

MARCH

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**YEAR C
WEEKDAYS I**

Friday, March 1, 2019
(Lec. 345)

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

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

FRIDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: Marriage is faithful, self-sacrificial and life-giving.

Although marriage, as an institution, has seen a great decline in recent years, it is so sacred that it has the power to join two people as *one flesh*. So strong is this bond that Jesus declares, *what God has joined together, no human being must separate*. This may sound beautifully romantic for a movie, but even the disciples are so bewildered at the strength of the teaching that they later *questioned Jesus about this*.

Yet it is only within the context of an unbreakable bond that individuals can have the security they need to develop intimate bonds to grow and nurture a healthy family. When we have the surety that our spouse will love us and stand by us no matter what, we have the freedom to be our most authentic selves and give sacrificially of ourselves. Because our authentic selves come with “warts” and flaws, it takes a lot of hard work to manage our own flaws while being patient with those of our partner.

Certainly, people who are called to marriage must choose their spouse wisely, as one would choose a faithful friend. Once the choice has been made, the couple must strive, with the help of God, to be the sturdy shelter for each other.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus compares his love for the Church to a bridegroom’s love for his bride. It is faithful, it is self-sacrificial, it is permanent and it is life-giving. Married people should try – as should we all – to emulate Christ. But God is, ultimately, who must lead us and where our true satisfaction must lie.

For those of us who are not married, we also have a role in protecting the bonds of marriage. We can cultivate a culture that respects and cherishes fidelity. And we can support families in their call to love each other so that their love spills over into the community. As God loves us with perfect sacrificial love, so we, too, can do our best to emulate that in how we love one another. And may the Eucharist, the manifestation of that perfect love, give us the strength and power to do so.

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Saturday, March 2, 2019

(Lec. 346)

1) Sirach 17:1-15

2) Mark 10:13-16

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

Gospel related: CCC 699, 1244, 1261

FOCUS: Let us be as children and have complete dependence on the loving God who made us.

"[God] wants a child's heart, but a grown-up's head," C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*.

Jesus tells his disciples that they must accept the kingdom of God like a child. This does not mean that Jesus wants the disciples to stop seeking to learn about the kingdom, but rather Jesus is describing how their hearts should be.

Why might the Lord want us to be childlike? We can think of a young child interacting with a parent. The parents are everything to that child: they provide food and clothing, bandages for scraped knees and goodnight kisses. Children instinctively trust their parents, love their parents and rely completely on them. They are simple – generally living in the moment. Mom and Dad are a main focus of their whole world. They are affectionate toward the parents they know love and care for them unconditionally. Children are eager to learn and strive to please their parents (at least most of the time.)

And we are all children of God, aren't we? Ben Sira, the author of today's first reading, marvels at God's tender care in creating humankind: Our bodies are very complex, with multiple systems, each one working together for us to live. Our minds and our souls were created to interact with each other and to know and love God. Ben Sira says that God has showed us *his mighty works* so that we might be able to praise him for his wonderful deeds.

Today, let's pray that we might have a child's heart – trusting completely in our loving Father. Let's also pray we may contemplate the marvels of God with a mature intellect and will. The Eucharistic table is a good place to begin. Let us approach the body and blood of Jesus with childlike simplicity, knowing in our hearts that we are receiving the Son of God.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 2019

(Lec. 84)

- 1) Sirach 27:4-7
- 2) 1 Corinthians 15:54-58
- 3) Luke 6:39-45

**EIGHTH SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: *Be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord.*

As Church, we have honored the countless learned and holy men and women – teachers of all generations and cultures who have dedicated their lives to the advancement not only of holy wisdom but of earthly knowledge. From the writer of Sirach in our first reading to Saint Paul the great evangelist and preacher, to modern theologians and catechists, they have shared their knowledge and wisdom and laid before us their insights and learning. There are even those among us who may have less formal scholarship and education, but lead lives and speak truths that advance the Gospel. They are all teachers of the faith who have helped us to mine and understand the mysteries of this world and the world to come. They have helped us to understand how God is present in our world, and in those great moments of life and death.

