

MARCH

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Wednesday, March 1, 2017

ASH WEDNESDAY

(Lec. 219)

1) Joel 2:12-18

2) 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2

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

Gospel related: **CCC** 268, 443, 575, 1063, 1165, 1430, 1434, 1693, 1753, 1969, 2447, 2608, 2632, 2655, 2659, 2668, 2691, 2736, 2759, 2776, 2792, 2841, 2845

FOCUS: Reflect, repent, renew.

Today's readings can seem to contradict our actions. Jesus tells us, *When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to others to be fasting.* And yet, every one of us will leave here with a clear sign that we are entering into our Lenten season of fasting, prayer and almsgiving. We often hope our ashes are a public witness of our Catholic Christian commitment to Jesus Christ. We want people to notice our ashes. There are even social media campaigns that encourage us to send in photos of our ashes. We take to heart what Saint Paul says in our second reading: *We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us.*

The readings are not asking us to shy away from a public display of our devotion to Christ. They're asking us to be very clear on whose behalf we are standing tall. Jesus reminds us that we can pray out loud and publicly witness to God, but if we are not doing so with a humble, contrite heart, then we are doing so for our own sense of pride. And in doing that, we've received our reward – people taking notice of us.

Lent is not a time of stern sacrifice. It is a time of being wooed by God to deepen our relationship with him. We are called to be courageous in giving up all that hinders the deepening of that relationship. Whatever it is we give up this Lent must be replaced by something of virtue.

Food and drink seem to be some of the most popular things given up, but in the end they will be placed back into the daily routine and what has really been given up? To go six weeks without them can be merely an action of sheer will power. On whose power do we rely when we give them up? We just may find at the end of the six weeks that we have received our own reward. We can give up junk food and never once experience God in a deeper way or purge our life of some character flaw that hinders our coming before God with a humble, contrite heart.

There is a hymn called *Hosea, or Come Back to Me with All Your Heart*. There is a line in the song which says, "The wilderness will lead you to the place where I will speak." The words of this song encapsulate much of what Lent is about. Lent is a season that invites us to go into the wilderness – to go to a quiet place in our hearts and in our homes – so we can become more attuned to the voice of God who speaks in the silence of hearts. And so we can, throughout the six weeks of Lent, lay ourselves bare before God and discover our relationship anew. The song goes on to say, "Long have I waited for your coming home to me and living deeply our new life."

Let us take time during this Eucharistic celebration and ask God to reveal what it is that hinders our relationship with him. Then let us ask God for help in finding ways to overcome it in the upcoming weeks. Then, when our Lenten journey of faith ends and we arrive at Easter Sunday, we may truly find ourselves raised up to a newer and fuller life in Jesus, and be able to share more fully in the joy of Easter.

Thursday, March 2, 2017

(Lec. 220)

1) Deuteronomy 30:15-20

2) Luke 9:22-25

Gospel related: **CCC** 1435

THURSDAY AFTER

ASH WEDNESDAY

FOCUS: We must follow God's will instead of our own, and trust in his plan for us.

There's a story about a restaurant perched high up on a hill. The fenced-in parking lot went right up to the edge of a steep cliff. A sign on the fence read, "No parking beyond this point." The restaurant owner wasn't trying to take away his patrons' freedom; he was protecting them.

That's how it is with God's commandments for us. God doesn't demand obedience to arbitrary laws to prove his omnipotence. God lovingly provides boundaries for our own good. Today's first reading tells us we have a choice. We can follow God's guidance, trusting that he knows more than we do and has our best interests at heart, or we can choose our will over God's. Not following God's plan leads to problems – not because God wants to get even with us for crossing him – but because rejecting the guidance that leads to our good has to lead away from it.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus warned his followers that the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected and be put to death before rising to new life. Only after that did he say following him meant taking up our crosses and denying ourselves. In other words, Jesus isn't asking us to do anything he isn't willing to do.

What does denying ourselves look like? The specifics might vary for each of us, but in general, it means letting go of self-will and those pursuits that are driven solely by selfish motives.

For example, we *think* getting our way will make us happy so we try to manipulate or force others to do what we think they should do – or maybe we just criticize and judge them when they don't. Either way, that leads to friction in our relationships.

Or, we *think* accomplishing everything on our ambitious to-do lists will bring satisfaction or admiration, so we wear ourselves out and become irritable or exhausted. We gain a world of achievement but lose ourselves in the process.

Dying to ourselves means setting aside the misguided notion that we know best, and instead trusting that God truly is all-wise and all-loving, and that his plan for us is better than anything we could come up with on our own. It means trusting that what's meant to get done will get done in God's time. It means trusting that life can be very good – even when we don't get our own way. Lent is an opportunity to say no to the ego-driven behaviors that do us in. Let's give it a try.

Friday, March 3, 2017
(Lec. 221)

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

FRIDAY AFTER
ASH WEDNESDAY
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Katharine Drexel,
Virgin)

FOCUS: Isaiah's admonition to the Israelites about meaningful fasting foreshadows Christ's message to the Pharisees about the proper time and purpose of fasting and feasting.

Didn't we commit ourselves to fasting for forty days just two days ago? And now Jesus is telling us it's optional? Haven't we been taught that the disciplines of fasting and self-denial are good for us and that's why we practice them every Lent?

As children, we talked about and compared what we were giving up for Lent as if it were a competition to see who could make the biggest sacrifice. As adults, our reasons for fasting are often about self-improvement: fasting may help us lose weight, eliminate behaviors that are harmful to us or even help us grow in self-discipline. All of these are admirable goals, but the focus of these activities is on how we benefit, not on God.

As we begin our Lenten journey, the readings today help us remember the true purposes of fasting – to open ourselves to grow in our understanding of God's great love for us, and in our ability to love others as he loves us. Isaiah chastises the Israelites because they draw attention to themselves with their lavish rituals for fasting – but at the same time oppress those who work for them, neglect widows and ignore the poor. God finds their fasting meaningless.

Jesus similarly corrects John's disciples in their attitude regarding fasting. Yes, fasting can be a valuable and holy practice, but our devotion to it should not take precedence over rejoicing in the joyous, life-giving events of our lives. Our forty days of Lent do not include the Sundays of Lent – because each Sunday of the year is a "little Easter" and calls for celebrating Jesus' resurrection.

Our individual fasting should also allow room for celebrating God's presence in the blessings we enjoy, and inspire us to cheerfully and thankfully share the joy of God's love as we serve others.

As our fasting this Lent draws us closer to God and into a greater awareness of his love for us, may it also open our hearts to cheerfully sharing God's love with those most in need of his love and care.

Saturday, March 4, 2017
(Lec. 222)

- 1) Isaiah 58:9b-14
- 2) Luke 5:27-32

Gospel related: **CCC** 588

SATURDAY AFTER
ASH WEDNESDAY
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Casimir)

FOCUS: We have all sinned, and we are all called to repentance during this holy season of Lent.

Today's readings invite and challenge us to explore ways that we can grow in our love for God throughout the season of Lent. They do this by going to the heart of our call as Christians: go deeper than the resolution to give up certain foods or pray in a certain way.

Isaiah is very specific in showing us how to please God: by caring for one another in our daily lives and in the choices we make. We are to refrain from doing anything that would hurt another, and take active measures to make sure that everyone has the bread they need. During this season of Lent, we are expected to walk in God's ways – not seeking our own interest.

If we feel overwhelmed by Isaiah's prescription for pleasing God, perhaps we can take heart from Jesus' actions and words in the Gospel. He invites Levi, a tax collector, to follow him. In a sense, Levi can be seen as one of the oppressors that Isaiah writes about, since he is taking taxes from his own people to give to their Roman oppressors. But Levi is open to Jesus' invitation. He leaves his customs post behind, and even invites friends to celebrate his joy.

Jesus' words to the Pharisees can be a great reassurance to us: *I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners*. If you see yourself in Isaiah's words – as one who, perhaps, speaks maliciously about others, who in some way participates in a culture that oppresses others, or who goes your own way on the Sabbath or during Lent – take heart. Jesus has come to call you to repentance!

