

FEBRUARY

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**YEAR C
WEEKDAYS I**

Friday, February 1, 2019

(Lec. 321)

1) Hebrews 10:32-39

2) Mark 4:26-34

Gospel related: CCC 546

FRIDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: *This is how it is with the Kingdom of God.*

Today's Gospel includes two parables, both about how the kingdom of God works. As with most of the stories Jesus tells, today's parables appear to be simple, but are deeper and more complex than they seem initially. While we think we are hearing an explanation of a natural growing process, we really are getting a lesson in the greatness and mystery of God.

And how great and mysterious – and yet able to be known and loved – is God! God designed the world such that the seed planted in the ground one day emerges and grows into a plant plentiful enough to harvest. And the tiny mustard seed grows to be a large tree. Today, we understand more about how a seed germinates and why and how it grows. But there is still mystery in the process. And, more to the point, in the end it is still by the will of God that the process works.

This is how it is with the Kingdom of God. Seeds are sown in the world or in our individual hearts, and God does the rest. It is not something we have much control over, but it is something we can participate in by being willing to plant seeds in other people, and responding when new seeds of faith are planted in us. When we live as Jesus taught, and acknowledge him as our Savior, we are doing both.

This is *how it is with the Kingdom of God.* The small mustard seed, once it is sown, springs up and becomes remarkably large. This is the Church. It grew from a small group of disciples to a body of Christ containing billions of members.

This is us. We grew from our baptism into people who consciously made Jesus, and the kingdom, a large part of our lives. We embrace this largesse here in the Mass, where we continue to be fed and continue to grow. Where we, too, can go into the world and provide relief – shade – to others through our being-in-Christ.

As the author of Hebrews says today, *We are not among those who draw back and perish, but among those who have faith and will possess life.* Let us give thanks for that, for this is how it is in the kingdom of God.

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Saturday, February 2, 2019
(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: Jesus is the life and light of God in a world darkened by sin and death.

The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord is the fortieth day after Christmas. The Presentation is the fourth joyful mystery of the rosary, and it is a Feast of Light and blessing of candles as Jesus, the one true Light, is brought to the Temple in Jerusalem for the first time.

The Jewish Temple was the *Shekinah* in Hebrew, the dwelling place of God. Nowhere on earth would Jesus feel closer to God and to heaven than when he was in his Father's house. Today marks the first of many visits he would make there during his brief thirty-three years on the earth. He is brought to the Temple in fulfillment of the law. Mary and Joseph are truly "people of the book" who do everything the law requires in caring for their child, even bringing with them the customary sacrifice of two pigeons.

Little did they know they would encounter a welcoming committee when they arrived. Simeon and Anna had waited there, praying for decades that they might live long enough to behold the Savior with their own eyes. With complete confidence, Simeon is ready to die because he knows that heaven is on the way thanks to this holy child.

The Blessed Mother is given a warning that her child will suffer and that her heart will be pierced by a sword because of the rejection he will experience. Mary meets all this news with the same faith with which she received Gabriel at the Annunciation. To her, this is all God's plan and he will see his will fulfilled, by and through her Son.

Jesus is the life and light of God in a world darkened by sin and death. He is for us a light at the end of the tunnel, beckoning us to live in the light and to be children of light. In him there is no darkness. Today, candles are blessed, that they might radiate the Light of Christ and help us to keep our eyes fixed on the heavens, remembering the day when Christ came as a Child, and looking to that day when he will come again as our King.

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2019

(Lec. 72)

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

Gospel related: CCC 436, 1286

**FOURTH SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: The most excellent of spiritual gifts is love.

Today, the first reading and the Gospel focus on the gift of prophecy given to both Jeremiah and Jesus to bring a particular message from God to the people. Perhaps prophecy is one of the most difficult gifts to receive from God, because, as we can see from the readings, good prophets are not always welcome, either in their native place, as Jesus discovered, or in places that receive difficult or challenging messages from God. But while prophets might not receive accolades from the people to whom they are sent, they do receive the assurance that God is with them to give them the strength and courage they need in their mission.

This assurance is implicit in our Rite of Baptism. By our baptism, we are anointed priest, prophet and king. That is our mission; these are the roles we have in evangelizing the world. Saint Paul gives us some insight into this. No matter what other gifts we might have, we are called to use them and the opportunities God gives us in love – for God and good of others, and for the salvation of the world. The kind of love that Paul calls us to is challenging; it is not meant simply to enrich us, make us feel good or inflate our egos. It is meant to benefit the other, to focus on what's best for the other person.

This is our challenge as Christians: to couch everything we do, all the spiritual gifts we bring to the Church, to our families or to our workplaces, with the gift of love, of practical concern for the benefit of others. As we go about the rest of our week, let us ask God for the special spiritual gift of love to accompany everything we do.

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Monday, February 4, 2019
(Lec. 323)

- 1) Hebrews 11:32-40
- 2) Mark 5:1-20

MONDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Let us give thanks to the Lord for the mercy he has shown us.

In today's Gospel, Jesus journeys to the other side of the Sea of Galilee into the land of the Gentiles. He is met on the shore by a man with an unclean spirit, who immediately recognizes Jesus as *Son of the Most High God*. The man prostrates himself before Jesus in a posture of homage. This unclean spirit recognizes the superior power of Jesus, and begs to be left alone. When Jesus commands the unclean spirit to come out of the man, it switches tactics and tries to negotiate.

The unclean spirit calls itself "Legion," because there are many of them. Jesus agrees to cast them out of the man and allow them to enter a nearby herd of swine, which immediately stampeded down a steep bank and drown in the sea. We can imagine their squeals and grunts and feel the earth shake as they thunder toward the sea.

The Gospel vividly makes clear that the Enemy is real – and dangerous. While possessed, the man cuts himself with stones. The locals have tried to restrain the man to prevent him from harming himself (and them), but the demons who possess him are so powerful that they easily break the shackles. The community is powerless. But as much as they feared the possessed man, they seem to fear Jesus even more. There is a price to be paid for freedom – the loss of the swine, the fear of the unknown power of Christ in their midst. They beg Jesus, their deliverer, to depart from them. They want their lives to return to normal.

When we are under the power of sin, we hurt not only ourselves, but those around us. Christ alone can deliver us in the sacrament of reconciliation. But, like the local population in this story, we often long to return to our previous life, to forget about God, putting him away until we find ourselves needing him again. We should remember the words of Jesus to the man, now cured, who wishes to follow him: *Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you*. Let us constantly keep in mind the power of God, and be grateful for the mercy he has shown us.

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Tuesday, February 5, 2019
(Lec. 324)

- 1) Hebrews 12:1-4
- 2) Mark 5:21-43

TUESDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saint Agatha,
Virgin and Martyr)

Gospel related: CCC 548, 994, 1504, 2616

FOCUS: Faith in Jesus enables us to rise again in him and have eternal life.

