11-18

2) Mark 6:45-52

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

WEDNESDAY

AFTER EPIPHANY

(USA Opt. Mem.

Saint André Bessette,

Religious)

Gospel related: **CCC** 2602 **CSDC** 453

FOCUS: The love of God frees us to love others.

In the first reading, Saint John explains that love is the key to knowing, understanding and being in God. One who fears is not yet perfect in love. Why? Because *perfect love drives out fear*.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark describes a moment of fear. After the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus sends the apostles to their boat, while he goes off and prays by himself. That evening the apostles, already on the sea, are rocked by bad weather. After Jesus was finished praying, he began walking across the water, intending to pass the disciples by, as he crossed to the other side of the sea. The disciples, however, caught sight of Jesus. Thinking he was a ghost, they became terrified. Jesus then acted to calm their nerves by identifying himself, by getting into the boat the disciples were traveling in and then calming the storm.

Today's Gospel reading goes on to tell us something interesting: It tells us that the disciples were astounded because they *had not understood* the feeding of the five thousand. *On the contrary, their hearts were hardened*.

What are we to make of this? First and foremost, the disciples' minds and hearts were probably hardened to the deeper meaning of the wondrous things they had just seen Jesus do. Most likely they felt overwhelmed, confused and afraid. However, as they continued to accompany Jesus as he carried out his public ministry preaching and teaching, curing the sick, and expelling demons, they slowly but surely grew in faith and love for him.

However, it would not be until after they had seen Jesus' passion, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, and after they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, that their faith and love for Lord would be strengthened, changed and transformed. They came to understand all that they had seen Jesus teach and do. The fears that had once held them back were dispelled and they were able to commit themselves to carrying out the mission Jesus had entrusted to them.

Similarly, the more we grow in our faith and love for the Lord Jesus, the more we will place our lives into his hands and go where he leads us. We will become more open and receptive to God's grace and the other gifts and blessings that he offers us. This, in turn, enables us to overcome the fears which hold us back from serving the Lord with our whole hearts. We will receive the grace and strength needed to overcome the trials and difficulties we will encounter along our earthly pilgrimage of faith.

The more our faith and love for the Lord is perfected, the more we are freed to live as Jesus taught, and the more his peace will reign in our hearts.

Thursday, January 7, 2016

(Lec. 215)

1) 1 John 4:19–5:4

2) Luke 4:14-22a

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

THURSDAY

AFTER EPIPHANY

(Opt. Mem.

Saint Raymond

of Penyafort, Priest)

Gospel related: **CCC** 436, 544, 695, 714, 1168, 1286, 2443 **CSDC** 28

FOCUS: Loving other people ultimately means to will their good.

The Gospel of John written by Saint John the Evangelist, and the three epistles that bear his name, are known for their mystical undercurrents. They have inspired profound prayer and writings by spiritual masters for two thousand years.

At the same time, they can be straightforward and even blunt. This is the case in today's first reading: *If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother who he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen (4:20).*

It would take a hardened heart to listen to these words and not be moved to an examination of conscience.

We may think that we love God. Viewed in light of today's first reading from the first letter of John, however, our love of God is only as great as our love of the person we love the least.

Loving a person does not necessarily mean that we have warm, affectionate feelings for him or her. Ultimately, loving another person means what Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote some 800 years ago: willing the good of the person who is loved. We need to want what is good for the beloved and act to make that a reality.

While it might seem to take a load off our shoulders that this definition of love does not include having affectionate feelings for people who might annoy us, it's still challenging. Sometimes we have been so hurt by other people that willing their good is the furthest thing from our minds.

Yet that is what God did and continues to do for us. Nothing could be worse than what we sinful humans inflicted upon Jesus in his passion and death. Yet even in the midst of the darkness of that first Good Friday, he loved us. He willed our good.

With the help of his grace, we can will the good of those whom we find hard to love.

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Friday, January 8, 2016
(Lec. 216)
1) 1 John 5:5-13
2) Luke 5:12-16
Gospel related: **CCC** 2602

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY
FRIDAY
AFTER EPIPHANY

FOCUS: If we place our faith in the testimony of the Son of God, we will have eternal life.

If I wanted to be a plumber, I would become an apprentice to a certified plumber. I would learn my craft from someone who truly knows the trade.

If I wanted to be a pianist, I would hire an instructor who is an accomplished pianist and would demonstrate the proper technique.

An athlete depends on a coach who once participated in the sport and who now instructs others.

We model ourselves after people we admire. We turn to people who have demonstrated the ability, skill or knowledge needed to assist us.

In our Gospel today, the leper cries out to Jesus to be healed. Certainly, he must have heard of Jesus the teacher who heals the sick, feeds the hungry and welcomes all. As a leper, he needed both welcome and healing – welcome because he is an outcast in society, healing because of his physical condition. He places his trust in Jesus. He places his life, well-being and future in his hands.

In the first reading, we hear that if we place our trust in Jesus, we will have eternal life.

For the leper in our story, an immediate need drew him to Jesus.

Are we so different? Do we not seek resolution to our immediate needs? Do we not seek welcome? Do we not seek the means to feed our hungers and heal our wounds? Do we not seek direction when we are lost?

Whom should we trust? Who should be our mentor? Who should be our teacher, instructing us regarding what is true, loving and beautiful? Who has been so trustworthy that we can place our lives in his hands?

By the life Jesus lived on earth, by the testimony of those who have believed and followed, by the witness of the Spirit in our hearts – we know it is Jesus.

Let us call out to him. Let him heal our wounds, welcome us into his fellowship and give us eternal life. For Jesus is our Savior, healer, teacher and Lord.

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Saturday, January 9, 2016

(Lec 217)

1) 1 John 5:14-21

2) John 3:22-30

Gospel related: CCC 523, 524, 796

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

SATURDAY

AFTER EPIPHANY

FOCUS: God gives us gifts in abundance, meant to be shared in a spirit of service and humility.

Some view the world as a zero-sum game: When one person gains, something is taken away from all others. For example, there's only so much fame in the world: when one person gains in praise, all others lose some praise. For many, this is the source of their jealousy and envy.

In today's Gospel account, it looks like the disciples of John the Baptist suffer from that sort of jealousy and envy. The more people admired Jesus, John's disciples thought, the fewer people thought of the Baptist.

The Baptizer himself steps away from that zero-sum game. John the Baptist was being quite counter-cultural when he declared: *He must increase, I must decrease.*

In our day, we hear many voices in our culture that call us to better ourselves, which is good. We need to have healthy self-images and a healthy self-respect. But there comes a point when that can be too much of a good thing. Self-promotion can be damaging to others. Self-concern can cost others.