Take heart as well from the promises God extends to us if we do turn back and follow in the ways of the Lord: God will renew your strength, grant you new life as a watered garden experiences during drought, and allow you to delight in the Lord. If we follow in the Lord's ways this Lent, we can hope to be transformed into people with renewed strength – righteous people rising out of the darkness of sin. Let us pray to Jesus, the Divine Physician, that he might heal us of whatever keeps us from following in his ways.

SUNDAY, MARCH 5, 2017

(Lec. 22)

- 1) Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7
- 2) Romans 5:12-19
or 5:12, 17-19
- 3) Matthew 4:1-11

Gospel related: **CCC** 333, 394, 2083, 2135, 2835, 2849 **CSDC** 175, 379

**FIRST SUNDAY
OF LENT**

FOCUS: Jesus, who remained true in spite of temptation, gives us the strength to do the same.

We all know it can be difficult at times to resist temptation. So many things require our time and attention. And so many *more* things call to us with the voice of persuasion: promising to make life less painful, less onerous or less costly. The struggle to make the right choices can be difficult.

There is a wonderful quote, attributed to many different people over the years, that wisely states: "Never sacrifice the permanent on the altar of the immediate."

Never sacrifice the permanent ... on the altar of the immediate.

Ten words – so simple, so seemingly easy to follow, and yet we still falter.

Adam and Eve faltered. Given everything in the Garden of Eden, they were tempted with the possibility of more, and so they committed the first sin of pride, which was disobedience.

They gave in to the temptation before them and set the course of Creation on a new trajectory. They sacrificed the permanent and eternal unity with God on the altar of the immediate possibility – false as it was – of being and having more.

But Paul tells us today that though sin entered the world and death came to all, God did not withhold his grace from us and sent his only Son into the world to redeem us. Jesus countered that first sin of disobedience with an act of perfect obedience – an obedience that would resist every temptation throughout the whole of his earthly life.

This Son, though divine, was also human – and the devil knew it. We are given three examples today of the devil trying to tempt him away from his mission with things that – in their immediacy – perhaps seemed far more enticing than his intended path. But Jesus never gave in. He refused to let his perfect love be clouded by the empty promises of the devil. He refused to sacrifice the eternal on the altar of the immediate.

We all face our own deserts with their unique temptations. We find it difficult to obey our conscience and our own moral compasses. But here's the thing: we are not fated to disobedience. We have a choice, and we have a model in Jesus and an advocate in the Holy Spirit. In as much as we share in the life of Christ – through the sacrament of baptism – we *can* refuse to let our love be clouded by the empty promises of the devil.

But we cannot do it alone. We need to rely on prayer; on the sacraments; on the charitable interactions and shared faith of friends and family; on our relationship with a triune God who loves us; and, ultimately, on the grace of our God.

In the desert, Jesus prayed. He drew on his faith, and on the Scriptures. And he sent the devil away.

So let us look to Jesus and ask him for help. And be confident that he'll show us the way.

Monday, March 6, 2017

(Lec. 224)

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

2) Matthew 25:31-46

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

MONDAY OF
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: We are called to consciously consider the purpose of our acts of charity.

Today's readings remind us that we are called to care for the physical needs of our neighbors with an attitude that can also serve their spiritual needs.

As we begin our Lenten journey, it is significant that we hear two of the most well-known messages about living a life that pleases God.

The reading from Leviticus begins with some familiar lines from the Ten Commandments, the laws that guided the Israelites in living as God's chosen people. Yes – not stealing, not bearing false witness, and avoiding what is wrong helped them on their paths to individual holiness. But this reading calls them to more than individual holiness. It expands their quest to taking responsibility for others – to caring for one another with kindness, to loving their neighbors as themselves.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus elevates the requirement for showing love for God even higher. He is clear about what is most important. He minces no words in identifying how we will be judged – it is not just whether or not we care for the hungry, sick, imprisoned and stranger, but how we care for them. Jesus calls us to treat even the least of our brothers as if they were him.

In our acts of charity throughout Lent and throughout the year, we have an opportunity to provide more than relief from physical suffering. Too often the poor, the sick and the stranger are treated with suspicion and judgement. When we instead seek to see the face of Jesus in those we care for and approach them with compassion and mercy, we can bring spiritual healing to them. When our words and actions show respect for the dignity of even the least of our brothers, we provide an opportunity for them to see the comfort and hope of Jesus at work through us.

Let this be the reason for our good works, not to ensure that we will be judged worthy, but that those we serve will be drawn closer to the love of God by their encounter with us.

Tuesday, March 7, 2017
(Lec. 225)

- 1) Isaiah 55:10-11
- 2) Matthew 6:7-15

TUESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

(Opt. Mem.
Saints Perpetua and Felicity,
Martyrs)

Gospel related: **CCC** 268, 443, 1165, 1434, 1969, 2608, 2632, 2659, 2668, 2736, 2759, 2776, 2792, 2841, 2845 **CSDC** 492

FOCUS: Jesus is the ultimate authority when it comes to teaching us how to pray.

Hearing today's Gospel, it would be reasonable for many of us to let our minds wander. The words of the Lord's Prayer are so familiar to us that we don't really need to listen very closely, we might think. What a mistake that would be.

Here we have God the Son telling us how we should speak to God the Father. That's pretty powerful. Jesus is the Word of God, and here he is instructing us on the words we should say to his and our heavenly Father. These words are important. The message they carry is vital to our salvation. Our first reading is like a flashing sign telling us to pay attention: that what Jesus tells us is like the rain coming down from heaven, making the earth fruitful and helping to manifest God's reign on the earth.

This is not the time or place to go into a full study of the Lord's Prayer, but it would be good to contemplate the words of this prayer, saying it thoughtfully, and meditating on all of the petitions it contains. It might be helpful to check the explanations included in any good bible or in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Take the opportunity today to look more deeply at what this prayer says – and what we are saying when we recite it.

The catechism says – using the words of some of the Church's greatest theologians – that “The Lord's Prayer is truly the summary of the whole gospel, the most perfect of prayers. It is at the center of the Scriptures” (CCC 2774). When you begin to study this prayer, you will find it hard to say it casually again.

In today's Gospel, Jesus introduces this prayer by saying that the Father knows what we need before we tell him. That does not mean we shouldn't tell him our needs. When we bring our problems and our desires to him, we are acknowledging that we need his help, that we cannot handle things alone. The prayers of petition we bring are not a *revelation* to God, but an *admission* of our dependence on him.

The Church suggests that when we bring our needs to the Father, we can use the Lord's Prayer as a first step, using the words Jesus taught us to set the stage and align ourselves with the will of the Father. Today, let us do just that. Let's use the words Jesus has given us to speak from our hearts to our Father in heaven, who loves us beyond our imagining.

Wednesday, March 8, 2017
(Lec. 226)

- 1) Jonah 3:1-10
- 2) Luke 11:29-32

WEDNESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK OF LENT
(Opt. Mem,
Saint John of God,
Religious)

FOCUS: During Lent, God calls us to examine our sin, repent and turn to him. Let us humble our hearts.

Ash Wednesday was a week ago today. We received ashes on our foreheads as a sign of our inward desire to repent and turn away from sin so that our relationship with God may be renewed and strengthened. Today's readings remind us of the necessity of ongoing repentance.

The story of Jonah is fascinating. God told Jonah to go to the wicked city of Nineveh so that its citizens could have a chance to repent and change their evil behavior. Most of us have heard the famous story about Jonah refusing God and consequently spending three days in the belly of an enormous sea animal. Jonah ultimately repented for his rebelliousness and subsequently went to Nineveh. The people of that city heard about God and repented of their evil ways. It is in our readings today that we hear a description of their repentance, and how it is a foretelling of Jesus Christ's mission to all of us.

