

February

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Wednesday, February 1, 2017
(Lec. 325)

- 1) Hebrews 12:4-7, 11-15
- 2) Mark 6:1-6

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

WEDNESDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Faith is greater than knowledge.

Prior to Jesus' rejection in his hometown of Nazareth, he had healed the sick, cast out demons, calmed the sea and brought a little girl back to life. Yet the people of Nazareth wonder, "What makes this carpenter, the son of Mary, so special?" Many struggle with this same question today.

Perhaps, for some, it is Jesus' humanity that causes them to doubt. Mark points out several of Jesus' human characteristics – his job as a carpenter, his family and even his feelings. He draws attention to Jesus' inability to perform mighty deeds when people reject him. We can relate to this on a human level. Imagine if your family, friends and neighbors didn't believe in you. How many mighty deeds could you accomplish?

But Christ's amazement at the Nazoreans' lack of faith doesn't stem from lack of confidence; he worries for them. They have knowledge of him and his teachings, yet they miss the point of his word. He wants them to exercise their faith – repent, pray and trust in the Lord. Instead, they question.

We see deeper evidence of Jesus' humanity later in our Lord's passion. He endures extreme physical pain, emotional anguish and spiritual distress in the garden and again on the cross.

Suffering challenges the faith of many. It doesn't make sense that the Lord allows suffering, especially to good people. The truth is that suffering is inevitable; it's part of life. We all have, or will experience suffering in different ways and at different intensities.

Today's reading from Hebrews invites us to look at suffering in a new way. Rather than complain, we should be courageous and believe it will eventually bear the *peaceful fruit of righteousness* promised by the Lord.

Our Lord chose to become one of us – to experience the same realities of work, family life and emotions that we face every day. In this way, he unites himself with us. By choosing to join our sufferings to those of Christ's, we help build up the kingdom of God and are joined more closely to Jesus.

Let's not make the same mistake the Nazoreans made and have certain faith expectations. We may not have all the answers, but we have faith. We believe, we trust and we hope, even when it doesn't seem to make sense. If our lives reflect this faith and we are deeply rooted in Christ, he can work in and through us to accomplish great deeds.

Thursday, February 2, 2017
(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: Christ is the light of the world who dispels the darkness of sin and evil, and illumines the path to salvation.

In today's Gospel, Mary and Joseph are submitting to the Law of Moses. It was the Jewish belief that when a woman gave birth, she was unclean and in need of ritual purification. When giving birth to a son, the Jewish woman would be in seclusion for the first forty days. At the end of that period, the mother would offer her first-born son to the Lord and be purified.

Even though we believe that Mary did not need such purification, the beauty of the ritual and the words of Simeon reveal that Jesus is the Christ – the light of the world. As we just heard from Simeon when he was holding the baby Jesus in the Gospel, Jesus is *a light for revelation to the Gentiles*.

Light illuminates our dark hours. For millennia, it has symbolized the triumph of good over evil – the light of Christ. This is why candles are so prevalent in Christianity – they remind us that we belong to Christ, the light of the world.

The first reading from the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament prophets, also speaks to the theme of light. It contains a prophecy about the coming of the Messiah. This prophet uses the words *the refiner's fire* and *the fuller's lye*. Fire refines and purifies gold as well as silver. Lye, combined with sunlight, bleaches cloth until it is immaculately white. Through Jesus, God is the light seeking to transform us into our very best selves. Through him we can have as much faith as Abraham and Sarah. This light will purify our motives and enable us to act in charity toward others.

The reading from Hebrews gives more details about the coming of the light of Christ. In sharing our flesh and blood, the Son of God would *destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil*. As the light of the world, he liberates us by being the priest and victim who takes away the sins of the world.

Today's readings clearly invite us to open our hearts more fully to Christ's light and love. When we do this, Jesus can continue to change and transform us so that we can share his light and love more fully with others, and in so doing, we help build up his kingdom of love and peace in the world.

Friday, February 3, 2017
(Lec. 327)

- 1) Hebrews 13:1-8
- 2) Mark 6:14-29

FRIDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.)

Saint Blaise, Bishop and Martyr;
Saint Ansgar, Bishop)

Gospel related: **CCC** 523

FOCUS: God will hold us accountable and responsible for the choices we make.

We meet an interesting cast of characters in today's Gospel. Herod, no doubt because of his guilty conscience, concluded that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life. In spite of John's criticism of Herod's adulterous relationship with Herodias, Herod liked listening to John.

Unfortunately, Herod's respect for John wasn't enough, it seems, to overcome his ego. When Herodias' daughter danced at his birthday party, Herod made a big show of promising to give her anything she wanted. She asked for John's head on a platter. Herod didn't want to look weak in front of his guests, so despite having internal reservations, he ordered John to be killed.

It's not too much of a stretch to say that, like Herod, we too can get ourselves in trouble by trying to impress others. People-pleasing can keep us from doing what we know is right.

Herodias' daughter consulted her mother before deciding what to ask for. Having *carte blanche* can be overwhelming. It's not surprising the young girl asked her mother for advice. It *is* surprising that she complied with such a grim choice instead of choosing something more in line with what a young girl might want. What made her willing to give in to her mother's morbid request? Most probably it was her desire to please her mother.

Similarly, we can get thrown off track when we rely on others instead of using our own judgment. While it is important to seek and consider trustworthy advice in making our decisions, let's not to use another's advice as an excuse for bad choices. We must take responsibility for our lives and choices. God has given us the gift of our minds, the gift of free will, the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of the Church and the Holy Spirit to help us know and choose the good. Therefore, God will hold us accountable for our choices, one way or another.

The characters in today's Gospel represent sinful inclinations and forces in the world that can dissuade us from making good choices that are not in keeping with the will of God. Despite these forces, however, we can, with the help of Jesus' teachings and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, resolve to make choices that align with the will of God and bring us closer to him.

Saturday, February 4, 2017

(Lec. 328)

1) Hebrews 13:15-17, 20-21

2) Mark 6:30-34

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

FOCUS: Turn to God in prayer, and experience his many blessings.

Each of us, throughout the course of our lives, encounters unexpected situations and circumstances – joyful or sorrowful, or somewhere in between. When such things happen, we can be uneasy, anxious or overwhelmed. Perhaps we call a trusted friend or go for a walk to gain our composure. But the relief offered by such strategies is temporary and fleeting, at best. We need something more.

In today's Gospel, Jesus offers an invitation to the Apostles, who had been teaching and healing in his name. Jesus says: *Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while*. The Apostles had been so busy *doing* that they were not taking the time to *be* with God in prayer. The same goes for us today. Yes, we are all very busy. So we must *make time* to rest a while – to turn to God and receive the strength we need to cope with life's unexpected trials and tribulations.

When we turn to Jesus in prayer and reflect on his word, it allows us to listen and discover what God's will is for us that day. Our God is a God of peace, and he wishes us to live in peace. Time spent in prayer can deepen our understanding of how God works in our lives.

