

# February

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Thursday, February 1, 2018  
(Lec. 326)

- 1) 1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12
- 2) Mark 6:7-13

Gospel related: CCC 765, 1506, 1511, 1673

THURSDAY OF  
FOURTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

**FOCUS:** Listen for divine guidance, and then step out in faith to bring the Good News of salvation to those around you.

Both of today's readings speak of following. In the first reading, Solomon is told by his dying father, King David, to *Keep the mandate of the Lord, your God, following his ways*. He was to rule his people in a way that honored God and benefited his people. Then in the Gospel, we have the Apostles, who have already been chosen, now being officially summoned and sent. They were to follow in his way as well – preaching repentance, driving out demons and curing illness. They have other instructions about what to bring with them, where to stay and what to do if the people they are trying to help refuse to listen to them.

Solomon and David followed in the way of the Lord in their own way. So did the Apostles. Perhaps following, or to put it another way, walking, in the way of the Lord is somewhat different for each of us. But we need to be alert, listening for instructions and being open to adjusting our path or our approach if necessary.

Today, we have an advantage over both Solomon and the Apostles, since Jesus is with us on our path. We can call on him at any moment to reinforce our mission or to guide us through difficulties. We also have centuries of Church teaching to fall back on.

For you and me, our *walk in the way of the Lord* differs from that of the Apostles in that most of us are not going out as missionaries, searching out people who have not yet heard the Good News. Instead, we are going out to our jobs or schools, living as members of families and communities, sharing our faith by our actions, as much or more than by our words. So, too, we are not kings, like Solomon, but, like him, we are called to live God's law daily, give good example and help those around us to see God in and through us.

We are challenged to listen for divine guidance, and then step out in faith to bring the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ to those around us. Like the Apostles, we are to remain humble and focused, not drawing attention to ourselves, but to the Word of God we are hoping to convey through our everyday words and actions. In the end, each of us must discern what it means for us to follow in his ways, and walk the walk.

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Friday, February 2, 2018  
(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: To live in the presence of the Lord.

The Jews saw the Temple as the *beit ha Elohim* – “House of God” – the dwelling place of YHWH. Christ had profound respect for the Temple and made multiple trips to Jerusalem (cf. CCC 583). This was the first recorded visit – when Mary and Joseph followed the prescriptions of the Law, presenting their first-born Son to the Lord. It was here that Malachi’s prophecy would be fulfilled – that *suddenly there will come to the temple the Lord whom you seek*.

In this holy place, Mary and Joseph encounter Simeon, who was *righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel*. When he saw the child, Jesus, he took him in his arms and blessed God, because he had lived to see the Messiah. In addition, Simeon predicted the sorrow which Mary would experience.

Likewise, the Holy Family encountered Anna, a devout widow who *worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer*.

And what did all these holy people – Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna – have in common? They lived their days in the presence of the Lord – two did so in God’s house in Jerusalem, two in a humble house of God in Nazareth. They were people of immense faith: Mary and Joseph trusted in the fulfillment of God’s word; Simeon and Anna trusted in the fulfillment of God’s promises. They were obedient to the Law of God – Mary and Joseph by fulfilling the prescriptions of the law and bringing their firstborn and two turtle doves; Simeon and Anna for living their days in following the prescriptions of Temple worship.

And once they all encountered this small babe – who was, at once, the Great High Priest and (later) the Sacrificial Victim – they did not remain silent, but gave thanks to God and shared the Good News of his divine presence with others.

But what of us? Where do we encounter the Living God? How do we live in his presence? Mary and Joseph, and Simeon and Anna, serve as examples to follow when pursuing answers to these questions. They are models for how to encounter God and share his message, with faith and trust.

Let us ask for the graces to live as they did – in the presence of the Lord – with faith and trust, that we, too, might be bearers of the Good News to others.

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Saturday, February 3, 2018  
(Lec. 328)

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

SATURDAY OF  
FOURTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(Opt. Mem.  
Saint Blaise,  
Bishop and Martyr;  
Saint Ansgar,  
Bishop  
Saturday in Honor of BVM)

FOCUS: Hasten to God for wisdom.

King Solomon responded to God's invitation by asking for wisdom. Despite the certainty that God would give him anything he asked for, he thought not of himself. Instead, Solomon prayed for a gift that would benefit his people: the gift of an understanding heart. The Lord was so pleased with Solomon's request that he gave him *a heart so wise and understanding* that there had never been anyone like him before, or ever to come. He also said to Solomon, *I give you what you have not asked for, such riches and glory that among kings there is not your like.*

God *cannot* be outdone in generosity!

Solomon responded to God's overture, and so can we. All of our life is an invitation to grow in relationship and union with God, who is the source and summit of our being. Seeking the wisdom of the Lord and asking – as the psalmist does – for the Lord to teach us his statutes, is a way of committing ourselves to God. For the more we learn of his ways, and grow in wisdom and understanding, the more we grow in holiness and spiritual riches. As Solomon was blessed in *his* kingdom, so will we be blessed in *God's* kingdom.

This is at the heart of the message that Jesus brings us in the Gospel. And in today's passage, we see that people have begun to respond. The number of people *coming and going in great numbers* seeking Jesus – God's wisdom in human form – has already kept the Apostles quite busy. As they and Jesus attempt a short retreat from everyone, a *vast crowd* of people were *hasten[ing] there on foot from all the towns*. Would that we might have the same intensity of desire for God's gifts to approach him in haste, and with confidence in his response.

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**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2018**

(Lec. 74)

1) Job 7:1-4, 6-7

2) 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23

3) Mark 1:29-39

Gospel related: CCC 2602

**FIFTH SUNDAY  
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: In encountering Jesus, we are healed and given a mission.

It is interesting to notice where Jesus encounters people. We might think that Jesus, son of God and Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, would live in the Temple and allow people to come and worship him. But time and again in the Gospels we see Jesus going out to encounter people no matter where they are. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at a well, he meets the good thief on the cross, and in today's Gospel, Jesus leaves the synagogue and enters the house of Simon's mother-in-law where he encounters her.

When we encounter Jesus, we should not leave unchanged. He brings healing to our bodies and our souls, if we have faith and trust in him. In today's Gospel, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law; he also cures many who were sick and drove out many demons. Jesus desires to heal us and make us whole. But this does not come without a cost.

Jesus heals us and sets us free not so that we can simply live life "our way," but so we can build the kingdom of God by spreading the Christian message. Each of us as a Christian is called to say with Saint Paul: *Woe to me if I do not preach [the Gospel]!* All of us are given this mission, we simply need to discover in what way God is calling us to accomplish it. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have access to the graces and gifts necessary to live out this call.