In today's Gospel, we hear of two individuals who encounter Jesus in their sickness and affliction. First is a young child, twelve years old, who is dying. She is the daughter of a synagogue official, Jairus, who pleads for her: *My daughter is at the point of death. Please, come lay your hands on her that she may get well and live.* Before Jesus can get to Jairus' daughter, however, he encounters a woman who has been suffering for twelve years. The Gospel describes her as having *suffered greatly at the hands of many doctors and had spent all that she had. Yet she was not helped but only grew worse.* Both the girl and the woman are healed by Jesus.

Standing in contrast to these two individuals are the crowds. In their lack of faith, they do not understand what is possible. The girl is dead, nothing can be done. They lack faith. They ridicule Jesus. As such, there is nothing that Jesus can do to or for them. And unless they eventually open their ears and their hearts to his message, and have faith, they will not receive the promise of the Good News.

Here we do well to listen to Jesus Christ, who is asking us to have faith. Jesus consistently honors the trust of those who seek healing and have faith in him. In Jesus we see the example of one who faces death and wins. Faith in Jesus enables us to rise again in him and have eternal life.

We are here because we have faith. We have faith in the one who suffered, died and rose again – and is now here present with us. We have faith that by encountering him in word and sacrament, we, too, will be healed of whatever would lead us to death. So let us allow Jesus to heal us, as he did the girl and the woman, that we may go forth and proclaim the Good News of salvation to those who may not yet believe.

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Wednesday, February 6, 2019
(Lec. 325)

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

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

Gospel related: CCC 500, 699, 2610 CSDC 259

FOCUS: Like a loving Father, God disciplines his children but never wavers in his fidelity.

Life is full of struggles and trials – there is no getting away from them. They are part of the lived experience and proof of our mortality and humanity. Yet how we, as Christians, respond to them is equally proof of our faith. The writer of Hebrews was clearly aware of this reality in the life of his community. He knew that it was struggling from all sides – from their own sinful inclinations to the struggles and threats of apostasy and persecution. How would it respond to and resist these trials? Two thousand years later, this question is as valid for us as it was for the early Church: how do we respond to moments of trial and difficulty?

The writer invites his community to see them as disciplines, or teaching moments, from God. God does not create evil and tragedy, but he allows it to exist. And, like a loving parent, God uses these moments of struggle to help us examine the depth of our faith and to strengthen our resolve and our commitment. He never deserts the faithful, but seeks to bring about the peaceful fruit of righteousness and to train us in the way of the Gospel. That way, we are not only strengthened in our resolve but we are a source of encouragement for others.

In many ways, we should not be surprised, for even Jesus faced uphill battles and difficulties. Today's Gospel tells of one of those trials. Jesus, at home with his own, is faced with their doubts and opposition. As the old adage says, *familiarity breeds contempt*. Those in his native place thought they knew Jesus and could not move beyond that knowledge. How could the carpenter's son be so mighty in word and deed? So great were their doubts and their contempt that he was unable to share with them the Good News.

As believers, we are never exempt from life's trials. Throughout the centuries the great and lowly, the famous and the unknown, have endured bravely life's trials and remained faithful to the Lord. Today we celebrate Saint Paul Miki and Companions, who in 1597 made the ultimate sacrifice at Nagasaki. They endured persecution and remained faithful to Christ – even to the point of shedding their blood. They lived our first reading: they struggled against sin, treated life's trials as a cause for joy, encouraged one another and forgave their enemies. May we do likewise!

Thursday, February 7, 2019

(Lec. 326)

1) Hebrews 12:18-19, 21-24

2) Mark 6:7-13

Gospel related: CCC 765, 1506, 1511, 1673

THURSDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: As we ponder the call and mission of the Twelve, we can reflect on our own unique call to follow Christ.

When we prepare for a long journey, or even just one day, what do we bring? Snacks, a wallet, a filled-backpack, Band-Aids, perhaps?

But doesn't it matter where we are going, or what we will do?

In the Gospel, Jesus begins with what the disciples will bring. He tells them to *take nothing for the journey ... no food, no sack, no money*. Maybe they already know what they will do – preach the Gospel – but where they are going hardly seems to factor in.

Jesus, once again, surprises. He doesn't tell them who, what, where and why. He starts with *how*. Essentially, they will be totally dependent on God's providence. Their lives must revolve completely around God. The grace of God is *how* they will prosper. They may preach repentance, anoint or cure, but the power of God is *how* it will happen. If they find food, shelter or generosity, the providence of God is how it will come about. Bringing nothing makes clear to them – and everyone else – that everything the disciples have comes from God whom they trust. There is a power in their poverty – of both spirit and possessions.

When the Twelve were called by Jesus, they admirably set aside everything to follow him. However, they were not completely ready for ministry – they had much still to learn. But they had spent time with Jesus and watched and listened. This was enough to begin. The example of the Apostles teaches us that one does not have to be fully trained or morally impeccable to be called to ministry. In fact, by our baptism, we have already been called to participate in Christ's mission. Furthermore, the act of ministry along our Christian journey is an essential part of our human growth and formation. So not having life "all figured out" cannot be an excuse for not sharing our faith and helping others. Rather, it is merely our necessary point of entry.

With Christ as our inspiration, our teacher, our guide and our hope, let us not fear what we do not have, but, rather, rejoice in what we do have – a God who has loved his people throughout the ages. Let us remember to be mindful to do what we say at the conclusion of the Mass, "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord."

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Friday, February 8, 2019
(Lec. 327)

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

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

Gospel related: CCC 523

FOCUS: *The Lord is my helper, and I will not be afraid.*

John the Baptist, already living a life fully dedicated to the service of God, would surely have known and been comforted by the verses quoted from Deuteronomy and the Psalms: *I will never forsake you or abandon you*, and *The Lord is my helper, and I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?* How often may he have recited these verses during his imprisonment?

To have such faith, even in the face of persecution and danger of death, is a gift. It is a gift that comes from being part of the body of Christ, heir to the promises of God from the beginning – *I will never forsake you or abandon you* – and a gift that grows and gets stronger with attention and cultivation.

This is the message of the Letter to the Hebrews we hear today: because we are part of the body of Christ, let us live as that membership demands: honoring commandments, living in brotherly love, imitating others in faith and relying on Jesus Christ, who *is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*

This description of Jesus is foundational to our faith. In speaking of Jesus, it is also speaking of God, and the Holy Spirit – the unchanging, immutable God who has always been with us; is always present to us; and will never abandon us. Nowhere in this constantly changing, shifting world do we find such constancy, such certainty and such love. Only in God are we righteous, as John the Baptist was; and freed from the imprisonment of the temporal things of this world.

King Herod feared John, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man, but he did not fear – in this case, know and have wisdom about – God. And so he gave in to the temptations, sin and vices before him. He was afraid of losing face and losing his reputation, and so he gave in to the demands of his wife and daughter. He was afraid, because the Lord was *not* his helper.