When he arrived in Nineveh, Jonah walked through the enormous city for three days preaching repentance to its citizens. He warned them that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days if the people did not turn from their wickedness. They heard and understood Jonah's warning. It was a time of great sorrow for the city. Even the king was grief-stricken to the point that he ordered all people, as well as all the animals, to cover themselves in sackcloth and ashes, which was an ancient tradition in which people could visibly demonstrate their anguish over their sins.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus makes a comparison between himself and Jonah. Jonah's story is a foretelling of Jesus' mission to earth. Jesus tells his listeners that just as Jonah was a sign to sinful Nineveh, he, too, is a sign for all who hear him. Jesus came that all might repent of their sin and turn to God. Those who heard Jesus had a chance to repent and follow him. They knew that Nineveh was given another chance to walk in holiness, and they, too, were being given a chance to change their actions as well as their hearts.

We also have been given an opportunity. Do we just shrug our shoulders and decide there is not much we can do about the consequences of sin? No! While we certainly cannot fix all the problems of the world, we are called to examine our own selves. During this season of Lent, let's turn away from our sin and turn toward God. He alone is our refuge and strength. He alone provides a clear path toward righteousness and holiness.

Thursday, March 9, 2017

(Lec. 227)

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

THURSDAY OF
FIRST WEEK OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Frances of Rome,
Religious)

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

FOCUS: *Make yourself known in the time of our distress and give me courage.*

In today's Gospel, we hear some of Jesus' most comforting words about prayer. Jesus encourages his disciples to be persistent in prayer, and likens God to a father who knows how to give good gifts to his children.

The reading from the Book of Esther tells the story of an orphan who is adopted by her uncle who serves in the Persian court. The king decides to take a new wife, and of all the young virgins, he chooses Esther as queen. Meanwhile, Esther's uncle, a faithful Jew, makes an enemy of a court official by refusing to bow down to him. In a jealous rage, the court official decides to massacre the Jewish community as punishment.

Today's first reading recounts the prayerful pleas of Esther for God's help in saving her people.

Both the words of Jesus and the example of Esther reflect something important about prayer – beyond simply asking for what we need. Esther prays for help with great humility, but asks that God *put in my mouth persuasive words*. Esther knows that as the queen, she can use her privileged position to save her people, but that she will need God's help to accomplish the task. She asks for courage and wisdom so she can participate in the work set before her.

Likewise, Jesus does not end his advice at *ask and it will be given to you*. Jesus tells his disciples to ask, seek and knock on the door. We are not supposed to wait for favors to rain down from heaven; after we ask, we are meant to get our hands dirty, seeking opportunities and knocking on the doors of those who might help. We are called to participate in the work God sets before us.

Unfortunately, there can be temptation to take personal credit for our successes, and to fail to acknowledge God's generosity and power in being the ultimate source of the good things we seek.

How can we find balance in both gratitude and hard work? A good spiritual discipline, especially during Lent, is to pray the Ignatian Examen each night. There are many variations of this prayer, but this is the simplest:

1. Become aware of God's presence and review your day with gratitude.
2. Ask God for forgiveness for any failings or sins that you committed.
3. Ask for God's help in the work or relationships that you will encounter tomorrow.

The Examen can help us keep the balance in acknowledging God's generosity through gratitude and petition, all the while working hard to participate in attaining what we seek in prayer. May God bless your Lenten journeys!

Friday, March 10, 2017
(Lec. 228)

FRIDAY OF
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

- 1) Ezekiel 18:21-28
- 2) Matthew 5:20-26

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

FOCUS: The Lenten table of virtuous living must be tended to every day.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving: the three legs of the Lenten table. But what of the table itself? What do the disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving hold for us as we seek to turn away from sin, so as to strengthen and deepen our relationship with Jesus? Each of these disciplines, if done with care and sincerity of heart, offers us the opportunity to take greater responsibility for our spiritual lives and live more consciously and intentionally as disciples of Jesus. For ultimately, living as a disciple of Jesus is a choice we have to make again and again day after day. It means doing what is right and just, keeping the commandments and practicing the teachings of Jesus in our daily lives. The three disciplines help us recognize more clearly our need for the Lord's grace and mercy to lead lives that are holy.

The importance of living a virtuous life is demonstrated in our first reading from the prophet Ezekiel, in which we hear: *If the wicked man turns away from all the sins he committed, if he keeps all my statutes and does what is right and just, he shall surely live, he shall not die.*

The Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving help hold up the table of leading virtuous and holy lives. But as we know, the grace they offer us alone will not suffice. Fortunately, we have another table – the Eucharistic table – at which the humble gifts of bread and wine are truly changed into the body of Christ during the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This means that every time we come forward to receive holy Communion, we are being nourished and strengthened by Jesus himself.

Prayer, fasting, almsgiving and Eucharist. Together, they give us the strength we need to lead holy lives which help build up God's kingdom on earth.

Saturday, March 11, 2017
(Lec. 229)

SATURDAY OF
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

- 1) Deuteronomy 26:16-19
- 2) Matthew 5:43-48

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

FOCUS: Love your enemy.

What a challenge Jesus gives us in today's Gospel! Love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you. This is easier said than done. There's a reason why our enemies are our enemies. Perhaps they have caused us (or someone we love) a great deal of pain – maybe intentionally, with no apologies or regrets. Or it could be that we see something in our enemies that we despise about ourselves.

In the Old Testament, a person's "neighbor" included those in his or her community. In the New Testament, Jesus broadens our understanding of "neighbor" to include everyone, even those who think or act differently from us or cause us harm. It's easy to like people who are good to us; anyone can do that. Christ calls us to show love and mercy to all people, even when it is difficult. Like us, our enemies are created in the image of God. We must love them even though we do not love the evil they do.

Why does the Lord ask this of us? Because hatred leads to sin. When we harbor powerful, negative feelings against another, especially when it reaches the point of wishing them harm, it becomes very difficult to love that person. It becomes very difficult to treat them with the kindness and respect they deserve as a child of God. The Lord also asks us to do this because harboring malice and ill will toward another can lead us to close our hearts to God's grace, and veer away from walking in God's way of love.

Jesus demonstrates what it means to "love our enemy" before he dies when he does not defend himself against his captors, and when he prays for those who persecute him. He goes as far as to die for sinners – those who condemn him. What greater expression of love can there be than this? By following Christ's example, we too will grow in holiness – to be perfect as our Father is perfect.

Earlier in Matthew (5:24), Jesus tells his listeners to reconcile with their brothers before worshipping at the altar. Perhaps if you are feeling disconnected from God, it could be that you need to first seek peace with someone in your life. As we continue this Lenten season, think about the people in your life you find difficult to love. Why do you feel this way?

While we may not be able to forget what someone has done to us, let's learn from our experiences and work toward reconciliation. We ask the Lord to "forgive us our trespasses," but we must also "forgive those who trespass against us."

SUNDAY, MARCH 12, 2017

(Lec. 25)

- 1) Genesis 12:1-4a
- 2) 2 Timothy 1:8b-10
- 3) Matthew 17:1-9

Gospel related: **CCC** 444, 554

**SECOND SUNDAY
OF LENT**

FOCUS: Lent is an opportunity for us to transform our lives.

We are awash in calls for change – to transform our political parties, transform our relationship with other nations, change our eating habits, and other sorts of transformations.

Lent is a season of change, a season of transforming our spiritual lives, a time of spiritual transfigurations. Our natural inclinations are to avoid the effort. Transformation requires energetic effort. It challenges and disturbs our comfortable patterns of behavior.

The episode in today's Gospel occurred just prior to the time Jesus was to enter Jerusalem, and there suffer his passion and death. He knows the trauma his Apostles are about to experience, and so he gives them a preview of his ultimate transfiguration.

Isaac Newton, one of the greatest scientists of all time, famously formulated his universal laws of motion. His first law of motion tells us that an object at rest stays at rest, and that an object in motion stays in motion. While that is true in the world of physics, we know that psychologically we all experience procrastination, laziness and resistance to change. We want to stay at rest.

