

January

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**YEAR B
WEEKDAYS II**

MONDAY, JANUARY 1, 2018
(Lec. 18)

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

Gospel related: CCC 527, 2599

**THE OCTAVE DAY
OF THE NATIVITY
OF THE LORD;
SOLEMNITY OF MARY,
THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD**
(not a Holyday of Obligation)

FOCUS: May the Lord bless us always.

The LORD bless you and keep you! The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace.

These words from our first reading from Numbers are still well-known today in artwork, greeting cards and ritual blessings. As we celebrate the solemnity of the Holy Mother of God today, and embark on a new chronological year, these words and today's entire Scripture message of "blessing" are both appropriate and encouraging.

It's not hard to imagine how this prayer from Numbers connects to Mary. Mary, the Mother of God, conceived without sin and bearer of the Savior of the world, is the embodiment of this prayer. Through her, the Lord's blessing and providence for us, his light and his graciousness, his loving kindness for us and consolation –are incarnated in his son, Jesus Christ.

Paul's letter to the Galatians today speaks of this: *When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*

This was the essence of the message that the shepherds, whom we encounter in today's Gospel, had received from the angels. We can understand why they *went in haste* to find Mary and Joseph in order to share that they knew!

It is a new year! What will it bring? We cannot know. But our Scriptures today provide us a wonderful way to approach a new beginning. Mary, a brand new mother, was asked by God to venture into an unknown future, filled with joy and suffering as all of life is. Mary heard the message offered by the shepherds, and Saint Luke tells us she *kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.*

Let us follow her example as we move forward, remembering – pondering, as Mary did – the fact that the Lord has indeed, and will continue to, *bless [us] and keep [us]! The Lord [has] let his face shine upon [us], and [been] gracious to [us]! The Lord [has looked] upon [us] kindly and [given us] peace.*

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Tuesday, January 2, 2018
(Lec. 205)

- 1) 1 John 2:22-28
- 2) John 1:19-28

Saints Basil the Great
and Gregory Nazianzen
Bishops and
Doctors of Church
(OBL MEM)

Gospel related: CCC 575, 613, 719

FOCUS: Our New Year's resolutions can help us reach both earthly and heavenly goals.

When making New Year's resolutions, some of us forget about making any that will help carry us into God's heavenly kingdom. We often have good intentions to exercise more, eat better, get more sleep and reach out to friends and family more often. These are all good, but they leave out a really important piece – the piece that will make a difference when none of these others will. They forget about improving our relationship with God.

The funny thing is that we do not even have to make a special resolution, we need only to adjust the ones we are already planning to work on – with just a little tweaking. For instance, we may resolve to eat better or exercise more because our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and need to be respected. Or we may decide to reach out to our parents or siblings as a way of honoring our Mother and Father. With such adjustments, we will be bringing God into all of the areas we want to improve, and be doing it for an eternal benefit, not a passing sense of satisfaction with what we see in the mirror or what someone else thinks of us, or to relieve a sense of guilt.

Including God in our day-to-day efforts to lead a good life is exactly what today's first reading tells us when it says: *And now, children, remain in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not be put to shame at his coming.* When God is the reason behind our efforts to do the right thing with our health, our personal relationships and other important parts of our lives, we automatically create a stronger bond with him. As a bonus, he can help us be successful in our efforts. He is almighty, after all.

And this is a point we can take from today's Gospel. John the Baptist was doing wonderful work. He was baptizing people and helping them grow closer to God. But John knew he was not the last word on these things. He knew Jesus was the one who could make these efforts work so much better. He pointed people to Jesus to make their journey in life better. As we ponder this, let's also look to Jesus to help us through our journey. Let's resolve to do better, and be better, for more than earthly benefits. With Jesus as our reason and our helper, our efforts are sure to be more rewarding.

Wednesday January 3, 2018
(Lec. 206)

- 1) 1 John 2:29–3:6
- 2) John 1:29-34

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY
(Opt. Mem.
The Most Holy
Name of Jesus)

Gospel related: CCC 408, 483, 486, 523, 536, 608, 713, 719, 1137, 1286, 1505

FOCUS: Through the in-breaking of God's love into the world, we were set free from sin.

We have just concluded the Octave of Christmas, a season that celebrates the birth of a baby – Jesus. Only two of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew and Luke) begin with the birth of Jesus, however. The third Synoptic (Mark) and the Gospel of John begin with the call of John the Baptist and Jesus' life as an adult. That is what we hear about today.

Be that as it may, we may still have our minds on Jesus' birth. Let us reflect on that for a moment. Babies are a sign of hope for us. In every birth, we have hope for a family's future. That includes, perhaps, a hope that this newborn child might be the one to cure a disease or will be the one to bring peace to the earth.

Jesus is the ultimate hope that has come into the world as a baby. His birth heralds the in-breaking of God into our world as one of us. Jesus comes as the embodied form of, as Saint John reminds us, *the love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God ... [and] when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*

The shepherds and the Magi knew, in the birth narratives, and today – in the Gospel, John the Baptist knows. He points out to his disciples, and to us, that Jesus is *the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.* And we, inheritors of this new covenant, know that Jesus is the new sacrifice whose blood will set us free to be children of God. Jesus gives us his Spirit to continue his work in the world.

This was good news then and it is still good news today as we begin a new year. For through the in-breaking of God's love into the world we were set free from sin. *In him there is no sin*, John tells us, and *no one who remains in him sins.*

So as we take stock of our lives and make decisions about our future – especially in these early days of a new year – we can ask ourselves this question: If we profess to be children of God, how should we act so as to personify that claim? We are called to live virtuous, not sinful, lives. If we live close to Jesus, then the virtuous life is more possible. Jesus is love and when we follow him and live in love, we do not sin. Authentic love and sin are incompatible.

A little over a week ago we celebrated God's love being born into the world to set us free. It is God's love that we are called to live and to spread. Let's dedicate ourselves to living a life of God's love in this new year.

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Thursday, January 4, 2018
(Lec. 207)

- 1) 1 John 3:7-10
- 2) John 1:35-42

Gospel related: CCC 608, 719

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

FOCUS: Let us share Christ's love with others.

What are you looking for? Jesus poses this question to John's disciples in today's Gospel, but it's a question many of us ask ourselves throughout life.

An answer to this question can be found in the catechism, which reads, "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for" (CCC27). French mathematician Blaise Pascal describes this desire as an infinite abyss that "can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object ... God Himself" (*Pensees*, 1688).

While many earthly pursuits, such as wealth or fame, may offer temporary satisfaction, they don't fill the inmost desire of our heart. This can only be satisfied by a relationship with our Lord, which is accomplished through Christ. Later in the Gospel of John Jesus tells us, *No one comes to the Father except through me* (14:6).

Once we encounter Christ, we will want to share the joy and peace he offers with those we love. Through the words, *Behold, the Lamb of God*, John the Baptist leads two of his disciples to Jesus. Then, after recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, one of these disciples, Andrew, introduces his brother, Peter, to him.

Today, we remember Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first American-born saint. Elizabeth, like the early disciples, introduced others to Christ. Elizabeth converted to Catholicism later in life, and started a girls' school in Baltimore, laying the foundation for the Catholic school system in the U.S. Although she died nearly two centuries ago, her work continues to bring close to two million children to Christ each year.

Saint Elizabeth is a model for us to grow closer to Christ. And as we grow closer to Christ, it becomes easier to share his love with others. In these remaining days of the Christmas season, let us consider how we can use our words and actions to bring others to Christ. This can happen through our own testimony, or by inviting someone to Mass or an event at church. Never underestimate your power to influence. It's through this gift that others will realize what they have been looking for.

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Friday, January 5, 2018
(Lec. 208)

1) 1 John 3:11-21

2) John 1:43-51

Gospel related: CCC 878

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

(OBL MEM

Saint John Neumann,
Bishop)

FOCUS: Christ summons us to fulfill his commandment of love.