Today's first reading from the letter to the Hebrews offers us similar guidance to help us find and experience God's blessings in the midst of our hectic lives. Hebrews tells us to continually offer praise to God; do good; share what we have; and fulfill our tasks with joy. Doing so will keep our eyes firmly fixed upon Jesus, and open our hearts to receiving the grace we need to cope with all that life throws at us – no matter how great the burden or unimaginable the joy.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2017

(Lec. 73)

- 1) Isaiah 58:7-10
- 2) 1 Corinthians 2:1-5
- 3) Matthew 5:13-16

Gospel related: **CCC** 326, 782, 1243, 2821

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: We are blessed by God and called to be his light before others, drawing others into a new relationship with the Lord.

A story is told of a church that was destroyed during the 1995 Rwandan genocide. As the parish sought to rebuild itself, it began by rebuilding the church, which once stood at the heart of the community. Unable to provide electricity, however, and with a residual fear of further violence, the scattered community would wait until dark to gather for Sunday Mass. Each week, with the ringing of a bell, a little miracle would happen.

As the people made their way to the shell of the church, they brought with them their lamps, using them to light the way and to light their parish church. When finished, they would return home the same way, taking with them their lamps. For anyone observing this, it was impossible not to see the connection between this miraculous event and today's Gospel. For this broken and grieving community, it was a sign of God's continuing presence in the life of their community, a sign that life was returning to normal – that God's light was with them and in them. The only time that little church was lit up was when people were present. That was when they became truly Church!

So it is for all believers as we gather on the Lord's Day. We gather in the light of Christ, and we are challenged to be that same light in the world – to be Christ in the world and in the lives of others. The image of light is a powerful one. We all know how important it is to life. When we have light we are more secure, and we can see the way even if it might be uneven or circuitous. Light is necessary; it brightens our vision of life and invites others to share in our vision.

So the words of Jesus, *You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden*, are both challenging and consoling. Being a Christian is like that! Our lives should shine with Christ's presence, compassion, care and love. And we must show this in practical ways, as Isaiah tells us in the first reading: sharing our bread, sheltering the oppressed and homeless, clothing the naked and fighting against oppression, lies and false accusation. Isaiah sets before us a vision or a road map for life according to the will of God.

The images of light and salt are interesting and provoking ones. Neither can exist for its own sake. Light is no good if there is no one to use it or to bask in its glow. As the Gospel tells us, you do not light a lamp and then hide it. Light is meant to penetrate and overcome darkness: it does not make sense to hide it. Likewise, salt is no good unless it brings flavor to food.

So our faith is no good if it is all about us. As we deepen our relationship with God through prayer and the Eucharist, we will be strengthened to go out and share our faith with others. Only then will we be fulfilling the Gospel mandate to be Christ's disciples, and to bring glory to God.

Monday, February 6, 2017
(Lec. 329)

- 1) Genesis 1:1-19
- 2) Mark 6:53-56

MONDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saint Paul Miki and Companions,
Martyrs)

Gospel related: **CCC** 1504 **CSDC** 453

FOCUS: God created all that is, and *saw that it was good*.

There's a beautiful reassurance in hearing the creation account that literally begins the Bible: "God made the world," and "everything is good." And so it is, even if not everything is simple, and even though darkness and evil are present in our midst. But only God is the creator and in God, good has conquered evil and always will.

The very next chapter of Genesis presents another account of creation, the one where God creates woman from the rib of the man after casting him into a deep sleep. The scholars tell us this double explanation of the same mystery is the result of joining two ancient literary traditions. Some find this troubling and confusing, but the point is clear: God is the source of it all, and from God's perspective and ours, it's all good.

Of course, there are plenty of other accounts of creation, each reflecting a particular culture and its particular outlook on life. Maybe you've come across a Native American creation account or two. There's one that has the world formed on the back of a huge, primordial turtle. There's another that presents every element of creation as a unique gift given to particular animals in order to be shared generously with all. In this one, though, the ever-hungry and self-centered seagull refuses to share one of the most precious gifts of all, the gift of light. Only the crafty intervention of the raven manages to trick the seagull into sharing what we all so depend on.

In another creation account, this one from the culture of Babylon, the earth is formed from the reeking remains of the exploded body of a wicked ancient dragon. This story is full of attention-grabbing drama and conflict, and since the very elements of creation come from an evil source, it easily explains the problem of evil in our midst.

What a contrast this is to our creation accounts! The end of the seven-day creation account from chapter one in Genesis concludes with these very words: *God looked around at everything he had made and saw that it was very good* (31).

Do you believe that God created all that is?

Can you believe that and still believe in evolution?

Can they both be good? Can both creation accounts in the book of Genesis be true? We can sometimes find ourselves torn between either-or conflicts like this that test our very faith. I hope you'll find it reassuring to know – or be reminded – that Saint John Paul, a model of fidelity to the teachings of the Church and a most honored teacher of the faith, spoke out strongly that there is no contradiction between faith and science, and that God is behind the creative design of the universe.

The conflict that some insist on between the two has led to painful divisions in the Church and society, and even in families. I don't have a simple resolution to the need to move from either-or to both-and in this conflict, but today's Gospel does. Like the sick and ailing who found healing in simply touching the hem of the garment of Jesus, this is one more ailment we need to bring to him. Touch the hem of his garment. Seek healing from any tensions regarding the faith.

Remember that he calls us to love of God and neighbor – to mercy and forgiveness. Remember how he welcomed those written off as sinners by the Pharisees and repeatedly pointed out the inconsistencies of those who insisted on their own righteousness. Do you want to know the Truth? Then humbly touch the garment of him who is our Truth by studying the Gospels and heeding them.

Tuesday, February 7, 2017
(Lec. 330)

- 1) Genesis 1:20-2:4a
- 2) Mark 7:1-13

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

TUESDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: The laws of God will always be more important than laws made by human beings.

Did you hear that word? The “h” word? Jesus does not hesitate to use that word – *hypocrites* – when someone is trying to show how good and righteous he or she is, but actually is being judgmental and prideful. Jesus had a hard time with hypocrites, and today's Gospel is a good case in point.

Some scribes and Pharisees had come to observe Jesus and his disciples. They noticed the disciples did not carry out the traditional washing ritual before they ate, and questioned Jesus about it. Jesus made no excuses for his disciples. He did not even address the question, but instead turned the criticism back on those doing the questioning.

Jesus knew the hearts of these men. He knew they had lost perspective. They had put the traditions and the human-made rituals ahead of the laws God had given them. They had done this for their own benefit, not for the salvation of the people whose souls were entrusted to them.

Our first reading speaks of the creation of the world and God's decision to make humankind in his own image and likeness. This included giving humans dominion over the creatures of the earth. The Pharisees and scribes of Jesus' time seem to have distorted this gift, creating their own laws and extending their dominion to other human beings. Jesus was not one to let such errors go unaddressed. What the scribes and Pharisees were doing was crushing the people's faith, and making it harder for them to know and experience God's love.

So, what does all this have to do with us? What is the message we can take from these readings for our own lives? There are many, but let's reflect on just a few today.