Jesus had to deal with that same tendency in his Apostles. Jesus knew the Apostles needed to see the ultimate outcome that would follow after all of the suffering they and Jesus were about to face in Jerusalem. Transformation is not easy. It costs.

And so we have the yearly season of Lent.

We all know that Lent is more than simply having ashes placed on our foreheads. Entering Lent, we made resolutions to take specific actions, such as attending Mass more often, reading spiritual books, increasing our times of prayer, performing acts of charity, and other actions that involve making some change in our lives. All of these involve movement toward one form or another of transformation – of transfiguration.

An object at rest tends to stay at rest, whereas an object in motion tends to stay in motion. The Church challenges us to move, to change, and to get out of our comfort zones. Peter wanted to hunker down in three tents. He was resisting movement and change. I can recognize myself in his attitude. I know a thing or two about staying in my comfort zone – about procrastination and resistance. That is why I need Lent. And that is why I need to keep in mind Easter and the resurrection toward which we are all journeying.

This is only the second Sunday of Lent. Many more days of Lent lie ahead of us. Let's keep in mind the ultimate outcome that is presented to us in today's Gospel. Let's you and I move, knowing that a body in motion tends to stay in motion.

Monday, March 13, 2017

(Lec. 230)

1) Daniel 9:4b-10

2) Luke 6:36-38

Gospel related: **CCC** 1458, 2842

MONDAY OF
SECOND WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: Living a merciful life starts with giving the most precious gift, our time, to the people in our own homes.

The Gospel message can sometimes seem very abstract. Jesus' message to us today through Luke, *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*, is a beautiful sentiment, but perhaps not that concrete. How do we find the time in our busy lives to translate the words that are the key to eternal life into something we can actually act on? What does it even mean to be truly merciful?

Mercy has been defined as the "willingness to enter into the chaos of someone else's life." But chaos is a frightening thing to deal with. Frankly, we all have enough of our own chaos without taking on the burden of someone else's. Except that is exactly what we have to do if we want God's mercy to be poured out upon us. As we hear later in the Gospel, *Stop judging, and you will not be judged ... Forgive and you will be forgiven*. But how do we even start?

The world is full of the chaos of violence, hunger, fear and injustice. Saint Teresa of Calcutta, canonized last September, spoke often about the poverty of being lonely and unwanted – a kind of chaos that is very hard to see. She also gave us a very concrete and practical starting point for living a merciful life, when she said: "It is easy to love the people far away. It is not always easy to love those close to us. It is easier to give a cup of rice to relieve hunger than to relieve the loneliness and pain of someone unloved in our own home. Bring love into your home for this is where our love for each other must start."

And if we take Saint Teresa's advice, the next steps Jesus give us then become easier to perform – stop judging, stop condemning and start forgiving. Forgive your spouse and your children and your next-door-neighbor – the people you deal with every day. Enter into the chaos of their lives, even if it makes you late for work or causes you to miss the first few minutes of a social gathering.

As our God is a God of compassion and forgiveness, so let us be the same, starting with the person who sits across from us at the dinner table or the conference table or even the picnic table. So as we continue our Lenten journey, let us take the time to give the most precious gift we have – our time – to help cure the poverty of loneliness right in our own homes, in our own neighborhoods, in our own workplaces. And before we know it the painful chaos of our own world will be replaced with an overflowing lap of love.

Tuesday, March 14, 2017
(Lec. 231)

- 1) Isaiah 1:10, 16-20
- 2) Matthew 23:1-12

Gospel related: **CCC** 526, 2367

TUESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: Work for justice with a heart full of humility and a soul rooted in prayer.

Today's words from the Prophet Isaiah are clear and direct: *Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good.* While such exhortation is certainly challenging, we are encouraged to do even more. Isaiah tells us to *make justice your aim; redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow*, with the words *orphan* and *widow* used symbolically for all in need.

In the Gospel, Jesus describes the Pharisees as people who *preach but they do not practice*. He tells how *their works are performed to be seen* rather than leading to actions that truly serve others. The Pharisees lack the humility and purity of intention that all disciples of Jesus are to hold in their hearts.

Putting the message for both these readings together leads to the natural conclusion that we have a lot of work to do! Yes, we must work for justice for all God's people and even more – do so with a humble heart. We must seek no recognition for our efforts, only the humble joy of seeing others' lives improve.

How do we go about this? We can work for justice by writing or emailing our elected representatives to enact laws and policies that care for the poor and protect the lives of the unborn. We can volunteer our time visiting the sick, elderly or the imprisoned. Obviously, the needs that exist among the whole human family spread across the earth are great, and more than we can tackle on our own. And yet, all of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus can do something. Let's do our work in the right manner, and with proper intentions – let our hearts be filled with humility and gratitude, and let our souls be rooted in prayer.

Wednesday, March 15, 2017
(Lec. 232)

WEDNESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK OF LENT

- 1) Jeremiah 18:18-20
- 2) Matthew 20:17-28

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

FOCUS: Lent calls us to turn away from sin and embrace a life of faith, virtue and humble service to others.

In the daily Mass readings for the first few weeks of Lent, the Church calls us continually to conversion – to turn away from sin and embrace the life of virtue and faith that Christ lays before us in himself.

That may seem to be a lot of time given to such a basic message. But when we consider the many ways we sin each day, and how our deeply ingrained bad habits can take so long to uproot, we soon realize that this is actually the work of a lifetime, and not just part of an annual Lenten season.

Today's readings show us evil tendencies that lie in every human heart, and a grace-filled alternative to them.

In the first reading, we hear how people in Judah and Jerusalem plotted against the prophet Jeremiah, even though he spoke God's word to them for their benefit. Had he chosen the seemingly natural, but nevertheless sinful inclination to such a situation, the prophet would have lashed out in anger and resentment against his enemies.

While he appears to experience frustration because of the threats, he takes a different tack, going before the Lord and saying: *Must good be repaid with evil that they should dig a pit to take my life? Remember that I stood before you to speak on their behalf, to turn your wrath away from them.*

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches the disciples the proper way to exercise leadership and service by saying: *Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave.*

With regard to service, leadership and love, it is important to remember that Jesus, throughout the whole of his life, perfectly embodied what it means to be a servant leader. He led his life in perfect and humble obedience to the will of his Father. Jesus poured himself out in love and service to others, and he performed healings and miracles. He did none of this for his own benefit, but in order to reveal the depths of the Father's love and the Father's plan of salvation. The culmination of Jesus' perfect embodiment of servant leadership is his perfect sacrifice of love – his life upon the cross – which won our salvation.

So today's readings underscore two virtues that are important for living as faithful disciples of Jesus. First, when others reject us or speak badly about us, we can be tempted to lash out or strike back in some way. Today's first reading reminds us that we must resist the urge, as Jeremiah did, and instead pray for those who persecute us. Second, today's Gospel reminds us that the goal of our lives is not to be seen as great in the eyes of others, but rather to be great in the kingdom of God. We can attain this by patterning our lives after that of Jesus.

Thursday, March 16, 2017
(Lec. 233)

1) Jeremiah 17:5-10

2) Luke 16:19-31

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

THURSDAY OF
SECOND WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: Our confidence in Jesus' resurrection gives us courage to trust in the Lord.

If only one person claimed to have seen Jesus alive after he was dead and buried, we might have serious doubts about the resurrection. Two or three witnesses in any situation tend to make an account more believable.

Dozens of people saw the risen Lord in the weeks leading up to his ascension. We can and should have great confidence that Jesus rose from the dead gloriously after being deceased for three days.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says that some folks won't be persuaded to focus on living a Godly life even if someone should rise from the dead. How right Jesus is! How easily people disregard the teaching of Christ and his Church even though we have very good reason to acknowledge the truth of his resurrection.

Most of us are neither entirely like the man in today's first reading who trusts entirely in human beings, nor completely like the one whose hope is totally in the Lord. We have good moments when our faith in Jesus shines brightly in the way we live our life, and we have not-so-good moments when our hearts appear to turn away from the Lord.