John the Baptizer gives us needed perspective for dealing with our bruised egos and self-centered pride. We should give our attention to this selection from today's Gospel: *And they came to John, and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, here he is, baptizing, and all are going to him." John answered, "No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease."*

As John declared, what we have is given to us from heaven. The gifts and talents we have are not exclusively ours. They are given by God to be shared – in humility and in service. Jealousy and envy are the devil's work. Love and communion in our family of faith are from God, for the life of the world.

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 10, 2016

(Lec. 21)

1) Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 or
Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

2) Acts 10:34-38 or
Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

3) Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Gospel related: CCC 536, 608, 696, 2600

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD - FEAST

FOCUS: When we commit ourselves to our Father as Jesus did, we grow in faith, joy and love.

When did Jesus know who he really was? We can assume that he grew into that knowledge. As he grew from being a little boy to a man, he came to understand who he was and the saving mission that his Father had sent him to accomplish.

This is confirmed in the signs that occurred after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove and a voice from the heavens was heard saying: *You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.* After his baptism and the forty days he spent fasting and praying in the desert, Jesus began his public ministry. He began teaching and doing the things necessary to reveal the depths of the Father's love for us, to reveal the Father's plan of salvation, to teach us how to live in order to enter eternal life. Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection would win our salvation and open the way to eternal life. When Jesus began this mission, he did so in firm resolve, with one hundred percent commitment, and in perfect fidelity to the will of the Father.

Similarly, for us to be successful in any endeavor, commitment is essential. Nothing of lasting value happens without it. And commitment is not easy. Our culture sends us many messages that work against keeping our commitments.

Thankfully we do, from time to time, come upon stories of heroic men and women who honor their commitments no matter the cost. We hear of mothers and fathers who stay with their children through horrible sicknesses and misfortunes, giving them their message of faithful and steadfast caring love.

Commitment is the key element of all noble adventures, wonderful discoveries and heroic deeds. Jesus started with it. So did Mary, his mother. Likewise, Saint Joseph remained faithful to his commitments. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were able to do all that God asked them to do because faith and love for God go hand-in-hand with commitment. Faith and love for God build commitment to living out one's faith, and vice versa.

Is there anyone here thinking of becoming a husband or a wife? Anyone here thinking of becoming a stepfather or a stepmother? Anyone here thinking of becoming a priest? If you are, then begin with commitment.

That's why we have the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, and why marriage and ordination also are sacraments. They are really, in a sense, sacraments of commitment. They are holy moments that fill us with the same Spirit which anointed Jesus Christ in his commitment to begin his saving mission.

Journey now back to your baptism. Open your ears. Hopefully you will hear the voice of God saying: *You are my beloved son. On you my favor rests. You are my beloved daughter and I will love you no matter what.* God's love and mercy enable us to commit ourselves to living as a disciple of Jesus, and give us the grace and strength we need to live out this call.

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Monday, January 11, 2016

(Lec. 305)

1) 1 Samuel 1:1-8

2) Mark 1:14-20

Gospel related: **CCC** 541, 787, 1423, 1427 **CSDC** 49

MONDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus calls us to live as his disciples by bearing witness to the Gospel and helping to build up God's kingdom on earth.

We have just finished the Christmas season, during which we celebrated anew the birth of Jesus. We now enter Ordinary Time, which continues until Lent. Many people think Ordinary Time means just regular time – nothing special. That could not be further from the truth. The root of the word “ordinary” is “order.” Ordinary Time is celebrated when we are not in Advent or Lent. It is a time when we focus on Jesus' public ministry – what he did to reveal the love of the Father, to reveal that God's kingdom was at hand, and what he taught as essential to live as his disciple.

Along these lines, today's Gospel reading tells about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In this passage from Saint Mark about how Jesus began preaching after John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus declares that *the Kingdom of God is at hand*, so all must *repent, and believe in the Gospel*. This meant that the long-promised day of salvation had arrived, the kingdom of God had broken into the world through Jesus, and people should turn away from sin and believe.

Aside from telling about Jesus beginning to preach and teach about the kingdom of God, the reading describes how Jesus called disciples to come and follow him. We are told that Simon (later renamed Peter) and his brother Andrew were fishing. When they heard Jesus' call, they dropped their fishing nets and followed him. James and John, who were mending their nets, responded in the same way. They left their father, Zebedee, in the boat.

Think about what a bold response these men had when they heard the voice of Jesus. They heard his voice and followed Him. They didn't say, “Hey, we'll come after we get these nets mended,” or “Wait, we have to fix supper for Dad.” He called them; they went.

What would we do if Jesus called us the way he called them? Hopefully, we would respond immediately as they did, leaving everything behind to go and follow Jesus. Similar to the way Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John by name to come and follow him, Jesus calls each of us by name to come and follow him. We are called to place our faith and trust in him, to practice his teachings in our daily lives, to share his light and love with others, to bear an effective witness to the Gospel and to help build up God's kingdom on earth. Let's resolve this day and every day to give our best for the Lord and to go where he leads us. Let's resolve to do whatever he bids us to do.

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Tuesday, January 12, 2016

(Lec. 306)

1) 1 Samuel 1:9-20

2) Mark 1:21-28

Gospel related: **CCC** 438, 1673, 2173

TUESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK IN
ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: The Lord has power over all things, both in heaven and on earth.

Sometimes we lose sight of the mighty power of Christ. We focus on Jesus' great love and the Father's limitless forgiveness so much that it can be hard to reconcile that image with a God so powerful that his very presence caused Moses to collapse before him. In today's Gospel, we see an example of Jesus' mighty power over demons. We might be tempted to see a contrast between this bold, powerful Jesus and the loving Jesus who welcomed children to his side. However, great love and great power coexist in harmony within Jesus, just as his fully divine and human natures do.

As humans with a limited perspective, it can be hard for us to reconcile those two qualities in one being. For us, power often is associated with ruthlessness; love may be associated with weakness. In our culture, we rarely see love and power portrayed as attributes in harmony. But, again, as humans, we are not capable of fully knowing God.

In God, power is motivated by love. God in his great love for us sent his Son into the world to win forgiveness for our sins, and to defeat the power of the evil one by dying on the cross.

Jesus' great love for the man at the Temple led him to cast out the demons that possessed him. Jesus used his divine power to help those he loved.