Saint John reminds us of our call to love today in our first reading. *Beloved: This is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another.* Not like Cain, whose hatred caused him to murder his own brother, but like Christ, whose command this is. Our whole way of living should be in harmony with the life that is presented to us by Christ. As he laid down his life for us, so are we to do for others: granting them compassion in their need, providing for them as we are able, and neither hating nor condemning them. We are to love *in deed and truth*, and not just *in word or speech*.

The Gospel today alludes to this message. Jesus has come upon Philip and instructed him, *Follow me*. He does, but by way of first going to get Nathanael, challenging him to *come and see*. He is asking Nathanael to come and see *the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets, Jesus*. Nathanael does accompany Philip and eventually declares his own understanding of who Jesus is: *Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel*.

These words, the first expression of love for Jesus by Philip and Nathanael, will eventually be expressed in deed and truth in their lives. Tradition has it that Philip preached the Gospel in Greece, Syria and other places, and Nathanael preached in India and Armenia. *We are called to preach where we are planted, so to speak. We are called to show in deed and truth Christ's love to others, no matter where we are.*

Saint John Neumann, whose feast we commemorate today, modeled this by his life. John Neumann left his home in Bohemia and came to the United States to serve God as a priest, and eventually as the Bishop of Philadelphia. In one of his sermons he says, "Everyone who breathes, high and low, educated and ignorant, young and old, man and woman, has a mission, has a work. We are not sent into this world for nothing; we are not born at random."

We each have a mission: to fulfill Christ's commandment of love. May we embrace *our* call to love one another as eagerly as Philip, Nathanael and Saint John Neumann did *theirs*.

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Saturday, January 6, 2018
(Lec. 209)

1) 1 John 5:5-13

2) Mark 1:7-11

or Luke 3:23-28

or 3:23, 31-34, 36, 38

Gospel related: CCC 161, 504, 690, 1286 CSDC 378

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

(Opt. Mem.)

Saint André Bessette,
Religious)

FOCUS: Water, blood and the Holy Spirit testify to Jesus as victor over the world.

Baptism is the first sacrament we receive. Couples choose to bring their child into God's cleansing mercy as their first major act as parents. Often, baptism is the occasion at which some relatives and friends encounter and embrace the child for the first time. These friends and relatives are truly members of the communion of saints.

Adult baptisms are just as joyful. They come after months or years of prayer and preparation, study of the faith and powerful experiences of conversion. For the newly baptized man or woman, the experience of freedom from sin and the initiation into the Christian community is truly one of celebration. Jesus, who was like us in all things but sin, experienced the same joy of encounter with God's love and the embrace of community.

Our sacramental life is always an encounter with God's mercy, the Christian community and even the goodness of the natural world through the elements of water, oil, bread or wine. In baptism, simple water and holy oil testify to God's mercy.

Later in the Christian life, a person learns the meaning of the cross. Jesus Christ shed blood, suffered and died for love and obedience to God and to save the world. A Christian finds unity in Christ through suffering. Although most people will not be called to shed blood to testify to Christ, we cannot forget that persecution and martyrdom are still a daily part of the Christian experience in today's world. That blood is not shed in vain – it, too, is a testament to Christ as victor over the world.

Finally, the Holy Spirit testifies to Jesus Christ as victor over the world. Although at times it can be challenging to persist in the Christian life, the Holy Spirit strengthens us, comforts us, and brings God's mercy again and again through the sacrament of reconciliation; the Spirit steels our resolve when we hear Jesus' words remind us again and again to take up our crosses and follow him.

Today, we gather as Christian community to be reminded that Jesus is victor over the world. We are reminded that our sufferings are temporary, but our joy in God's mercy and the communion of the saints will be eternal. Through water, blood and the Holy Spirit, we will be strengthened to testify to Jesus Christ, victor over the world.

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 7, 2018

(Lec. 20)

- 1) Isaiah 60:1-6
- 2) Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6
- 3) Matthew 2:1-12

Gospel related: CCC 439, 486, 528, 724

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

FOCUS: What gifts do we have to offer to the Christ Child?

There is a story about a parish children's Christmas pageant from a few years ago. Everyone was selected for the variety of roles and the costumes were all prepared. There was lots of practice, but as is often the case when young children take the lead, one never knows exactly what to expect. Such was the case that day as the Magi proceeded down the church's main aisle, headed toward the manger and the Christ Child. Upon arriving, the leader of three turned to the congregation, and proclaimed in a loud voice, "We are the Magi, and behold, we come bearing gifts of gold, common sense and fur!"

The Magi brought to Christ the gifts they could bring: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Today's celebration of the Epiphany should encourage each of us to reflect on the gifts we can bring to Christ, so that he may put them to use in building his kingdom here on earth. The gifts don't have to be wildly expensive, but they must come from the heart of who we are, and must be rooted in the unique way that each of us has been fashioned by God.

Consider Dorothy, who at eighty-four, was a widow who had grown tired of only talking about the world's problems. She wondered what she could do to make a difference. She had heard about the plight of her community's homeless, and decided that what she could do is to make them sandwiches. And so she did, taking the sandwiches to the local park where she knew a number of the homeless gathered daily. Engaging them in conversation, she discovered that many of the homeless wanted to work, but didn't have a way to make or receive phone calls or to receive mail regularly. Some of them shared that even if they were fortunate enough to arrange a job interview, they didn't have good clothes to wear or a place to shower.

She took their concerns to her friends, and in a short while, with all of them working together, they were able to secure safe shelter, have a general telephone, a general mailbox, a clothes closet that made available gently used clothing for free, and a place that would eventually be able to serve three simple meals each day. Dorothy is now ninety-four, and still going strong. The place she and her friends helped to create now assists hundreds of people annually.

What is the most valuable gift that each of us has to offer? A sense of humor? An ability to pray with others? Kindness, gentleness and patience? An ability to fix cars or computers? Musical talent? The ability to make others feel welcome? People such as Dorothy help us to know that each of us has a gift that can be offered to Christ. In making that concrete choice, we can help to make God's presence known, and so the Epiphany continues.

In a few short moments, we will present our gifts of bread and wine, as well as our monetary gifts. As we do so, Christ will lovingly accept them and then return them to us, transformed into his body and blood. This is all the nourishment we need to continue to love and serve the Lord.

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Monday, January 8, 2018
(Lec. 21)

**THE BAPTISM
OF THE LORD
- FEAST**

- 1) Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7
or Acts 10:34-38
or 1 John 5:1-9
- 2) Mark 1:7-11

FOCUS: Through our baptism, we are called to assist Christ in the work of redemption.

As the shortest of the four Gospels, Mark's is best described as brief and to the point. This is evident in his description of the event we celebrate today – the Baptism of the Lord. He begins his account by briefly introducing and describing John the Baptist and his words regarding the coming Messiah – the one who *will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*. Mark then focuses on the aftermath of the event as the Holy Spirit descends and Jesus is revealed as *beloved Son* by a voice from heaven. For Mark, the real activity here is no mere human ritual but divine action, as Jesus is anointed with the Spirit and his identity as Messiah is revealed.

Mark uses two images to describe this divine action – the Spirit and the voice. Immediately, we are transported back to Genesis. Is this the same Spirit that hovered over the chaotic deep at the moment of creation and is now here at its re-creation? And that voice – is it the same voice that brought forth creation and now reveals Jesus as God's beloved son?

The word *beloved* here evokes the nuance of unique or only Son. It reminds us of the words of Isaiah we heard today (*my chosen one*), and even bears some resemblance to God's words to Abraham when he asked him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac (Gen 22:1-2: *Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love*). Of course, we see here the irony that while God ultimately does not allow Abraham to make this sacrifice, God himself will sacrifice his beloved Son, and it is to fulfill this divine plan that Jesus is anointed Messiah and Savior.

As we hear this Gospel proclaimed, we note this revelation/divine action occurs as Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan. We, too, have emerged from the waters of baptism and have been anointed with the same Spirit. The words of the Father are for us, too, for we are beloved by God. But the challenge will always be to retain God's pleasure. In the midst of his love, will he always be pleased with us as he is pleased with his Son? As we survey our lives, is he pleased with our acts and choices? Are we fully aware of God's tenderness made manifest in Christ? Do we live up to our baptismal identity, happy to continue this divine work in our battered world?