Even when we fall into sin, God in his great love calls us to repent – to turn toward him in his great mercy. At Mass, we acknowledge our sinfulness as we did a few moments ago. Then we eagerly anticipate experiencing communion with Jesus, as we will have an opportunity to do in a few minutes by receiving the holy Eucharist.

When we prayerfully read and reflect upon sacred Scripture, when we attend to the teaching of Christ's Church by staying close to Jesus, when we invite him to live in our hearts and shine in our lives, we truly are like *a tree planted beside the waters*, staying green and bearing good fruit. Jesus loves us so much. He suffered and died so that we can have eternal life. He rose from the dead so that death and sin lose their power over us forever.

So let's trust in the Lord. Hope in the Lord. Stay close to Jesus. Then, we will experience peace and joy, even amidst occasional suffering.

Friday, March 17, 2017

(Lec. 234)

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

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

Gospel related: CCC 443, 755, 756

FRIDAY OF
SECOND WEEK OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Patrick, Bishop)

FOCUS: God's providential care reaches into the very depths of our existence.

In the passage from Genesis, Joseph is the favorite of Jacob's twelve sons, and his brothers became very jealous of him. When Joseph goes to visit them in the fields, they devise a plot to kill him. However, Joseph's brother, Rueben, intervenes, and Joseph is sold for twenty pieces of silver instead.

Joseph should have ended up as a slave in Egypt. Because of his ability to interpret dreams, however, he won the favor of the Pharaoh and held a high position in the royal court in Egypt. Eventually, he saved his own people from famine. It was a famine that he had foretold. In this story, we see God acting powerfully, yet mysteriously, to turn hatred into an overflowing goodness.

In the Gospel, the parable contains a similar theme. The vineyard is the house of Israel, and the owner is God. The tenants are the people of God. The servants are the prophets and other spokespersons sent by God to collect the harvest. When they arrive they are beaten, killed and stoned. The owner then decides to send his son because he thinks they will respect him. But they seize the son and kill him, too. The owner then chooses to give the vineyard to other tenants who will produce the harvest that he desires.

In this story, the son is Jesus. Similar to Joseph, he was betrayed by someone who was close to him. Judas' betrayal of Jesus, and handing him over to Jewish authorities, ultimately led to Jesus being crucified and dying upon a cross. But as we know, the powers of sin and darkness didn't have the final word. For Jesus, in and through his death on the cross, won forgiveness for our sins, reconciled us to the Father and defeated the power of sin and death. And then when Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, he restored us to life, becoming the source of salvation for all those who place their faith in him and faithfully practice his teachings in their lives. In the words of Psalm 118:22, Jesus is *the stone the builders rejected that has become the cornerstone*.

Both of today's readings remind us that God is so powerful that he can work in and through the most painful and tragic events that happen in the world and in our lives to accomplish a greater good. However, it doesn't happen by magic. We must do our part by placing our faith and trust firmly in the Lord, being steadfast in prayer, and joining our sufferings to Christ so we can receive the strength and grace needed to endure times of trial and difficulty.

Saturday, March 18, 2017

(Lec. 235)

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

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

SATURDAY OF
SECOND WEEK OF LENT

(Opt. Mem.)

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem,
Bishop and Doctor of
the Church)

Gospel related: **CCC** 545, 589, 1423, 1439, 1443, 1468, 1700, 1846, 2795, 2839

FOCUS: The Mass is a celebration of our heavenly Father's freely given love and forgiveness.

Was the older brother short-changed? Don't we have a sneaky feeling that his complaint was justified? Unlike his shiftless younger brother, he never left home. He never asked for his father's money. Nor had he wasted what his father had been good enough to give him.

All that is true. But the older brother's reaction to his younger brother's shame-faced return shows that the elder brother, too, is in a distant country. He is physically at home, but far removed from his father's attitude of love. He apparently never noticed his father's grief all the time his brother was away. Now that he is home again, the elder brother refuses to acknowledge him. He refers to him as *your son* when speaking to his father, as if to say, "he may be your son, but he's no brother of mine." He is filled with resentment, envy and hate. Yet the father does not condemn this son any more than he had condemned his younger son: *Everything I have is yours*, he reminds the elder brother. Those are words of love.

"Who in the story suffered the most?" asked a Sunday school teacher after reading them this story. One child answered at once: "The fattened calf." Next to the fattened calf, however, might be the older brother, who remains outside while the party goes on inside. He does not even taste the fattened calf he himself probably helped to raise.

Or did he? Did he change his mind and go in after all? Jesus doesn't tell us. Jesus leaves the story open-ended. He does so because us wants *us* to supply the ending. This Mass, and every Mass, is a celebration of our heavenly Father's freely given love and forgiveness. The price of that forgiveness was the poured-out blood of his Son. As Saint Paul tells us, *He made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him* (2 Cor. 5:21). We supply the ending to the story by confronting honestly the questions Jesus is putting to each of us right now.

Is the Mass for you a celebration of joy at your heavenly Father's love, given not just to good, faithful people like yourself, but to *all*, without limit? In other words: Have *you* heard the Good News? Are you joining in its celebration?

SUNDAY, MARCH 19, 2017

(Lec. 28)

- 1) Exodus 17:3-7
- 2) Romans 5:1-2, 5-8
- 3) John 4:5-42 or 4:5-15, 19b-26, 39a, 40-42

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

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

FOCUS: Salvation – or a share in the eternal life of God – is not earned but is pure gift from God.

Possibly no other part of Scripture has caused more dispute among Christians than the meaning of Paul's Letter to the Romans. To many it is the text that gave rise to the reformation. So what does Paul mean when he writes: *Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ?* And why has the Church chosen it for us today? What does it mean to be justified? From the start, it has been held by the Church that salvation is not something that we can ever achieve or earn on our own. It is always God's gift.

If we accept this, then what role do we play in our salvation? Are we just puppets, with God pulling our strings? Are we able to sit back and rest on our spiritual laurels? Do our life choices, our good works or our commitment to the Gospel make a difference? For some, this idea that has all been decided ahead of time might sound attractive. If it has, then why worry? Why be faithful, honest or just in this life? Indeed, the litany of our own personal and communal sins becomes irrelevant if we simply think that God has already decided beforehand.

But Paul doesn't stop with telling us that we have been justified, he goes on to say that we now have hope and access to God's grace. Because we have been justified, we can boast in hope of God's glory because the love of God has been *poured out into our hearts*, and makes us capable of more than just blind obedience or the bare minimum. In other words, Paul tells us that God is on our side revealing his mercy and forgiveness that pours forth like living water – purifying, cleansing and renewing the heart that desires life with him.

It is this image of mercy flowing like water that is central to today's Gospel. In an encounter that is full of symbolism and meaning, the Samaritan woman meets the One who reveals God's mercy to all. In the brokenness of her past, this woman is isolated and separated from her community. But in her encounter with Jesus, she goes from suspicious outsider, full of doubts and misunderstandings, to spiritual seeker, and finally becomes an evangelist ready to share the news of her renewal.

Key to this change is her use of titles. First Jesus is *a Jew*, then *Sir*, then *a prophet* and finally *the Christ*. For her, it was a mini RCIA journey as the offer of living water slowly soaks into her very being, renewing her and finally changing her. How quickly this outsider becomes an insider, perhaps not to her community but certainly to the truth of the kingdom.

Lent invites us to seek God's mercy, too. And just as we seek God, we come to know that God is also seeking us, taking the initiative so that we each might lead lives that are justified by him. This offer of *living water* is given to us today; let us drink freely of this life-giving and refreshing gift.

Monday, March 20, 2017

(Lec. 543)

- 1) 2 Samuel 7:4-5a,
12-14a, 16
- 2) Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22
- 3) Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24a
or Luke 2:41-51a

Gospel related: **CCC** 333, 430, 437, 452, 486, 497, 1507, 1846, 2666, 2812 **CSDC** 378

ST. JOSEPH
SPOUSE of the
BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
- SOLEMNITY

FOCUS: Saint Joseph models for us the virtues of being right and just before God, firmly set upon his strong faith.