Knowledge, integrity and responsibility are necessary qualities for anyone who wishes to teach, or share, the faith. Jesus is scathing when these are absent; one is guilty of hypocrisy when one ignores serious matters and insists that others adhere to minor things. Likewise, if we all concentrate on removing the splinters in our own lives, we would have no time to judge and gossip about the faults and struggles of others. For Jesus, the ultimate success of an individual's efforts relies on the effect they have on the lives of others. The true teacher will produce *good fruit*; the uninformed, self-centered or misguided teacher will produce *rotten fruit*. The status of the fruit reveals the true nature of the tree.

The blind cannot lead the blind. Good produces good, and evil produces evil. As we heard in the first reading, *so too does one's speech disclose the bent of one's mind*. So let us always, as Saint Paul says, *be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord*. For the ways of the Lord are always and only good, and thus so shall be what we teach, preach and live as a result.

Let us nourish our hearts and bodies with the perfect gift from God in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. May it give us the grace to be firm and steadfast as Paul encourages, and to bear good fruit for the world.

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Monday, March 4, 2019

(Lec. 347)

1) Sirach 17:20-24

2) Mark 10:17-27

MONDAY OF
EIGHTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Casimir)

Gospel related: CCC 1858, 2728

FOCUS: Salvation is a good and free gift from a Father who loves us.

The main character in today's Gospel story, often labeled simply as "the rich man," was by all references a *good* man, a disciple of Scripture, who genuinely tried to live well by following the commandments. The Gospel even describes how he ran up and knelt before Jesus, showing his respect for the Lord and paying Jesus homage. He was not a bad guy!

Jesus looks at him, and *loving him*, knows that he is capable of more than just trying to do good – more than fulfilling the law by his own efforts, on his own terms. So Jesus invites this rich man to take a bigger step, to go a little deeper in his call to holiness. When Jesus asks him to let go of his treasure, he is asking the rich man to give up false securities, to surrender trying to earn eternal life by his own efforts. Jesus is reminding him, and teaching all who are listening, that eternal life is a gift that cannot be earned. And that the grace he needs, much like the eternal salvation he seeks, is something we *receive*, not something we can ever accomplish.

It is important to note that this story follows immediately after Jesus' teaching that, *whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it*. So when Jesus emphasizes today, *Children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God!* he is, once again, asking his disciples – and us – to let go of our crazy desire to control, to instead open ourselves to receive God's gift of grace. Jesus invites the rich man, his own disciples and us to prepare ourselves to receive salvation – that good and free gift from a Father who loves us. Yet God's gift always requires our assent.

We are all called to do good, to live well, to follow the commandments. But our *doing* must always be a manifestation of our *being*, an expression of our spirit. We are Easter people, children of a heavenly Father who has adopted us in love, embraced us in his mercy and invited us to accept the gift of eternal life. This is why we are here, to participate in that gift, in the thanksgiving of the Eucharist. Simply obeying rules and trying to do the right thing falls short in our earthly pilgrimage toward holiness. It is not about rules, it is about Love. The love of a Father for his children. The love of a Savior for his disciples. Come, let us greet that Savior at the altar.

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Tuesday, March 5, 2019

(Lec. 348)

1) Sirach 35:1-12

2) Mark 10:28-31

Gospel related: CCC 1618

TUESDAY OF
EIGHTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: God is in control, and all we have comes from his grace.

It may be difficult for us to fathom how radical some of Jesus' teachings were when he introduced them during his public ministry. As a matter of fact, they are still pretty radical, if we lived them fully. Consider Jesus' words that giving up one's earthly possessions and even family connections for the sake of following him would bring about a return of a hundredfold.

Today's Gospel is not the first time in Scripture we have heard Jesus talk about earthly possessions and attachments, and how our relationship to them is tied to our salvation. Jesus was serious about this: he wants us to have our priorities straight. This means not allowing wealth and its trappings to rule our lives or make us feel superior to others. It means having material wealth without losing humility – not forgetting that God is in control, and that all we have comes from his grace. Wealth can mask our need to turn to God. And Jesus does not want that to happen.