If anything, this feast has as much to say about us as it has about Jesus. Yes, by going down into the Jordan Jesus demonstrates his solidarity with our broken world, but we know that he was without sin and so our baptism is different from his. Today, we are invited to reflect on our baptism identity. Would others know that we are baptized and anointed? Would they know we are beloved of the Father? Or do we simply blend into this ragged world?

The choice is ours: let us choose well!

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Tuesday, January 9, 2018
(Lec. 306)

TUESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

- 1) 1 Samuel 1:9-20
- 2) Mark 1:21-28 or

When the Baptism of the Lord occurs on Monday of the First Week in Ordinary Time, the readings assigned to Monday may be joined to those of Tuesday so that the opening of each book will be read" (305).

- 1) 1 Samuel 1:1-8 (305) and 1 Samuel 1:9-20 (306)
- 2) Mark 1:14-20 (305) and Mark 1:21-28 (306)

FOCUS: Bringing our human frailty to God opens us to the power that sets us free.

It's just over a week since many of us made New Year's resolutions. Some of our good intentions may have already fallen by the wayside. One cartoon out there shows two people, committed to cutting breads and sweets out of their diet, grabbing on to a parking meter as they walk down the street. They are struggling to resist the invisible force pulling them into a bakery. Sometimes we don't know how strong a grip our weaknesses have on us until we try to be free of them.

It's like that in our spiritual lives, too. We may want to act on our good intentions, but something within us resists. We're well aware that our impatience, self-centeredness or critical nature hurts those around us and damages our own self-respect. Much as we'd like to change, it's impossible on our own. We need God's help. Jesus called himself the Vine and said we're the branches – apart from him we can do nothing (John 15:5).

Today's Gospel tells us Jesus was in a synagogue, not just reciting religious theory, but speaking with authority. A man with an evil spirit was affected by Jesus' powerful words. We might wonder what someone with an evil spirit was even doing in a holy place to begin with! Clearly, something within this man longed to be healed, even though something else within him resisted healing. This unfortunate man brought himself into Jesus' presence in spite of the inner resistance he felt, and Jesus had the power to do for the man what the man could not do for himself.

When we're unable to live up to our good intentions, we, too, can bring our weaknesses to God. We don't have to put on a show of perfection; we can come before him just as we are. The Lord knows our flaws better than we do. Through prayer and the sacraments, we can open ourselves to him and allow his power to overcome the resistance we're too weak to overcome by our unaided will.

At times, the process of becoming whole might be uncomfortable, even painful. The evil spirit didn't leave the man in the synagogue without shaking him and causing him to cry out, but it did leave him.

Jesus came to set us free – if we let him.

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Wednesday, January 10, 2018
(Lec. 307)

1) 1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20
2) Mark 1:29-39

Gospel related: CCC 2602

WEDNESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Our words and actions have an effect – for good or ill – on the lives of others.

Today's first reading, which includes the familiar story of God's call to Samuel in the night, ends on a striking note. We are told that, as Samuel grew up, God remained with him, *not permitting any word of his to be without effect*. Equally striking is the Gospel, in which Jesus spends an evening healing the sick and driving out demons – only to be ready the next morning to move and minister in a similar way to people in towns throughout Galilee.

It can be so easy for us, as present-day followers of Jesus, to read these passages and think that we ourselves can never live up to them. Can we, like Samuel and Jesus, be so effective in our words and actions? Can what we say and do make such a difference in the lives of others?

Actually, whether we realize it or not, we can have a great impact on other people in our lives – and even on people whom we just see casually in the marketplace or on the street. A smile or word of encouragement can set somebody up for the day, and a word of truth at the right time can help a loved one to move in the right direction. And, while we can't expect to perform miraculous cures as Jesus did, we can reach out to others in need and, through our generous response, help them to accomplish what they need and bring hope to their hearts. On the other hand, without even thinking of it or intending to, we can respond to a family member, colleague or stranger in a way that brings down their spirits and affects them negatively.

How can we, like Samuel and Jesus, have a positive effect on others and avoid inadvertently hurting them? Perhaps the best way is by imitating their dependence on God. Both took the time to listen to God and to allow God to guide them in their daily lives. When we take time daily to be with God in prayer, we can be sure that he will guide us in the large and small actions we take, not permitting any word we say – or any action we take – to be without a positive effect.

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Thursday, January 11, 2018
(Lec. 308)

1) 1 Samuel 4:1-11

2) Mark 1:40-45

Gospel related: CCC 1504, 2616

THURSDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: We can always count on God's love for us.

What strange stories we hear today: about Philistines and a leper, about defeat on the battlefield and secret healing. Likely we have the same question on our lips as the elders of Israel – namely, why did the Lord allow the Israelites to be conquered? Perhaps we are also puzzled as to why Jesus sternly warned the leper to tell no one how he was made clean.

Scripture reveals that in the devastating military defeat of Israel, God was establishing a new house, choosing a faithful priest and beginning a new chapter in salvation history that would eventually lead to the birth of the Messiah. This is the same Messiah whose baptism we just celebrated days ago, who has already in the very first chapter of Mark cured many who were sick and many who were possessed with demons, including the demoniac in the synagogue and Simon Peter's mother-in-law.

The leper from today's Gospel likely heard the stories of Jesus' healing and sought him out. But like the elders of Israel, he had no clear picture as to why the Lord had acted as he had. There was no explanation, just a command: *See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed.*

It is not enough to say that God's ways are mysterious, though they are. It is not enough to say that God has a plan for our lives, though he does. We ought to consider *why* God acts in our lives at all: *it is because he loves us.* God has only one reason to reveal himself, a single motive for choosing us as his special possession: his "sheer gratuitous love," as we hear in the catechism. It is out of love that God never stops saving us and pardoning our unfaithfulness and sins (CCC 218).

In our times of delight as well as in our times of despair, it is important to remember that God loves us. It is easy to forget that it is the Lord alone who weaves together all of creation throughout all of time into a glorious tapestry of majestic beauty. Like the Israelites, we may not see the whole picture, and like the leper we may not understand the purpose of events. But as faithful disciples, we may always count on God's love for us, and on the eternal life it promises. May that alone sustain us when all else seems lost.

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Friday, January 12, 2018

(Lec. 309)

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

2) Mark 2:1-12

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

FRIDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Be persistent in prayer and faithful in listening.

Today's readings are about persistence in prayer, and God's response. In the First Book of Samuel, the people continue pressing until God gives them a king. It did not turn out so well for them, once they got what they wanted. They had forgotten that God knows our needs before we even ask, and that submitting to his holy will is the best course of action. In the Gospel of Mark, it is the persistence of the people carrying the paralytic that ultimately allows him an audience with Jesus, and provides the occasion for healing.

Let us not miss that the paralytic was carried to Jesus by four men. These men were persistent on behalf of another. Who do we know that is in need of healing, or God's grace, such that we might bring them to Jesus as the four men did? Is it a neighbor, a family member or a friend?

For us

to "carry" someone to Jesus is to offer a loving act of kindness, or maybe even gentle words that speak of our own relationship with Christ as an opportunity to witness to our faith. It may also be simply that we pray fervently and persistently on their behalf, confident in the knowledge that if we bring another before Jesus, Jesus will answer our prayer.

The Lord heard the people's prayer for a king, and Jesus understood the faith and implicit prayer of the paralyzed man. In both cases, God heard and God provided. In the former, however, the people did not have confidence in God. In the latter, the men acted with great faith. In either example, we might consider who we are in the interactions. Are we the doubtful Israelites? Are we the men giving assistance? The paralytic in need of healing?

More than likely, each of us is each one of them, at some point in time. After all, we suffer from the human condition of sin and weakness, and we are not always faithful listeners to what God is saying to us.

So we come here, to Mass, where we have the opportunity to remain persistent in prayer, and perhaps be a little more attentive in our listening. For it is here that we encounter Jesus as we listen to the Word of God, receive forgiveness and partake of the Eucharistic sacrifice. It is here where we celebrate the just ruler that God provided for us in Jesus. It is here that we are told to take up our mats and be a witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Let us then be thankful for this great gift of God, and go forward glorifying him as the people of Capernaum did.