At times, the way we are to live out the mission Jesus gives us is simply to be a good mother or father, a loving and devoted wife or husband, a faithful friend. There will be other times when Jesus wants us to preach the truth of the Gospel in a literal way to those who have never heard of him. There will be times when our mission is to preach through our actions and lifestyle. We heard in today's Gospel that everyone was looking for Jesus. How can we help them find him?

Each one of us has been called by name. We have already encountered Jesus in the sacraments, and have been healed of the stain of our original sin. Now God calls us forth to proclaim this Good News to all. Let us undertake our mission with joy and gladness.

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Monday, February 5, 2018  
(Lec. 329)

- 1) 1 Kings 8:1-7, 9-13
- 2) Mark 6:53-56

MONDAY OF  
FIFTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(OBL MEM  
Saint Agatha,  
Virgin and Martyr)

Gospel related: CCC 1504

FOCUS: God dwells with us, his people.

In the first reading today, as the *Ark of the Covenant* containing God's law is placed in the *Holy of Holies*, the Lord fills the Temple with a cloud of his glory. Now God dwells with his people.

This Temple would be destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. But by then, God had fully revealed himself by coming to dwell – not in a building of bricks and mortar but in the great mystery of Jesus Christ. The Church founded by Jesus would be God's new and permanent in-dwelling in the world, and would continue his work of proclaiming God's mercy and love and witnessing to his healing in our broken world.

As we hear these readings today, two questions come to mind. First, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Do we recognize Jesus dwelling in our midst, or would he recognize us? In the Gospel, we are told that the people recognized him immediately. Is that true of us? Is our relationship with Jesus rich and life-giving?

And second, do we seek the glory of God that once filled the Temple of Solomon? To share in God's glory is the purpose of every Christian life – as well as its ultimate goal. For that glory is not simply the reward for a life well-spent, but a dignity and holy presence that we possess by virtue of our baptism and our daily living out of the Christian vocation.

Today, we celebrate the feast of Saint Agatha, virgin and martyr, who gave herself completely to Christ and his Gospel message, and who witnessed to God's presence by her life and her death. Her answers to these questions are profoundly in the positive. That she was a temple of the Holy Spirit is evidenced by her life, and she fully lived her Christian vocation with joy. Let us ask for her intercession that we may do the same, and share in God's glory here, and for eternity.

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Tuesday, February 6, 2018  
(Lec. 330)

- 1) 1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30
- 2) Mark 7:1-13

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

FOCUS: Offering ourselves in love for the sake of God's people.

In the Gospel today we hear the term *qorban*, along with the explanation, *meaning dedicated to God*. Just as some folks exploit the tax laws to get around paying their fair share, in Jesus' time some folks invoked *qorban* as a way of getting out of providing appropriately for one's parents. We might describe this as adhering to a very specific reading of the letter of the law, without paying any attention to the spirit and intent with which it was written and promulgated.

This kind of scrupulosity, exhibited by the Pharisees and scribes, is what drives Jesus' very pointed discussion with them today. They are all hung up on whether or not the disciples are following certain laws and traditions. Jesus reacts to this, and scolds them for their neurotic fussiness in following legal mandates for the sake of following them, rather than for the love and honor of God.

Jesus would have been familiar with Solomon's example in this regard, which we find in the first reading. Solomon has built the Temple for the Lord, but knows it is for *encountering* the Lord, not *containing* him. God is not present *in* the laws and traditions, but is glorified *through* them when they are enacted in love and humility. These are two attributes that the Pharisees and scribes did not exhibit, and Jesus reminds them of Isaiah's prophecy, *This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts*.

What Solomon and Jesus are teaching us today is that it is all well and good to know God's law, but if it has not taken up residence in our hearts – and burst forth in humility and love, then it doesn't do much good. So let us note the example of both Solomon and Jesus, who humbled themselves before God, and offered themselves in love for the sake of God's people. We are called to do the same, and with prayer and reliance on grace, we can answer the call.

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Wednesday, February 7, 2018  
(Lec. 331)

- 1) 1 Kings 10:1-10
- 2) Mark 7:14-23

Gospel related: CCC 574

WEDNESDAY OF  
FIFTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Seek the Lord's wisdom so as to see with God's eyes and speak with his words.

In today's reading, the Queen of Sheba travels to Solomon's kingdom to experience his wisdom and prosperity. The queen is so intrigued by what she hears and sees that she believes the Lord made him king to carry out judgment and justice. Solomon prayed for this gift at the time of his coronation. He asked the Lord for a listening heart to judge God's people and to distinguish between good and evil (1 Kings 3:9).

In our Gospel, we find an even greater teacher of the Lord's wisdom – Jesus. He explains how what passes through a person from the outside cannot defile or make him impure. It's what comes from within that defiles.

Jesus' comments challenge the religious leaders of his time, causing many to accuse him of being possessed – and of blasphemy and false prophecy. Despite such allegations, Jesus professes to speak the truth.

Jesus doesn't only speak to those present with him two thousand years ago. His words contain the truth for us today – words that lead to eternal life. These same words, the wisdom of God embodied in *the Word*, are present in all aspects of our faith, not just Scripture. We can learn more about our faith through formation opportunities, such as being a sponsor for RCIA, or by reading some of the catechism, for example.

Finally, we can turn to prayer. Rather than fill our prayer time only *talking* to God, we might take time to listen in quiet contemplation. Intimacy with our Lord leads us to true wisdom. As Pope Francis said in a general audience a few years back, it's this gift of wisdom that "teaches us to see with God's eyes, to feel with God's heart, to speak with God's words."

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Thursday, February 8, 2018  
(Lec. 332)

- 1) 1 Kings 11:4-13
- 2) Mark 7:24-30

THURSDAY OF  
FIFTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME  
(Opt. Mem.  
Saint Jerome Emiliani;  
Saint Josephine Bakhita,  
Virgin)

Gospel related: CCC 2616

FOCUS: Jesus responds to prayers offered in faith.

Today's readings offer a study in contrasts, with faith at the core. In the first reading, King Solomon has turned away from his faith in the Lord and erected temples to the *strange gods* of his many foreign wives, doing what was *evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not follow him unreservedly as his father David had done*. His sin would cost his descendants the kingdom, since the Lord tells him, *I will deprive you of the kingdom and give it to your servant*. However, even the Lord shows some mercy and tells Solomon he will leave one tribe *for the sake of my servant David and of Jerusalem, which I have chosen*.

The Syro-Phoenician woman is at the opposite end of the cultural spectrum. She is a Greek and a Gentile, and she must have loved her daughter very much to throw herself on the mercy of Jesus. As we hear in the Gospel, *Soon a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him. She came and fell at his feet*. When Jesus responds, he does so cryptically, which is Mark's way of illustrating Jesus' mission to minister first to the Jews, then to the rest of the world. The woman is persistent, and asserts that *even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps*. Jesus acknowledges her great faith, and sends her away – her daughter healed.