- If you want to be a follower of Jesus, you cannot be a hypocrite. Jesus will call you on it every time.
- Keep your perspective. The laws of God are designed to help us grow in our love for God and for each other. The laws we create should support this effort, not make it more difficult.
- We are made in his image, but we are not God. Let us humbly remember this when we are in positions of authority and have opportunities to help others discover and know the goodness of and reason for God's laws.

Wednesday, February 8, 2017
(Lec. 331)

- 1) Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17
- 2) Mark 7:14-23

WEDNESDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.)

Saint Jerome Emiliani;
Saint Josephine Bakhita, Virgin)

Gospel related: **CCC** 574, 582, 1764

FOCUS: Give us hearts that seek what is good and right – hearts that seek Jesus.

In today's first reading, we see God instructing Adam not to eat from the *tree of knowledge of good and evil*, and that if he does, Adam shall die. Of course, we know what happens. Adam and Eve defy God and suffer the consequences. He and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden.

The Gospel passage from Mark deals with the interpretation of similar sin. In chapter seven, Jesus goes against the traditions of the elders, threatening the old ways with his divine interpretation of the law, and flying in the face of those who are able to wield power through the enforcement of laws designed to oppress rather than free. Jesus again incites criticism from the Pharisees, who secretly are plotting to destroy him (**CCC** 574). He takes their dietary law and reveals its divine meaning: it is not what is eaten that defiles, but what comes from within (**CCC** 582). Jesus says food is not what defiles us, but rather that sin which comes from within us – from our hearts, the source of our passions.

So in today's readings, we are reminded of the ways we can be defiled by sinful and selfish passions that drive us to act in ways that are unholy. Similar to the way Adam and Eve are tricked by the snake in the next chapter of Genesis and willfully defy God, we, too, can find ourselves going against what we know to be right if we fail to examine our minds and hearts on a regular basis and place into the Lord's hands any desire that could lead us to act in a way that is contrary to his will. For as Jesus says, *From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile.*

Finally, as we receive the Eucharist today, let us ask God to purify our minds and give us hearts that seek what is good and right – hearts that seek Jesus.

Thursday, February 9, 2017
(Lec. 332)

- 1) Genesis 2:18-25
- 2) Mark 7:24-30

Gospel related: **CCC** 2616

THURSDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Unity with God is reflected in the unity of man and woman in the sacrament of matrimony.

Today's first reading from Genesis makes it clear that God established and instituted marriage from the beginning of creation to be a covenant which joins together a man and a woman in a lifelong partnership of life and love. Understanding this important truth, let us take a look at a few essential points we can draw from this passage regarding marriage.

First, God wants us to be united to each other – uniquely, intimately – as it is good for us. Second, we learn that “suitability” is important, so when we do entertain the idea of a lifelong commitment to another in marriage, it is important to first seek God's will. We do not want to enter into marriage based only on emotion. Although it seems to be a strong indicator, it is not necessarily the *best* indicator for determining a suitable partner. Notice in our reading today that man recognized the woman as a *suitable partner* – as one with whom he shares his very being.

It is also important to realize that every marriage is created by God to a particular end. We know that a willingness to accept children is primary, but how many of us recognize the relationship God has with us, within marriage? Every marriage is to be a witness to God. The union shared by a husband and wife reflects the divine union between God and man. The selfless giving, the sacrificial nature, the loving gift that God offers us throughout and within all of our trials, is not unlike what takes place within the *one body* shared in a marriage.

I would encourage you to reflect on this passage and the new form that takes place when a man and woman are joined in matrimony. The Church does not take this union lightly, and has a responsibility to prepare couples so they have an understanding of the nature of their oneness in God. In its loving response to couples who are struggling, our priests are available to pray for, and with, those who long for a healthy union. Often, people wait until relationships have spiraled out of control before seeking help. Please do not wait! It is God's plan that we live in happiness and peace, and it is something we naturally seek. Let us pray for those preparing for marriage, and for those who are struggling to live out this beautiful vocation.

Friday, February 10, 2017
(Lec. 333)

- 1) Genesis 3:1-8
- 2) Mark 7:31-37

FRIDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saint Scholastica, Virgin)

Gospel related: **CCC** 1151, 1504

FOCUS: Christ fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament, and calls us to hear and live the word of God.

Many of the prophetic references in Old Testament Scripture concerning the Messiah share the common theme that the Messiah's coming would be marked by miraculous happenings. And it's important to remember that what God promises, God fulfills. If we have any doubt about this, let's look at today's Gospel reading. The phrase that says *he makes the deaf hear and the mute speak* comes directly from the prophecy of Isaiah (29, 35). Therefore, the fulfillment of God's promise is at hand. Yet in fulfilling the prophecy, there is movement beyond it because this man was a Gentile, not an Israelite. Indeed, Jesus demonstrates that foreigners as well as Israelites are a part of his universal salvation.

Additionally, this healing is much more than a story about the curing of a physical ailment. What Jesus does to this individual is meant to happen to every one of his followers. Indeed, all of us need to have our ears open so we can hear and understand the message of Jesus. When we have heard the message and when we understand it, we are called to speak it to the world. Hearing and speaking, then, are inseparable elements for the disciple of Christ. Through sacred Scripture and the sacraments, Christ continues to touch us.

Saint Scholastica is a good example of someone who heard the word of God and acted on it. She consecrated her life to God at a young age. After her brother, Saint Benedict, established a Benedictine monastery, she founded a monastery of nuns. She and her brother conferred with one another on spiritual matters in order to live the Gospel message more fully. We need to ask her to intercede for us so we will hear and act on the word of God.

Saturday, February 11, 2017
(Lec.334)

- 1) Genesis 3:9-24
- 2) Mark 8:1-10

SATURDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.
Our Lady of Lourdes;
Saturday in honor of BVM)

Gospel related: **CCC** 1329

FOCUS: Surrender in faith to the Lord God.

Have you ever felt so ashamed of yourself that you wanted to run away and hide? Today's first reading is about a man who felt that way. After disobeying God's command, Adam hides, hoping to avoid a confrontation with the loving Creator and Father against whom he has rebelled.

When God pursues him and asks, *Where are you?* the man replies: *I was afraid ... so I hid.* He thought he would find happiness by "doing his own thing." Instead, he finds only disappointment, frustration and shame. Is there anyone here who hasn't had a similar experience? This simple story is no primitive folk tale. It is the story of Everyman with a capital "E" – true to our common experience of life. If the story has a moral, it is this: We find happiness, joy and peace only when we stop trying to run away and hide from God, and begin entrusting ourselves to him in faith.

The phrase "in faith" is crucial. It means trusting God. That does not come easily to us. Our natural instinct is to trust ourselves. Most of the time we enjoy playing the leading role in what Bishop Robert Barron, widely recognized as the Bishop Fulton Sheen of our day, calls our "ego-drama" – an apt term for the idea that life is really all about me, and I'm in charge, thank you.

It takes most of us years, with many falls into disgrace and failure, to learn that life is *not* all about me. We begin really to live, and to enjoy happiness, fulfillment and peace, only when we start to enter into what Bishop Barron calls the "theo-drama" – God's drama. *He* plays the leading role, *he* is in charge.