Saturday, January 13, 2018
(Lec. 309)

- 1) 1 Samuel 9:1-4,
17-19; 10:1a
- 2) Mark 2:13-17

SATURDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Hilary, Bishop
and Doctor Of the Church;
Saturday in honor of BVM)

Gospel related: CCC 574, 1484, 1503

FOCUS: We are called by God to do his will in our lives.

Today is the Feast of Saint Hilary, Bishop and Doctor of the Church. Like countless Christians before him and since his death, he was called by God for an important mission: the defense of Christian beliefs against heresy. Likewise, today's readings are models for our own response to God's call in our lives.

Opportunities are presented to ordinary men that result in extraordinary actions. Two "giants" of Biblical times, Saul and Matthew, are called by the Lord to lead and to follow. In the account we heard in the first reading, Saul, described as a "handsome" man – apparently the best-looking guy in antiquity – is out looking for his father's donkeys, which have wandered away. Saul doesn't find the animals, but *Samuel* finds *him*. Samuel finds *him* because the Lord has decreed that Saul will be the king who will command his people as the first ruler of the Kingdom of Israel and Judah. Saul responds in faith and allows himself to be anointed.

Matthew's calling was much different. In fact, today's Gospel refers to him by his other name, Levi. Jesus summons Levi, the tax collector, to follow him and he accepts the call. Levi, Jesus and the disciples go to Levi's home for a meal, and when the Pharisees hear Jesus is breaking bread with *many tax collectors and sinners*, they criticize him. Jesus' reply is simple, *I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners*.

Levi and the others who dined with Jesus that day knew that answering the call could bring them difficulty, especially from religious leaders. The scribes and Pharisees were self-righteous, and unable to respond to Jesus' call to repent and follow the Lord. The catechism tells us that "From the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, certain Pharisees and partisans of Herod, together with priests and scribes agreed together to destroy him" (CCC 574). But the fear and threat of persecution did not dissuade these early disciples from doing God's will.

In both of these instances, the Lord called and ordinary people answered. But their faith gave them the strength to do extraordinary things. Our own calling may not be as dramatic as those of Saul and Matthew/Levi, but it bears just as much significance. God is calling us. Are we listening?

* * *

SUNDAY, JANUARY 14, 2018

(Lec. 65)

- 1) 1 Samuel 3:3b-10, 19
- 2) 1 Corinthians 6:13c-15a, 17-20
- 3) John 1:35-42

Gospel related: CCC 608, 719

**SECOND SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: We are listening, Lord. Speak, for we have come to do your will.

There is a good-natured theological adage that says the six most dangerous words in Scripture are *Speak, for your servant is listening*. This is because whenever it is expressed in Scripture, something big, important, and usually quite difficult is handed to the one who speaks it.

Of course, receiving a call and a mission from God is never a bad thing – but the humor reflects our understanding of our human selves. As much as our hearts (and spirit) might desire to cry out as the psalmist does, *Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will*, we know that the flesh – our self-doubts, anxieties and limitations – get in the way. But God does not see it that way – he has full faith and confidence that we can do what he asks.

We know this because we are never spiritually alone. God has provided the Holy Spirit and his gifts for us. Graces are conferred by our valid and fruitful reception of the sacraments. And often, there is a person, or persons, beside us helping us out, as when Eli prompts Samuel in our first reading, and Andrew prompts Simon in the Gospel, after himself being prompted by John the Baptist. But how does all this prompting and grace provided by God ensure we really do have the capability to do God's will?

That answer is in our second reading from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians: *[our] bodies are members of Christ ...*

whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one Spirit with him ... Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, [our] body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within [us]. In other words, by design, we are made in God's image exactly for the purpose of union with God.

Our fallen nature inhibits our attainment of this perfection on our own, of course. But because Jesus removed the impediment of death for us, we are not limited in our *ability* to conform ourselves to him; we are limited only in our ability to do it *alone*. So we rely on grace; we rely on the assistance of others; we rely on prayer. All of these enable us to do that which God desires.

So as we approach the altar of the Lord, and receive him into our bodies, let us say with great love and confidence, "here I am Lord, speak. I have come to do your will."

* * *

Monday, January 15, 2018
(Lec. 311)

- 1) 1 Samuel 15:16-23
- 2) Mark 2:18-22

Gospel related: CCC 796

MONDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Let us do all things out of real, obedient, sacrificial and self-giving love.

There is a well-known clip from *Peanuts* in which Linus says, with exasperation, “How can you do ‘new math’ problems with an ‘old math’ mind?” Several books in theology use this as a way of introducing today’s Gospel passage – perhaps making it accessible by giving us a more contemporary example – math – for the teaching Jesus provides.

The Good News that Jesus brings, the new covenant he initiates, is built around what we know as the central truths of Christianity: the Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, and redemption. His disciples and the Pharisees did not yet have this full knowledge, however, and so this is what Jesus was trying to teach them. They were being asked to think in a way that was different from anything they had ever seen or heard.

Samuel’s words to Saul in today’s first reading are a kind of foretelling of this. He says, *Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission than the fat of rams. For a sin like divination is rebellion, and presumption is the crime of idolatry.* This was a reversal of the usual adherence to the law and its observances with which Saul would have been familiar. Sacrifice and offerings were pleasing to the Lord, but now Samuel was saying otherwise?

Samuel’s point was to highlight that observance of the law that had become simply cultic practice – which was Saul’s reality – was of no meaning or use to God unless it emerged from the intention of doing God’s will. Jesus’ comments to the Pharisees are for much the same purpose: if the law is observed for the sake of the law, and not God, then it is meaningless. He says, *no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins are ruined. Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins.*

This complements our understanding that Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. In obedience *and* sacrifice, for the sake of love of God the Father and of God’s love for us, Jesus was a perfect offering for our redemption.

We know the full truth of the Gospel message. So, in simple terms, Jesus is asking us to consider why we do everything that we do. If it is for the sake of anything other than love – real, obedient, sacrificial, self-giving love – then we may need to think about whether we are indeed trying to put new wine in old wineskins, or attempting to solve new math with an old math mind. And then try again.

* * *

Tuesday, January 16, 2018
(Lec. 312)

- 1) 1 Samuel 16:1-13
- 2) Mark 2:23-28

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

TUESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: *Enlighten the eyes of our hearts.*

There is a strong connection between David and Jesus in today's Scriptures. They are both chosen by God – anointed by God. David is the youngest of the possible choices for king, which alone makes him unusual given the common practice, in most cultures, of passing on rule to the eldest. He is also an unknown to the people; he spends his days shepherding sheep.

Jesus enters history as our King as a newborn – which is an even more radical occurrence than the youthfulness of David. Like David, Jesus tends to his Father's sheep – God's people, us – as the Good Shepherd. He is unknown as he begins his ministry, and will be challenged by the Pharisees because of that.

But Jesus is of David's lineage, and he knew his Scriptures, as well as the psalms from which we heard God say, *I have found David, my servant*. So when, in the Gospel, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees for allowing the disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath, he has the perfect response: *Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions were hungry? How he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of offering that only the priests could lawfully eat, and shared it with his companions?*

Now the Pharisees were men who took Jewish law very seriously, studying the Scriptures and attempting to live strictly by their many commandments, rules and laws. So Jesus' response to the Pharisees is a reminder that God's laws are for the benefit of people; they are rules meant to be of service, not burden, to God's people.

Thus the Sabbath, a chance for rest and worship of God, is a gift to humankind. And Jesus, as the Son of Man (Mark's cue to his community that Jesus is the Son of God), is Lord of the Sabbath – the Pharisees are not. The lesson from this encounter is that, as we learn again and again, accepting the Gospel message requires a new way of thinking, and a conversion of heart.

So as we travel through the fields of our own discipleship, let us ask, as the verse before our Gospel says, that God would *enlighten the eyes of our hearts*. May we serve the Lord in humility, remembering that God's law is meant to bring his mercy and love to the world, and it is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

* * * *

Wednesday, January 17, 2018
(Lec. 313)

- 1) 1 Samuel 17:32-33
37, 40-51
- 2) Mark 3:1-6

WEDNESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saint Anthony,
Abbot)

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

FOCUS: God is our rock, and our deliverer.