This is an important contrast for us to see. Are we more of a John the Baptist, fearlessly following God and telling the truth, even when others don't want to hear it? Or are we more of a King Herod, acting unjustly and wanting to impress others? Are we Herodias, filled with anger toward those who speak the truth? Or are we John's disciples, who act with compassion toward others?

Most likely, because we are sinners who are not perfect, we each are a combination of these traits. But through prayer and sacrament, we receive the grace to cultivate the faith we have been given. And we, too, can be more like John than Herod. We can also repent and be forgiven when we fail – and strengthen ourselves even more.

The Letter to the Hebrews recommends we remember the holy people in our lives and to imitate their faith. Consider: the same God who guided John the Baptist and Paul to sainthood is the same God who works in the lives of those we love, and he is the same God who continues to move in our own lives as long as we are open to him.

As we prepare our altar table for the Eucharistic sacrifice, let us pray that the Holy Spirit may show us ways to emulate these teachers of faith, and practice love for one another as the words to the Hebrews instruct.

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Saturday, February 9, 2019
(Lec. 328)

- 1) Hebrews 13:15-17, 20-21
- 2) Mark 6:30-34

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

FOCUS: Cultivate an understanding heart with focus, discipline and commitment.

May the God of peace ... furnish you with all that is good, that you may do his will. This is the loving challenge the author of Hebrews offers his readers. So our question today is: When we encounter God in prayer, are we asking for the grace we need to do his will or are we more focused on what we want?

Accepting God's will takes hard work and a lot of practice. It is also very freeing and makes life much more manageable. Quality time for prayer and contemplation are essential in carrying out this mandate to do the Father's will.

Mark tells us that the Apostles were out and about doing good things in Jesus' name. The Lord's response to them was to come away and rest. To have the resilience a faithful disciple needs in carrying out God's plan for us, we need to spiritually rest from time to time. That is why if we are a smart disciple we take quality time to pray, to read the Scriptures and to worship.

Perhaps we have never thought of our coming together for Mass as taking the time to spiritually rest, but when we stop and think about it, isn't that a good reason to be here entering into this holy encounter with our God? This is our oasis, our quiet place where we come not to escape the world, but to prepare ourselves to embrace the world.

Our job as a disciple of Jesus is to bring the love of God into the lives we encounter each day. These encounters happen within our homes, places of work and in the various social settings we find ourselves in over the course of the day or week.

We all know what happens when we do not get enough rest, proper nutrition or social interaction. We get run down, grouchy and dispirited. The same is true when we do not take the Lord's advice to rest with him. We become spiritually cranky inside.

In order to be effective disciples, we need to be spiritually happy and energized disciples. Like anything important in our lives this takes focus, discipline and commitment. God has promised us that what we sow will be returned to us in abundance. He also told us those who sow sparingly will reap sparingly. The choice is always ours to make.

Being here today says we have chosen to continue our efforts in cultivating generous spirits committed to doing the Father's will. So as we prepare for the transforming power of the Eucharist, let us be open to where that transformation may take us.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2019

(Lec. 75)

- 1) Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8
- 2) 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 or 15:3-8, 11
- 3) Luke 5:1-11

Gospel related: CCC 208

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus invites us to follow him, little by little. With his grace we will become faithful disciples.

Looking back at our life, we may recognize a particular person or specific experience that caused us to make a significant change or to go in a different direction than we would have otherwise. Hopefully, the change was good; hopefully it caused us to think bigger, do better things, use our talents in ways that we didn't imagine possible.

This is what happens in today's readings. Isaiah is called by God to be his prophet. In the beginning, however, Isaiah does not feel worthy to be in God's presence, saying, *I am doomed!* But by the end of the reading, Isaiah is ready; *Here I am*, he says, *send me*.

It is a similar experience for Simon in today's Gospel. In the beginning, Simon and his companions are getting out of their boats and washing their nets, finished for the night. Yet by the end, everything has changed. The same fishermen have abandoned their boats, left everything and followed Jesus. What a turnaround!

It is interesting to note how this happened. It doesn't start with Jesus asking Simon to follow him. Rather, Jesus begins with something basic, something that Peter can do with relative ease: *Put out a short distance*. Now this may be inconvenient, especially since Simon has been fishing all night, is probably tired and has just finished. But it is doable. Simon takes the first step – he gets back in the boat, puts out a short distance, and in the process is able to hear the Master of all masters speak and teach.

Jesus has a second step: *Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch*. Now this is getting much more inconvenient. One can imagine Simon's thoughts, "I really didn't want to come out here at all, but I agreed to a short distance. Now you want me to go into deep water?"

Master, Simon says, *we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing*. Nevertheless, he agrees, and they catch so many fish that the nets are tearing.

Simon is astonished. By the time they return to shore, the men who had been finishing their work are now beginning *new* work. They leave everything and follow Jesus.

This encounter applies to our lives as well. Jesus doesn't necessarily ask us to leave everything right away. Sometimes he comes to us in ways that we can accept, bit by bit. Go just a little further. OK, we do. Then, like Simon on the boat, we hear something new, something different.

Go a little further. "I'm not so sure Lord, I've tried that so many times. But at your command I will."

And this time things are different, because the work is not our own, but the Lord's. *We* have worked, we have worked *hard*, and have caught nothing. Our efforts, alone, are insufficient. But at the command of the Lord, at the *Lord's* initiative, with *his* presence, our work is productive,

fruitful, overflowing. Paul says in the second reading that he has *toiled harder* than any, but he clarifies: *not I, however, but the grace of God that is with me.*

Jesus will meet us where we are. Little by little, he will invite us to take the next step toward becoming faithful disciples. Our efforts without him will fail. We may work hard, but our “catch” will be minimal to nothing. With the Lord, however, saying yes little by little, our lives will change. Our efforts will bear fruit. Our “catch” will be overflowing.

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Monday, February 11, 2019
(Lec. 329)

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

Gospel related: CCC 1504

MONDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.
Our Lady of Lourdes)

FOCUS: The unity of Creation and Redemption are expressions of God's merciful love.

Why is it that the Church sets before us the Genesis creation account of the first four days and the healing ministry of Jesus? Because the same Spirit that brooded over the dark abyss, the *formless wasteland*, of the beginning, this same wind was breathing in the new creation of Jesus' healing ministry. In the first creation, there is a recurring pattern that brings order out of the chaos of primal beginnings. God speaks, God says, *Let there be*, and it comes into being, and God *saw how good it was*. Things come into being out of nothing because of God's creative word. There is a foundational affirmation of the goodness of created beings, of creaturely existence.