Faith is the bedrock of Christianity. When Pope Francis visited a homeless shelter in 2015, he said, "Faith makes us open to the quiet presence of God at every moment of our lives, in every person and in every situation." The catechism tells us Jesus always responds to prayers "offered in faith" (CCC 2616). Throughout the Gospels, Jesus heals the sick, drives out demons and raises people from the dead. These were people who had faith.

It doesn't matter whether our prayers are shouted from mountaintops or kept in the silence of our hearts. When offered in faith, our prayers are heard and answered according to the will of God.

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Friday, February 9, 2018

(Lec. 333)

1) 1 Kings 11:29-32; 12:19

2) Mark 7:31-37

Gospel related: CCC 1151, 1504

FRIDAY OF  
FIFTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: God gives us signs to show us the way; we need only be open to them.

In Scripture, God often uses symbols and signs to convey a message to his people. In the first reading a minor prophet, Ahijah, presents ten pieces of his cloak to Jeroboam, representing the ten northern tribes that will break away from Judah. The loss of the ten tribes was a response to Solomon, who grew unfaithful to God by worshipping the foreign gods of his wives. God remains faithful to David, however, by allowing David's tribe of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin to remain under the reign of Rehoboam, of David's line.

In the Gospel, Mark depicts Jesus himself as a sign from God. In healing the man suffering from deafness and a speech impediment, Jesus points to the coming of the reign of God. Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies from Isaiah 35 that *the ears of the deaf be opened ... [and] the mute tongue sing for joy* (5-6). God is telling the people of Jesus' day that Jesus is ushering in the kingdom of God.

Signs and symbols from the times of Solomon and Jesus can seem very distant to us – not only in time but in relevance. In our day, we might be tempted to believe that the time of God's mighty works are finished and that we're just living in "ordinary times." Yet Jesus invites us – along with the ears of the deaf man – to "be open." God is still at work in our lives through what might seem like ordinary means.

At a more day-to-day level, how often does God lift your heart through the gift or presence of a friend? How often does a simple conversation with a friend, neighbor or family member help you to solve a problem you have been struggling with – or set you on the right path when you've been straying? And, on the other hand, how often have you brought joy, peace or even reconciliation to the hearts of others by your words and actions? While perhaps not of Biblical proportions, these are still signs from God that we are not forgotten – that God loves us, cares for us and wants to make sure we go in the right direction.

Today, let your eyes, ears and hearts be open to the Word of God – in Scripture or around you – and open your mouth in praise of the God who does all things well.

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Saturday, February 10, 2018  
(Lec. 334)

- 1) 1 Kings 12:26-32; 13:33-34
- 2) Mark 8:1-10

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

Gospel related: CCC 1329

FOCUS: Do all things with wisdom and charity.

Scam artists come in all forms. From overseas contacts who claim to have millions of dollars to give us – if only we'd give them \$10,000 first – to those who sell knock-off merchandise as the real thing. People will try to sell anything they can get away with selling, but whatever the product is, they are all peddling the exact same thing: lies and falsehoods dressed up as truth.

We might think of Jeroboam as the scam artist of the day. He is fearful that he is about to lose out on both commerce and loyalty from the people of his kingdom. He worries that if they *go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem*, then he will lose the battle for control of the tribes to Rehoboam, King of Judah. So Jeroboam devises a plan to keep that from happening.

His plan consists of making two calves of gold, and saying to the people, *You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. Here is your God, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.* He places these calves in two popular cities, and also built temples. This led to sin, because the people visited those cities and temples, rather than Jerusalem. Jeroboam had scammed them: he saw a need they had and provided for it with lies and deceit.

Contrast this story with the one we find in the Gospel. Like Jeroboam, Jesus sees the immediate need of the people. Unlike Jeroboam, Jesus does not deceive in his provisions. They are hungry, and he offers real food. Where there is lack, he creates abundance. He is not concerned for his own interests or what he might lose, as Jeroboam was. Nor does he promote himself in accomplishing the task of feeding the people. He simply sees, and acts out of love.

So here we have two examples of individuals who, like the phrase, "saw an opening and took it." One, Jeroboam, chose unwisely – providing falsehood and deceit, and leading his people to sin. Jesus acted with wisdom and charity – providing truth and both physical and spiritual nourishment, and leading the people to life. It seems that our choice is simple: whom do we wish to imitate – Jeroboam, or Jesus?

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**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2018**

(Lec.77)

- 1) Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46
- 2) 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1
- 3) Mark 1:40-45

Gospel related: CCC 1504, 2616

**SIXTH SUNDAY  
IN ORDINARY TIME**

**FOCUS:** Let us use all that God has given us to lift up the last, the lowest and the least around us.

People in ancient Israel and Judah had a very limited concept of sin and grace. For many, God was a distant figure – one who had little patience and almost no mercy. There were real and lasting consequences for sin, and one of the worst was leprosy. It was thought to be a consequence of sin, and, as such, untreatable – and the sin unforgiveable. For the Jewish person trying to keep and observe all the laws of ritual purity, touching a leper could make you unclean and bring upon you all their misfortunes.

For thousands of years lepers were, for all intents and purposes, the “walking dead.” Their diagnosis cut them off from their families and left them on the furthest fringes of society. They could not work or have a family; they were deprived of their dignity, and treated as subhuman. They had to stay out of the towns, touch no one but other lepers, leave their heads uncovered in the hot, desert sun, and ring a bell calling out “unclean, unclean!” to deter other people from making contact with them, even by accident.

As we know, Jesus did not come to congratulate the worldly, the wealthy and the wise, he came to lift up the last, the lowest, the least, the lame, and even the lepers. Jesus touches the man in today’s Gospel which, given the ritual purity laws of the time, is something he should never have done, and in that moment, two miracles occurred. The man has his humanity restored to him by the loving touch of Christ, and then his skin is healed.

In healing the leper, we see a miracle not unlike the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus took a man, as good as dead, and gave him his life back. Isn’t it strange that Jesus does not want this man to tell anyone about who is responsible for his good fortune? But Jesus has his reasons. He wants people to believe in him because of faith, not because of fame.

Jesus was able to work this amazing feat for this desperate soul because he did everything for the glory of God, as Paul suggested in the second reading. He is not alone. The Church has raised up countless saints who have imitated the selfless love of Christ in working with the sick, the diseased and the poor – chief among them the recently canonized saints, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Saint Damien, the Leper Priest of Molokai. Their charity was not for their own benefit, but that others may be saved. That is where our time, talent and treasure can do the greatest good – when we use all that God has given us to lift up the last, the lowest and the least all around us.