There is a sense of peace and confidence that comes upon a person whenever things are right in one's relationship with another person. It is a true blessing. Far greater still is the peace and confidence that comes when a person knows that things are right in his or her relationship with God. It is firmly set upon faith that is lived out.

Saint Joseph was a just and righteous man. Though limited in its content concerning Saint Joseph, the Scriptures make this point clear. As a righteous man, Joseph would have distanced himself from a perceived sinful situation – a betrothed woman with a child not his own. He intended to do so discreetly. His righteousness kept him open to listen and obey God, who called him to be a husband to Mary and a foster father to Jesus. His righteousness moved him to provide steady care and concern for Mary and Jesus.

In order for Saint Joseph to do what seemed so contrary to his life of righteousness it would take faith, not unlike the faith of Abraham. Saint Paul expounds on this virtuous example of faith in his letter to the Romans. Abraham believed and hoped in the word of God, even when it seemed impossible, which is why *it was credited to him as righteousness*. So, too, it was with Saint Joseph. His faith impelled him to believe and hope in the word of God revealed to him by the angel. His faith compelled him to assume his role in connecting the house and lineage of King David to Jesus. His faith kept his life right with God.

It must be our deepest desire to have our life right and just before God. It is not self-righteousness or self-justification. No, through his Son, God has made things right between us and him. But we must be willing to accept and respond to the gift of justification that God has made possible for us. Like Saint Joseph, we are to respond in faith. For in faith, we embrace the gift of salvation that comes through Jesus. In faith, we heed the word of God that shows us the path of holiness. In faith, we embrace our role to bring Christ to the world. Our life of faith will be credited to us as righteousness.

Living and dying with the knowledge that our life is truly right and just before God give us blessings that nothing else can provide. They are the blessings of confidence and peace. These are the blessings that brought Saint Joseph to see the face of the Son of God. These are the blessings that brought Abraham to his homeland. These are the same blessings that will bring us face to face with Jesus in our true homeland of heaven.

Tuesday, March 21, 2017
(Lec. 238)

- 1) Daniel 3:25, 34-43
- 2) Matthew 18:21-35

Gospel related: **CCC** 982, 2227, 2843, 2845

TUESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: Because we have been greatly loved, we are called to love greatly.

Do not take away your mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham, your beloved, Isaac your servant, and Israel your holy one. And so begins the reply of Azariah, as he stands amidst the fire that threatens to consume him in a fiery furnace that he was thrown into for refusing to forsake his faith in God. And as the fire surrounds him, God does show mercy, as he has promised in his covenant, by preventing the flames of the furnace from consuming his faithful servant.

Now Azariah's prayer asking God to have mercy on his people is significant for us because it reminds us of our on-going need for deliverance and mercy. It reminds us of our need to turn to God and humbly ask forgiveness. And God, who is ever-willing to forgive, will surely forgive us. The only thing that God expects in return is that we be ever-willing to forgive others.

That expectation is clearly laid before us in today's Gospel. Peter asks Jesus how often we must forgive – how often we must show mercy. Jesus' response of *not seven times but seventy-seven times* means we must never stop. And so the parable follows.

A man owed a great debt to his master. When brought forward, he pleads for mercy and it is granted. The man goes off and comes across someone who owes him a much smaller debt, and he refuses to show the mercy that was shown him. The master finds out and is angered by his lack of compassion and the man, who was shown mercy, is now imprisoned.

There is nothing that binds us more than our own lack of compassion. We pray, Father, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Then why do we harbor resentment for the circumstances of our lives, hold grudges against those who have hurt us, remain angry when our own hopes are dashed? Possibly, we have forgotten what we have asked for earlier in our reciting of the Lord's Prayer – "thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

There is nothing more central to the Gospel than forgiving and being forgiven. Because we have been greatly loved, we are called to love greatly. This was the message of the parable. As the master has forgiven the great debt of his servant, so he demands we do the same.

If we have truly opened our hearts to God's mercy, then – filled with the love of God – we will show that same mercy to others.

Wednesday, March 22, 2017
(Lec. 239)

- 1) Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9
- 2) Matthew 5:17-19

Gospel related: **CCC** 577, 592, 1967, 2053

WEDNESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: *Whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

Lent is our communal opportunity for a major examination of conscience. Hopefully, each of us has examined our failings and faults, and attempted to repent and purify our lives through acts of prayer, fasting and abstinence.

Today, in the middle of Lent, and in the middle of the week, the Lord is asking us to examine how faithfully we are working to pass on the wisdom of God to the next generation.

In the first reading, God speaks to his people about the laws he gave them for the governance of their community. He tells them that other nations will admire them as a *wise and discerning people* if they keep his law. God's laws were not meant to restrict or control his people; they were meant to protect them from temptation, sin and false idols that would ultimately lead them away from him. They were meant to allow God's people to live in love and unity with him and with one another, and experience the blessings of peace and prosperity.

The most touching line is the last, where the Lord says, *Be on your guard and be very careful not to forget the things that your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your heart as long as you live, but make them known to your children and to your children's children.* God loves not only the people standing before him, but he loves their children and their grandchildren already.

In the Gospel, Jesus teaches that he did not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them. He warns that those who lead others astray will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but those who obey and teach the commandments will be the greatest.

Every one of us in this church is responsible for the faith of the next generation. Some of you have children of your own, and as parents, you are their first teachers in the faith. It is a tremendous responsibility. We must acknowledge that it is difficult in today's world to choose Sunday school over soccer or other extracurricular activities. Parents need support, not judgment, in raising their children to know the wisdom of the Christian faith.

Those of us without children in the home have a duty to support the faith formation of others. Some are called to be catechists in a religious education program or volunteer with the youth group. Others may have been gifted with the ability to financially support parish educational initiatives. Many of us have godchildren that we promised to help grow in faith. Have we taken that promise seriously, or did our obligation fade after the party was over? Could we encourage another person with a spiritual book or simply an offer to pray for their needs?

Today, in the middle of Lent and the middle of our lives, we are called to examine our commitment to passing on the gift of faith. Make a commitment today to one action that you will take to contribute to the faith of the next generation.

Thursday, March 23, 2017
(Lec. 240)

- 1) Jeremiah 7:23-28
- 2) Luke 11:14-23

THURSDAY OF
THIRD WEEK OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Turibius of Mogrovejo,
Bishop)

Gospel related: **CCC** 385, 700

FOCUS: We are called to foster faithfulness and obedience to God in our daily lives.

In our first reading, we heard our Lord speaking to Jeremiah. He describes to the prophet the state of the people of Israel, how they refuse to listen. *Faithfulness has disappeared*, he says. But interestingly, God still wants to send Jeremiah to them, to tell them they are being disobedient. And of course Jeremiah obeys, even though it will be dangerous for him.

In the Gospel we see a similar dynamic at work with Jesus casting out a demon from a mute man, who was then able to speak. As we heard, there was a mixed reaction from the crowd who witnessed Jesus work this miracle. Some were utterly amazed. Others in the crowd accuse Jesus of casting out the demon by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of the demons. Jesus shows that this accusation lacks credibility by saying, *Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste and house will fall against house. And if Satan is divided against himself how will his kingdom stand?*

These two passages offer a portrait of how sin can lead people to become selfish and hard-hearted, seemingly immune to God's love, grace and mercy that is always at work trying to draw them back to himself. We are blessed in that the saint the Church honors today, Saint Turibius, offers a wonderful example of what it means to serve God with a faithful and obedient heart.

Saint Turibius of Mogrovejo was born of Spanish nobility in 1538. After being ordained a priest, he was sent to Peru, and became a famous Spanish missionary. He traveled his archdiocese by foot, going from village to village meeting the poor and baptizing and confirming them. He personally baptized and confirmed almost half a million souls, including Saint Rose of Lima and Saint Martin de Porres.