The question emerges, if God is good, and creation is good, where does evil come from? This is the classic formulation of "the problem of evil." The original goodness of creation has been wounded, injured, broken. Sickness, death, disorder, chaos, darkness – in a word, evil – is now part of our experience of the world. God is good. Creation is still good, the affirmation of creaturely existence still stands, but we are in need of healing. The good God continues to reach out to us in the person and ministry of Jesus, to heal the ill of sin, to restore what is broken and fragmented, to make us whole.

People flock to Jesus because they experience in his person and his teaching the restorative power of a new creation where we can once again say, as in the beginning, "behold it is good." Mark tells us that people *scurried about the surrounding country* and began to bring the sick to Jesus. We have here a fine example of people thinking not of themselves, but of their broken brothers and sisters, carrying them on stretchers over rough country to wherever they heard Jesus was.

So restorative and healing was the presence of Jesus that they *begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak; and as many as touched it were healed*. Other translations speak of the "fringe of his garment." What is meant here is the "tzitzit," the many sacred woven threads that hang from a Jewish prayer shawl. If only we could touch the prayer shawl of Jesus, we will be made whole. What a powerful hunger for wholeness, for a restored, elevated new creation. May we approach Jesus with this same confidence in the healing power of his person and his prayer, and enter into this new creation.

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Tuesday, February 12, 2019
(Lec. 330)

1) Genesis 1:20–2:4a

2) Mark 7:1-13

Gospel related: CCC 581, 2196, 2218, 2247

TUESDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: God has called us to love him with all our hearts.

It is probably safe to say that every person here has been told to wash his or her hands before we eat. Most of us who are adults most likely have told children to do the same. Washing is an important part of staying healthy. We're taught to keep our hands washed especially when coming in from outside, and with extra precautions during flu season. This helps prevent illness and disease.

God also gave the ancient Israelites a set of guidelines for spiritually healthy living, including standards for the food they were to eat, as well as instructions for washing before meals and before ceremonies at the Temple. These laws revealed God's involvement in every detail of their daily lives. They enabled the Israelites to grow in relationship with God and *be holy as He is holy* (cf. Leviticus 19:2).

Looking at our Gospel reading, the Pharisees had taken the purification of cups, jugs, kettles and other items to new heights of awareness, concentrating on the process more than the intended result. The key word is process. They were appalled to see the disciples eating without washing their hands. They became overly concentrated on the external aspects of the cleansing ritual while ignoring its deeper spiritual meaning – the purification and cleansing of the heart from sin. They angrily confronted Jesus about this perceived neglect, asking him why his disciples didn't follow the traditions of their ancestors.

Instead of agreeing that the disciples were a bit sloppy, Jesus chastised the Pharisees for overdoing the ceremonial cleaning. Did he do that in order to overturn that practice, just to be contradictory and cause chaos? Of course not. There is a good lesson to be learned here: The Pharisees were merely going through the ritualistic motions of washing, but not remaining open to God's call to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. They followed all the rules but neglected the purpose of the cleansing ritual, which was to be symbolic of having clean hearts before God.

This inability to recognize the deeper spiritual meanings of our rituals is not only a problem experienced by the Pharisees in the time of Jesus. Jesus used this as a teachable moment for us all. As Catholics, we have the beautiful liturgy our early Church Fathers gave us as modeled by Jesus at the Last Supper. It is divinely inspired to bring us closer to our Lord. Do we just go through the motions of the sacraments without paying attention to God's invitation of love? Do we sometimes pay more attention to the external ritual details of the Mass rather than on the ways God comes to meet us in these sacred mysteries?

It is God's unfathomable love for us which is why we are really here. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was the ultimate gift. As we prepare to receive the Eucharist, let's focus upon that profound love he has for us. Then, let us have thankful hearts which focus upon that price he paid to redeem us.

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Wednesday, February 13, 2019
(Lec. 331)

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

Gospel related: CCC 574, 582, 1764

WEDNESDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus reminds us that it is the state of our hearts – the true source of our actions – which determines our holiness.

In today's Gospel, Jesus seems to take a rather base approach to making his point that all foods are clean – talking about eating, digesting and, let's just put it bluntly, going to the bathroom. And we might be tempted to be a bit dismissive about his re-interpretation of dietary laws since they are not something we ourselves observe. Sure, we do have some rules about eating – fasting before receiving Communion and in Lent we fast and abstain from meat – but these are fairly minimal by comparison.

But of course, there's more to Jesus' point about food and eating. Observing dietary laws was one external way to practice your faith and show that you were "a good Jew," just as we have our own "external" Catholic practices: coming to Mass, praying, supporting the work of the Church, engaging in works of mercy, to name a few. But even though these are important, Jesus reminds us that these practices don't mean much when the heart that lies within is mired in what's truly foul, namely, *evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly.*

This is a pretty heavy-handed list. And we could go through each action and reflect on how it applies to us – what are the evil and unkind thoughts we secretly harbor about other people? How have we slain someone with harsh and belittling words? How have we allowed our eyes and hands to linger and stray where we know they shouldn't? Yes, we could carefully examine our conscience in light of the list and find ourselves humbled and disheartened.

But if we did let ourselves be cast down, we would be missing the good news that is here to lift us up. In the first reading, we are reminded of what it is that stirs the human heart: it is the very breath of God that animates us and gives us life. And although we lost this original grace and oneness with God in the fall, Jesus' saving work has restored what was lost.

Through baptism, we have been freed from the darkness of sin and been given the grace to act and think in the Christ-like way to which we are called. And in the Eucharist in which we are about to share, the Lord himself comes to us to banish any remaining shadow from those venial sins and give us a new start in the Christian life. Let us then come to him with hearts that are open to this restoration.

* * *

Thursday, February 14, 2019
(Lec. 332)

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

THURSDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saints Cyril, Monk,
and Methodius,
Bishop)

Gospel related: CCC 2616

FOCUS: God does not put limits on his healing. He is generous and abundant in his gifts.

Mark's Gospel of the Syrophenician woman meeting Jesus is unique. It's not the usual compassionate and merciful Jesus; instead he seems cold, even harsh. Out of Israel and in the district of Tyre, Jesus is confronted by the woman. Tyre was not just a pagan city but a bitter enemy of the Jews. Clearly, this woman must have heard of his fame and had come to ask a big favor for her daughter.

One has to wonder if the account is complete – might there be more hidden in the text? We know that until now, Jesus' mission seemed focused solely on the Jewish people – *the children* who are true heirs to mission. Why, then, has he come to Tyre and how has this woman come to know of his presence? Frequently, Mark uses this desire for anonymity as a device for discovery, thereby heightening the power and mystical presence of Jesus.

On the face of it, the encounter begins like any other healing: the woman meets Jesus, falls at his feet and makes her request. But then the story breaks off and continues with a lively debate over the appropriateness of healing a pagan Gentile. Jesus uses the debate to illustrate the progress of the Good News: just as children are fed before the pets, so, too, the Gospel is offered to Israel before the Gentiles. By not allowing Jesus' initial rebuke to deter her, the woman shows humility and persevering insistence. Her faith in the face of adversity serves as a model of our own prayer to the heavenly Father.