Many who are first will be last, Jesus says, and the last will be first. He upends the cultural, and erroneous, theological belief of his time that *wealth equals status equals blessed equals importance equals primacy of place in an afterlife*. Instead, Jesus points out, those who have given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for his sake will receive a hundred times more in this life, and eternal life in the age to come. In other words, salvation comes from God, as a gift freely given – a gift multiplied in his unlimited generosity as a reward to our own response and acceptance of it.

Jesus asks a lot from his followers. But what he asks is never more than we can do, with his help. So let us rely on the promises of God, and not on earthly wealth and possessions. And may the perfection of that promise we encounter in the Eucharist remind us that God is in control and that all we have comes from his grace.

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Wednesday, March 6, 2019

ASH WEDNESDAY

(Lec. 219)

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

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

FOCUS: Lent is a time to gain mastery over ourselves – that we might each make of ourselves an offering to God.

Forty hours. Forty days. Forty years. All represent periods of testing, preparation and purification in the Bible. The rain fell on Noah's Ark for forty days. Moses was on top of Sinai for forty days, eating and drinking nothing before he received the Ten Commandments. The Hebrews wandered the desert for forty years on the way to the Promised Land. David reigned over Israel for forty years. Jesus was in the desert for forty days after his baptism before beginning his ministry. He was forty hours in the tomb following the crucifixion, and would appear on the earth for forty days before his Ascension.

Yes, in so many ways, forty is a Biblical number, and one which suggests a time of testing, preparation and purification. This is our time, what Saint Paul calls the *acceptable time . . . the day of salvation*. It is easy to spend too much time losing focus on what matters most – storing up for ourselves treasures in heaven. Lent is a time to use prayer, penance, fasting, almsgiving, service and self-denial to gain mastery over ourselves – that we might each make of ourselves an offering to God.

Being marked with ashes is reminiscent of the fast proclaimed by Joel in today's first reading. Joel lived in difficult times in a divided kingdom, eight centuries before the coming of Christ. To him, the end was near – always. Each day could be his last. The same could be said for all people of all time.

During the end of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages us to use Lent as a time to pray, fast and give alms – not to impress others, but to humble ourselves and give glory to God. Traditionally, Lent is viewed as time to give something up and take something up. We are meant to give up those things that distract us from the love of God or worse, lead us into sin, that we might take up our crosses and follow Jesus to Calvary, that he might lead all of us to victory.

In that way, our Father who *sees in secret* will repay us, in this life and in the next. May we all use these forty days as a chance to die to self and live for him who sent his only Son to die for us, for our sins and for our salvation.

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Thursday, March 7, 2019

(Lec. 220)

1) Deuteronomy 30:15-20

2) Luke 9:22-25

THURSDAY

AFTER

ASH WEDNESDAY

(Opt. Mem.

Saints Perpetua and Felicity,
Martyrs)

Gospel related: CCC 1435

FOCUS: Lent is a time to put away our false gods and turn our hearts back toward God, our Creator.

As we begin to cross the desert of Lent and head toward the Promised Land of Easter, we have a great prophet and leader in Moses. His words to the Hebrew people are very fitting for us today: choose life by walking in God's ways and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees. Perhaps the best commandment for us to focus on this Lent is the first, which prohibits us from worshiping false gods – any god but the true God who created each one of us and the entire universe.

We might think that the first commandment is the easiest to follow. Who among us has carved a molten calf and bowed down to it? But we are so much more like Moses' people than we like to think. We, like the Hebrews in the desert, find it so easy to be *led astray and adore and serve other gods*.

Our culture can so easily dangle extraneous values before our eyes, trying to convince us that they are the most important things to strive for. Lent helps us to explore the ways in which we might have been led astray. In our daily lives, we all must work, study, keep in touch with others and take care of details. But if these become the center of our lives and the sole focus of our concerns and thoughts, they can become our false god – something that takes primacy of place over the one true God.