Monday, February 12, 2018  
(Lec. 335)

- 1) James 1:1-11
- 2) Mark 8:11-13

MONDAY OF  
SIXTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: We ask God for the grace to be able to trust in him.

If you happen to play poker, you will recognize what happens when a player wants to “up the ante.” According to the Oxford dictionary, to “up the ante” means that a player wants to increase his or her risks in order to gain a greater advantage. In other words, the player will risk more of his or her money in order to get a bigger return if he should win. The risk occurs if the player should happen to guess wrong and lose.

The Pharisees in today’s Gospel were upping the ante with Jesus. This was not the only time the Pharisees questioned Jesus or sought a sign from him. We can count seventy-seven times in Scripture that the Pharisees test Jesus or question his authority. What were the Pharisees betting? Perhaps they continued to test Jesus believing that he would eventually fail. They were willing to risk not “seeing” the true Messiah – though all signs pointed toward Jesus as being such – because Jesus did not fit their ideal of who the messiah should be.

Regardless, we know that the stakes grew higher and higher, and also that God was not bluffing. The hand of God that formed creation would prevail in this round.

Of course, we do not see ourselves as pharisaical, and faith, and our relationship to Jesus, are not a poker game. But it is helpful to think about how we approach God when we are praying, especially when we are petitioning. Do we ask for a sign that all will be well? Or can we trust that Jesus hears our request and that the best will happen, even if the best is not what we would have chosen for ourselves?

In our first reading, James encourages us to see our trials as joys: to know that even when we don’t have our prayers answered in exactly the way we hope or desire, or things in life don’t go our way, God will see us through. Going through difficulties helps us develop perseverance and trust in God. There is no gamble here, and all debts have been paid. Let us give thanks for that, and more.

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Tuesday, February 13, 2018  
(Lec. 336)

1) James 1:12-18

2) Mark 8:14-21

Gospel related: CCC 1329

TUESDAY OF  
SIXTH WEEK  
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: All good giving and every perfect gift is from above.

Our human instincts are often to blame a higher power for our pain, disappointments and mistakes. A small child may have a tantrum when disciplined by his or her parents. Teenagers may blame their teachers when they do poorly on a test. Adults may blame their bosses for a failure in the workplace. Likewise, we sometimes blame God for our weaknesses, tragedies and failures.

The Letter of Saint James is filled with advice for dealing with temptation. In today's reading, we are reminded that temptation does not come from God, but from our personal desires. James reminds us that only good gifts come from God.

In the Gospel, Jesus tries to warn his disciples about the Pharisees and King Herod. He is reminding them that the judgmental standards and deceptive nature of the religious and political leaders could harm their community. Sadly, Jesus' message is lost in his disciples' confusion. Jesus tries to reorient their thoughts by reminding them that they can find truth in his miracles – the good gifts provided from above.

Christian life is meant to be simple. Love God and your neighbors as you love yourself. Follow the witness of Jesus in carrying your cross when life becomes more complicated. Unfortunately, our personal desires often lead us to sin. Our selfishness blinds us to the evils of temptation and we fall to sin.

We experience the "leaven of the Pharisees" even in today's world. The sins of pride, jealousy, bearing false witness and many others introduce unhealthy leaven in today's Christian communities, and the world as a whole. Too often, we get distracted by the wrong things and forget to mind our own behavior and to care for our own family and community first. We respond in anxiety and anger to those with whom we disagree. The deceptive worldly power that existed in King Herod's reign is just as dangerous today as it was for Jesus' disciples.

How does Jesus guide us back to the simplicity of Christian discipleship? He reminds us of the miracles we have witnessed. He points us to the "mountaintop" experiences of our Christian life. Jesus tells us to return again and again to the memories of what he has done for us, our friends and our families. In remembering these good gifts, and in giving glory to God, we will be freed from the temptations of personal selfishness and worldly power.

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Wednesday, February 14, 2018  
(Lec. 219)

**ASH WEDNESDAY**

- 1) Joel 2:12-18
- 2) 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2
- 3) Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

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

FOCUS: God is reshaping us into something beautiful.

We are fortunate to live in a time when recycling is becoming ever more prevalent. By diverting paper and plastics and other materials away from landfills and toward recycling, that which we once threw away can be transformed into something new and useful. Think of the equipment on local playgrounds. Much, if not all, of the plastic we see comes from recycled milk jugs and other plastic items. Something that once seemed to have reached the end of its useful life was collected, reshaped and re-formed into something that will provide joy and usefulness for many years to come.

As we gather on this Ash Wednesday, we enter into the Church's great plan for recycling. The ashes that will be imposed on our foreheads in just a short time are a wonderful representation of this. Once the beautiful palm branches that we waved in great joy as we recalled Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, these palm-branches-become-ashes will be used to remind us of the need for repentance, change and growth as we enter into this season of Lent.

That recycling of the palms of Palm Sunday into the ashes of Ash Wednesday is a reminder that God is seeking to recycle us. *Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart.* God wishes to lovingly reshape and re-form our hearts and our lives. Whatever is not true or beautiful or worthy of God in our lives needs to be purged from us by God's grace and mercy during the forty days of Lent. Although the springtime of Easter may seem distant now, we have this opportunity to respond to God's loving invitation to grow and change.

Just as we gathered the palms of Palm Sundays past, so we are now gathered here to begin this Lenten journey of recycling. We ask that the season of Lent that opens before us may be a time filled with God's love and mercy, and the grace of conversion in our hearts and in our lives. This is our opportunity to be gathered into God's recycling bin, so to speak.

Let us pray that the same God who graciously transforms our simple gifts of bread and wine into the body and blood of his Son will lovingly transform each of us, so that we might rise, reshaped and renewed, in the glory of Easter.

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Thursday, February 15, 2018

(Lec. 220)

1) Deuteronomy 30:15-20

2) Luke 9:22-25

Gospel related: CCC 2743

THURSDAY  
AFTER  
ASH WEDNESDAY

FOCUS: Humbly asking Christ's help in carrying our daily crosses can ease our burden.

What do the crosses we carry look like and how are we carrying them? These are a couple of questions we might want to think about as we begin the Lenten season.

Do our crosses look like sickness in ourselves or someone close to us? Does it look like too little money or long hours or strain in our family life? Maybe we have more than one cross we are carrying. Sometimes our cross may be heavier than other times. Let us stop for a moment and think about what our crosses are today.

Now, how are we carrying them? Are we angry about them? Resigned? Impatient? Resentful? Jesus tells us his followers are to pick up their cross *daily*. Yet carrying them for one day can be a burden ... and day after day is exhausting. And if we are trying to do it all ourselves, we are adding burdens we might be able to take off our shoulders.