It's a Gospel where boundaries are crossed and God's healing is manifest. Jesus crosses the boundaries between Israel and the pagan world; the woman crosses the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, male and female. In doing so, Jesus reveals that his mission is not territorial, but for all nations. Initially referring to the non-Jews as *dogs*, his dialogue with the woman helps us understand that they are more like *house puppies*, fed by the children and yet part of the family.

As we celebrate Saints Cyril and Methodius and their outreach to the Slavic nations, we celebrate the universality of God's salvation. What was once the preserve of one people is now open to all nations – God's love, healing and presence is so abundant that it cannot be contained within ethnic or national borders. God has created us in his image and likeness, and desires to share his life with all people.

* * *

Friday, February 15, 2019
(Lec. 333)

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

Gospel related: CCC 1151, 1504

FRIDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Trust in God, even in the midst of uncertainty.

The story of Adam and Eve is one we have heard so often, it can be tempting to scan through the words without really letting them sink in. But if we go back through the Genesis account of the Fall, putting ourselves in Adam and Eve's shoes, we may gain new insights.

Adam and Eve had everything. They lived in a garden paradise that met all their needs, and they even walked with God. Then the serpent – the devil – came along and planted a different sort of seed: the seed of doubt. This deception led Adam and Eve to lose trust in the very God who made them.

First, he asks Eve if God told them they could not eat of any tree in the garden, suggesting that God's rules are too restrictive. While Eve corrects him, she also adds a false detail: that God had forbidden them from even touching the tree. The serpent continues by telling the couple that they will not die, but rather *be like gods who know what is good and what is evil*.

Before this, our first parents were as innocent as children. They had only known good. But when they disobeyed God, that all changed. Sin, spiritual death and mortality were all brought into the world.

How often do we, like Adam and Eve, look at all the wonderful things God has given us and desire more? How often do we fall into the trap of believing that God's commandments are unnecessary restrictions, rather than rules for our own good? How often do we let a distrusting thought fester until it becomes a sinful action? We may not live in the Garden of Eden, but we have all experienced the same test.

In the Gospel, people brought a deaf man with a speech impediment to Jesus, begging the Lord to *lay his hand on him*. Instead, Jesus took the man away from the crowd. Once they are alone, he puts his finger into the man's ears, spits and touches his tongue. This all may seem like strange behavior, but Mark does not mention anyone protesting.

If we were in today's Gospel reading, would we have trusted in Jesus to do what was best for the man? Or would we have questioned why Jesus wasn't acting the way we expected? Would we have trusted him?

Today, let's ask ourselves where we fall into the same trap as our first parents, and pray for the grace to continue trusting in God, especially when we don't understand what God is doing.

* * *

Saturday, February 16, 2019
(Lec. 334)

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

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

Gospel related: CCC 1329

FOCUS: The work of human hands underlines the dignity of the Church's communion with God.

Saturday is the first day of the weekend. Together with Sunday, they are two days when many people do not have to work. It is a time to relax, to catch up on other responsibilities and to be with loved ones. But let us look at how our readings today shape our vision of the importance of work.

In the Creation story from our first reading, the Lord God tells the man, *In toil shall you eat [the ground's] yield all the days of your life . . . By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat.* Many generations later, Jesus takes what little bread his disciples have, gives thanks, breaks the bread and gives it to his disciples to feed those who hunger. And in our present time, before the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest prays, "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands." Without work, there would not be any food for us to eat. Without work, we would not be alive.

Saint John Paul the Second contemplated the importance of work in his 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens*. In it, he speaks of the dignity in work, the rights of workers and elements for a spirituality of work. He reflects: "the knowledge that by means of work man shares in the work of creation constitutes the most profound motive for undertaking it in various sectors." And we know from Catholic social teaching that people always take priority over products, profits and production systems. Wages should be fair and working conditions ought to be safe. No one should be forced into doing work, especially if it is indecent or immoral. Any business that does not enhance its workers and serve the common good is a moral failure, no matter how healthy its financial bottom line appears.

After taking the bread from the disciples, Jesus gave thanks. The Gospel writer Mark does not say who Jesus gave thanks to. Perhaps he gave thanks to both God the Father and to the people who had provided the bread. It certainly would be fitting for Jesus to thank those who made the bread. Anyone who works ought to be appreciated for the work that they do. And hopefully, all workers can take pride in the work that they do.

As we continue with this celebration, let us be mindful of all the work of human hands, and remember all those hands who work for the common good. Above all, let us remember that it is God's work in us and for us through his son, Jesus Christ, which enables us to consecrate our daily work and glorify his name.

* * *

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2019

(Lec. 78)

- 1) Jeremiah 17:5-8
- 2) 1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20
- 3) Luke 6:17, 20-26

Gospel related: CCC 2444, 2546, 2547 CSDC 325

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: *Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is in the Lord.*

Don't we all sometimes wonder when we see someone behave a certain way, "What, don't they know that's not right?" Or, "Why didn't they know better?" We witness so many actions and decisions that are quite contrary to what we expect of people, or that go against what we know to be right and wrong.

The catechism tells us, "Every institution is inspired, at least implicitly, by a vision of man and his destiny, from which it derives the point of reference for its judgment, its hierarchy of values, its line of conduct" (2244). There are rules for living properly in the world. We have federal laws and state regulations. But these are external rules. These rules do not form us. They can show some things, but it is from God that we properly learn how to act in the world. God's instructions show us how we can be our best selves.

How does God guide us? Listen to the words of Jesus in the Gospel reading from Luke today. This is a great place to start.

The beatitudes are the heart of Jesus' preaching. They tell us to love our enemies and love our neighbor. At the core of the sermon is Jesus' teaching on love. This love is characterized by forgiveness and generosity. These are characteristic of the Christian life. They offer us hope in the midst of trials and tests. And they show us what is already ours by virtue of our salvation through Christ. They help us to see the fullness of our lives as God designs it. According to the catechism, "The Beatitudes respond to the natural desire for happiness. This desire is of divine origin: God has placed it in the human heart in order to draw man to the One who alone can fulfill it" (1718).

Just as there are consequences to disobeying rules and laws in our society, so, too, there are negative repercussions from straying from God's vision of human happiness. Unlike Matthew's Gospel, Luke gives four "woes" after his description of the beatitudes. These woes are reminiscent of the cries of impending distress used by the Old Testament prophets. Luke depicts Jesus as fulfilling the same prophetic role to warn that disaster comes upon those whose worldly comfort and prosperity has turned them away from God and fidelity to the demands of his covenant. The woes remind us that satisfaction in worldly wealth and prestige can give us a false sense of security and lead us to overlook our radical dependence on God's mercy.