He served tirelessly for the Church, and also defended the rights of the native people against their Spanish rulers, until his death in 1606. The thing that marks the disciple of Christ is the radical obedience we see in Saint Turibius. One can be the greatest scholar and know the catechism backward and forward, but if we do not have obedience, then we are no better than the Israelites from our first reading or those who were skeptical of Jesus in our Gospel reading.

Today's readings, and the example of Saint Turibius, remind us that we cannot be casual or cavalier in seeking to be faithful and obedient to Jesus. We must work to be faithful in little things so we can be sure to be faithful in those areas of our life where it is most difficult. Lent is a perfect time to practice this obedience.

Friday, March 24, 2017
(Lec. 241)

- 1) Hosea 14:2-10
- 2) Mark 12:28-34

FRIDAY OF
THIRD WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: Authentic love is rooted in honesty.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

We're told in today's Gospel that this is the most important commandment. But why should we love God? Although simple obedience is reason enough, is there another reason?

Let's look at today's first reading. The Israelites turned their backs on God. They relied on their own strength, and on foreign alliances. This led to trouble. When the prophet Hosea urged the Israelites to return to God, he didn't tell them to cover up their wrongdoings. Instead, he advised them to admit their faults to God honestly and trust in his mercy. Hosea reassured the people that God loved them unconditionally and wanted to lavish his blessing upon them – if only they would turn back to him.

Now Hosea's reassuring words were not just for the Israelites, they are for us as well. For like the Israelites, we don't have to deny or cover up our wrongdoings. Although feeling vulnerable might be uncomfortable, it's safe to be honest with God. He knows all about our faults anyway. Acknowledging them enables us to grow closer to God, who is waiting for us with open arms. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and loves us in spite of our imperfections. When we're honest about our flaws, we open ourselves to God's healing love – a love strong enough to penetrate our deepest guilt and shame.

After experiencing such lavish love and mercy, responding with authentic love for God is just a natural result. When we love someone we want to please them. One way to please God is by loving our neighbor as ourselves, which Jesus said was the second greatest commandment. As we take responsibility for the harm we've caused others, as we experience God's unconditional love in spite of our wrongs, as we realize how much we have been forgiven, it becomes easier to forgive others who have wronged us. This can lead to healing in our relationships with others.

And let's not forget the part of the commandment that says to love ourselves. What could be more loving than doing ourselves the favor of being honest about our weaknesses? Why carry the burden of pretending to be something we're not? Humble honesty opens us to authentic love for God, our neighbors and ourselves.

Saturday, March 25, 2017
(Lec. 545)

- 1) Isaiah 7:10-14; 8:10
- 2) Hebrews 10:4-10
- 3) Luke 1:26-38

Gospel related: **CCC** 64, 148, 269, 273, 276, 332, 430, 437, 484, 486, 488, 490, 491, 494, 497, 505, 510, 559, 697, 706, 709, 723, 2571, 2617, 2677, 2812, 2827, 2856 **CSDC** 59

**THE ANNUNCIATION
OF THE LORD
- SOLEMNITY**

FOCUS: *How can this be?*

Often, parents will say that some of their most powerful moments of experiencing God's presence are through their children. One mother shared that if God had come to her the night before her son was born and told her to write down everything she wanted in a son because God would give it to her, what she would have dreamed up would have fallen far short of the actual glory and gift of the young man who was now 18 years old. She realized that God's dreams and visions for her life were far beyond her capacity to imagine.

In today's Gospel, Mary is on the precipice of God's dreams and visions not only for her life, but for all of humanity. Her response demonstrates that she realizes it's beyond her capacity to imagine or reason. She asks, *How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?*

Mary responds initially in much the same way we do, attempting to reason it out. As we can all attest, we live in an age where you can Google the answer to any question or YouTube a video to learn how to accomplish any task that you care to undertake. Reasoning things out seems to be the default approach to all life's circumstances.

Saint John Paul, in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, or *Faith and Reason*, states, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves."

Reason is critical in discovering the truth of who we are. However, if not accompanied by faith, it will prove insufficient.

Faith is necessary because much of what we encounter is mystery. Some mysteries, like the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist or the Holy Trinity, will remain for us a mystery. We need to be comfortable trusting in mystery. Exploring mystery through the eyes of faith allows God to reveal to us his glory and gifts, which are beyond our human capacity to imagine or reason.

SUNDAY, MARCH 26, 2017

(Lec. 31)

- 1) 1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a
- 2) Ephesians 5:8-14
- 3) John 9:1-41 or
9:1, 6-9, 13-17, 34-38

Gospel related: **CCC** 575, 588, 595, 596, 1151, 1504, 2173, 2827

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

FOCUS: Living in the Light of Christ is easy to say, hard to do.

Saint Paul's challenge to us to live as children of light is easier said than done. Witness our reading from the first Book of Samuel and what we just heard from the ninth chapter of John's Gospel.

First, Samuel sets out to anoint God's choice to replace Saul as king of Israel. Samuel gets caught up in judging Jesse's sons by external appearances alone, and not by their hearts, as the Lord expects Samuel to do.

Beginning with Eliab, who Samuel believed to be the one, Jesse's sons are paraded in front of Samuel and, one by one, they are rejected after being reminded by the Lord how to pick a worthy candidate. Finally David, who is seen by his father as the youngest and therefore the least likely candidate to be a leader, is anointed by Samuel.

At the moment of his anointing, our first reading tells us, *The spirit of the Lord rushed upon David*. In a little less than two weeks at the Easter Vigil, our candidates for baptism and confirmation will feel that same spirit rushing upon them. This experience gives the rest of us the opportunity to reflect on whether or not we need to reawaken the spirit of God dwelling within us.

In the Gospel today, recall how the blind man cured by Jesus moves from seeing Jesus as a prophet to bantering with the Pharisees, to finally becoming a believer in Jesus as the Promised One. This conversion process is in stark contrast to the intransigence of the Pharisees, whose power and status were being undermined, they believed, by this itinerant preacher known as Jesus the Nazarene.

In the end, Jesus points to the blindness of the Pharisees. This sort of blindness, frankly, is much harder to cure than physical blindness. It can manifest itself as blindness to the needs of those around us, especially the most marginalized and powerless in our midst. It can be blindness toward a lonely neighbor or a struggling teenager or a stressed-out spouse. It is blindness to the need to see as God sees, and not as humankind sees.

Pope Francis is constantly challenging believers and non-believers alike to love and care for one another and to love and care for our earthly home. We are not called to like everybody, which is humanly impossible, but we are called to love everyone, which is possible, because God said it is our job to do so.

Too often today in our polarized world, we think that if we don't like someone's political affiliation, religious beliefs or moral standards, that means we don't have to love them. Quite the contrary; it is our loving example, and not our brilliantly crafted rebuttals, that wins souls for Christ. That,

after all, is what it means to be a good and faithful steward of the Lord. Our job therefore as *children of light* is to bring others to the Light of all Lights – Jesus Christ.

Monday, March 27, 2017
(Lec. 244)

- 1) Isaiah 65:17-21
- 2) John 4:43-54

MONDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: When we walk in the light of faith, we rely on the word and authority of Jesus.

In today's Gospel, Jesus returns to Cana, a place where he was known by many since it was there he performed his first miracle, even if somewhat reluctantly. In today's Scripture reading, we hear once again a seeming reluctance on Jesus' part when he says, *Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe.* Perhaps this was because the people in this region have known Jesus as the carpenter's son, and as a carpenter himself. This would have caused them to wonder about the authority he has to be a preacher, and to refer to God in such intimate terms as "Abba." Nonetheless, the majority of them do welcome Jesus, accepting him more for what he can do than for who he is.

The Scripture goes on to say that a royal official who had come from Capernaum seeking Jesus begged him to travel the twenty miles – a good two days' journey on foot – back to heal his son who was close to death. Any parent with an extremely sick child has begged the same of Jesus: "please heal my son," "please heal my daughter." This official may have heard about Jesus and the miracles he had performed from some of Jesus' followers. Conceivably, he had seen some miracles himself.