Is Jesus helping us carry our cross? Remember, he had Simon of Cyrene to help him carry his wooden cross to Calvary, not because he couldn't do it himself, but because having Simon do so was important. In the same way, Jesus is here to help us carry ours. We may find it hard to ask for his help, though, but just as Jesus was humble enough to accept Simon's assistance, so can we be.

Eternal life is the reward for carrying our cross for Jesus' sake. If we do not offer our burdens for the sake of Jesus and our salvation, it is unclear if there is any benefit gained. Suffering is part of life, but if we offer our suffering to Jesus, he transforms it into something beneficial. Jesus gave us his word on this when he said *whoever loses his life for my sake will save it*.

We have the next six weeks to focus on living this Gospel message. Each day we can examine the cross we need to bear and ask Christ's help. We can accept the day's cross for his sake, which is also for our own salvation. We can accept it with love and humility, and look for ways Jesus helps lighten the burden throughout the day. It may not be easy at first, but Jesus is patient and understanding. And we may find that by Easter we have found a new way to see God's love through the burdens he asks us to carry day by day.

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Friday, February 16, 2018  
(Lec. 221)

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

FRIDAY  
AFTER  
ASH WEDNESDAY

FOCUS: Let us open our hearts and minds to hear the ways in which we are called to live out the Gospel.

We have probably all heard the criticism concerning a particular type of individual, one who expects to get medals or trophies “just for showing up.” We call these awards participation trophies, and their prominence is criticized for lowering standards and cheapening the accomplishments required to gain notable recognition. Of course, we ourselves create this situation if we teach people to expect high praise for, and effusive notice of, doing exactly [and not more than] what they are supposed to be doing.

It seems like the Israelites in today’s reading from Isaiah are behaving like a “participation trophy” generation. Pleased to have access to God, they ask him to declare what is due to them, saying, *Why do we fast, and you do not see it? afflict ourselves, and you take no note of it?* God’s lengthy response is, in essence: because that is the bare minimum you are supposed to be doing, and you are not even doing it right!

Rather than leaving them alone to sulk beneath this criticism, however, God spells out for them what “noteworthy” behavior would look like. It includes releasing the unjustly bound and freeing the oppressed; sharing bread with the hungry and housing the homeless; and clothing the naked and not abandoning loved ones.

While the people of Isaiah understood and eventually got better at following the Lord’s commandment, the disciples of John, and the Pharisees, seem to have forgotten the lesson. Jesus is asked why his disciples do not do things the way John’s disciples and the Pharisees do. Like the Israelites, they feel comfortable that what they are doing is noteworthy and worthy of recognition. But Jesus answers much the way God did: “you’re missing the point.”

Let us not be too hard on the Pharisees, John’s disciples and the Israelites. This is a lesson that often needs repeating, for it is often in need of relearning by us. It is a simple lesson, but it’s easy to overlook: God is not playing “I’ve got a secret.” God has made available to us both law, and love, and has given us instructions – specific ones at that! – for what we need to do to do things right; to be confident that all things work out when they are worked through with God.

None of us wants to “miss the point,” as our protagonists did today. Let us, therefore, particularly in this season of Lent, open our hearts and minds to hear the ways in which we are called to live out the Gospel. No trophy or medal here on earth can surpass the prize that awaits us when we do.

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Saturday, February 17, 2018  
(Lec. 222)

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

SATURDAY  
AFTER  
ASH WEDNESDAY  
(Opt. Mem.  
The Seven Holy Founders  
of the Servite Order)

Gospel related: CCC 588

FOCUS: *Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth.*

- Be open to being taught what you need to know.
- The promise of salvation lies before us.
- God hears and answers our prayers.
- 

If we wanted a *Cliffs Notes* version of, not just today's readings, but an essential understanding of the Gospel message, these three imperatives would serve us well. Like most catchy sayings and motivational phrases, however, these can be classified as "easier said than done!"

The Israelites in our first reading today were fasting and following the commandments as best as they knew how – so they thought. Isaiah has a message for them from God, however, letting them know they are falling a little short. But rather than leaving them with a problem and walking away, he helps them correct their deficiencies through careful instruction and the promise of assistance. And God gives his word that if they put him first, the bounty is unending.

In the Gospel, Jesus' interactions with Levi raise the ire, unsurprisingly, of the Pharisees. They, too, fall short in their understanding of what is happening around them, and Jesus corrects them by reminding them that, *those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do*. And that his mission is to call to repentance all those who need to be called. As with the promise in Isaiah, we know that for those who put their faith in God's word, a bounty awaits.

In both of these stories there is a need for an openness to being taught – to be charitably corrected. In both we hear, either explicitly or implicitly, the promise of salvation before us. And in both we hear the echo of the cry raised by the psalmist today, which represents the praise of the earliest people of the covenant, and everyone in between until, and including, ourselves: *Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth.*

God has never ceased responding, and never will cease to respond, to that prayer. He answered throughout the Old Testament; he answered in the person of Jesus Christ, who with him and the Holy Spirit he continues to answer today. May we who send up this prayer be always open to its answers, that we might enjoy eternity with God.

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**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2018**

(Lec. 23)

1) Genesis 9:8-15

2) 1 Peter 3:18-22

3) Mark 1:12-15

Gospel related: CCC 333, 538, 541, 1423, 1427 CSDC 175

**FIRST SUNDAY  
OF LENT**

**FOCUS:** The desert is transformed into green pastures.

There are some wonderful contrasts in our readings today, all dealing with nature. In Genesis, we find God speaking to Noah after the flood waters have receded. God is establishing his covenant with Noah and his descendants, but also *every living creature* that was with him on the Ark: *all the birds, and the various tame and wild animals*. God promises that flood waters shall never again destroy the earth, and he establishes the rainbow as a sign of this covenant, to be witnessed among the clouds.

The imagery of the colorful rainbow among cloud-filled skies, with the fresh scent of the newly-rained-upon earth that is filled with animals of all variety, clashes quite a bit with the imagery in our Gospel passage. Here, Jesus is spending forty days in a desert – dry, dusty and most likely free of much color or scent. He is alone but for wild beasts, and the ministration of angels. Unlike what we see with Noah, there is no apparent conversation with God, but there are temptations from Satan.

What might these contrasts have to share with us about the Good News we come to this place to hear? Let us look at two things in particular. The first is the fullness of nature in Genesis. As in the beginning of Creation, God is intervening in and caring deeply for the earth and its inhabitants. He promises to remain with all of his creation in a covenant that promises that full destruction shall never again come upon it. In fact, God will come to impose destruction upon death itself, renewing his covenant with all of creation in the person of Jesus Christ.