Today, let us heed God's warnings about the dangers of a life lived apart from his grace, and follow the path of blessing and human flourishing he has chartered for us in the beatitudes.

* * *

Monday, February 18, 2019
(Lec. 335)

- 1) Genesis 4:1-15, 25
- 2) Mark 8:11-13

MONDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: The Gospels provide us with practical life-lessons if we choose to see them.

If you ever wondered if Jesus really felt things the way we feel them, today's short Gospel leaves no doubt – *He sighed from the depth of his spirit*. Nothing could say frustration in a more human way than this statement.

Why was he so upset that the Pharisees wanted him to show a sign of God's favor? We cannot know for sure, but it would make sense that Jesus would wonder why all the cures and miracle feedings and raising the dead, as well as the testimony of John the Baptist, would not have been enough to satisfy them. It was obvious that there was nothing Jesus could say or do to convince them that he was the long-awaited Messiah.

There was no point in arguing. Jesus left the area and went back to teaching and ministering to people. He did not have to prove anything to the religious leaders. The people saw what he was able to accomplish and knew it originated in the love God the Father had for them. They needed no sign separate and apart from the words and actions of Jesus.

Today's Gospel can have several lessons for us. It tells us that looking for signs that God hears our prayers is a waste of time. He knows before we ever ask what we need. He provides for us generously, so we can accept that and be grateful for all he does for us.

We also can learn that when we are in an impossible situation, with people who refuse to be reasonable, we can walk away. We do not have to convince them we are right, we just need to get away and continue doing what God wants us to do. Such a situation may even help us clarify in our own minds what we are trying to accomplish or what we truly believe.

Another lesson we might learn from this incident is that *we* are sometimes the Pharisees. Maybe it is *we* who are refusing to see the obvious, and stubbornly denying what is right in front of our faces. Such lessons may not seem to impact our relationship with God directly, but they do make us better human beings and help us sustain better relationships with others. And these things *do* impact our relationship with God.

It is this sort of introspection that helps us choose more deliberately to follow Jesus, and to make our lives reflect his example and his teaching. Let us be grateful today for the many life-lessons the Gospels provide for us, and pray that we may see them and apply them faithfully to our own lives.

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Tuesday, February 19, 2019
(Lec. 336)

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

2) Mark 8:14-21

Gospel related: CCC 1329

TUESDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: All shall be well.

You can hear the profound frustration inherent in Jesus' words: *Do you have eyes and not see, ears and not hear? And do you not remember, when I ...?* Jesus was on a boat with his closest friends, his disciples, the very people who had been listening to Jesus and witnessing with their own eyes his marvelous deeds. Yet not only do they misunderstand what Jesus is saying to them, they also seem to be worrying about something as inconsequential as food. In spite of the countless miracles Jesus has already performed in their presence, the Lord has to point out – again – the obvious. He has to once more remind them of the miracles they had already experienced: *Do you not remember, when I...?*

The verb “remember” comes from the Latin *rememorari*, meaning “to be mindful of.” As an action, to remember requires that we literally bring a memory to mind, that we recall a past event or moment in order for us to become aware, and to gain a fuller understanding. When we remember, we make an intentional and deliberate step to better understand or call to mind in order to gain a fuller picture – to re-member, to become whole. And often, when we remember in order to pass on what is in our mind, the memory is even associated with emotions that are important to us.

We do this every day and all the time. We remember important work information. We remember driving directions. We remember the prayers at Mass. We remember stories from our family's history, and we tell them to our children and grandchildren. We remember dates, data, numbers, words, lyrics and moments.

Yet when it comes to God, we often act like the grumbling Israelites in the desert, forgetting from one event to the next that it was the Lord who took great care to get us here. Rather than remember how God provided what we needed the last time we were anxious about the future or worried about our needs, we forget to remember.

To remember requires an active participation in the *now* that the Apostles lacked in today's Gospel story. But it is memory that makes the *now* fully inhabitable. Memory provides us with a lens through which we can interpret the present. It becomes a compass in discerning what direction we are to take next.

As Julian of Norwich noted, “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.” Why? Because God was with us in the past, is with us in the present, and therefore will be in the future – no matter what that may be.

* * *

Wednesday, February 20, 2019
(Lec. 337)

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

Gospel related: CCC 699, 1151, 1504

WEDNESDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus can bring our vision into focus, allowing us to grow in faith.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark opens with Jesus arriving in Bethsaida. It is in this town that the disciples bring him a blind man and plead with him just to touch him. Notice they are not asking for a dramatic display, but a simple touch. Jesus does not disappoint. He takes the blind man outside, puts spittle on his eyes, lays his hands on him and then questions him: *Do you see anything?* As the man describes what we would consider an incomplete cure, Jesus again puts his hands on him and the deed is done.

There are a few layers of meaning we can draw from this passage. First, we can see the healing power of God. In addition, we can see the revelation that Jesus loves and responds to the blind man. Remember, Jesus does not reveal his power for self-aggrandizement or to be showy. He genuinely loves and cares for those who seek him and ask for his help. Next, it is interesting that he uses ordinary things – spittle, and personal touch – to heal. We can see his divine power working through his human nature.

In considering this passage, we might also extend the physical healing of the blind man to reflect our own spiritual blindness. What is spiritual blindness? Perhaps our own vision is clouded like the man's in this passage, preventing us from seeing Christ clearly. Do I go through my day as if Christ does not exist? As if he did not die on the cross so that I might have eternal life? Do I see myself as self-made, rather than created by our loving Father? Where in my spiritual life do I need to make more of an effort – in prayer, in participating in the sacraments, in my faithfulness?

And finally, returning to the question that has been left dangling from the start, we must ask, "Why did it take Jesus two times for this man to be fully healed?" It is definitely a question worth pondering, but one which may leave us a little unsatisfied. We can speculate, as many have, that the two-stage unfolding of the healing represents the spiritual life of the disciples who were enlightened gradually about Jesus being the Messiah (*NAB* footnote 8:22-26).

One thing we can know for sure is that Jesus had the ability to heal perfectly the first time he touched the man; there was no deficiency in his power. It would be sound wisdom for us to consider the possibility that in our own spiritual life, it can take us time to be able to see Jesus with clear vision as well.

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Thursday, February 21, 2019
(Lec. 338)

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

THURSDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.)

Saint Peter Damian,
Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

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

FOCUS: The fulfillment of God's promise is Jesus.

The story of Noah and his ark is probably one of the best known Bible stories of all time. A quick search on Amazon reveals dozens and dozens of books about Noah: picture books, sticker books, board books and even some award winners. Most of us have heard this story all our lives and may have read some of these books to children we know. It's such a big story: the building of the ark, the animals two by two, the rain, the flood, the sun, and the renewal of the earth all combine to make a great story.