This Lent, let us choose practices that will truly bring us life – that will turn our hearts back toward God. As we go about the rest of our day, let us spend some time with Jesus and ask him to guide us in the best ways for us to focus our energy this Lent. Jesus, who laid down his life on the cross for us, longs for us to choose life, return to him and hold fast to him through Lent and for the rest of our lives.

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Friday, March 8, 2019

(Lec. 221)

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

FRIDAY
AFTER
ASH WEDNESDAY
(Opt. Mem.
Saint John of God,
Religious)

FOCUS: May Lent make us better able to love God and keep his commands.

If we think of Lent as a self-improvement project, then we might be the ones to whom God is speaking in the first reading. God says, *Lo, on your fast day you carry out your own pursuits, and drive all your laborers ... you might fast so as to make your voice heard on high!* Because Lent is not about who we are, but who and what we love.

This is the fasting that God desires, according to Isaiah: *Releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own.*

This may seem an odd way of talking about fasting, since we usually speak of it as fasting from food, or – more generally – under the umbrella of “giving something up for Lent.” But it is the essence of fasting that is being addressed here: the penitential practice that helps us make satisfaction for our sins, much like what we do after confession. It’s the penitential spirit that allows us to monitor our self, and selfish desires – which helps elevate our souls toward divine realities. And so when the focus of fasting is removed from us and the focus becomes how we can be “in better health by giving up smoking” or “a better person by giving up complaining” [both of which are good things, by the way, they are just not the purpose of Lent], we can offer it to God and become better able to love him and keep his commands – commands such as those found in Isaiah.

Too often, people see Lent as a time of gloom and darkness rather than an opportunity to draw closer to God. Yes, it is a somber and penitential time, but done from a spirit of joy in anticipation of the Resurrection! How much more glorious will that day be if we are of pure and clean heart. What a gift the Church gives us in this season of contemplation and action. What a gift God gives us in his mercy to forgive that for which we are truly sorry.

As we prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mystery of Christ upon this altar, let us give special thanks today for those gifts.

Saturday, March 9, 2019

(Lec. 222)

1) Isaiah 58:9b-14

2) Luke 5:27-32

SATURDAY

AFTER

ASH WEDNESDAY

(Opt. Mem.

Saint Frances of Rome,

Religious)

Gospel related: CCC 588

FOCUS: *I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.*

Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners. Today's passage ends with this beautiful proclamation of Christ about his mission – and the mission of the Church – as well as a description of our own responsibility as disciples. We are not righteous, but sinners, for whom the Church – both institutional and as individuals who make up the body of Christ – is the place of healing and forgiveness.

Jesus, in the analogy about sick people needing a physician, was candidly pointing out that those most in need of God's mercy need to encounter it personally. How could anyone possibly come to know God remotely? And so we come here together to hear the Word, to pray with and for each other, and to share in the Eucharist. Eating together is a very personal experience, something Jesus understood. The example he sets forth in today's Gospel is the foreshadowing of our experience of eating together at the table of the Lord as we gather for the Eucharist. We, who are but sinners, whom he has called to be close to him.

It is often too easy to think that the Scripture passages are meant for someone else, or that we are now to be like Jesus "calling the sinners" to repentance. While there is some truth to the fact that we ought to share the message to repent and believe in the Gospel, these passages are for us directly: *we are the sinners* whom Jesus calls. But we already know and believe that – or we would not be here! We believe this, and we have faith that Jesus can heal us. That is the Good News we are called to go forth and share.

May Christ in the Eucharist heal us from our sin, and give us the strength and wisdom to bring that healing to the world.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2019

(Lec. 24)

1) Deuteronomy 26:4-10

2) Romans 10:8-13

3) Luke 4:1-13

Gospel related: CCC 538, 695, 2096, 2119, 2855

**FIRST SUNDAY
OF LENT**

FOCUS: Sustained by the Spirit.

Perhaps the most overlooked line in this famous Gospel is that Jesus had just *returned from the Jordan*. He had just been filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit (his own Spirit) in the waters of the Jordan, an “anointing” which established him publicly as the Christ, the Anointed One. That same Spirit had overshadowed Mary and led to her conceiving the Lord; that same Spirit had inspired Simeon to recognize a small baby as the Messiah; that same Spirit goes out of Jesus when he performs miracles; and that same Spirit will raise him from the dead (CCC 695).