And Jesus comes to us, with a fully human nature, and initiates the kingdom of God on earth. But prior to his final victory, he spends time in the desert. This is the second way that nature “speaks” to us today: in his time before his glory, Jesus is in the dry, arid and naturally dead environment of the desert. As were we. His forty days remind us of the desert of death and sin, even in a world where rainbows grace the sky and vegetation springs from flood-receded plains. Compared to the kingdom, this earth – even as just described – is a desert. But once Jesus had died and was raised, the valleys of the shadow of death were transformed into green pastures – the pastures where we, too, hope to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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Monday, February 19, 2018  
(Lec. 224)

MONDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK  
OF LENT

- 1) Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18
- 2) Matthew 25:31-46

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

FOCUS: Being part of God's kingdom means doing what we can to reach out to others in love.

Little Susie told her mother, "If I never do anything, I'll never be wrong." It's easy to see how a four-year-old might get that impression. Raising little children involves a lot of "don'ts." Don't run in the house. Don't push your brother. Don't pull the dog's tail.

Today's reading from Leviticus sounds a bit like that. Don't steal. Don't cheat. Don't take revenge. These instructions are fine as far as they go, but they don't go far enough. Not taking revenge on those who've hurt us is not the same as forgiving them.

Wise parents teach children more than the "don'ts." They also teach them the "do's": treat others with kindness, respect and consideration. It's no accident that the final verse in the reading from Leviticus tells us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Jesus echoes this principle in today's Gospel. Those welcomed into God's kingdom don't merely avoid harming others – they actively reach out in love to those in need. They feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome strangers, and take care of the sick and imprisoned. Jesus said that when we help the least important people in the world, we're helping him. In other words, Jesus takes how we treat others very personally.

Sin isn't just about the harm we do, but the loving actions we don't bother to take. During the Penitential Act at the beginning of Mass, we confess that we have sinned by what we have done *and* by what we have failed to do. None of us can alleviate all suffering, nor are we expected to. But we can all do *something* to help those who suffer.

We may not be able to end world hunger, but we can feed the hungry by donating to a food bank, volunteering at a soup kitchen or simply putting dinner on the table for our families.

If we can't visit the sick in person, we can call or send a card to someone convalescing or in a nursing home to let them know they haven't been forgotten.

Maybe we're understandably cautious about talking to complete strangers on the street. We can welcome the new kid in school or the new hire at work. We can try to be patient with beginners' questions as they get the hang of things.

What if we're not in a position to take on prison ministry? We can give a smile or word of encouragement to those imprisoned by shyness, loneliness or insecurity.

While God never expects us to do more than we can, we can all do something to reach out in love. On our Lenten journey, let's think about what we can do to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

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Tuesday, February 20, 2018  
(Lec. 225)

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

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

TUESDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK  
OF LENT

FOCUS: Let us work with God to accomplish his will.

Today, as we begin this solemn season of Lent, we are given an encouraging glimpse of a God who loves us and wants only what is best for us. God's message through Isaiah is very consoling – part of a much longer message in this same chapter in which God invites Israel to *come to the water* and be refreshed during a difficult time of exile. God assures his people that his word will come to earth, like the rain, *achieving the end for which I sent it* – bringing about his will for a fuller life for the people suffering in exile.

Jesus reinforces this message as he teaches us how to pray to his heavenly Father, asking for what we need each day. As Jesus says, God knows what we need and is ready to give it to us if we just ask. Yet, in this simple prayer composed by Jesus, we are also taught to seek God's will here on earth – as we know it is always fulfilled in heaven.

While Jesus teaches us to trust his Father, he also emphasizes that we must do our part. We must go beyond seeking only our own good and strive for the good of all – God's kingdom here on earth. Most striking in Matthew's description of the Our Father is Jesus' emphasis on forgiveness – our forgiveness of other as a condition for God's forgiveness of us.

We are called to imitate our heavenly Father in one of the most difficult areas – forgiveness of those who hurt us. This is modeled for us many times throughout Scriptures, especially in the Gospel parables and in Jesus' forgiveness of the thief on the cross. The emphasis on forgiveness is one of the ways that God wills our good – not just in the material sense but in the spiritual sense. God loves us deeply and looks out for our good and the good of all his children in relationships forged in love, understanding and forgiveness.

As we begin this holy season, let us take some time with our loving Father and listen to his words of love and of challenge. In what ways in the next forty days can we bring about his kingdom on earth, help his will be done and forgive those who have hurt us?

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Wednesday, February 21, 2018  
(Lec. 226)

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

TUESDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK  
OF LENT  
(Opt. Mem.  
Saint Peter Damian,  
Bishop and Doctor  
of the Church)

FOCUS: Now is the time to look with new eyes so we may recognize the Lord's presence right in front of us.

It does seem a bit surprising that the crowds gathered around Jesus keep asking for a sign in order to believe in him. By the time we get to the eleventh chapter in Luke's Gospel today, Jesus has been doing an awful lot of preaching and healing, driving out demons and even calming the stormy sea. No wonder the Lord seems somewhat frustrated by the generation right in front of him.

Indeed, as Jesus reminds the crowd, the inhabitants of Nineveh became repentant believers before Jonah had gone even a third of the way through the great city. And Jonah was the most reluctant of prophets. Imagine how the people of Nineveh would have reacted to Jesus himself!

And what about the queen of the south, also known as the queen of Sheba, who traveled a great distance – certainly what would have been the *ends of the earth* in her time – just to witness for herself the great wisdom of Solomon. Think about what she would have done even to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

Are we more like the king of Nineveh and the queen of Sheba, or are we more like the crowd surrounding Jesus and demanding a sign? Maybe the people in Luke's Gospel did not recognize Jesus because he was familiar to them. But what of us? We have something greater than even Jesus' generation had – we have the Lord Jesus Christ truly present in word and sacrament.

Is our faith so familiar to us that we do not recognize what a gift it really is? Every time we hear Scripture proclaimed, every time we partake of the body and blood, we take into ourselves the risen Christ himself. And does it really change us? Do we leave the liturgy truly sent – truly exhibiting in word and deed our belief in our great and glorious God? Or are we still looking for a sign? Are we right there with Jesus' companions, standing directly in front of our mighty God, not recognizing the Lord among us in the very people standing right next to us?

The Lenten season gives us the perfect opportunity to ponder those questions – to look into our hearts, to examine our offenses, to turn aside from all the ways we have done evil in the eyes of our loving God. We can use this time to see with new eyes – like the Ninevites and the queen of the south – the gifts of the Lord we have been given. As he showed in Nineveh, God will not spurn a heart contrite and humbled. So let us, like the people of Nineveh, return to the Lord with all our heart.

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Thursday, February 22, 2018  
(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: Today we celebrate the four marks of the Church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

Any exploration, whether formal or informal, into Church history is an eye-opening experience. One might begin to think, "This has to get better at some point!" There was so much disagreement, fracturing, corruption and sinfulness, it almost seems a wonder that this Church survived so many trials. And then we realize this is not an argument *against* the divine foundation of the Church, but rather an argument *for* it: If the Church has persevered through all of our mistakes and shortcomings, it must be because it's divine!