Today, let's step away from the picture books and kid's songs about Noah and look at the story with adult eyes. Does the flood represent the destruction of the earth, or a cleansing of the world? Is it an ending, or a beginning? A death or a rebirth? Perhaps we see all those things in this story. Have we had "floods" in our own lives where we needed to be washed away so we could begin again, cleansed and refreshed?

Today's reading from Genesis takes place after the flood, as God talks to Noah and enters into a covenant with him. God pledges, *I will establish my covenant with you ... there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth.* He seals this promise by placing a rainbow in the sky for all to see. Even today, we get excited when we see a rainbow grace the sky. It generally comes at the end of a storm, as the clouds clear and the sun begins to re-emerge. It reminds us of God's solemn promise. It signifies hope and brings us joy.

The fulfillment of God's promise is Jesus. He is salvation. In Mark's Gospel today, Jesus asks his Apostles, *Who do you say that I am?* How would we answer that question? Peter replies, *You are the Christ.* This comes from a Greek word meaning "anointed one" or "messiah."

Throughout his ministry, Jesus gives himself many names that are familiar to us today. We know him as the Light of the World, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Good Shepherd, and the Son of Man, to name just a few. Jesus is our brother, our friend, our Savior and our God. He teaches us with his word. He nourishes us in the Eucharist. He has saved us with his sacrifice. So, we ask ourselves today, "Who do we say that he is?" And perhaps more important, how do we respond to his presence in our lives?

* * *

Friday, February 22, 2019
(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

**THE CHAIR OF
SAINT PETER THE APOSTLE
- FEAST**

FOCUS: Jesus built his Church on a man, Peter, who responded to the grace of God.

Today's Gospel takes place in a region called Caesarea Philippi, and that detail underlines the whole event.

Caesarea Philippi is about thirty-five miles north of Capernaum, and was a center of pagan worship with temples to Caesar Augustus and the ancient Greek god Pan, who was associated with fertility.

The temple to Pan was built near one of the few natural springs that flow into the Jordan River. The ancient pagans believed that such springs of water coming out of rocks were gateways to the netherworld. Against this backdrop of pagan worship and a temple built near a gate to Hades, Jesus asks his disciples the same question he asks each of us: *Who do you say that I am?*

And Simon responds the way we should answer: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" It is not because Peter is the smartest or the most mystical or even the most faithful of the disciples, but because God the Father gave him the grace to know the truth, and Peter responded to that grace.

Jesus' response is to call Simon by a new name, Peter – meaning rock – and declaring that, *Upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.* Imagine Jesus saying this as the disciples were within view of a spring believed to be a gate to the netherworld. Jesus promises that not only will the powers of evil not prevail over the Church, but the Church will also overcome pagan worship. Jesus gives Peter unimaginable authority with the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Peter is the impulsive disciple who began to walk on water, but then doubted – who denied Jesus and abandoned him at the crucifixion. That same Peter was the first leader of the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church which has outlasted empires, persecutions and even corruption within her.

Peter was a man, and as such, had weaknesses. Yet, the Church that Christ founded with him as the rock continues to grow and proclaim the Gospel. Like he did with Peter, Jesus wants to work through us for his glory. What might Jesus be able to accomplish through us?

But first, we must answer the same question Jesus posed to Peter: *Who do you say that I am?* May we all have the grace to answer: "Christ, the Son of the living God."

* * *

Saturday, February 23, 2019
(Lec. 340)

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

SATURDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM
Saint Polycarp,
Bishop and Martyr)

Gospel related: CCC 151, 459, 552

FOCUS: We are called to be authentic witnesses of who Jesus truly is.

Most of us know the first line of a rather familiar hymn, "We walk by faith, and not by sight." In our first reading today, the author of Hebrews reminds us of the faith of three Old Testament figures: Abel, Enoch and Noah. None had seen God, but all three had great faith in God.

Today's Gospel, on the other hand, describes Jesus being transfigured in the presence of Peter, James and John, while standing with Moses and Elijah. These three Apostles were exposed to the glory of God, but were a little slow grasping what it all meant. Some days, we are a little slow in grasping meaning, ourselves.

There are days when we look into the eyes of a newborn child and see the glory of God. Then there are other days when we watch so much violence and distrust unfold in the daily news that we wonder where God is. It is important for us to remember the words of Jesus to a doubting Thomas after the Resurrection: *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed* (John 20:29). That describes Abel, Enoch and Noah – and that needs to describe us.

Saint Polycarp, whom we remember today, is said to have been a student of Saint John the Evangelist. He was not a contemporary of Jesus as was John. Rather, he was a part of the second generation of believers. Like the generations to follow, like us, he knew Jesus spiritually and not physically. His intimate spiritual connection with Jesus gave him the courage he would need to become a martyr for the faith.

It was not until the resurrection of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit that the Apostles finally grasped the fullness of who Jesus is. Through our initiation into the Church in baptism, confirmation and Eucharist, we are also brought into the fullness of faith.

While the odds are in our favor that we will not pay the ultimate price of martyrdom because of our faith in Jesus Christ, we are nonetheless called to be authentic witnesses of who Jesus truly is. We must not be afraid to bring Jesus into our homes and neighborhoods and workplaces. May others who have not seen come to believe because we lovingly shared, by word and by deed, the presence of the risen Christ alive in our lives.

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2019

(Lec. 81)

1) 1 Samuel 26:2, 7-9,
12-13, 22-23

2) 1 Corinthians 15:45-49

3) Luke 6:27-38

Gospel related: CCC 1458, 1669, 1789, 1970, 2842

**SEVENTH SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: We are being transformed into the image of Christ.

As Christians, we worship a God who loves us so much that he became human for our sake and went the extra mile of love, dying an excruciating and humiliating death on a cross. Paul reassures us in the second reading that, as we are human and in the likeness of Adam – complete with sin – so we will also take on the likeness of Jesus, the *heavenly one*.

That's a reassuring thought when we read the Gospel, in which Jesus describes what he expects from those who follow him. We are called to see with God's eyes – to see our enemies as brothers or sisters and to love them. We are to return good to those who mistreat us.

In the first reading, we get a glimpse of God's ability to transform people. David, even though he knows that Saul plans to kill him, spares Saul when he has the chance to do harm instead. His reverence for God's anointing of Saul is what stays his hand. David chooses the higher ground that, centuries later, would be taught by his descendant and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Often, we fall short of the standards Jesus set for us, but other times we might come close, as David did in the first reading. Could we take time out of a busy day to listen to a friend who needs to talk, or give up a free day to volunteer at a place of need? Do we call on reserves of patience to listen quietly when an angry friend or colleague complains to us?

Because we are human, we might not live out these expectations consistently, but if we stay close to Jesus in prayer, we can trust that he is transforming us, step by step, into his image. As Lent approaches, take advantage of this special season to spend more time with Jesus and more time serving others, allowing him to transform you.

* * *

Monday, February 25, 2019
(Lec. 341)

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

Gospel related: CCC 162, 649, 1504, 2610

MONDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: God's wisdom and increased faith will enhance our journey of faith.