Everybody loves an underdog. We love to read books or watch movies where the “little guy,” battling against enormous odds, wins out in the end. It’s especially gratifying when the battle is against a powerful, evil villain.

Perhaps that’s why the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy has been so popular. The story is filled with strong characters on both sides: Elves and Dwarves, who are free peoples, Orcs and Ringwraiths, who are enslaved peoples, Wizards, and even Kings. But the hero of the story is Frodo, a hobbit – one of the smallest, weakest and least formidable of them all. It is Frodo who undertakes the hazardous and arduous journey to Mount Doom, where he destroys the powerful Ring before it can fall into the hands of the Dark Lord Sauron, who seeks to rule the world.

Strange names and characters. But perhaps no stranger than what we encounter in our first reading today from the Book of Samuel. The Israelites are preparing for battle in the Valley of Elah against the Philistines, whose champion is the giant, Goliath of Gath. We have heard the story of David and Goliath so often that we react to it in a familiar pattern: We cheer for David, the heroic underdog, and boo Goliath, the evil villain. We identify with David, seeing ourselves as heroes and underdogs, too. God is on his side, and we like to think he is on our side as well.

But if we’re honest with ourselves, we have to admit that the people we admire, the ones we try to model ourselves after, are often more like Goliath. We celebrate the strong and the powerful, the successful businessperson, the popular entertainer – those who have made it to the top. In our own, smaller worlds, don’t we want to be “on top” as well? Aren’t there times when we are proud and boastful? When we argue and fight with others to get what we want? When we think just a little too much of ourselves and not enough of others?

It is at times like these that God may send a David into our lives – someone to puncture our inflated egos and bring us down to earth. It may be a close friend, a spouse or even one of our children. It was certainly Jesus in his interaction with the Pharisees today in the Gospel. He brought a message of salvation and yet they refused to hear, and Jesus was grieved at their hardness of heart. And in those times when we act like Pharisees, we need to hear the truth, which often hits us “right between the eyes,” like the stone from David’s slingshot. After all, as the psalmist reminds us today, the Lord is our rock!

Granted, the writer probably did not have in mind the Lord as a rock coming at us in a slingshot, but we can still take it to heart as a metaphor as we hear him say, *Blessed be the Lord, my Rock! My refuge and my fortress, my stronghold, my deliverer.* For in those times when God allows a David into our lives, we ought to be honest with ourselves and humble enough to accept criticism from those who love us. And because God gave us the gift of Jesus in our lives, we ought to follow his example of what are true goodness, strength and power. For God is watching out for us; he is indeed, our stronghold and deliverer. And we would do well to thank him for that.

Thursday, January 18, 2018
(Lec.314)

1) 1 Samuel 18:6-9; 19:1-7

2) Mark 3:7-12

Gospel related: CCC 1504

THURSDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Give thanks for Christ's dominion and our redemption.

The imagery that stands out today in our readings includes a contrast between killing and saving, and the comparison of numbers with other numbers.

In our first reading, we hear about the women in the cities of Israel playing and singing a song: *Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands*. Saul is angry and resentful – even jealous – of David, because of what the song says. He is bothered by the higher number attributed to David.

Regardless of the numbers, it seems an extreme reaction on Saul's part to allow his jealousy to turn into an intention of killing David. After all, was not David an excellent warrior? Wasn't he the kind of get-the-job-done person he would want on his team? At the end of this passage, Jonathan convinces Saul not to act on his intention, and David continues to serve.

Compare and contrast these events with those we hear in the Gospel. Here, rather than killing people, Jesus is healing and curing them. *His numbers are high, too – though we hear only generic descriptions such as large number of people, the crowd, and the imagery of pressing upon him to touch him*. The only reaction we have from anyone about these numbers is not an emotional one, like Saul's, but a practical one: Jesus requests a boat so he can get away from the crowd, *so that they would not crush him*.

The juxtaposition of these two scenarios is purposeful in its movement from a story of jealousy and killing to one of following (loyalty) and healing/curing. The movement parallels our own shift from a people bound under the punishment of death to a people redeemed and raised to new life. Where Saul and David would rule over large numbers, Christ rules over *all, far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come* (Eph 1:21-23).

In the Eucharist we celebrate today, when we approach the altar we are not unlike those early crowds who sought him out to touch him, and be healed. So as we partake of his body and blood today, may we give thanks for Christ's dominion, and for his redemption of us into union with God and away from sin.

* * *

Friday, January 19, 2018
(Lec. 315)

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

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

FRIDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Christ reconciles the world to God.

[Today's lengthy account from the book of Samuel has an important message to us, but that message could be diluted if we do not understand the larger context. We have been reading from Samuel since Ordinary Time began last week. Most of this past week we have heard about the undertakings of, and the interactions between, Saul and David. These interactions have resulted in Saul being very jealous of David – so jealous that he wants to kill David.]

When we come upon Saul and David today, David has realized that Saul's desire to kill him has progressed to an actual intent to kill him and that his life is in danger. So he has run away, to a place called En Gedi, which is the largest oasis along the western shore of the Dead Sea. Saul pursues him there.

After their close encounter in the cave, the two men have the lengthy discourse we hear today, which ends when Saul says to David, *you have treated me generously, while I have done you harm. Great is the generosity you showed me today, when the LORD delivered me into your grasp and you did not kill me ... And now, I know that you shall surely be king and that sovereignty over Israel shall come into your possession.*

These words mark two moments in salvation history. The first is that David and Saul are reconciled, though Saul will still, in the future, cause problems in their relationship. The second is that Saul truly recognizes that David will be king over all of Israel.

Today's account of David and Saul stands somewhat in parallel to the Gospel. Our verse before the Gospel today hints at this: *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.* In this parallel, rather than the relationship between David and Saul, the relationship is between God, and us.

Like David, and from the *house* of David, Jesus has been anointed by God as king over all of Israel – that is, God's people. Like Saul, we are human beings who are a combination of goodness and sinful nature. As David reconciled with Saul, so Jesus, as the Son, reconciles us to himself and thus the Father. As Saul remained imperfect in his relationship with David, even intending his death a few more times, so, too, did we kill the person of Jesus in history and continue to sin against him today.

But herein lies the important message. Despite the failings on the part of Saul, David reconciled with him. Despite the failings of all of us throughout our history as people of the covenant, God reconciled with us. Jesus knew he would be killed, but that was in fact *how* our reconciliation with God was achieved. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus mediated for us the new covenant with God; and in his naming of the Twelve that we heard about today, he assured us of its continuity.

So in a sense, we are left as Saul was, with the ability to say only this: *you have treated me generously, while I have done you harm. Great is the generosity you showed me today,* – only we would add, "and every day."

Saturday, January 20, 2018
(Lec. 316)

- 1) 2 Samuel 1:1-4,
11-12, 19, 23-27
- 2) Mark 3:20-21

SATURDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Fabian,
Pope and Martyr;
Saint Sebastian,
Martyr;
Saturday in honor of
BVM)

FOCUS: Beyond pain and uncertainty lie hope and fulfillment.

In our first reading, David mourns the death of King Saul and his closest friend, Jonathan. His actions and poignant elegy reflect the deep sorrow he feels at their loss. While the deaths of the king and his son caused David great pain, they were necessary for him to become king. Although it was unclear to David at the time, there was hope and fulfillment at the far edges of his grief.

From our Gospel, we get a sense of the type of pain and uncertainty Jesus' family and those surrounding him must have felt during his ministry. Such massive crowds engulfed him that he and his disciples can't even eat. His family tries to seize him; they think he is *out of his mind*. What would we think if someone we love started preaching radical messages or challenging religious authority? Most likely, we would worry for their sanity, but also for their safety. Now, let us imagine how those early disciples must have felt because, like David, they did not yet understand the hope and fulfillment that awaited them.