Jesus founded his Church on the foundation of Peter, who himself was a sinner, and promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against her. Jesus founded the Church to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Because of this, we have hope and confidence that the truth will continue to be lived and preached in the Church even when individual Christians fall short.

The Church is "one" because of her founder and her goal. Jesus, as the founder of the Church, gives it a unity in himself. He also orients the Church toward salvation as its goal. So in our diversity of gifts, languages, cultures, etc., we are one in the Church because of our founder and goal.

The Church is "holy" because she is united with Christ and continually sanctified by him. Through this perpetual sanctification, the Church becomes sanctifying by becoming a conduit of graces flowing from Jesus. Despite our individual sinfulness, the Church is able to remain holy because of who Jesus has created her to be.

The Church is "catholic" (which means universal) because it is not for a few select individuals, but for all people of all times and places. Our continued mission is to invite all people into a life-giving relationship with Jesus in the Church.

The Church is "apostolic" because she was built on the foundations of the Apostles, with Peter as the rock. The Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, has received the deposit of faith passed from Jesus to the Apostles to us, and is thus apostolic in her teachings. The Church continues to be so in her teaching and mission because of the apostolic succession present in the ordinations of priests and bishops. Through the laying on of hands, there is a direct connection between each individual bishop and priest all the way back to the Apostles and Jesus himself.

As we celebrate the Chair of Peter, we recognize that although we are not perfect, God has chosen to make his Church one, holy, catholic and apostolic. May each of us strive to abide in this reality, protect it from slander and derision, and spread the Good News of God's love through the Church.

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Friday, February 23, 2018  
(Lec. 228)

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

FRIDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK  
OF LENT  
(Opt. Mem.  
Saint Polycarp,  
Bishop and Martyr)

Gospel related: CCC 678, 1034, 1424, 2054, 2257, 2262, 2302, 2608, 2792, 2842, 2845

FOCUS: Turn away from sin and live.

The prophet Ezekiel speaks very plainly today of something you and I already know but may not have given much thought to: turn away from sin and we will *surely live*. Turn away from virtue, and die! Intuitively, we know the importance of staying on the right path and rejecting any evil that comes our way. The key, as Ezekiel points out, is that the path we walk is of our own choosing. We have free will. It is not that God is unfair, but that God allows us to make choices that either lead toward him, or away from him. And we receive just consequences for our actions.

It is important to recognize and admit those times when we do not follow God's statutes and do what is right. Whether it is the Ten Commandments that we play a little loose with, or teachings that God has given us to follow that we ignore, our free will is a gift that we must use very carefully. The great news in this passage from Ezekiel is the potential for us to turn away from *all the sins* we have committed and *surely live*. What does it take for us to turn away from sin, and what does it mean for us to live?

If we hope to turn away from sin, we will need to rely on God. It is that simple. It is by strength found only in God, wisdom that comes from knowing him, and persistence in resisting temptations that come our way, that we will stay on the path to life. We might personally have a lot of fortitude, but what will sustain us will be the graces that arise from God's love and mercy toward us. Saint Polycarp, whom we celebrate today, could not be induced to turn away from God, even in the face of martyrdom. He was only able to persevere by the grace of God poured out in his life.

And what does it mean to live, as Ezekiel describes? To live is to live in the freedom that comes from confidence in God. Through our relationship with God, we find ourselves free of attachments and enslavements that do not bring us ultimate joy. God calls us to real happiness, a happiness that lasts forever – not a happiness that passes with the blowing of the wind. The choices we make today may bring momentary joy to our lives, but the life God promises us through the words of Ezekiel is everlasting. We can become virtuous people when we follow God, and it is worth everything for us to make an earnest effort to become all that God calls us to be.

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Saturday, February 24, 2018  
(Lec. 229)

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

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

SATURDAY OF  
FIRST WEEK  
OF LENT

FOCUS: As children of God, we are called to love.

Just ten days ago, Catholics and other Christians around the world marked the beginning of the Lenten season with Ash Wednesday, a day for fasting and reflection. This year, Ash Wednesday fell on February 14, the feast day of Saint Valentine, whose legacy is known to far more than Catholics, since he is the patron saint of love, marriage and young people.

Like the many hundreds of Christian martyrs in the first, second and third centuries, Valentine died for love – love of God. And while he has been secularized with all manner of cupids, chocolates and cards, Saint Valentine still offers us a Christian message of love, the love Christ calls us to demonstrate in our own lives – love for God and love for our neighbor.

Today's Gospel reading reminds us of yet another important manifestation of God's love for us. The passage is taken from the Sermon on the Mount, which encompasses chapters 5-7 in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus tells his disciples, *You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies.*

An enemy, in this context, is not some nameless being. It can be anyone, unknown or known, who wishes us harm or has hurt us in some way. We all understand the difficulty that arises in loving them. Loving our enemies in this context also requires we forgive whatever offense they have committed against us. In fact, rather than reaching out in love, our human nature often desires revenge, justifying it with the Old Testament mentality of *an eye for an eye* (Ex 21:24). These are the people Jesus commands us to embrace. Sometimes, loving our enemies can be something as simple as being patient with those who vex us in our daily lives, whether it is a spouse, a child, a sibling or a good friend.

At a Mass in 2014, Pope Francis put it another way when he said, "Jesus asks those who would follow him to love those who do not deserve it, without expecting anything in return, and in this way to fill the emptiness present in human hearts, relationships, families, communities and in the entire world."

We must ask ourselves if we are willing to love as God wishes us to love, without reservation and without condition. In this Lenten season, when we reflect on the suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord and the gift of love he has given us, let us all strive to *Be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect.*

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**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2018**

(Lec. 26)

- 1) Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18
- 2) Romans 8:31b-34
- 3) Mark 9:2-10

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

**SECOND SUNDAY  
OF LENT**

FOCUS: Give God everything – hold nothing back.

Many lessons can be gleaned from the story of Isaac and Abraham. God appears to be asking the impossible of him: to surrender his only son through mortal sacrifice. But perhaps what is really being asked for here is trust, faith and total self-gift back to God – in the same way that God has been all, and only, total self-gift to us.

Because – notice – Abraham does not actually kill his son. Nor does God actually demand it. He simply tells Abraham to prepare the sacrifice [of course with the implication that it would be carried out], and then stops him. And Abraham's willingness to comply is not reflective of aberrant behavior, but representative of complete vulnerability and a willingness to put love of God before *any* and *every* other attachment and affection. That is a tough act to follow.