Today's first reading helps us to realize the greatness of God's grace. Sirach proclaims the profundity of God's wisdom, and also that God is the author of wisdom itself. God's wisdom is a treasury just waiting to be shared, but the question is, do we reach out to receive this beautiful gift? Today's Gospel suggests that in large measure we do not.

Today's Gospel relates a story of Jesus expelling a demon when his disciples had failed. Taking it from the beginning, Jesus asked why they were arguing among themselves. They explained about the possessed boy and the failure of his disciples to expel the demon. Jesus' reaction seems to be one of exasperation at their lack of faith. Jesus then spoke with the boy's father and explained to him that everything was possible with faith, and the man asked for help in his unbelief. Jesus expelled the demon, and later said privately that these demons must be driven out by prayer.

The two readings make two important points: profound wisdom awaits those who are willing to seek it, and prayer is the pathway to this wisdom. When the boy's father asked for help, he did not specifically seek relief for his son's ailments, but rather asked for help in his unbelief. Essentially, he sought first wisdom, and then tangible relief. None of this came to him until he was willing to ask.

These readings underscore the power of prayer. Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said, "Millions of favors are hanging from Heaven on silken cords – prayer is the sword that will cut them." It is through prayer that the treasury of divine wisdom can be accessed, and essentially, it is the cornerstone of our relationship with God.

Having come to understand the importance of prayer, we now have an opportunity here to examine our individual prayer lives. Are we taking enough time for prayer daily? Perhaps an examination of how we pray is in order. Considering what we have learned today, the readings suggest we should seek first wisdom to help our unbelief and increase our faith. Seeking wisdom and faith first could lead to a whole new chapter in our spiritual journey. The potential for renewal and enhancement in our relationship with God is completely limitless, because with faith all things are possible.

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Tuesday, February 26, 2019
(Lec. 342)

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

Gospel related: CCC 474, 557, 1825 CSDC 379

TUESDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Jesus tells his disciples to have a stronger faith in God and an attitude of humility.

Our lives are full of problems and challenges. Sometimes, they might overwhelm us and make us want to give up on God and our desire to live. In today's first reading, Ben Sira acknowledges this feeling in the face of trial and advises us to be steadfast and cling to God a little tighter in those times. He reminds us that God is compassionate and never stops loving us. He will come to save us in due time.

Meanwhile, Jesus, in today's Gospel, lets his disciples know about his upcoming passion and death. Instead of focusing on that, they are debating among themselves about who will be greatest. They cannot empathize with Jesus and his impending suffering. Jesus finally points out to them the right attitude for facing challenging times. They must welcome and embrace the weak and vulnerable with the humble attitude of a servant.

Both readings today call us to humility. Turning to God when we feel sorrowful or defeated or humiliated, as Ben Sira advises, requires admitting that we need help and that we can't end or endure the pain in our lives on our own. But the words of Ben Sira assure us that God will protect and save those who turn to him and trust him. Warmly accepting and embracing the least among us, as Jesus asks us in using a child to demonstrate his message, requires us to humbly forget ourselves and the things the world sees as important and successful.

Committing to living a life of humble respect and concern for the little ones of our world does not earn anyone the title of "greatest" among the rich and powerful. But Jesus assures us that our reward will be much greater. By humbly receiving the vulnerable in his name, we also receive not only Jesus, but the One who sent him. And in committing our lives to the Lord, we can trust that we will join him in the heavenly banquet, with no concern about where we sit.

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Wednesday, February 27, 2019
(Lec. 343)

- 1) Sirach 4:11-19
- 2) Mark 9:38-40

WEDNESDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Wisdom means following Jesus, not following us.

In this Gospel reading, this is the only time Mark has John as the spokesperson. Quite often, it is the impulsive Peter who cannot contain himself; he says what he thinks. When John speaks today, he is echoing the general spirit of self-assurance that exists among the Apostles. After all, when Mark records this incident, he places it immediately after two significant events in the life of the Apostles: the transfiguration of the Lord and the argument over who is the greatest. Clearly, Jesus' disciples must have felt pretty good about themselves, but was this confidence a distraction to the lessons Jesus continually modeled for them?

This feeling of confidence is echoed in John's complaint when he reports to Jesus that someone was *driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us*. It is interesting that John ends his complaint by saying, follow *us* rather than follow *you*. Apparently, his criterion for legitimate ministry is acting under the disciples' authority. Perhaps John does not yet fully recognize that Jesus himself is the only source of their power.

Jesus, who is the personification of wisdom, responds by telling them that if someone performs a mighty deed in his name, that person can't be against them. In other words, Jesus is telling them, as Lady Wisdom teaches near the beginning of the book of Sirach, stop meddling and trusting in your own opinion. In this exchange, Jesus is reminding them, as Lady Wisdom suggests in the first reading, not to walk with him as a stranger, but to trust him and they will inherit his wisdom.

Sometimes, we can become complacent in our faith, and worse, we may be judgmental of those we believe are not living up to our standards. But we should be busy with our own journey toward increased faith and wisdom. Let our prayers and actions be directed to growing closer to Christ.

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Thursday, February 28, 2019
(Lec. 344)

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

Gospel related: CCC 1034

THURSDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Trust in God, hope in the Lord and see all others as belonging to Christ.

There is an organization that walks alongside homeless youth, who are homeless on their journey of reconciliation with themselves, God and society. Rooted in the values of the Gospels, they build healthy relationships, provide service and mentor street youth. They also provide a safe, peaceful space where young people can experience respite from street culture while having some of their basic needs met. The name of this group is “Cup of Cool Water.” They incarnate Jesus’ first words in today’s Gospel: *Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.* Those who serve the homeless in this way are not doing it *because* they will receive the reward, but because they believe in the promises of God, and know that those promises are meant for those whom they serve.

Blessed are they who hope in the Lord, says our Psalmist today. This is the hope we are called to embody, no matter where we work and what we do. God has told us, time and again, to trust him. He has reminded us, in every conceivable way possible, that the way to eternal life is through avoidance of sin, and repentance when we give in to temptation. *Delay not your conversion to the Lord*, Sirach tells us, *put it not off from day to day.* We are also charged, as Jesus says, with not causing others to sin.

We all know, to some degree, how difficult it can be to stop unhealthy habits. The same is true for vices and sin. The Good News in all of this is that God is present to us always; we do not have to rely on ourselves to overcome the challenges we face. Trusting in God, hoping in the Lord, knowing that others belong to Christ as we do – this is what grace, and faith, help us attain. We may not always be able to resist temptation, but we can always ask for forgiveness and mercy when we fail. We cannot keep others from making sinful choices, but we *can* and *must* ensure we do not lead them there.

So as we celebrate the Lord giving completely of himself for us, let us pray that we might have the grace to follow his example without fail.

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