How can we come to know God's mighty power? We can ask the Holy Spirit to strengthen his gift of fear of the Lord within us. This gift of the Holy Spirit is often misunderstood. If God is so loving, why should we fear him? Perhaps a better word might be "awe." "Awe of the Lord" means having an awareness of the power of God and a respect for it.

Today's Gospel demonstrates God's power. Our challenge is to remember that the power of God is greater than we could ever imagine – and so is his love for us.

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Wednesday, January 13, 2016

(Lec. 307)

1) 1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20

2) Mark 1:29-39

Gospel related: **CCC** 2602

WEDNESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: *Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.*

Quite often, during Ordinary Time, the readings don't "match up" very well. Today is an exception. Both young Samuel and Jesus listened to God as he spoke to them.

The first reading includes an interesting observation about the time of Samuel: *A revelation of the Lord was uncommon and vision infrequent.* When the Lord called Samuel, he thought it was Eli. In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark, we hear that Jesus, after preaching and healing in Capernaum, sought to spend some time alone with his Father as he went out to *a deserted place, where he prayed.*

Similarly, we are always challenged to go to the Lord as he invites us to listen to him. We are encouraged, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, to pray like Jesus, who would often "draw apart to pray in solitude, on a mountain, preferably at night" (2602).

With the hustle and bustle of today's society, it can be difficult to take time to *pray in solitude.* However, we must make the effort for, as Saint Augustine once said, "our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O Lord."

Perhaps we have a quiet place at home where we can answer, like young Samuel did: *Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.* If the weather is good, we can go to a special place like a park, a stream or a river. Perhaps, like Jesus, we can go to a mountain to hear God speaking to us.

Best of all, we have churches where we can go to pray quietly and adore Christ our Lord, who is really and truly present in the Eucharist – body, blood, soul and divinity.

We have many options while we pray. Samuel was asleep when the Lord called him. Jesus was very much awake. The late Archbishop Fulton Sheen made a Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament almost every day of his life. He recounts that when needed, he would fall asleep in the presence of the Lord, who would refresh him in that way. Perhaps that has happened to you.

Regardless of how we pray, remember that in addition to sacred Scripture, we have wonderful books and magazines that can help us in our meditation. We have the rosary and the Chaplet of Divine Mercy. We have many other resources, but the key is the same: Spend time with the Lord and listen to him.

Yes, my brothers and sisters, we need to say, *Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.* May we be faithful in uttering those words this day and every day.

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Thursday, January 14, 2016
(Lec. 308)

1) 1 Samuel 4:1-11

2) Mark 1:40-45

Gospel related: **CCC** 1504, 2616

THURSDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Forgiveness is God's gift of love for us.

Leprosy was a disfiguring and feared disease. Although lepers were excluded from society, in today's Gospel, we find Jesus touching the untouchable. He didn't command healing from a distance. Jesus acted not as God's agent but as God himself. Only the clean can clean the unclean, which is why the Son of God came among us. We are incapable of curing ourselves, especially our self-centeredness and our belief that we don't need God. We might call such attitudes spiritual leprosy. The truth is that we have sinned and that our sins have weakened us.

Can I set aside my pride and realize that I cannot save myself?

Am I willing to let God touch me, sinner though I am? Is there any sin of mine that I consider unforgivable? We have a hard time with forgiveness, don't we? Is there anyone who has sinned against me whom I feel I cannot forgive? Am I unable to forgive myself for certain things I have done in the past?

We have a hard time with forgiveness. Jesus touched the untouchable, and not only lepers but all who suffered from spiritual maladies that made them cry out to Jesus for mercy. For in his kingdom there are no outcasts. Perhaps that is why our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has made such an impact by his actions. He is not afraid to touch anyone who feels like a leper, who feels outcast, who feels untouchable.

Only the clean can clean the unclean. We need to receive the great healing gift Jesus gave us in the sacrament of reconciliation. *Receive the Holy Spirit*, he said to his apostles the evening he rose from the dead, the evening of Easter. *Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven* (Jn 20: 22-23). Be generous in sharing forgiveness. It is God's gift of love for us – not just for our own sakes but for the life of the world.

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Friday, January 15, 2016

(Lec. 309)

1) 1 Samuel 8:4-7, 10-22a

2) Mark 2:1-12

Gospel related: **CCC** 430, 473, 574, 589, 1421, 1441, 1484, 1502, 1503, 2616

FRIDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: We must be ever-willing to adjust routines so we can overcome life's obstacles and give of ourselves in service to others.

It is important to establish a daily routine to fulfill our duties and responsibilities in life, be true to our commitments and grow in our relationship with the Lord. This can include having a regular bedtime, a regular time for prayer or leaving the house on time to get to work. But we can get into trouble with routines when difficult and unexpected events occur that throw our lives off track. These events challenge us to trust that the Lord can bring good out of them. At such challenging times, we must turn to the Lord for guidance to establish a new routine which better matches our current reality. This allows us to move confidently forward, overcoming obstacles in our path.

The actions of the four men in today's Gospel who brought the paralytic to Jesus provide us a wonderful example of the good that comes from trusting in the Lord. Now, before we go any further, it is important to note that today's Gospel tells us very little about the four men. From the context of today's reading, it seems likely they were friends or family members of the paralyzed man. As such, they probably had established a certain routine in their lives to help provide for the needs of their friend or family member.

When they heard that Jesus – who had brought healing to the lives of many others – was back in town, they were willing to break their regular routine and take a leap of faith. They carried their paralyzed friend or family member to the house where Jesus was staying, only to find that a crowd had gathered, making it seemingly impossible to get in. But they didn't give up. Rather, they opened the roof of the house and lowered the paralyzed man down. Jesus, who was moved by what he witnessed, told the paralyzed man that his sins were forgiven. To demonstrate that he had the power to forgive sins, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, *Rise, pick up your mat, and go home.* The paralyzed man then stood up, picked up his mat and walked away.

Applying this to ourselves, let us strive to have a basic routine for our lives that enables us to meet our responsibilities, be true to our commitments and put our best foot forward each day for the Lord. Let us also be ever-willing, as were the four men in the Gospel, to adjust our routines when necessary so we can meet the demands of new situations and circumstances in our lives. And let us also be willing to take advantage of the new opportunities that present themselves amid our daily lives to give of ourselves in love and service to others.

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Saturday, January 16, 2016

(Lec. 310)

1) 1 Samuel 9:1-4, 17-19; 10:1a

2) Mark 2:13-17

Gospel related: CCC 545, 574, 1484, 1503

SATURDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Saturday in honor of BVM)

FOCUS: God has a plan for us. If we say “yes,” God will be glorified.