No one ever said being a Christian was easy. Suffering is part of the human experience and, as difficult as it is, part of a greater plan that we may never realize here on earth. We must be able to see beyond our temporary uncertainty and pain and trust in God the Father. This is why a close relationship with the Lord through prayer and the sacraments is so important.

Prayer opens our hearts to God's plan. He sees the bigger picture not only for our lives, but also for the lives of others and those in future generations. The sacraments provide grace to strengthen us to survive even the most difficult situations. So let us avail ourselves of prayer and sacrament – especially the Eucharist. For the Eucharist is the ultimate promise that beyond pain and uncertainty, we will find hope and fulfillment.

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 21, 2018

(Lec. 68)

- 1) Jonah 3:1-5, 10
- 2) 1 Corinthians 7:29-31
- 3) Mark 1:14-20

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

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: When an alarm goes off in our hearts, it is best to heed the warning and respond with faith.

If only we were as quick at jumping out of bed when the alarm goes off as were the people of Nineveh in responding to Jonah, when he sounded the alarm of their impending demise if they did not change their ways! And wouldn't it be great if it were as easy for us to decide on a vocation, as it appears to have been for Simon and Andrew, and for James and John?

We are better at responding to some alarms than others – and sometimes even to gentle nudges more than loud attention-grabbers. For example, if the fire alarm goes off, we tend to take that one seriously. And if a trusted friend gently but insistently nudges us to get help when we are in a bad place, we might take that seriously too. So when it comes to making spiritual decisions for our lives, perhaps we should try to fight the temptation of becoming complacent about the alarms that go off in our hearts, or the nudges we receive from God.

God's direction to us is very seldom as obvious as Jonah's warning, or Jesus' call to his first followers. God nudges us out of the way of spiritual harm, but it is up to us if we will respond or not. If we don't accept God's prompt, then we risk occasions of sin or missing the opportunity to flourish.

It is also God who nudges us, not just away from harm, but toward the good – such as marriage, a single way of life or religious life. Once again, however, it is our decision whether or not to allow ourselves to be moved. It is true that sometimes God gets our attention with metaphorical lightning bolts, but for most of us the prompts are much more subtle. So we have to pay close attention in listening for God's voice and in sensing the soft touch of the gentle nudge.

We all long to be happy. God longs for us to be happy too! We will be happy if we respond with faith and love to the Lord's admonition to come and follow him. God knows our abilities, and how each of us fits into his grand design for the world. He encourages us to follow our heart's desire – as researchers, laborers, teachers, clergy, religious or civil servants, to name but a few. He wants us to have holy relationships, and to live holy lives.

So while, yes, we are free to choose our own path, accepting a friendly nudge from the Lord sets us on the *right* path: a path that leads to happiness for us and a better world for all. And ultimately, a path that leads to our eternal life with him.

So let us be attentive to those alarms, calls and nudges – and be quick and joyful to respond.

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Monday, January 22, 2018
(Lec. 317)

- 1) 2 Samuel 5:1-7, 10
- 2) Mark 3:22-30

MONDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
USA: Day of Prayer for the
Legal Protection
of Unborn Children

For the Day of Prayer, any readings from the *Lectionary for Mass Supplement*, the Mass "For Giving Thanks to God for the Gift of Human Life," nos. 947A-947E, or the *Lectionary for Mass* (vol. IV), the Mass "For Peace and Justice," nos. 887-891

Gospel related: CCC 538, 548, 574, 1864

FOCUS: Let us pray without ceasing for unborn children.

Our two readings today illustrate that what we think and feel about others often affects how we act toward them. Conversely, how we *act toward* another tends to affect what we, or others, come to *feel* about them.

In the first reading, the leaders of the tribes of Israel approach David with gratitude and compliments: *when Saul was our king, they say, it was you who led the children of Israel out [in all its battles] and brought them back.* They knew that the Lord had appointed David to shepherd the Israelites, and so the elders of Israel anointed him king.

In the Gospel, the scribes who had come from Jerusalem draw near to Jesus in a decidedly different manner than those who approached David. They come not with gratitude and compliments, but suspicion and epithets. *He is possessed by Beelzebul, they say of Jesus, and, By the prince of demons he drives out demons.*

These expressions of how they feel toward Jesus, and what they think of him, will eventually lead them to mockingly crown him King of the Jews, and to kill him.

How we think and feel about others – the value we ascribe to them – plays out in how we behave toward them.

Today is the Day of Prayer for the Legal Protection of Unborn Children. It is a day set aside for us to reflect on how we as a society – not just a country, but globally – think about, value and act toward unborn children. Specifically, it is a call for Christians to pray for an end to abortion.

Two thousand years ago, the Twelve Tribes of Israel united and joined forces to put David on the throne. Jesus reigns as King forever and Prince of Peace, and yet many still do not believe in him or obey his teachings. Let us muster the courage of David and the gentle mercy of Jesus in praying without ceasing for the legal protection of unborn children everywhere.

* * *

Tuesday, January 23, 2018
(Lec. 318)

- 1) 2 Samuel 6:12b-15, 17-19
- 2) Mark 3:31-35

TUESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.)

Saint Vincent, Deacon and Martyr;
Saint Marianne Cope, Virgin)

Gospel related: CCC 500

FOCUS: Family is everyone who does the will of God.

It is not uncommon in parishes today to speak of ourselves as family. The word family is a broad term. It can mean relations by blood, or express a deep abiding connectedness by law or through interests or common experiences. It is within family life that we learn how to communicate and to share with each other, and to grow in ways that speak to our individual gifts and nourish and strengthen them for the greater good.

Jesus speaks of family today in the Gospel of Mark; in the language of the day, he is referring to extended relatives. Understanding this, we can look closer at this passage and see that Jesus, in responding to the crowd's announcement that his mother and his brothers and sisters arrived, uses this as a teachable moment. He asks an important question: *Who are my mother and my brothers?*

Not waiting for a reply, he looks intently at the crowd and explains: *Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.* Family in the eyes of God is not limited by biology or ethnicity. Family in the eyes of God is anyone who shares in the mission – the will of the Father.

Who would have been gathered that day in the crowd? Most likely people who were not Jewish, but Gentile. Imagine how affirming this would be for the Gentiles to hear from Jesus himself that they are not outside the family fold! The debate about Gentiles and their place was an important discussion in the early Church, and Jesus in this Gospel makes it very clear that everyone is to be included in the family. In other words salvation was, and is, offered to all. But we must choose to accept it.

This is good for us to keep in mind when we think of our parish family, and especially those we think of as being outside our congregation. What about strangers who come to us? We must welcome everyone. This is not just a nice thing to do, but it is what Christ himself has laid down as essential to our role as disciples because we are all brothers and sisters in the faith.

We may be saints-in-the-making, but we are sinners now and we can accompany one another on the Christian journey. Imagine how affirming it is for those who come to us today, to know they will be met with love and care in this house of God. Whether it is gentle love in response to grief, or tough love as a means of encouragement and accountability, how we love one another demonstrates how seriously we embrace our commitment to the Christian family, and to doing the will of the Father.

So let us pray for the grace and strength to love ourselves, and one another, as God loves us. With truth, charity, laughter and sorrow, let us sanctify each other and grow together as we share in Christ's mission.

Wednesday, January 24, 2018
(Lec. 319)

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

WEDNESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saint Francis de Sales,
Bishop and Doctor
of the Church)

Gospel related: CCC 546, 2707

FOCUS: When we respond to the seed of God's love within us, we can share that love by growing where we're planted.

In today's Gospel, Jesus compares the Word of God to seed that is scattered – meaning seed that is made available to all. The different types of soil represent different responses to God's Word. It's the same good seed – the same good Word – but its growth depends on our response.

Some people ignore the message of God's love. Some take it in superficially, but give up at the first sign of trouble. Others are so distracted by either pleasure or worry – or both – that they lose sight of what truly matters. Some people hear the message, accept it wholeheartedly, and, changed by God's love, share that love with others.

Which group are we in? Probably all of them at one time or another. Sometimes, Scripture goes in one ear and out the other. Sometimes, we ignore the promptings of our heart because we're afraid to venture outside our comfort zone. Sometimes, we're just too darn busy with everyday life; we forget that treating people with respect and courtesy – at work, school or even at home – is more important than getting another item crossed off our "to-do" list. And yes, sometimes we allow the message of God's love to sink deep into our hearts and change us from within.