Moses and Elijah were two men of the covenant who also gave their all to God, withholding nothing. In their carrying out of God's divine plan, they prefigure Jesus Christ. Jesus gave his all to God, putting his love for God, and for us, above all else to the point of sacrificing his own life for the sake of obedience to God's will. And he now intercedes for us as we, too, strive to put God ahead of all things.

Saint Paul reminds the Romans and each of us today that Jesus always intercedes for us to the Father. To paraphrase Saint Paul: "Our God did not spare his own Son to prove how far he is willing to go for each of us. Will he not provide whatever we truly need throughout our journey of life?"

Every year on the Second Sunday of Lent, the pre- resurrection event of the Transfiguration of Jesus is proclaimed. It sets the stage for the Passion of Christ to unfold right before the disciples, and strengthen their resolve to endure what was coming.

Christ crucified, Christ glorified is who gives us the strength to work through our own personal ways of the cross that end with "Resurrection grace." Think of Resurrection grace as the grace of letting go of fear: the grace of letting go of the transient and focusing on the eternal; the grace of vulnerability that allows us to put love of God before *any* and *every* other attachment and affection.

In this season of Lent, and in every season, may we have such grace.

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Monday, February 26, 2018  
(Lec. 230)

- 1) Daniel 9:4b-10
- 2) Luke 6:36-38

Gospel related: CCC 575, 588, 2616, 2712

MONDAY OF  
SECOND WEEK  
OF LENT

FOCUS: Let us walk each day in the love of the Lord.

All too often as we live our faith, we seem more concerned with whether we have checked all the right boxes, rather than if we have loved one another, as God commands. Have we given something up for Lent? Have we attended Mass every Sunday and all the holy days? Are we behaving at least tolerably well when it comes to others? If we can easily answer “yes” to these questions, great. But we are barely passing.

Why? Because the life of Christian faith is more than mere observance of the commandments and religious traditions. Time and again this Lent we have seen this message in our Scriptures. The life of faith is an active relationship with God, where our intentions matter and our humility is required.

The author of the Book of Daniel alludes to this when he references the act of living by the law, or walking in the laws of the Lord. He does not mean righteousness by using God’s law as a task on a list, but living the Law, out of love of the Lord. He also highlights the humility of those who are speaking to God, as they come before him with full accountability for their sins, and gratitude for God’s mercy.

And mercy is one of God’s hallmarks. His mercy is abundant and fills the areas where we are lacking, to help bring us to deeper and more perfect relationship with him. In the Gospel today, we learned how this mercy is imparted, and ultimately it comes down to our treatment of others. Jesus cautions us that *...the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you*. Thus, if we are forgiving to others who have wronged us, God will forgive our offenses. If we are not, then forgiveness will not be given to us.

Therefore, let us seek the assistance of the one who seeks us first: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a relationship of perfect love. And may we have the grace to receive what we ask for.

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Tuesday, February 27, 2018  
(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: Let us repent, and embrace God's merciful love.

How are we getting along with God and others so far this Lent? As we count the days and weeks until Easter, we may be feeling a bit unsettled knowing that we can do better with these relationships. However, focusing only on our own shortcomings may miss the bigger Lenten picture. Yes, Lent is about repentance for our sins, but it is more importantly about God's mercy.

These forty days of Lent give us the opportunity to focus on God's merciful love freely given in response to our sins and failings. Yet God's mercy is possible only if we repent by acknowledging our sins and admitting our faults.

When we repent, we open our hearts to take in God's mercy. And like a loving parent, God is ready to pour out his mercy on us. God is waiting for us to return to him with a contrite heart – ready to receive his merciful love. That's not the end of the story however. Once we have received the gift of mercy, Jesus calls us to be merciful to others.

In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah calls the princes of Sodom and Gomorrah to listen to God, hear his word and *cease doing evil; learn to do good*. If they choose to act with justice on behalf of the widows and orphans, God will show them mercy. God follows up with the promise that even though their sins are deplorable, he will cleanse them and make them white as snow. No matter how bad they have been, if they change their ways they will receive mercy.

In today's Gospel, Jesus cautions the Jewish people and his disciples to be wary of the scribes and Pharisees. Since the scribes and Pharisees do not practice what they preach, Jesus advises the crowd to follow only their teachings, but not their example. Jesus says they lay heavy burdens on the shoulders of people, and instead of offering mercy, they let them bear these burdens without lifting a finger to help them. Somehow, the scribes and Pharisees had lost sight of a merciful God.

These days of Lent can be a time for us to set things right with God, with ourselves, with our families and our neighbors. A good starting point is to embrace God's merciful love when we turn to him for forgiveness.

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Wednesday, February 28, 2018  
(Lec. 232)

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

Gospel related: CCC 440, 575, 601, 605, 622, 786, 2235 CSDC 193, 379

WEDNESDAY OF  
SECOND WEEK  
OF LENT

FOCUS: Christian discipleship is about dying to oneself and service to others.

Throughout the Old Testament, prophets had the most difficult of times. While chosen and sent by the Lord with messages of consolation and challenge to Israel at times of trial, they were often met with opposition and even persecution, many times from the very people they were sent to console and guide. Some were even put to death by their own people.

Jeremiah is one of the best examples of this. Sent to Israel to condemn idolatry, greed and the influence of false prophets, he suffered persecution, imprisonment and the threat of death. *The people of Judah and the citizens of Jerusalem* saw him as threat to their power and influence. Determined to destroy him, they sought to use and, if necessary, distort his prophetic teachings against him. But as a prophet of the Lord, he was protected and their treacherous plans revealed. In many ways, Jeremiah and indeed all the prophets prefigure the person of Christ. As the Father's final and definitive word, Jesus, too, knew opposition and persecution. He, too, met with violence and ultimate death.

Our Gospel recalls how Jesus for the third time predicts his passion and death. Now one might think that having heard this prediction on two other occasions, his followers would have begun to understand the true meaning and purpose of his mission. But they don't. Instead, the prediction is followed by the mother of the sons of Zebedee requesting places of honor in the kingdom that will lead to an argument among the other disciples. Like any good mother, she wants her boys to do well and sees Jesus as one who can bring that about. But she and the others have not heard or understood the purpose of Jesus' words and actions. So Jesus goes back to the basics and tells them he has not come to gain places of honor or greatness, but has come to serve, and that service is intimately connected with suffering and death. He has come to give his life as a ransom, and anyone who truly seeks to be his disciple must be ready to do likewise.

As we continue our Lenten journey, Jesus' words challenge us. Christian discipleship is not about worldly greatness or places of honor, but dying to oneself and service to others. In whatever our walk of life, we must strive for the good of others, even if it means putting aside our own hopes and dreams and even if brings persecution and opposition. Staying faithful to the truth of the Gospel, standing strong in the face of rejection and derision, was once the hallmark of the true prophet. Now it is the hallmark of the true Christian believer.

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