Everyone has an experience of having been chosen, called or selected for something special. Were you chosen to play on a team, join a choir, take a new job or be a godparent or best friend? Maybe you really wanted to be picked – or it was a total surprise. Were you selected because of talents and skills? Or were you unaware of the reasons? Whatever the case, we owe all that we are to a loving and generous God, who created us with unique gifts and talents to play a unique role in his unfolding plan of salvation.

Today’s Scripture readings show us God’s unconditional love and care for everyone. We can see this in our first reading, which reveals that God’s criteria for choosing a leader to govern Israel differ from ours. There are no primaries or stump speeches, no auditions, no resumes required. Instead, God sees into the hearts of his people and chooses them – not because of their qualifications but their faithfulness. Saul did not seek to be king of the Israelites. God took the initiative, calling Saul through Samuel. Saul acquiesced and God anointed him through Samuel as commander of his people. In the verses that follow today’s reading, we see that God also made Saul into a different man, giving him a new heart and anointing him with the Spirit of God. What happened to Saul was a pure gift from God – undeserved grace so that he might be able to carry out the duties and responsibilities God had entrusted to him.

Similarly, did Jesus require tryouts for the apostles and disciples? As we see in today’s Gospel, Jesus was walking along the sea when he called Levi the tax collector. We later come to know Levi as Matthew the tax collector. Wouldn’t it have been more prudent for Jesus to have posted the position for apostle, taken resumes and done an interview before choosing Matthew? Isn’t that how we would do it? Jesus, however, exemplifies God’s way of doing things. So as God called Saul, Jesus called his disciples for reasons that elude us. And this is true for us today as well. God created each of us with different but equally important gifts and talents to play a unique role in helping advance his plan of salvation toward its completion.

In and through our baptism, we were given new life in Christ. We were claimed by God as his dearly beloved sons and daughters, and officially called to go forth to live as faithful disciples of Jesus and be true to God’s unique plan and purpose for our lives. Let our answer to God’s call be a resounding “yes,” like that of Matthew and countless others through the ages.

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 17, 2016

(Lec. 66)

1) Isaiah 62:1-5

2) 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

3) John 2:1-11

Gospel related: **CCC** 486, 495, 1335, 1613, 2618

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: God has tender compassion for each of us.

Today's readings tell us about the tender compassion of our God. In the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, we hear language that is tender, passionate and definitive. The Lord says to the people of Israel – and to us today – that we will not be called *forsaken*. Our land will not be called *desolate*. Rather, the Lord wants to call us “delightful” and “loved.”

In the second reading, Saint Paul teaches us that the Spirit gives each of us different gifts, such as teaching, knowledge, healing or amazing faith. We are not given these gifts solely for our own benefit, but to help further the work and mission of the Church and to serve the needs of others in the midst of our daily lives.

Today's lesson does not end there. In John's Gospel, we hear the familiar story of the wedding at Cana. Marriage has long been an analogy of God's intimate love for his people. It is fitting, then, that Jesus performs the first miracle of his public ministry at a wedding.

It is Mary who notices the problem with the wine and decides to intercede. She doesn't do so because the couple will be punished for running out of wine. At worst, the couple or the families will be ashamed by their lack of resources. But Our Lady exemplifies God's tender and personal loving care so well that she wants to protect this young couple from any undue anxiety. She steps in, and is persistent with Jesus, who first denies his mother's request to help.

Jesus doesn't just give this couple ordinary wine. He provides them the best wine.

Our three readings communicate one important truth: Our God utterly delights in each of us and loves us unconditionally and without limits. Some of the ways God shows his love for us are by giving us special graces that allow us to serve each other; giving us his own mother Mary, who watches for our slightest need and anxiety and who intercedes for us; and by giving us more than our heart's desire.

God's tender and compassionate love for us extends throughout the centuries to today. Let us all pray that we become more open to his transformative love in our lives.

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Monday, January 18, 2016

(Lec. 311)

1) 1 Samuel 15:16-23

2) Mark 2:18-22

Gospel related: **CCC** 796

MONDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Seek new ways and attitudes that will deepen your relationship with God.

Today's readings suggest that we consider this question: "What attitudes could deepen our relationship with God?"

The readings describe important spiritual qualities that can help us answer this question. In the reading from the first Book of Samuel, King Saul is described as using his own thinking about what was right in a situation over what God had asked of him. Samuel confronts Saul and asks, *Why then have you disobeyed the Lord?* Saul denies any disobedience, but as his explanation unfolds, it is clear that he put his opinion before what God had asked him to do. So, what quality has Saul overlooked in his relationship with God? Saul lacks humility. He considers his vision of what is right more compelling than God's.

Mark's Gospel suggests another quality that can help us as we grow in our relationship with God. People complain to Jesus that his disciples do not fast, as do the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus asks these critics to expand their perspective about what uplifts the soul to God. The disciples are with Jesus, and he is teaching them how to live as God wants. Now is not the time to fast, but to pay attention and to receive, as Pope Francis often states, "the joy of the Gospel." Fasting can be a helpful spiritual practice, but in this context, it is more important to be joyful, to celebrate how God is manifest in their very presence through Jesus.

Both of these qualities – humility before God, and the joy of knowing Jesus as the Son of God – help us assess our own discipleship. When we ask God to lead us through certain situations and provide us with guidance, do we humbly accept it? Do we really listen to how God is leading us, and obey? This can be difficult, and, like Saul, we may be tempted to rationalize a different approach.

Do we manifest this joy of having God with us through all sorts of circumstances and situations? This, too, can be difficult, especially when life seems to weigh us down.

As disciples, our goal is to continue growing in our relationship with God. Thus, we need to consider how more joy and humility would deepen our sense of God's presence in our lives.

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Tuesday, January 19, 2016
(Lec. 312)

1) 1 Samuel 16:1-13

2) Mark 2:23-28

Gospel related: **CCC** 544, 581, 582, 2167, 2173 **CSDC** 261

TUESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: God, who knows us through and through, might surprise us.

David's father did not appear to hold him in very high regard. When the spiritual leader, Samuel, asked Jesse to bring his sons for the sacrificial banquet, Jesse did not even invite his youngest son. But our God, who sees past appearances and reads hearts, saw much more in the young shepherd: he saw a man fit to shepherd his people. God surely had a surprise for everyone that day – from Samuel and Jesse to David himself – when he selected David as the next king of Israel.

Scripture is full of people who surprise us: the young Jeremiah, who proved to be a great prophet; the young girl Mary, destined to be the Mother of God; and the uneducated fisherman who became the first leader of the Church. By outward appearance, none of them would have led others to believe that they could bring so much glory to God. And yet, they responded to God's call and played crucial roles in God's unfolding plan of salvation.