It is the Spirit who now leads him into the desert for forty days. Certainly, that Spirit never parted from him in that lonely desert, but instead inspired his prayer. For prayer was Christ’s usual habit to discern and obey the will of the Father, and to prepare himself for whatever momentous event was ahead of him.

Sustained by only grace and prayer, Christ encounters the devil. Imagine – the devil tries to put God himself to the test! Famously, the devil tempts him three times. The devil commands Christ to turn stones into bread to satisfy his physical needs. Christ refuses because *one does not live by bread alone* (Deuteronomy 8:3). The devil asks Christ to worship him, claiming he will give him all the kingdoms of the world. Christ refuses, stating that *you shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve* (Deuteronomy 6:13). Finally, the devil asks Christ to prove that he is the Son of God by throwing himself down from the highest point of the Temple because angels will guard him. Christ refuses, saying, *you shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test* (Deuteronomy 6:16). Each time, sustained by the Spirit and with a command of God’s revealed word, Christ can resist temptation. He is victorious over temptation just as he will be victorious over death (CCC 539).

Like that devil in the desert, how often do we put God to the test? How often do we “negotiate” with God and ignore his will to suit ours? How often do we pray that “yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,” yet turn away to seek our own glory, to demand our own power and to build our own little kingdoms?

This Lent, let us resolve to be fortified by the same thing which gave Jesus strength against evil. Like Jesus, let us cultivate a deeper prayer life. Let us turn to sacred Scripture to discern God’s will for us and to hear God speaking to us. Let us rely on the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit when we are weak, and thank him when we are made strong. And when these forty days of Lent are through, may we sing ever more joyfully that Christ has conquered sin and death.

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Monday, March 11, 2019

(Lec. 224)

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

2) Matthew 25:31-46

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

MONDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: *Whatever you do [or don't do] to the least of these, you do [or don't do] to me.*

Pope Francis recently reaffirmed the universal call to holiness in an apostolic exhortation when he said “[The Lord] wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence.” And then our first reading begins with these words: *Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.*

We tend to identify holiness with devotional practices, such as prayer and contemplation – things easily identified as part of being religious. Both readings warn us against this tendency. The theological criteria for holiness is the practice of mercy.

Holiness includes reverence for God's name – trembling awe in God's presence. But holiness also has to do with the kind of reverence and awe we bring to our relationships: *You shall not lie.* Our economic relationships: *You shall not steal ... [or] withhold ... wages.* Not pigeon-holing people: *Show neither partiality to the weak nor deference to the mighty.* Especially how we treat the vulnerable – *the deaf and the blind.* And lest we think this is all a matter of external observance, this is related to the disposition of your heart: *You shall love your neighbour as yourself.* Holiness comes from the heart and finds its criteria in love toward our neighbor.

The parable of the sheep and the goats should cause us discomfort, for it holds out the criteria for our final judgment. John of the Cross summarizes this when he says, “In the evening of this life we will be judged on love.” It is that simple. We all know the drill. *For I was hungry and you gave me food ... A stranger and* The list goes on. And the contrary, *I was hungry and you gave me no food ... A stranger and you gave me no welcome.* Both groups have in common their utter surprise at the criteria and its application to them.

The righteous are surprised in the midst of their attentiveness to the good of others. The unrighteous are surprised in the midst of their inattentiveness to the neighbor in need. The righteous ask, *When did we?* Jesus answers, *Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.* The unrighteous ask, *When did we not?* Jesus answers, *What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.* In both cases, we see Jesus' radical identification with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger. Salvation is pure grace, but the corporal works of mercy are the measure of our response to grace, not the many practices we usually associate with being religious.

The measure of our relationship with God is the relationship with the other person, especially the poor and the vulnerable. Jesus identifies himself with the victims of history, and asks us to encounter him in encountering them.