People who do that to a heroic degree are called saints. They surrender their lives to the One who made them: the Lord God. Saint Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, wrote what has become a classic prayer which expresses this surrender. It goes like this:

"Take, O Lord, and receive my entire life: my liberty, my understanding, my memory, my will. All that I am and have you have given me. I give back to you all, to be disposed of according to your good pleasure. Give me only the comfort of your presence, and the joy of your love. With these I shall be more than rich, and shall desire nothing more."

Pray those words daily, and you will have found the basis, at least, for lifelong happiness.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2017

(Lec. 76)

1) Sirach 15:15-20

2) 1 Corinthians 2:6-10

3) Matthew 5:17-37

or 5:20-22a, 27-28, 33-34a, 37

Gospel related: CCC 226, 577, 581, 592, 678, 1034, 1424, 1456, 1967, 2053, 2054, 2141, 2153, 2257, 2262, 2302, 2330, 2336, 2338, 2380, 2382, 2463, 2466, 2513, 2528, 2608, 2792, 2841, 2845

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: The desire for a deeper relationship with God inspires us to choose to keep his commandments.

In the first and second readings, we are reminded of how important it is to make good choices, and how much we rely on the wisdom of God to help us do so. This is *not a wisdom of this age*, but, rather, a determination to have our eyes set on heaven. The wisdom of God, the desire for a deeper relationship with him, inspires us to choose to keep the commandments and to trust in him: *Whichever they choose will be given them.*

As Christians and as children of God, we are given a radical freedom and free will – to listen and obey or to turn away. God has not done this in order to mock us and watch us fail. Rather, he allows us the freedom to choose to love him and be loved by him, leaving open the possibility that we might also go our own way.

A narrow reading of the Gospel, or a “Pharisaical” reading of it, portrays Jesus as an “outlaw to the outcast,” breaking so many of the rules of ritual purity – talking to and touching and eating with people he should have stayed away from, lest he be declared unclean. That is why it comes as such a surprise when he says, during the Sermon on the Mount: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.* Indeed, Jesus makes it clear that every last letter must be fulfilled. This does not suggest that he is what we might call a stickler for the rules, or a tattletale, looking to get us into trouble with the Father. No, the Good Shepherd is once again trying to protect his lost, wounded and wandering lambs from doing harm to ourselves or one another, and he firmly believes that a greater respect for the laws of God will lead us to show greater respect for God’s people.

Yes, Jesus, dined with tax collectors and prostitutes, and showed affection for the unclean and the untouchable, because that is what God’s law commands all of us to do – to look out for the needs of the least among us. In the mind and heart of Jesus, fulfilling the law to the *smallest part of a letter* means two things: 1) going further than the law requires, and 2) obeying and applying God’s law with love for God and all people whom we encounter.

This is why Jesus chooses some of the Ten Commandments, and then shows us that it would never be enough to simply not kill someone, or never cheat on our spouse. In order to live the beatitudes, first preached earlier in this same chapter, we must embrace the idea that faith in God and belief in his Son as our Savior is meant not only to change how we view and respond to God, but more importantly, it should change how we treat others – especially the weakest and most vulnerable. We can no longer say one thing and do another. Instead, *let your “yes” mean “yes” and your “no” mean “no.”*

Monday, February 13, 2017
(Lec. 335)
1) Genesis 4:1-15, 25
2) Mark 8:11-13

MONDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Give yourself to God in faith and love, and you will receive signs.

The Pharisees came forward and began to argue with [Jesus], seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. The words show the hostility of Jesus' critics. They argue with him. They put him to the test. They assume that he will fail the test, and thus lose popular support.

Jesus has already given numerous signs, such as his healing miracles. For his critics, however, these are insufficient. They demand a sign so dramatic that it will *compel* belief. Jesus refuses their demand. Why? Because he knows that belief cannot be compelled, any more than love can be compelled. The greatest sign of all – the empty tomb – was still in the future at the time of this confrontation. When it came, Jesus' critics had a perfectly plausible explanation: persons unknown, possibly Jesus' own friends, had moved his body. The only person who came to belief on the basis of the empty tomb alone was the man always referred to in the Gospel which bears his name as "the disciple whom Jesus loved": the Apostle John. All the other friends of Jesus came to belief in the resurrection only after seeing the risen Lord – and most of them were initially skeptical.

Signs are given to people who already believe, never to people who demand proof as a condition of belief. One of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, *Othello*, is about this: A rough military man, Othello's life is transformed when he meets the woman who will become his wife, Desdemona. She brings love into his life, but also beauty, tenderness and light.

All is well until Othello's lieutenant Iago, for reasons which literary scholars are still disputing, suggests to Othello that the wife whom he passionately loves is unfaithful to him. Whereupon Othello demands that Desdemona prove she has not betrayed him. But you can't prove a negative. As long as Othello loved and trusted the wife whose love had lit up his life, he received constant proof of her love. Once he withdrew that trust and demanded proof, no proof was sufficient. A love, once beautiful, dies; and at the end of the play Desdemona herself dies at the hand of her now estranged husband. A tragedy indeed.

You want signs that prove the Lord's love for you? Proof that Jesus, while completely human like us, is truly the divine Son of God? Then give yourself to him in faith and love, and you will receive signs which prove both these things. But demand proofs *before* you believe, and like Jesus' critics, you will go away empty-handed.

Tuesday, February 14, 2017

(Lec. 336)

1) Genesis 6:5-8; 7:1-5, 10

2) Mark 8:14-21

TUESDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saints Cyril, Monk;
and Methodius, Bishop)

Gospel related: **CCC** 1329

FOCUS: Trust and understanding are fundamental to our relationship with God.

Two words come to mind after listening to today's Scriptures: trust and understanding.

These two virtues are fundamental to any relationship, including our relationship with God. That might seem obvious; after all, we declare our belief in the triune God with every proclamation of the creed. But what does it mean to truly trust God? And do we ever really understand what is happening in our lives, and what God is asking of us?

Our Scripture passages today touch on the ideas of trust and understanding, and give some insight into how we might foster these elements in our spiritual lives. In our reading from Genesis, we hear the story of the great flood. What stands out in this story, for our purposes today, is the trust that Noah had in God.

Noah was given specific instructions, and he did as God commanded. He understood, and complied with, every detail – never questioning God's plan. He trusted that if he did what was asked – if he listened to what God had to say – that all would be well for him and God would save him. And God does.

In Mark's Gospel, the communication between Jesus and the disciples does not go as smoothly as that between God and Noah. While the disciples trust Jesus and believe in him, they do not always understand the things he says. This is exemplified in the Gospel when Jesus, soon after miraculously feeding a crowd of four thousand with seven loaves and a few fish, warns the disciples to guard themselves against the *leaven* – the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees. One of the reasons Jesus gives the disciples this warning is that he wants them to understand the importance of keeping their hearts open to all that he says and does because they still had much to learn. The disciples totally miss the point, however, as they conclude that Jesus gave them the warning because they only had one loaf of bread with them.