David, Jeremiah, Mary and Saint Peter offer lessons for us. Do we have people in our own lives whom we discount because they don't seem to have what it takes? Even the people closest to us can surprise us with their hidden gifts or generous response to a difficult situation. Likewise, we, too, have gifts that may be overlooked by family members, friends or colleagues. Only God, our Creator, truly knows our potential and our hearts! If we take the time every day to pray and to listen to God, we will be able to hear his call.

So, as we continue with our day, let us pray to be open to God's call to our hearts – and to any surprises that God might reveal in ourselves and others. Let us see each other as we truly are – utterly unique and special children of God who possess unique gifts and talents that are not always readily apparent.

Knowing the gifts each of us brings to the world, let us encourage one another to listen to God's call in our hearts and to live out that call courageously.

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Wednesday, January 20, 2016

(Lec. 313)

1) 1 Samuel 17:32-33, 37, 40-51

2) Mark 3:1-6

WEDNESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem. Saint Fabian,
Pope and Martyr;
Saint Sebastian, Martyr)

Gospel related: **CCC** 574, 591, 1859, 2173 **CSDC** 261

FOCUS: Let us seek to be set free of any traces of hatred, envy and jealousy, which hurt our relationships with God and others.

There is not the slightest hint of love in Satan's heart. He is filled with nothing but hatred. Today's Gospel account demonstrates that. We find Jesus in a synagogue encountering a man with a withered hand ... most likely from birth. Without touching the man or his hand, Jesus cures him by a simple command. This is something only God can do.

The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, to destroy Jesus. We need to note that the Pharisees and the Herodians intensely disliked each other; and yet today we hear of them joining forces because, out of envy and jealousy, both groups wanted to get rid of Jesus.

Jealousy, envy and hatred were at work in the Pharisees and Herodians we just heard about. Blind hatred is born of one's own insecurities. Blind hatred accounts for part of the mystery of evil. How is it that the religious authorities were so blind to who Jesus was, and that he was the Son of God? I have often puzzled over that. The many miracles of Jesus clearly demonstrated that he was their longed-for Messiah, and the Son of God. Hatred – a blind hatred – seems to be a significant part of the answer.

Today's readings should cause us to think about the presence of envy, jealousy and hatred in our own hearts. Do we find traces of them within us? They can wither our hearts and damage our relationships with others and with God. Perhaps you and I should ask God to cure us of any traces of these afflictions. Jesus is the Divine Physician. He stands ready to heal and cure us ... if only we ask.

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Thursday, January 21, 2016
(Lec. 314)

- 1) 1 Samuel 18:6-9; 19:1-7
- 2) Mark 3:7-12

THURSDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL. MEM.
Saint Agnes,
Virgin and Martyr)

Gospel related: **CCC** 1504

FOCUS: Christ loves us unconditionally and without limits; in response, we are to love him with our whole being and love others as they are.

What makes us want to draw close to God? In today's Gospel, a crowd seeks Jesus because many of them are sick and they had heard that he could cure them. In other words, Jesus had something to offer them, and they wanted to have it. Is this a bad thing? Not in itself. It's part of life to want things and to need things, and we're naturally drawn to people who can provide them for us. This is particularly true for the sick; it's entirely normal and understandable for them to seek relief and, if possible, a cure.

Likewise, it's not a bad thing in itself to seek God because of what he can do for us. When we turn to God for consolation, for strength, for peace of mind, or for any other need, he is there to grant what we ask. But that should not be the only reason for wanting him in our lives. In one version of the Act of Contrition, we express sorrow for our sins because we dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell. That's a valid reason for wanting our sins forgiven, but it's not ideal. What completes our sorrow is to believe that our sins have offended God and have separated us from him, and that he deserves better from us. He deserves all our love.

Certainly, following Christ comes with rewards – the most important being his greatest healing act of all, the salvation of our souls and eternal life with him in heaven. There's nothing wrong with wanting to go to heaven or with not wanting to go to hell, of course. Nor can the crowd be faulted for wanting to be cured by Jesus. But our Christian faith cannot be limited to such "what's in it for me" thinking; it must go beyond that. It must strive for a pure and wholehearted love for God, which we express by serving the needs of others and by loving them unconditionally.

How are we to go about this? First, we are called to pray constantly – not only to ask God for things, but also to thank him, praise him and acknowledge his glory. We also love God unconditionally by how we treat other people. In order to grow in our ability to live this ideal, we must continue to place attitudes such as jealousy and resentment into God's hands. This will ensure they don't build up inside us and move us to act in ways that are hurtful to others. Finally, of paramount importance is the Eucharist. For every time we come forward to receive holy Communion we truly receive Jesus. Through the Eucharist, Jesus draws us closer to himself and nourishes with the gift of himself, so we may have the grace and strength needed to go forward and share his love with others.

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Friday, January 22, 2016
(Lec. 315)

- 1) 1 Samuel 24:3-21
- 2) Mark 3:13-19

NOTE: Or for the Day of Prayer, any of the following readings: Genesis 1:1–2:2 (41) or 2 Maccabees 7:1, 20-31 (499) or Isaiah 49:1-6 (587) or Romans 11:33-36 (121) or Ephesians 1:3-14 (104) or Ephesians 3:14-21 (vol. III, 476) or Colossians 1:12-20 (162) or 1 John 3:11-21 (208)/Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14 (414) or Mark 9:30-37 (134) or Luke 1:39-56 (622) or Luke 17:11-19 (144) or Luke 23:35-43 (162) or John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-18 (755) or John 6:24-35 (113), or the *Lectionary for Ritual Masses* (vol. IV), the Mass “For Peace and Justice,” nos. 887-891.

Gospel related: **CCC** 551, 552, 765, 787, 858, 1577, 1673

DAY OF PRAYER for the
LEGAL PROTECTION
of UNBORN CHILDREN

FOCUS: What we do to the least and most vulnerable of all, we do to Christ himself.

Modern-day public figures abuse their power at times, and this was no less of a problem in ancient biblical days. In today’s reading, we see King Saul of Israel abusing his power by seeking to kill David. Saul was jealous of David and saw him as an inconvenience, a threat to his own legacy and rule. At the same time, David stood to gain if he killed Saul; he not only would get rid of the man who was out to destroy him, but he would succeed him to the throne. In the end, however, respect for life won out. David spared Saul’s life because it was the right thing to do. In turn, won over by David’s decision, Saul repented. He abandoned his plan to abuse his power by killing David.