The royal official was persistent in his pleading. Possibly as a test of the man's faith and a reaction to the superficial nature of the crowd who just wanted to see signs and wonders, Jesus' first response is a rebuke. The man again pleads with Jesus, *Sir, come down before my child dies.* Jesus tells the man, *You may go; your son will live.* Without another word, the man leaves. The man leaves because he heard Jesus say, *Your son will live.* The official couldn't phone ahead or find out in any other way, but would have to travel another two days to "see" with his own eyes that his son was healed. Which one of us here would have that kind of faith to walk away from someone we knew could heal by touching and just rely on his word? Deeply grounded faith is based on who Jesus actually is; in other words, it is based on believing in the power of his word and in his authority.

Jesus tells us in Scripture that he is with us. He is present in the sacraments, and especially in the most Blessed Sacrament of the altar. He speaks to us in the silence of our hearts if we take the time to pray daily, quiet ourselves and listen. As the royal official did, we must then take Jesus at his word and act on that word before seeing the result.

Tuesday, March 28, 2017
(Lec. 245)

- 1) Ezekiel 47: 1-9, 12
- 2) John 5:1-16

Gospel related: **CCC** 575, 583, 594

TUESDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: God's healing power reaches into the depths of our being.

The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of a wonderful stream flowing out of the Temple. In his vision, the water in the stream rises and rises until it becomes a river. The river gives life and provides refreshment. It is filled with fish and other living creatures, and its banks are lined with trees that provide fruit for food and leaves that bring healing.

In Ezekiel's lifetime, the Babylonians had destroyed the Temple and sacked Jerusalem. While in exile, he experienced visions that provided his people with hope for a future when the Temple would be rebuilt. At that time, blessings would flow out of the Temple like water.

The Temple was indeed restored less than a hundred years after Ezekiel's death. During Jesus' time, it was the center of worship for the Jewish faith. Faithful Jews poured into Jerusalem to worship at the Temple for major feasts. It is also important to note that during this time Jewish religious leaders taught that strict observance of the Law, especially restrictions concerning the Sabbath, was necessary to lead lives that were holy and pleasing to God.

So when Jesus heals the lame man, he both challenges the status quo and demonstrates that neither the Temple nor the Law could bring salvation. The healing takes place at the pool of Bethesda, which is outside the Temple, and it also takes place on the Sabbath, violating the law against working on that day. Jesus shows that we are not healed by rigid and strict adherence to the Law. Rather, we are healed first and foremost by grace – by the power of God transforming our hearts.

Today's Gospel also shows how Jesus himself is the life-giving water who heals and saves the whole person. Notice that Jesus asked the man, *Do you want to be well?* Not, "Do you want to walk?" The story is deeper than it appears on the surface. Something very powerful is happening here: Jesus is asking the man if he wants to be healed – not just physically, but in the depths of his very being, freed from sin and reconciled with God.

Restoring the man's ability to walk was an outward sign of the healing grace he had received from Jesus – and isn't that the very definition of a sacrament? "An outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace." When we come to God in the sacrament of reconciliation, we are crippled by sin. We cannot free ourselves and so we pray to be made whole, and we are healed by God's grace. Jesus has never stopped performing miracles. His loving kindness endures forever.

Wednesday, March 29, 2017
(Lec. 246)

- 1) Isaiah 49:8-15
- 2) John 5:17-30

Gospel related: **CCC** 574, 589, 594, 612, 635, 679, 859, 994, 998, 1038, 1063, 1470, 2824
CSDC 259

WEDNESDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: Jesus came to do the Father's work, living and dying for our salvation.

An old picture in a family photo album shows a little boy holding up a big fish. The only smile bigger than the boy's is on the face of his father, standing in the background with his own fishing pole, letting the viewer know that he taught his son how to bait that hook, throw out the line, reel in the fish and take pride in his success. A video on social media shows a father and son dancing to a wild rhythm, doing fancy footwork that is obviously handed down from father to son. This is the same sort of picture we get in today's Gospel, as Jesus tells the religious leaders that he only does what his father has done before him.

Of course, the Gospel portrait is on a much grander scale than the fishing or dancing, but the basic concept is not too different. In simple terms, Jesus teaches the people that he is the son of God, doing the work his Father has sent him to do. In the verses before this Gospel, the Jews were questioning Jesus because he cured on the Sabbath. In response, Jesus says: *My Father is at work until now, so I am at work.*

Jesus goes on to say: *For just as the Father raises the dead and gives life, so also does the Son give life to whomever he wishes. Nor does the Father judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to his Son.*

Let us remember that the totality of God's love for us never changes. It is ours for all time. As we contemplate how much God loves us, let us give thanks for the precious gift we have in God's fatherly love, shown so clearly in the life, death and resurrection of his only begotten Son.

Thursday, March 30, 2017
(Lec. 247)

- 1) Exodus 32:7-14
- 2) John 5:31-47

Gospel related: **CCC** 548, 582, 702, 719

THURSDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: God hates the sin, but loves the sinner.

In the first reading today, we find Moses pleading lawyer-like with God on behalf of the Hebrews, who with their idolatry, had sinned against God.

Moses asks God to remember his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But does God need to remember? No, of course not. He is quite aware of what he has promised. When it comes to remembering, who is doing the remembering? Moses, of course. He needs to remember just who it was that made the promises. He, and we with him, need to remember that God loves us and always will love us even though we are imperfect, even though we are sinners, even though we perhaps all too often falter in our faith in him. God hates the sin, but he loves the sinner. We must always remember that.

And so it is with us. We sometimes have our own idols, not unlike the Hebrews. Whether it be sports icons, media personalities or Hollywood stars, our idolatry can choke our hearts and souls.

In times of temptation, in times when our hearts are set on the idols of this world, we need to remember. We need to remember God's promises, we need to remember God's love, and we need to remember that we need God's graces. It is not God who needs to remember. We are the ones called to do the remembering.

Friday, March 31, 2017

(Lec. 248)

1) Wisdom 2:1a, 12-22

2) John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Gospel related: **CCC** 583

FRIDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

FOCUS: Turn away from wickedness, and seek the Lord's wisdom.

While it's easy to accept that everyone sins, it can be challenging to admit, "I'm a sinner." The reality is even harder to face when someone else points out that we are not living as we should. No one likes to be rebuked. We tend to get defensive and maybe even angry.

But if the person correcting us is acting on our behalf, why do we feel such negativity when we should be grateful? The answer is pride, and hurt feelings.

In our first reading from Wisdom, we hear the thoughts of the wicked. They are threatened by the just one, who points out their transgressions from the law. Rather than change, the wicked want to go on living as they'd like. They decide to silence the voice. They question his relationship with the Lord and plot to torture him. In the end, they condemn the just one to death to see if God will take care of him. Their wickedness blinds them to wisdom and justice.

We can interpret this reading as a prophecy that continues to unfold throughout Christ's passion. Part of it is fulfilled in today's Gospel, as the inhabitants of Jerusalem discuss Jesus' presence at the Temple. This was during the Feast of Tabernacles, an annual celebration of thanksgiving for the year's harvest, and the miracles of water and fire recorded in Exodus.

As Jesus is teaching, the crowd questions if he is the Messiah. He knows the thoughts of the wicked and tells them that he is sent by the one *whom you do not know*. Instead of listening, they try to arrest him.

One of the spiritual works of mercy is to admonish the sinner. Sometimes we are the one admonishing, and sometimes we're the sinner. Like the voices in today's readings, many of us would rather ignore or silence a person who questions our actions than the alternative – to change. Changing challenges our pride, as we acknowledge that we're not living as we should, and it requires deliberate effort.

These next two weeks of Lent can be a powerful period of spiritual transformation. Let's consider our attitude toward people we encounter who call us to walk in truth and holiness. Recognizing our shortcomings, we can take the next step and turn to the sacrament of reconciliation where we receive forgiveness. Together, we can help each other walk more closely with the Lord.