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Tuesday, March 12, 2019

(Lec. 225)

1) Isaiah 55:10-11

2) Matthew 6:7-15

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

TUESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Each one of us is known and loved by God.

If we have ever been outside on a clear starry night and looked up into the infinite sky, we see how immense and beautiful the universe is. It's literally breathtaking. In so doing, we might feel pretty tiny when we compare ourselves to the full scope of God's creation.

The reality is that although we are relatively small, we are known and loved by God. He loves us so much that he sent Jesus to demonstrate his love for us. God desires to redeem us as one of his own children. During the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples, *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father* (John 14:9). He was underscoring just who he is – the physical manifestation of God. By understanding what Jesus taught, we can develop that connection with God and see him more clearly.

As Jesus showed us who God the Father is, he also taught us how to approach him in prayer. In Matthew's Gospel, we just heard the primary prayer of our faith which Jesus first taught his disciples. It is called the Lord's Prayer because it came from Jesus himself. Prayer is God's invitation and model for us to address him. It might be easy to take that for granted because at church, we talk about prayer often. We pray the Lord's Prayer at every Mass. The good news is that we don't have to be biblical scholars with theology degrees before we can pray. We can grow closer to God by coming humbly to him in prayer.

Our lives will encompass many events which will drive us to prayer. Jesus told his disciples, *Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This is how you are to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven* Think about that! We can actually speak to God, who created the heavens and the earth. That reality may sometimes be difficult, if not impossible, to fully comprehend.

We are invited to commune with God, our heavenly Father. Amazing, isn't it? Let's decide today that we will be more conscious of God's encouragement to draw closer to him through prayer.

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Wednesday, March 13, 2019

(Lec. 226)

1) Jonah 3:1-10

2) Luke 11:29-32

WEDNESDAY OF

FIRST WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: The Lord has given us the greatest of signs – his own presence in our midst.

Today, we hear Jesus calling people to task for not responding to his preaching about repentance and the kingdom of God. They seek signs, he tells us, but have missed the greatest of signs – the presence and proclamation of God's own chosen one. They are an *evil generation*.

Why are they an evil generation? Because they had already been given so much by God, including the literal manifestation of his promises in the person of Jesus, and yet they robustly rejected it all. Whereas the Ninevites simply listened to Jonah's words of warning, and repented. The contrast is clear, and we can see why Jesus would be frustrated.

We can also see how, in some ways, Jesus could just as easily be talking about today's world. People are drawn not just to the miraculous but to any big "sign" – things, or events that are glitzy or that make an impact. As for words, unless they generate some kind of controversy, people hardly seem to pay attention. What is by comparison "plain and true," – that is, the "visibly unflashy" (by worldly standards) reality of the Triune God – is often overlooked, if not intentionally overshadowed by the bright lights and sounds of modernity.

And yet, not a single aspect of goodness in this world would exist without the constant outpouring of God's love. Not a single breath of life could be taken without God first breathing life into us. Thus, ironically, what is "most plain and true" about every single item around us is actually a definitive sign of God. Most important, though perhaps in appearance of bread and wine the least "flashy" by modern criteria, the Lord has given us the greatest of signs – his own presence in our midst. That should be enough for us; there is no greater sign he can give us.

So as we prepare to come to the Table, let us do so with eyes that truly see this wondrous sign we receive, and hearts that are open to being transformed by its power – that we might then go out into the world and be that sign for others.

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Thursday, March 14, 2019

(Lec. 227)

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

2) Matthew 7:7-12

Gospel related: CCC 1789, 1970, 2609 CSDC 20

THURSDAY OF

FIRST WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: Our heavenly Father gives good things to those who ask him.

If we ever hear people tell us that they have difficulty with prayer, or knowing how to tell God what they need, we can share today's readings with them. The first reading is from an Old Testament book that we do not use very often in the liturgy: the Book of Esther. It tells the story of a strong and faithful woman who, through her intercession to God, saved her people from destruction. We heard her beautiful and incredibly forthright prayer – her humble plea, full of descriptions of exactly what she needed.