Today is the anniversary of what is perhaps the worst case of abuse of government power in our nation’s history. The Roe v. Wade decision, handed down 43 years ago today, removed the government’s obligation to protect the lives of the unborn. The protection of all people’s right to life is one of the highest duties of any government. We pray today for an end to this dereliction of duty – for Roe v. Wade to be struck down. We pray that our government guard the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. We pray that our country may repent and put an end to the evil of abortion.

From the earliest stages of pregnancy an unborn baby has DNA, a heart, a brain, a blood type and so on. This means it’s a biological fact, not just a religious belief, that unborn babies are human beings. Christ said that how we treat the least, most vulnerable among us is also how we treat him, and this teaching is particularly applicable to the unborn. We fail in our duty to do this by enabling abortion in any way – by having one, paying for one, encouraging someone to have one, not trying to talk someone out of it and so on. Again, how we treat unborn babies, the most vulnerable and innocent, is how we individually and collectively treat Christ himself.

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Saturday, January 23, 2016

(Lec. 316)

1) 2 Samuel 1:1-4, 11-12, 19, 23-27

2) Mark 3:20-21

SATURDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem. Saint Vincent,
Deacon and Martyr;
Saint Marianne Cope, Virgin;
Saturday in honor of BVM)

FOCUS: True life in Christ often clashes with the world's priorities.

Usually when a person returns home after being away for a long while, there are lots of smiles, hugs and hearty "welcome home" greetings. Such homecomings can be treasured memories – a perfect way for the returning person to cap off his or her travels and adventures. Jesus received no such welcome on his return home, however. His relatives were convinced that Jesus was *out of his mind*. Not exactly a happy and hearty "welcome home."

What had Jesus been doing that made his relatives call him crazy? The passages in Mark that precede today's Gospel recount Jesus calling the first disciples, and preaching and healing people. Jesus' choice of first disciples may have come across to his relatives as crazy – after all, he didn't exactly pick the *crème de la crème* of ancient Jewish society. He chose common working-poor laborers, the ever-detested tax collectors and a high-strung zealot.

Then there was his preaching and healing. Much of it involved two highly prominent practices in ancient Judaism – fasting and celebrating the Sabbath. Jesus and his disciples didn't fast like everyone else. Jesus also healed people whose infirmities had made them outcasts – on the Sabbath, a clear violation of Jewish law. The nerve of this man, the Pharisees must have thought, for breaking the Sabbath and then lecturing us about why it's okay to do it!

All of this led some of Jesus' relatives to think that Jesus, in some shape or fashion, was not in his right mind. But Jesus is God, and God's ways are far above those of the world. So are the teachings of the Church that he established.

The world has a view of sex that is often self-serving; the Church teaches that it is a divine expression of love exclusively expressed within holy matrimony. The world pushes either unfettered capitalism or collectivist socialism, depending on the prevailing politics; the Church rejects socialism's view of people as mere parts of a whole, while also insisting that wealth acquisition be tempered with charity and justice. The world teaches that freedom means doing what we want; the Church says true liberty means being free to do what we ought.

Finally, the world stresses happiness and success in *this* life while the Church teaches that the ultimate goal is eternal salvation. We strive to achieve that goal so we might have Christ's life within us, and receive the grace and strength needed to persevere in faith and one day enter unto eternal life in heaven. The Church also emphasizes the necessity of regularly receiving holy Communion. This concurs with the teaching of Jesus in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel – that in order for a person to be saved they must eat his body and drink his blood.

This teaching, aside from spelling out what was necessary and essential to do in order to be saved, also brought a good many who heard it to conclude that Jesus was in some shape or fashion out of his mind. Do we have the courage to believe and live all this regardless of personal cost to ourselves? Are we “crazy” enough to live it? Let us have the strength and faith to be truly Catholic – for ultimately what matters is our relationship to God and living the way he calls us to live.

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 24, 2016

(Lec. 69)

1) Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10

2) 1 Corinthians 12:12-30 or 12:12-14, 27

3) Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21

Gospel related: **CCC** 436, 544, 695, 714, 1168, 1286, 2443 **CSDC** 28

**THIRD SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: As followers of Jesus, we are called to bear witness to the Gospel and help build up God's kingdom on earth.

All of us are familiar with inaugural addresses, especially when presidents take office and begin their elected terms. Some of these addresses are, of course, more memorable than others. Unfortunately, much of the content of these inaugural addresses bears little relationship to the subsequent actions of these leaders.

Similarly, Jesus gave an inaugural address of sorts shortly after he returned to Nazareth from the desert, where he had spent forty days and forty nights preparing for his public ministry. We heard his inaugural address in today's Gospel account:

He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

Can we carry the torch and make Christ's saving mission our own? It seems to me the answer is "yes." This is because Christ entrusted the continuation of his saving mission to the Church and because each of us, by virtue of our baptism, has become a member of Christ's body, the Church. As such, each of us is called to use our unique gifts and talents to further the work and mission of the Church and help build up God's kingdom on earth,

How can we further the mission of the Church and help to build up God's kingdom on earth? The first thing we can do is to seek to set aside our differences, and work together with people of good will to help bring peace and healing to the world. Ultimately, the way we live our lives, should say to others: "Today this Scripture passage is being fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus Christ's saving mission, example and activities matched the words of the inaugural address he gave at the beginning of his ministry. He did bring freedom to those held captive in webs of lies and deceit, to those held captive in addictive behavior patterns, along with freedom to those held captive and victimized under exploitative power. In and through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus defeated the power of sin and evil and opened the way to eternal light. He is the true light of the world that illumines our minds and hearts, and allows us to see the truth plainly.

The Bible, you see, isn't so much a creed to be accepted as it is a mission to be accomplished. We, walking together in Christ, are to be out there in the world, working to

advance and move Christ's saving mission toward its fulfillment. We can bring good news to the poor, liberty to those bound by addictions and compulsions, and we can give the light of knowledge and vision to those who are blinded by this world's darkness.

Living our Christian values by respecting life, living in honesty and truth, establishing justice, working for peace, and building up our families allows us to further Christ's mission on earth.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon you. He has anointed you and given you his gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, steadfastness and courage. Live your commissioning boldly and courageously. With those first apostles, burst out of your private rooms and go into the public square. Proclaim and give witness to the Gospel by the example of your lives so that many others may come to know the new life, healing, peace, freedom and salvation Jesus offers.