When we receive good news, we naturally want to share it with others. Let's remember, though, that the seed in the parable is scattered, not shoved into the ground by brute force. That means saying what we have to say gently but firmly instead of hammering home our point.

Friendly persuasion is a more effective way to sow the seeds of God's love. Today is the Memorial of Saint Francis de Sales, a Doctor of the Church known for being gentle, patient and quite influential. Francis' father wanted him to study law, not become a priest. The same gentle persuasion that eventually won over his father also helped Francis win over many souls.

Saint Francis de Sales is also known for his prolific writing, and for his efforts to reach out to lay people. Francis let them know that the call to a holy life wasn't only for priests and religious, but possible for business people, soldiers, homemakers, and people in all walks of life. It's not our occupations that determine what happens to the seed of God's Word within us, but the receptivity of our hearts. We can grow where God plants us.

* * *

Thursday, January 25, 2018
(Lec. 519)

- 1) Acts 22:3-16
or Acts 9:1-22
- 2) Mark 16:15-18

Gospel related: CCC 161, 183, 434, 670, 699, 888, 977, 1223, 1253, 1256, 1257, 15070, 1673

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

FOCUS: We each have our own “calling” story. What is that story – and to what are we called?

The readings for today present us with some very dramatic stories of God’s call to individuals. The first reading is perhaps the most dramatic and famous call story of all: the conversion of the zealous Pharisee Saul from a persecutor of Christians to, almost immediately, an equally zealous follower of Christ. In the Gospel, before departing for heaven, Jesus confirms the special call of his followers to *proclaim the Gospel to every creature*, and then baptize those who believe.

Whether we were baptized as babies or made our own decision as adults to be baptized, God has called each of us in a unique way and for a distinct purpose. Most of us were probably not struck down by God with a life-changing message of a new and compelling mission. More often, God calls us through the love and commitment of our family, the example of friends or an incident within our own lives.

We are all called – but what are we called to? Like the disciples in the Gospel, we are called to bring the Good News of the Gospel to people in our time and in our area – but our mission within that general call to discipleship varies from person to person. Once we are aware of the call from God, it might take us time and much prayer to discern exactly what that specific mission might be. Sometimes, our mission only unfolds as we follow in the way of Jesus and listen to his voice daily. God also calls us not only to a formal, lifelong vocation – whether to marriage, the priesthood, religious life or a dedicated life as a single person – but to various missions throughout our lives, within a particular vocation and in response to current issues and events around us.

In normal circumstances, God’s mission for us is tailored to the gifts and interests he has already given us. While Paul’s conversion changed his purpose dramatically – from persecuting Christians to converting and teaching them – God continued to use his zeal, dedication, intelligence and strong personality in his new calling. In the same way, God might well make use of our gifts – compassion, generosity, a scientific mind, or talents in teaching or in leadership – to call us to various missions in our own lives.

Let us take some time in prayer today to recognize and appreciate that we are, indeed, called by God to bring the Gospel to those who most need to hear it. But to what specific mission is God calling us at this point in our life? Let us listen to the words of Jesus in our heart, to the advice of people who know us, and to our own unique gifts, circumstances and concerns. If we pray for this with a sincere heart, we will probably not be struck down on the road with a specific answer, but we will ultimately know where God is calling us now.

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Friday, January 26, 2018
(Lec. 520)

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

(Lec. 321)

2) Mark 4:26-34

Gospel related: CCC 546

FRIDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saints Timothy and Titus,
Bishops)

FOCUS: Faith is nourished by reading Scripture, partaking in the sacraments and praying to grow into the kingdom of God.

Is it not strange how the smallest of puppies and the tiniest of babies grow into the most massive of dogs and the most towering of adults? While sometimes the transformation seems impossible to predict, often it takes simply looking down and seeing oddly large feet on such little creatures. Puppy paws can be enormous!

So it can be with people of faith who seem to have belief as miniscule as a mustard seed, but develop into disciples brimming with the spirit of power and love and self-control that comes only from sincere faith in God. Timothy was one of those people. He may have begun his life with what seemed like a small amount of belief; after all, his father was Greek and he lived in Lystra, a city in Asia Minor. But he had two big feet to stand on – his mother Eunice, a believing Christian woman, and his grandmother Lois, eminent for her piety and faith.

And even as the smallest of puppies and the tiniest of babies grow with the right sustenance, so the faith of Timothy was nourished by his close relationship with the Apostle Paul, who imposed his hands upon him, bestowing the gift of God. Indeed, as we heard today, even when far away and in prison, Paul continued to pray night and day for the one he called his *dear child*.

In today's Gospel, Jesus told the crowds that the kingdom of God was like seed scattered and left alone that sprouted and grew and yielded fruit. He also said that the kingdom of God was like the tiny mustard seed that grows into a massive plant large enough to shelter the birds of the sky. But those seeds the Lord talked about also had pretty big feet, as it were: the feet of none other than the Lord God. And they had the nourishment of the Holy Spirit, poured out in abundance on them.

The message of the kingdom is proclaimed to all; the seeds of faith are sown in each person. But it is only the disciple who understands the meaning. It is only the believer whose God-given gifts are stirred into flame by sincere faith. Certainly, there is hardship in living the Gospel. Courage is required to bear testimony to our Lord.

But just as the little seed grows with nurture, so, too, does faith in Christ. Reading Scripture, partaking of the sacraments, praying often – all give the strength that comes from God. We might seem now to be but a sapling in faith, but we must not forget to look down and see those giant feet of the Lord's love for us on which we are always standing.

Saturday, January 27, 2018
(Lec. 322)
1) 2 Samuel 12:1-7a, 10-17
2) Mark 4:35-41

SATURDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Angela Merici,
Virgin;
Saturday in Honor of BVM)

Gospel related: CCC 546

FOCUS: Jesus is Lord, we do not need to be afraid.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus sound asleep ... in a boat ... in the middle of a storm. Curiously, it is the only time in the four Gospels where we find him asleep. For whatever reason, the only recorded Divine Nap takes place in circumstances that one could only charitably describe as supremely unpleasant!

So it is understandable, on the one hand, that the disciples are noticeably anxious. Not only does Jesus appear unconcerned about the danger, he is asleep in physical conditions that would normally make sleep impossible. Who could sleep through such nauseating tumult?

On the other hand, by this time in their association with Jesus, he has cured a demoniac and Simon's mother-in-law; cleansed a leper; healed a paralytic and a man's withered hand; and cured and healed many others. So it is interesting that when Jesus rebukes the wind, and says to the sea, *Quiet! Be still!* they are shocked by and in awe of the resulting calm. *Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?* they ask one another.

They are asking because the Scriptures they knew so intimately stressed that only God can control the wind and the sea. Only God had the power to, literally, quiet a storm. And the Apostles did not see, or understand, Jesus as God – yet. They had awakened him as *Teacher*, as if he would perhaps explain to them what was happening ... not expecting that he would actually *stop* what was happening.

Jesus may have been, in a sense, full of surprises for the disciples, but he is not for us. We are fully aware of who he is: the second person of the Trinity; the one true God who, in his divine power, became a human being in order to redeem all mankind; the Son of God who emerged in human history as the ruler over the new kingdom of Israel – the kingdom of God.

We are blessed with the gift of not only being members of that kingdom, but of bearing the kingdom within us. We were baptized into it, and we encounter Christ in his fullness here in the Eucharist.

So let us boldly make our way through the circumstances of our days – whether clear, or stormy, knowing we do not have to be afraid. We *know* who Jesus is. We can have faith that he is not, in fact sleeping – but instead has the boat's watch, and will steer us safely to our final destination ... if we let him.