This must have frustrated Jesus. For he wanted the disciples to understand all that he came to reveal and accomplish. If they do not truly understand it, how can they in turn teach it? Jesus must keep speaking to them, and they must keep listening with open minds and hearts.

Our own spiritual lives and our daily endeavors probably include a mix of trust and understanding. Sometimes we hear God clearly, and though we do not see, or perhaps even understand, the larger picture, we trust that God will see us safely through the stormy times of life. We figure understanding will come in time. On other occasions, we might feel we understand what God is communicating to us, only to find out we missed the point entirely.

Trust and understanding are essential to our relationship with God. We foster these virtues by listening to God, by asking for his help to understand, and by trusting that, no matter what, he is there to guide and save us.

Wednesday, February 15, 2017
(Lec. 337)

- 1) Genesis 8:6-13, 20-22
- 2) Mark 8:22-26

Gospel related: **CCC** 699, 1151, 1504

WEDNESDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus challenges us to be the first to forgive.

Symbols are all around us. Just look at the instrument panel on your car, the icons on your computer or the one dollar bill. On that one dollar bill you will find the seal of the United States over the right-hand side. Grasped in the eagle's right-hand pinion, you will find an olive branch with thirteen leaves. The statement being made is that the thirteen colonies are now binding themselves together to live in peace and to promote peace. Coupled with the arrows in the eagle's left pinion, the message is "peace through strength."

Symbols can inspire us, assist us and give us direction. Symbols were also used in ancient times, in many cultures, and in almost all religions.

Today's first reading presents us with two well-known symbols: the olive branch and the dove. They represent our hope for the restoration of peace and tranquility. Returning to Noah in his ark, the dove and the olive branch signal that God is now going to restore and renew creation.

As we all know, Jesus Christ was all about bringing salvation and healing to the world through reconciliation and forgiveness. He has challenged us, and continues to challenge us, to forgive – to follow his path of mercy. We know that this can be hard to do – not only to forgive but also to receive forgiveness.

Do any of us need to extend the olive branch of peace to someone in our own life? Jesus asks us – he challenges us – to be the first to forgive, to take the initiative in offering the olive branch of peace. It's not easy. And so we have the prayer that Jesus taught us – the Lord's Prayer. In this prayer, Jesus teaches us to ask our Father in heaven to give us our daily bread – the bread of life, the bread that strengthens us, the bread that fills us with his graces. These are the graces we need to follow in the way of Jesus – to be the first to forgive.

The olive branch and the dove symbolize what God wants us to do.

Thursday, February 16, 2017
(Lec.338)

- 1) Genesis 9:1-13
- 2) Mark 8:27-33

Gospel related: **CCC** 472, 474, 557, 572, 649

THURSDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: *Who do you say that I am?*

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples: *Who do people say that I am?* They respond: *John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets.* Then he presses them further, *Who do you say that I am?* Peter responds with great faith: *You are the Messiah.*

This is a turning point in the Gospel of Mark. The disciples had just witnessed some impressive miracles – the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter, the curing of the man who was deaf and mute, the feeding of the multitudes and the gradual cure of the blind man at Bethsaida. It must have been quite fascinating to follow this type of Messiah – one with great powers and popularity! Yet now the disciples hear, for the first time, Jesus predicting his certain future. He speaks openly about how the *Son of Man* will be rejected by the elders, chief priests and the scribes. He will indeed suffer and die. Peter rebukes Jesus for such a notion.

Christ, in turn, reprimands Peter for not thinking *as God does, but as human beings do.*

Even Jesus' terminology holds a clue – though he was the Son of God, Jesus often used the term *Son of Man*. It is a title of humility, often attributed to prophets with great spiritual powers and, ultimately, one who would exhibit messianic qualities. The term also recognized Jesus' truly human nature, which coexisted with his divine nature (CCC 472-474).

How would you have answered Jesus' questions? Would you have been quick to label him as just another great prophet? Would you have been convinced that he was the long-awaited Messiah? Would you have boldly proclaimed that he is the Christ ("the anointed one")? Would you have left everything to follow this itinerant preacher, the son of a carpenter? Or would you have enjoyed the miracles, perhaps thanked God for them, and then returned to your daily life?

Would we be like Noah who listened to God's predictions, built an ark, and gathered creatures of every kind? Or would we be like Peter, who initially thought that the notion of the long-awaited, powerful Messiah being put to death was unacceptable? How long would it take for us to bear witness to the truth? Would we be willing to die for the sake of Christ?

We, too, are part of God's plan of salvation. How often have we missed the obvious? When have we misinterpreted God's plan? We, too, hear his word and encounter him in the sacraments. We, too, have met him in the streets and seen his miracles. We, too, are called to do his work, share the Gospel message, and perhaps be ridiculed because of it. How often do we ignore God's plan for us because it may be too messy, or inconvenient, or simply too much to sacrifice? Do we try to ignore it or do we negotiate with God and reject the notion of giving up our vision to live out his? Spend some time in prayer with God and ask him.

Friday, February 17, 2017
(Lec. 339)

- 1) Genesis 11:1-9
- 2) Mark 8:34—9:1

FRIDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem. The Seven
Holy Founders of the
Servite Order)

Gospel related: **CCC** 459, 1615, 2544 **CSDC** 260

FOCUS: Take up your cross and follow Christ.

“What is my purpose in life?” At some point, every person wrestles with this question. Perhaps it is because in our answer, we discover life’s direction and meaning.

Psychiatrist and holocaust survivor Viktor E. Frankl writes in his powerful memoir *Man’s Search for Meaning*, “Man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life.” This is the same lesson Jesus teaches us in our Gospel when he talks about the price of discipleship.

Popular culture teaches us to live for ourselves – do what we enjoy, avoid what we don’t enjoy and acquire earthly treasures like money, property and possessions. This is not unlike the early Babylonians from our first reading who built a magnificent tower in hopes of making a name for themselves. Jesus challenges this self-centered notion when he asks his disciples, *What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? What could one give in exchange for his life?*

The instructions Jesus gives his disciples are radical. They were already facing harsh conditions living under Roman rule, and most likely looking to Jesus for relief – not to encounter more hardships. Yet, Jesus asks them to sacrifice earthly pleasures, unite their suffering with his and do as he commands – a total surrender of self.

The conditions of discipleship aren’t confined to those present when Jesus spoke these words. They are directed toward us as followers of Christ today. Some may be inspired by these words and moved by the Holy Spirit to pursue a vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life – uniting one’s self to Christ and serving the Church.

Others are called to the vocation of marriage. In this sacrament, a man and a woman, out of their love for the Lord and as a sign of having dedicated their lives to living as disciples of Jesus, join themselves together in an unbreakable union of life and love that represents Christ’s love for his Church.

What sacrifices can you make in your life right now that will allow you to live as a more faithful disciple of Jesus? Through setting aside our sinful and selfish desires and walking in Christ’s way of love, we find purpose and meaning. It is this sacrifice that allows us to live out the two greatest commandments, to love our Lord and to love our neighbor, untainted by pride or selfishness. The treasures of this world will one day perish; those awaiting us in the kingdom of heaven are eternal.

Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake ... will save it.

Saturday, February 18, 2017
(Lec. 340)

- 1) Hebrews 11:1-7
- 2) Mark 9:2-13

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

Gospel related: **CCC** 151, 459, 552, 649

FOCUS: The transfiguration of Jesus reminds us that suffering and death do not have the final word.

According to Mark's gospel, Jesus led Peter, James, and John up a high mountain *after six days* (Mk 9: 2). Six days after what? In the verses just before this passage, Jesus warned his followers that he must suffer, be rejected and put to death before rising again. When well-meaning Peter criticized Jesus for saying such a thing, Jesus called Peter an obstacle, saying, *Get behind me, Satan*. Jesus then made it plain that all those who wanted to follow him would have to deny themselves and take up their crosses (Mk 8: 34-38).

Apparently the transfiguration was six days after Jesus gave the disciples this warning. It's as if Jesus' glorious manifestation served to balance the foreshadowing of suffering. While on the mountain, the glorified Jesus spoke with the prophet Elijah and with Moses, to whom God had given the Ten Commandments. Their appearance signifies Jesus as the fulfillment of both the law and prophecies of the Old Testament. This divine prefiguring confirmed that Jesus' suffering would not have the last word.

Awestruck, Peter wanted to participate in this mountaintop experience. He offered to build shelters for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Who doesn't want to take up permanent residence at life's high points? But the heavenly voice said, *This is my beloved Son. Listen to him*. Peter, James and John listened. They followed Jesus back down the mountain, where they were reminded again of the reality of suffering. Our earthly lives include both joy and sorrow.

When Jesus had first warned the disciples about his suffering and death, we could say that Peter tried to change the conversation. On the mountaintop, Peter wanted to get in on the action and spoke up again. Although his remarks weren't helpful in either case, we can learn from Peter. We don't have to have an answer for everything. We don't have to comment on or take action in all situations – especially when we don't know what to say or do. When we're overwhelmed by joy or sorrow, it's OK to just listen in silence. That's when we can hear the words God speaks within the silence of our hearts.

Now while Jesus made it explicitly clear that to live as one of his disciples, we must take up our cross each day and follow him, his transfiguration reminds us that suffering and death are not the end of the story. Rather Jesus' suffering and death lead to the glory of the resurrection. When we take up our cross each day and follow him, bear our share of hardship for the sake of the Gospel, and persevere in faith, we are given the promise and hope of eternal life in heaven.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2017

(Lec. 79)

- 1) Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18
- 2) 1 Corinthians 3:16-23
- 3) Matthew 5:38-48

Gospel related: **CCC** 443, 1693, 1825, 1933, 1968, 2013, 2054, 2262, 2303, 2443, 2608, 2828, 2842, 2844 **CSDC** 40

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Living the faith is acting with love and mercy.

Today's reading from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew can be very challenging for us. The first part of this passage speaks of the familiar, *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. This is often misinterpreted to mean that if someone hurts you, you should hurt them back. The actual point of this passage is about justice, not revenge. God is a just God, which explains why, at times in the Old Testament, when it sounds like God is being mean to people, in actuality, he is keeping his word – fulfilling his promise. If God told the Israelites what they should do and what the consequence would be if they did not do it, he would provide the anticipated punishment out of justice if they did not follow his command.

In the "Love your Enemies" verses, we are given one of the most difficult tasks – to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Isn't it true we sometimes find it much easier to do physical tasks in the name of Jesus than respond in humility to someone who offends us? It is easier to take care of the church's flower gardens than to forgive our wayward son or daughter. It is less challenging to work at the soup kitchen than it is to love the co-worker who does not do his or her share of work, or the neighbor who is argumentative and irritating. Of course, garden and soup kitchen work are good and necessary, but loving our enemies or praying for those who persecute us is incredibly difficult to do.

Jesus tells us in today's passage that the greatest response to any situation is love. It is a direct imitation of the way God treats us – his children – in his great mercy. When we come to realize that our worthiness is not the cause of God's loving us – that his love and mercy are pure gift – our response should be one of gratitude, which brings about a transformation in our relationships with others. Quite simply, it may feel counter-intuitive to be kind to those who are unkind to us, but that is what we are called to do. Living out the Gospel in a radical way is essential to spreading the Good News. Of course, praying for others and treating them lovingly does not mean we have to endure disrespect or abuse from others. Rather, we are to set appropriate boundaries which shield us from abusive and disrespectful behavior on the part of others toward us.

At the end of this passage, Jesus tells us to *be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect*. Here, he is not literally calling us to be perfect. This is impossible due to our human weakness and sin. But, we are called to perfection in the sense of striving each day to be all that God has called us to be – to love without limit, to be generous beyond measure, to show mercy to those in need. We work at these and, with the grace of God, we are transformed, and transform the world around us. Jesus did not say that doing this would be easy, but clearly, we are called to go the extra mile as we serve him and work to build up the kingdom of God here on earth.

Monday, February 20, 2017
(Lec. 341)

- 1) Sirach 1:1-10
- 2) Mark 9:14-29

Gospel related: **CCC** 162, 649, 1504, 2610

MONDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Faith and science can come together as we see the wisdom of God in creation.

There is a growing belief that having faith in God and appreciating the work of science are incompatible. Such a notion has existed for many centuries among some philosophers and scientists.

In recent years, though, it has gained a wider popularity as the “new atheists,” such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, have spread their ideas through popular books, cable news channels and social media.

And so it's not unusual for ordinary Catholics to have co-workers, friends or relatives make assumptions in everyday conversations that a person who believes in God must either be ignorant of the claims of science or stubbornly reject them, despite the evidence in their favor.

Thankfully, many Catholic and other Christian writers have stepped forward to aid believers in offering a reasoned alternative to such perspectives. Bishop Robert Barron, an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, is the founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, which offers a treasure trove of answers to the growing secularism of our culture.

Any such answer, though, must be rooted in the word of God. Today's readings offer an opportunity in terms of the goal of the new evangelization – to renew the faith in our society that was once imbued with a Christian ethos but is becoming less so all the time.

In today's first reading from Sirach, we hear that God poured wisdom *upon all his works, upon every living thing according to his bounty*, and that this wisdom has existed from all eternity.

When we observe the smallest subatomic particle or peer into the heavens to see galaxies millions of light years away, we can, if we have faith, see the fingerprints of God who created them all.

But we must have faith. Given our current cultural climate, it is easy for us to look at the wonders of creation and conclude that they were created randomly, that there is, in the final analysis, no meaning to it all.

We can still go against the tide if we join the father of the possessed boy we hear about in today's Gospel and cry out to the Lord, *I do believe, help my unbelief!*

If we make this prayer our own, the Lord will, in his own time little by little, day by day, open our eyes to see more clearly the wondrous wisdom of God to be found throughout the miracles of creation all around us.