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Monday, January 25, 2016
(Lec. 519)

1) Acts 22:3-16 or
Acts 9:1-22

2) Mark 16:15-18

Gospel related: **CCC** 161, 183, 434, 670, 699, 888, 977, 1223, 1253, 1256, 1257, 1507, 1673

**THE CONVERSION
OF SAINT PAUL
the APOSTLE - FEAST**

FOCUS: As we celebrate Paul's conversion, we are challenged to give our all to God.

Why are you persecuting me? The voice from heaven asks the zealous defender of his Jewish faith, Saul, as he approaches Damascus. He is armed with letters from the religious authorities in Jerusalem authorizing him to track down and arrest members of this heretical sect who follow and worship a mere man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Persecuting "me"? Persecuting "my Church," we could understand. But "me"? Paul's experience is the origin of his teaching that the Church is Christ's body. What does that mean? Simply this: Since his return to his Father's right hand in heaven, Jesus has no body on earth but us. *We* are hands, arms, feet, eyes, ears and voice for Jesus Christ. What a tremendous responsibility! But it is a tremendous opportunity also.

Paul's conversion is yet another of the Lord's surprises. Which of us would have chosen an arch-persecutor of the Church to be the first great missionary of the Gospel to those outside the Jewish world in which Jesus lived?

Unlike Jesus' other apostles, Paul was not an eyewitness to Jesus' deeds and teaching. In time, however, Paul became convinced that he had seen the risen Lord outside Damascus. Here is what Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures; that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at once, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. After that he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them; not I, however, but the grace of God [that is] with me (15: 3-10).

As we celebrate Paul's conversion today, we pray that like him, we too may give ourselves completely to the Lord and one day hear the Lord speaking to us tenderly, and with great love: "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into your master's joy."

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Tuesday, January 26, 2016

(Lec. 520)

1) 2 Timothy 1:1-8* or
Titus 1:1-5*

(Lec. 318)

2) Mark 3:31-35

Gospel related: **CCC** 500

TUESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL. MEM. Saint Timothy
and Saint Titus, Bishops)

FOCUS: Christians are deeply united to one another by their faith and love for Jesus, and by conforming their lives to the will of God.

Today's reading is the beautiful beginning to Paul's second letter to his coworker, Timothy. In it we catch a glimpse of the affection between Christians in the early days of the Church. Paul demonstrates his familial bond with Timothy, whom he calls "[his] dear child." Not only does Paul write to Timothy, but we hear that Paul also prays ardently for him, is encouraged by his faith and desires to see him so that he can be filled with joy.

This is but one example of the observation in the Acts of the Apostles that the early Christians were *of one heart and mind*. (4:32) But how can such unity, affection and friendship be developed? Jesus gives us the answer in today's Gospel: *For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*

Just as with a family, the community formed by those who do the will of God cannot be replaced or found elsewhere. In fact, no other community is like it. Other organizations or social groups are based on the common will of their members. But the Church is kept unified by the way its members conform their lives to Jesus and to one another, which is the will of God.

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus describes doing God's will as *remaining* in his word (Jn 8:31), and likens it to a branch remaining connected to the vine (Jn 15:5) and a sheep following its shepherd (Jn 10:4). These and other passages highlight the importance of doing the will of God, and the new community that results. But they also highlight the fact that such a community must be maintained. A branch disconnected from its vine loses its connection to the other branches, and a sheep apart from its shepherd is separated from its fellow sheep. Thus we must continually recommit ourselves to the will of God.

Where and how do we renew our unity with Jesus and one another? Every time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we pray for each other, we witness to our shared faith, and we renew our commitment to patterning our life after Jesus. And we conform our lives to God's will when, before we receive the Eucharist, we say, "Amen, I believe."

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Wednesday, January 27, 2016
(Lec. 319)

- 1) 2 Samuel 7:4-17
- 2) Mark 4:1-20

WEDNESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem. Saint Angela Merici,
Virgin)

Gospel related: **CCC** 546, 2707

FOCUS: Jesus teaches us that with grace, we prepare our hearts for God's goodness to take root.

Jesus was both a man of his time and a man for all times. He was fully God and fully human. Through Jesus we meet his Father. Through the stories of Jesus, we awaken to the knowledge that we are beloved children of God. Few things translate across time and culture as well as a good story. The stories of the Bible offer us a glimpse into the heart of God, into God's way of thinking and being.

In today's first reading from Samuel, we hear God's call to David to build a temple. For David, this was a concrete request to build God's house, but it is also a metaphor. We are all called to build God's house. The parable of the sower in our Gospel today shifts the metaphor from a house to a garden. It asks us to reflect on the soil of our hearts. What state is it in? Is there anything we can do to improve the ground there?

A garden is a particularly interesting metaphor for the Christian life because unlike a builder, no gardener tills the soil once, wipes his hands and considers the task complete. Soil is prepared yearly before planting. The garden is watched over and tended throughout the growing season. When the harvest is complete, the soil is turned again. Fertilizer is added and the ground is left to rest. Cycles of care and attention are the definition of gardening.

Perhaps we wish Jesus would have left us with only building metaphors. One strong foundation and we're all set! But maybe Jesus knew that to understand our journey toward the kingdom of God, we also would need to reflect on a garden. Expecting seeds to grow requires ongoing time and consideration. Our relationship with God, our path toward greater holiness, our love and compassion for our neighbors – all of these need our conscious care and attention.

Today we are invited to look at the soil of our hearts, not with discouragement, but with great hope. The master gardener of all master gardeners has offered to help us prepare a slightly better space there for the purpose of growing all manner of holy things.

Let us open our hearts to Jesus' invitation. Let us dare to believe that ours are hearts in which he wishes to plant his love. Let us dare to build God's house within us. Let us offer prayers for ourselves and for each other, that God will honor our efforts, however small, and that the seeds of his goodness will find in us places to take root and grow.

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Thursday, January 28, 2016
(Lec. 320)
1) 2 Samuel 7:18-19, 24-29
2) Mark 4:21-25

THURSDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL. MEM.
Saint Thomas Aquinas,
Priest and Doctor
of the Church)

FOCUS: God is not outdone in generosity. We are called to be generous, as God is generous.

King David wanted to build a house for the Lord, a temple built of cedar wood. But through the words of Nathan the prophet, God tells David that his son will be the one to build a temple. Instead, God promises David that he will build him a house – not a material one, but a spiritual one that will be a source of blessing for all people. In the first reading today, David gives thanks to the Lord and accepts his promise. This blessing from the Lord to David has not remained private or hidden, but has been extended to all people in the person of Jesus Christ, the son of David, who is the savior and redeemer of all people.