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 28, 2018

(Lec. 71)

1) Deuteronomy 18:15-20

2) 1 Corinthians 7:32-35

3) Mark 1:21-28

Gospel related: CCC 438, 1673, 2173

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: *For he is our God, and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.*

In last week's Gospel from Mark, we heard the call of the first disciples, and today those new disciples were with Jesus on the Sabbath as he *entered the synagogue [in Capernaum] and taught*. While Mark does not record *what* Jesus taught at this particular time, he does tell us the reaction to it: *The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.*

This moment is followed by Jesus' expulsion of an unclean spirit from a man, and Jesus' interaction with the demon is telling. Jesus recognizes the demon as the very antithesis of the kingdom and the demon recognizes Jesus as the *Holy One of God*. While the demon taunts Jesus, Jesus silences the demon in response and orders him to come out of the man. Once more, the people are affected: they are amazed and question one another as to what is happening.

Writing for a community suffering under the oppressive regime and power of imperial Rome, Mark is encouraging his listeners by reminding them of Jesus' power and promises. Two millennia later we, too, are challenged by our own demons, personal and communal. We, too, desire words of encouragement and a reminder that Jesus is the Holy One who liberates and acts with true compassion. This Gospel serves as a reminder of that.

Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians today can be of help in this as well, when he says, *Brothers and sisters: I should like you to be free of anxieties*. Most, if not all of us, would agree with him! Writing for a community that expected the Second Coming to happen imminently, Paul is communicating a message of hope. He is telling them that the circumstances and conditions of earthly existence (being married or unmarried in this case) are important, but they are of less significance than the new life we are all called to in Christ.

In other words, he is reinforcing for them – and therefore for us – the transitory nature of this life. And as such, our state in life should be of less concern than our state in the kingdom. Wherever we find ourselves, we are to answer God's call and *[adhere] to the Lord without distraction*.

Paul's message of hope, along with Mark's encouraging message of Jesus' power and promises, are a reminder that the *Holy One of God* has liberated us from death and sin – that the difficulties and trials of this life are, in the end, overcome. We have certainty that with faith in the risen Lord, we are destined for an eternity with him.

So let us go forward to the Eucharist in faith and *sing joyfully to the Lord*, as our psalmist says, *com[ing] into his presence with thanksgiving ... For he is our God, and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.*

* * *

Monday, January 29, 2018
(Lec. 323)

- 1) 2 Samuel 15:13-14, 30;
16:5-13
- 2) Mark 5:1-20

MONDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: The Lord sustains us; in him we find mercy and consolation.

Today's Gospel offers a concrete example of how we find mercy and consolation in God. A man, possessed with a legion of demons, had suffered profoundly at their hands. His body was wracked night and day by their torments and he knew no consolation from the community since they were likely terrified of him. We heard: *In fact, he had frequently been bound with shackles and chains, but the chains had been pulled apart by him and the shackles smashed, and no one was strong enough to subdue him.* No one, that is, until Jesus.

Jesus not only subdues the tormented man simply by his presence – *he ran up and prostrated himself before [Jesus]* – but also frees him from his affliction by ordering the demons to leave the man. And they do.

So now, the man who had been possessed is described as *sitting there clothed and in his right mind.* What it must have been like to be that man! Jesus not only frees him from his chains – literal and metaphorical – but then commands him to return to his family, and *announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done* for him.

In essence, the man has been returned to health, clothed, given a place to live (with his family) and given a job (proclaiming what Jesus had done for him) – which we know he undertakes with great vigor.

By Jesus' saving power and word, torment has been overcome by mercy; and chaos replaced with consolation.

This, it seems, is the heart of the message in today's passage. By God's saving power and word, judgment for the world has been replaced by mercy, and death has been overcome by the consolation of new life. Everything the demoniac received represents what we find in the kingdom of God: we are restored to the fullness of life.

When we encounter suffering and tribulation in our lives, God's profound love and mercy come to meet us in the messiness of it. The relief we are granted in those moments is but a taste of his promise in eternity. So as we prepare to approach the altar, where that taste is most genuinely found in the Eucharist, let us give thanks for the Lord who sustains us – in whom we find mercy and consolation.

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Tuesday, January 30, 2018
(Lec. 324)

1) 2 Samuel 18:9-10, 14b,
24-25a, 30-19:3

2) Mark 5:21-43

Gospel related: CCC 546, 548, 994, 1504, 2616

TUESDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Trust in the Lord who saves us.

*Incline your ear, O LORD; answer me,
for I am afflicted and poor...
save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God.*

These words of lament and praise in today's responsorial psalm, from Psalm 86, a "Prayer of David," would have been very familiar to the crowds in our Gospel passage. And like David, the specific two who seek Jesus clearly articulate what they expect God to do. They also reflect the same humility, trust and faith that David had: *You are God, not I. And you are my God; I need you – so hear my petition and answer me.*

The synagogue official pleads directly with Jesus, seemingly confident that what he asks, Jesus will accomplish. The woman with the twelve-year hemorrhage also looks to Jesus for help, but unlike David and the official, she does not verbalize a petition first. She simply states aloud what she believes: *If I but touch his clothes, I shall be cured.*

How great the faith of these two, and how humble and yet confident they are in their approach. They believe and trust that a physical encounter with Jesus, combined with their faith in his saving power, will result in new life – and they are right. Jesus raises the official's daughter with a touch, and a command. And to the sick woman who touched *him*, Jesus proclaims, *Daughter, your faith has saved you.*

Your faith has saved you. These words are meant for us, too. At every moment of our lives, we are free to approach God in prayer, and reap the harvest of this radical dependence upon him who never fails to incline his ear and answer. And, as in the case of the woman – our God who knows what we need before we even address it to him.

Nowhere does that freedom in God become more *literally possible* than here in the celebration of the Eucharist. Exactly as the official and the woman did two thousand years ago, we, too, have a genuine physical encounter with Jesus Christ, fully present in our midst in body and blood, soul and divinity. What a tremendous, mysterious gift from God who heard David's cry, *save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God.*

So let us, with faith and a humble, contrite heart, approach our Lord, and receive that gift. And as it enters our bodies, our hearts and our lives, may it transform us. May it transform the world.

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Wednesday, January 31, 2018
(Lec. 325)

- 1) 2 Samuel 24:2, 9-17
- 2) Mark 6:1-6

WEDNESDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saint John Bosco,
Priest)

Gospel related: CCC 500, 699, 2610

FOCUS: God needs to hear our “yes” today.

At first glance, the end of today’s Gospel seems to imply a limit to the power of God: *So he was not able to perform any mighty deeds there*. At the very least, it questions whether something can, indeed, interfere with God’s ability to carry out “mighty deeds”!

But let us begin by surveying the big picture. At this point in Mark’s Gospel, we have already witnessed many mighty deeds worked by Jesus – healings, miracles, calming of the sea – and Mark points out that Jesus has now returned to *his native place* to continue his ministry. Yet from the beginning of this story, the mood and the setting here have become antagonistic. Despite hearing Jesus’ preaching in the synagogue and being *astonished* by his words, the crowd could not get past their narrow view of who Jesus was – *the carpenter, the son of Mary*.

So when Mark says, *they took offense at him*, he is emphasizing just how narrow-minded and dismissive they acted. Jesus is with *his own kin*, in his native place – and they are simply too proud to be taught. They are too full of their own preconceived notions about *the son of Mary* to be able to hear anything he said.

To put it another way, their minds are already made up about him. In fact, they act insulted that one of their own – a carpenter at that – could teach them. They are not only condescending in their response to Jesus, they are arrogant and disrespectful. They are closed – in mind and heart – to the presence of God among them

But before we let ourselves get too puffed up by what “they” did, let us take stock of how “we” respond to Jesus.

Faith requires that we open ourselves – that we allow our mind and our heart to receive whatever God has in mind for us in the present moment. In order to hear the Good News and recognize Jesus in our day-to-day, we must be willing to: be wrong, be surprised, be converted, be right, be successful, be hurt, be vulnerable, be awed, be disciplined, be loved.

Jesus was *not able to perform any mighty deeds there* because they were not open, not even a crack. And faith always requires our consent. A well-known phrase that says, “Bless her (or him), change me,” can help us be open to God in the midst of facing a challenging person or situation.

Bless the other, Lord, and change me! An open heart such as this is a willing heart, and that “yes” is what God needs most from us today.

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