Tuesday, February 21, 2017
(Lec. 342)

- 1) Sirach 2:1-11
- 2) Mark 9:30-37

TUESDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Peter Damian,
Bishop and Doctor
of the Church)

Gospel related: **CCC** 474, 557, 649, 1825 **CSDC** 379

FOCUS: Put God first, and trust in him.

Among children, we sometimes hear these familiar words: "I want to be first in line." Transform these words into the adult world. We see it while driving in traffic as we are cut off by another car. Maybe it shows itself as we line up in the wee hours of the morning to be first in line to buy the latest electronic gadget. The urge to be first is somehow ingrained in our human nature. Even so, we know from experience that ego-driven behavior usually alienates others. At the same time, we know there is a place of leadership for exemplary people who accept their calling with humility.

Our first reading today from the Book of Sirach provides us with sage advice on what we need to do in order to live as God wants us to live and not as our human desire disordered by sin dictates. The author begins by establishing our relationship with God. He advises us to *stand in justice and fear* before the Lord, relying on God for everything – even in times of trial and difficulty. This advice contradicts our seemingly natural human inclination to rely on ourselves. But when we put God first and trust that he will be there for us, we are told that our *reward will not be lost*.

In today's Gospel passage from Saint Mark, we hear Jesus tell his disciples for the second time that he will suffer, die and rise on the third day. But they did not understand, and they were afraid to ask questions. Jesus, however, was not hesitant to ask a question about the topic of their argument, even though he knew the answer. Their response: silence. Jesus then takes the occasion to teach them: *If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all*.

Jesus takes our ingrained way of thinking and turns it upside down for us to see in a new way. Jesus presents himself as the one who came not to be served, but to serve. His life is an example to follow when our urge is to be first. Begin by trusting in God, and doing what you know to be right and good.

Wednesday, February 22, 2017
(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: Jesus continues to care for and guide the Church.

Today as we gather to celebrate Eucharist, we join with the Church to celebrate the feast of the Chair of Saint Peter. This feast has been a part of the Church's life since some time in the fourth century, but possibly dates to many years before that. I can hear the gears clicking in your minds today as you may be wondering, "So we're celebrating a feast about a piece of *furniture*?" The answer to your question is both "yes" and "no." While we celebrate a feast, the title of which seems to focus on a chair – and a very important one at that – we are really celebrating what is represented by that chair, which is the special role of leadership for which Jesus selected Peter.

When Jesus speaks to Peter in today's Gospel, he is giving him the responsibility to guide and care for the small flock of believers who will become the Church after Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven. Jesus assigns this special role to Peter, and gives him the responsibility of "binding and loosing" – in other words, the responsibility of caring for the faithful. Peter, for his part, has taken the lead in helping the other disciples understand who Jesus is when he answers Jesus' question with the positive, *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*. In a sense, Peter has already begun his role as teacher of the disciples, and he will continue it, as he becomes the leader of the Apostles and chief shepherd of the Church.

If you have ever visited our cathedral, perhaps you have noted the special chair – the *cathedra* – that is placed prominently there. The cathedral derives its name from the chair that it is built to house and, more importantly, what that chair represents. The *cathedra* is the bishop's chair, and it is the chair he uses as he teaches and guides our diocesan church, principally when we are gathered for the important liturgies that enrich and shape the life of our diocese – especially the Chrism Mass, the ordination of priests or deacons, and other large gatherings that bring together the people of our diocese in our cathedral home. The chair is a visible reminder of the leadership role of our bishop, his role as a successor to the Apostles, and most importantly, his ministry as an image of Jesus – the Good Shepherd – helping to guide and teach the flock for which our bishop is given care.

Today's feast is a beautiful reminder of how Jesus, in his great goodness, continues to provide for the care and tending of the flock of believers. He does so through those who are given roles to teach, guide and sanctify. He does so in this present moment, as he now lovingly guides us to this altar table, and nourishes us with the gift of the Eucharist.

Thursday, February 23, 2017
(Lec. 344)

- 1) Sirach 5:1-8
- 2) Mark 9:41-50

THURSDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM Saint Polycarp,
Bishop and Martyr)

Gospel related: **CCC** 1034

FOCUS: Sacred Scripture offers us sound advice for living the Christian message every day of our lives.

The author of the book of Sirach was a sage who had a great love for the law, the priesthood and divine worship. He also wanted to help preserve the integrity of the Jewish tradition and help people grow in their love for the Lord. Therefore, he treats a variety of subjects aimed at helping us live in love and unity with God and one another.

In today's passage, this wise man gives important advice. He believes that when we avoid setting our hearts on the things of this world, God is first and foremost in our lives. Therefore, while we might be wealthy and have great power, we must realize that total reliance on either can get us into deep trouble. They can draw us into sin. They can give us a false sense of security.

This sensible sage also warns against people who live immoral lives. They boast because nothing bad has happened to them. He reminds us that it is a mistake to assume that since God is slow to anger, we can sin freely. We must remember that God's mercy and justice are in proportion to our motives and how we act.

The Gospel continues giving counsel about how we are to live our lives. Anyone who gives a follower of Christ even a drink of water will not go unrewarded. On the other hand, anyone who is an obstacle to another person's belief in Christ will face a fate worse than death. Within us, many things can become obstacles to living out the Gospel message. Although Jesus is clearly not urging us to a literal understanding of amputating body parts, he is warning us about the various stumbling blocks to living the Christian life.

A good examination of our day can help us live better lives. Spend some quiet time in prayer each day. Ask yourself how you have lived the Christian message and how you have failed. As you recognize the ways in which you've fallen short, turn to the Lord and ask for his forgiveness and his help to improve so you can serve him faithfully. All of us can make more frequent use of the sacrament of reconciliation. This will allow us to more fully acknowledge the nature of our wrongs, acknowledge our ongoing need for God's mercy, be forgiven our sins, and receive the grace needed to continue to grow in holiness.

Friday, February 24, 2017
(Lec. 345)

- 1) Sirach 6:5-17
- 2) Mark 10:1-12

Gospel related: **CCC** 1627, 1639, 1650, 2364, 2380, 2382 **CSDC** 217

FRIDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Wisdom allows us to value the spiritual over the material.

The first reading today comes from the wisdom books of the Old Testament, and offers an opportunity to reflect on the topic of wisdom.

In this age of tweeting and texting and sound bites, we might ask ourselves: Whatever happened to wisdom? Does wisdom have any value at all in our modern world? Is it still admired or esteemed?

There is great hidden value in wisdom. After all, wisdom is the expression of a great deal of human experience, both painful and beneficial. One of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit is the gift of wisdom, which allows us to value the spiritual over the material – the eternal over the temporal. It allows a person to understand things “with the eyes of God,” and to recognize truth. With this truth, we can glorify God by choosing godly solutions to problems.

Patiently enduring, maintaining conscious awareness, being observant and being reflective are some of the paths we travel on which we gain wisdom. Facts, information and data are truly important. But wisdom is of greater value.

And so today we might ask ourselves to identify the people in our lives whom we consider to be wise. As we heard in the reading from Sirach:

A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter; he who finds one finds a treasure. A faithful friend is beyond price, no sum can balance his worth. A faithful friend is a life-saving remedy, such as he who fears God finds.