In the Gospel, the Lord Jesus tells us not to keep private the graces and blessings we receive from God, but to share them generously with others. Jesus tells us that light is not meant to be hidden, but to be in a prominent place so that others may benefit from it. He also says that the measure with which we measure will be measured out to us, and still more. The gifts we receive from God are like light that must be placed on a lamp stand so that they may give light to all in the house.

We also are called to be generous with our gifts from God, and Jesus assures us that God will be even more generous with us. God has given us life and salvation through Jesus Christ. We are called to be as generous with others as God has been to us.

Today we remember Saint Thomas Aquinas, who was gifted by God with a brilliant mind and a pure heart. He did not take credit for or become prideful over his talents, but he used them for the glory of God and the building up of the Church. His major theological work, the *Summa Theologica*, continues to be studied even today. He did not keep the light of wisdom hidden under a bushel basket, but by his generosity he has allowed the light of his teaching to illuminate the whole house, which is the Church.

Let us imitate the example of Saint Thomas Aquinas and follow the teaching of Christ by using the unique gifts and talents God has given us to help further the work and mission of the Church.

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Friday, January 29, 2016
(Lec. 321)
1) 2 Samuel 11:1-4a, 5-10a 13-17
2) Mark 4:26-34
Gospel related: **CCC** 546

FRIDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: The ways of the Lord are often unexpected and mysterious, changing hearts and bringing about growth and conversion.

The story of David and his relationship with the beautiful Bathsheba is well-known and even infamous. On the one hand, David, the poet King, mighty champion and slayer of Goliath, is depicted as a man with feet of clay. In his lust, David had allowed his broken humanity to take control of his thoughts and actions and to sin greatly before the Lord. In short, David has breached his personal and royal covenant with the God of Israel, who first chose him to replace Saul, Israel's first king.

The story is about more than just personal or private sin. In his desire to have Bathsheba and to avoid the scandal of his own adulterous activities, David plans the death of Uriah the Hittite, an innocent man and ally in his military campaigns. By arranging his untimely death, David hopes to hide his adultery and is even willing to betray another to achieve this end. But as with all things in life, David is ultimately unable to control every event that follows.

Today's Old Testament reading reminds us that the lure of sin is never too far away from any of us. Like David, we all have brokenness and sinful desires. Too often, we also seek to hide them, fearing what the world might say or think. But just as sin is never too far away, neither is the presence of our loving and merciful God far away. In this Year of Mercy, we, too, are called to celebrate and embrace that mercy. As we listen and respond to the words of our responsorial psalm, words traditionally attributed to David when confronted by the prophet Nathan, we are invited to seek the mercy of God. We ask that his forgiveness might wash away our guilt and wipe out our offense.

Like the images used by Jesus in today's Gospel, that forgiveness, a hallmark and gift of the kingdom of God, comes silently into the hearts of all contrite and repentant sinners. Like the mustard seed that finds a fertile plot to grow and flourish, so God's mercy and forgiveness when it finds a contrite heart will grow and flourish and bring new life to every sinner.

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Saturday, January 30, 2016
(Lec. 322)
1) 2 Samuel 12:1-7a, 10-17
2) Mark 4:35-41

SATURDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Saturday in honor
of BVM)

FOCUS: Faith in Jesus helps dispel fear in our lives.

Today's Gospel story of Jesus calming the storm at sea begins a narrative of four miracle stories. The opening line describes the setting for the miracle: *It was evening*, which indicates that it had been a day of preaching and caring for the multitudes and Jesus was tired. He commanded the disciples *to cross to the other side*. Apparently, Jesus felt a need to get away from the crowds.

The disciples took Jesus into their boat. As they crossed, a violent squall came up and water filled the boat. Through this terrible storm, *Jesus was in the stern asleep on a cushion*. Most likely exhausted, Jesus slept through the storm until the disciples, fearing for their lives, woke him. They sought his help, asking, *Do you not care that we are perishing?*

Jesus cared. He used these words to calm the winds and storm: *Quiet. Be still*. Jesus had used the same words to expel demons (Mk 1:25). Immediately a great calm and ceasing of winds happened. Seeing what Jesus had done, the disciples were filled with awe. They responded: *Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?*

In this miracle story we witness the humanity of Jesus needing to rest after a hard day of labor, preaching to a large crowd and being present to them. We also experience Jesus as God in the calming of the storm.

During times of turmoil in our lives, do we hear Jesus say, *Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?* If our faith in Jesus is like the tiny mustard seed, mountains can be moved. If we believe in the power of Jesus, he will see and guide us through life's stormy seas and bring us to the light of a brighter day.

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 31, 2016

(Lec. 72)

- 1) Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19
- 2) 1 Corinthians 12:31—13:13 or 13:4-13
- 3) Luke 4:21-30

Gospel related: **CCC** 436, 1286

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: We are to walk in God's way of love.

Today's Gospel tells of Jesus coming to his hometown of Nazareth and going to teach in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Before beginning his teaching, Jesus reads a passage from the prophet Isaiah, which told of the Messiah and Savior God promised to bring healing, restoration and salvation to the people of Israel. After reading the passage, Jesus proclaims that this passage was fulfilled in their hearing. In other words, he was announcing himself as the long-promised Messiah.

How sad it was that the majority of the people gathered there that day were unable to see that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. It seems they were blinded by their experience of Jesus growing up humbly among them as the son of a carpenter. The Messiah was supposed to be someone like the great King David, who threw off the oppressors and restored the nation of Israel. Jesus certainly didn't fit the bill. And so they rejected Jesus and his message of salvation.

Now we shouldn't be too hasty in judging the people in Nazareth, because they had certain expectations, and they weren't being met in the manner they expected. How often do we think things should unfold and happen in our lives in a certain time and fashion because we have prayed for them? And then when they do not, we feel discouraged and frustrated and turn away from God.

For example, this can happen when we place the pursuit of money or material things before God, thinking they can bring us happiness or peace. But ultimately, the only things that will bring us true happiness, peace and joy are loving Jesus and trying to walk in his way of love. So let's try to keep our minds and hearts open to the Lord's love, and to the many and varied ways that he wants to work in our lives. Let us press upon our hearts the importance of remembering that God hears and answers all our prayers, but he answers them in his time and in the way that is best for us.

If we bear these things in mind, it will help us to keep our eyes firmly fixed upon Jesus, and make slow and steady progress in growing in faith and holiness of life. This will enable us to become more patient, gentle, kind, compassionate and forgiving toward others. Our goal is to live in such a way that we give glory to God, and invite others to know the joy we have found in Jesus.

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