Saturday, February 25, 2017
(Lec. 346)

- 1) Sirach 17:1-15
- 2) Mark 10:13-16

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

Gospel related: CCC 699, 1244, 1261

FOCUS: Entering the kingdom of God like a child requires love, obedience and openness to following him.

When Jesus says, *Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it*, he is not speaking of immaturity or blind obedience that does not require something from us. To help us understand what it means to accept the kingdom of God like a child, let us look at the characteristics to which he refers. Children should be able to confidently trust those who give them direction and care. The obedience of a child should come out of love, not fear.

Children do not have to earn a parent's love, nor do they have to earn the kingdom of God. It is pure gift – it is unconditional. The most important thing “required” of a child is their openness to the gift of love that God offers. It is easy to see that a child has much growing to do. Jesus does not call children from a state in which they are perfectly formed, mature in faith, ready to witness to the Gospel. So for us to be like children and be embraced by Jesus, blessed by him and anointed by his touch, we need nothing more than a willingness to accept what he offers.

In our adult world, we have the added responsibility of cooperation. We strive to follow God's will for us and follow wherever he leads. The kingdom of God, then, becomes more obvious to us as we participate in it, as we pattern our lives after Christ in our loving response to others and the world around us. We live in the kingdom of God every day. We should not imagine it as a physical place outside of our natural world, but here – where we live – with the presence of Jesus among us.

When we consider that God created humans *in his own image*, as it says in our first reading from Sirach, we can see that we share in his divine life in our bodies, which are temples of the Holy Spirit. He gives us his strength and power, and sets us to rule *over beasts and birds*. This is not something you would ask of an immature child, but something you expect from one who is childlike in the sense that they are open to following, learning and growing. So let us be *like a child* as Jesus calls each of us to be.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2017

(Lec. 82)

- 1) Isaiah 49:14-15
- 2) 1 Corinthians 4:1-5
- 3) Matthew 6:24-34

Gospel related: **CCC** 270, 305, 322, 1942, 2113, 2416, 2424, 2547, 2604, 2608, 2632, 2659, 2729, 2821, 2830, 2836, 2848 **CSDC** 181, 260, 325

EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: How do we know God loves us?

Today's Gospel reading invites us to reflect upon the questions: How do we know that God loves us? And what proof has God given us that we are loved? If we are honest, we have to acknowledge that love cannot be proven. Love can only be accepted.

How do we know that God loves us? Well, God the Son became one of us. He was born as a little baby just like us. He gave us inspired teachings. He suffered and died a horrible death for us. He rose from the dead, giving us hope that we, along with him, can defeat death. He opened the gates of heaven for us. This is why it is important for us to take some time on a regular basis to contemplate Jesus hanging on the cross. This might give us a greater appreciation for the depths of God's love for us, and allow that love to more fully penetrate our hearts.

Because of God's love for us, we have hope that we can live forever in heaven with him. If that is not loving and caring for us, then I don't know what is.

How do we know that God loves us? We are given the gift of sacred Scripture, which contains God's word for us. In it and through it, Jesus speaks to us of the many ways God shows forth his great love for us. Such is the case with today's Gospel, in which Jesus teaches that one of the ways our loving Father shows his great love for us is by continually watching over us, and providing for what we most truly need.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap; they gather nothing, into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than they?

How do we know that God loves us? We know because he made us free to not love him. He gave us freedom of choice. God did not make us like computers, pre-programmed to love him. A computer program responds only to a command. Love responds only to an invitation – not to a command. Love has no meaning unless it is freely given. Coerced love isn't love at all. Nor can it be bought. It exists only when freely given and freely received – in faith and in hope. God created us so that we could love him and experience ourselves as being loved by him.

In closing, let's remember that love is not something that can be proven, but instead must be accepted. And let's make sure that we open ourselves to the many ways that God continually pours himself out in love to us. So this day and every day, let us resolve to be vigilant in prayer so we might not only experience the many ways in which God loves us, but more importantly, know the inexplicable joy that comes from loving him in return.

Monday, February 27, 2017

(Lec. 347)

1) Sirach 17:20-24

2) Mark 10:17-27

Gospel related: CCC 1858, 2728

MONDAY OF
EIGHTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: *Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.*

We have all heard the saying that money is the root of all evil, thinking that it is one of the teachings of Jesus. It is not. But let's look at today's Gospel. What Jesus did condemn was all that can take us away from dependence upon God. What Jesus condemned was allowing money to become an idol – a false God to which people devote themselves.

It is the love of money that Jesus condemns, not money itself. Money is morally neutral. It's how we use money – how we regard money – that can be the source of a great deal of evil. Do we control money, or does money control us? *No man can serve two masters*, Jesus told us (Mt 6:24). Where are our hearts? Greed can cause people to do all sorts of evil things.

The misquoted version ("money is the root of all evil") makes money and wealth the source of all evil in the world. This is clearly false. The Bible makes it quite clear that sin is the root of all evil in the world. Wealth is morally neutral; there is nothing wrong with money, in and of itself, or the possession of money. But it's important to remember that even though money is a useful tool, it can control us and cause separation from God.

This is why Jesus said, *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and vermin destroy, and thieves break in and steal, but rather store up treasures in heaven ... for where your treasure is, there also will your heart be* (Mt 6:19-21). Trying to serve two masters is impossible because we *will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other.*

Tuesday, February 28, 2017
(Lec. 348)

- 1) Sirach 35:1-12
- 2) Mark 10:28-31

Gospel related: **CCC** 1618

TUESDAY OF
EIGHTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: We are called to practice the works of mercy, offering them to God with generosity and joy.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus challenges his followers, *Go and learn the meaning of the words, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice"* (9:13). As we reflect on today's readings, we begin to understand the meaning of those words, and it makes all the difference for our life of faith.

In our first reading from Sirach, we hear a series of examples of how we are called to offer our acts of mercy to God in place of the many sacrifices of the old covenant: observance of the commandments, works of charity, giving alms, avoidance of evil. Then, Sirach continues, we are to bring those things, those works of mercy, to the altar of the Lord. He writes: *Do not appear before the Lord empty-handed, and, The offering of the just enriches the altar.*

When we come before the altar at Mass, we should bring not only bread and wine, but also those works of mercy that are so pleasing to the Lord. Moreover, we are called to bring our offering *with a generous spirit* and having a *cheerful countenance* and a *spirit of joy*.

But what gives us this spirit of joy as we live mercifully and bring all that we have and do to God? Today's Gospel gives us an important part of the equation.

Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples that what they have given up for him, and for the Gospel, including *house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands*, will be returned to them one hundredfold in this life and eternal life in the next.

Now, one of the meanings of this for us is that the Lord does not overlook our sacrifices, be they great or small. Rather, they will be rewarded by God with the blessings of peace and joy in our lives here on earth.

Finally, the blessed assurance of reward, the trust in Jesus' promise, *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy* (Mt 5:7), helps sustain us when living for others becomes difficult. It also enables us to approach the altar with that *spirit of joy* God wishes us to have.