Esther's example is worthy of following in our own lives. Not just because she was humble and specific, but also because she asked for things that she knew would ensure her continued relationship with God. She begged for his intercession in order that she might remain close to him, and that her people might continue to thrive under his providence. She asked things *of God* so that she might stand up to those things *not-of-God*.

Jesus says as much today when he instructs his disciples to *ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find. ... For, your heavenly Father [will] give good things to those who ask him*. Without saying so directly, Jesus is essentially pointing out what we already learned today from Esther: those things that are good – that is, those things that are *of God* – will be given to us if we ask. God cannot give us anything that is *not* good, for he is pure goodness. So, when we ask, humbly and specifically, to share in that goodness, those prayers are answered.

Let us be honest here, though: the answers to those prayers may not look like what we think they ought to look like. After all, our loved ones still become ill and die; natural disasters strike; war and famine cause suffering around the world. But the good that we ask of God does come to be in some way, even if we cannot see or understand it yet, through our asking. And we believe and have faith that this goodness does have an effect on the world. Or else why do we pray at all? As C.S. Lewis famously said, "prayer doesn't change God, it changes me."

The Eucharist we are about to receive is a visible answer to our prayer – for daily bread – that we can understand. Both in the real presence of Christ, and in the promise of the Holy Spirit who remains with us and helps us. So let us approach with the humility of Esther and the confidence that Jesus gives us, so that we may take the good that God gives us and share it with the world. Especially with those who may tell us they do not know how to pray.

* * *

Friday, March 15, 2019

(Lec. 228)

1) Ezekiel 18:21-28

2) Matthew 5:20-26

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

FRIDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Do what is right and just and you shall live.

The prophet Ezekiel tells us that the Lord God says, *If the wicked man turns away from all the sins he committed, if he keeps all my statutes and does what is right and just, he shall surely live, he shall not die.*

That is a fairly straightforward set of directions from God. There's no complex formula here; no lengthy set of instructions, as if we were putting together furniture from Ikea. God is simple and direct: turn away from sin. Do what is right and just.

But we know that living out these simple instructions is not always so easy. And God does not leave us to our own devices to accomplish what he commands. He gives us examples and solutions for common trials – as in today's Gospel where Jesus instructs us to reconcile with one another; to not let anger make us behave badly toward another. God also gives us grace, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit to help us in our efforts. We have the sacraments, to strengthen us and increase us in holiness and virtue.

And God gives us the Church – a community of accountability and support, and one that nourishes us in the life of the Spirit. All of this, freely given from God, is not about making us *better*, but about making us *better able to love God and keep his commands*. During this time of Lent, we have a focused opportunity to reexamine our lives and determine what aspects of our spiritual lives we can improve upon. During these forty days, we can renew our focus on reconciling with God and return to him with our whole hearts. We should also be striving to reconcile with one another, as Jesus tells us in the Gospel.

As Christians, we are called to do more than simply abstain from the worst sins. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. Lent is about loving God – again, if we've failed to do so well – and recognizing our need for a Savior. A Savior whose grace and mercy, through the endless love of God the Father, enables us to do as he commands: to turn away from sin, do what is right and just, and live.

* * *

Saturday, March 16, 2019

(Lec. 229)

1) Deuteronomy 26:16-19

2) Matthew 5:43-48

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

SATURDAY OF

FIRST WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: *[The Lord] is to be your God and you are to walk in his ways.*

Expectations. The world seems in order when we know what we can expect on a daily basis. We expect to know approximately how much a piece of fruit will cost at the store. We expect that drivers will obey the laws of the road. We expect that God will continue to choose us as his holy people. Today's readings offer expectations we have for God, and expectations that God has for us.

Here is what God expects of us: We are to choose God, and to follow God's law. We are to put God first in all that we do. Our lives need to be directed in God's ways. Lent is a time when we are called back to follow God.

In turn, here is what we can expect of God: God chooses us to be his people. If we keep God's commandments, then we will be raised up over all other peoples. God promises that we will be sacred and holy. This is what we can expect of God *if* we keep the laws of the Lord.

So many of us have had our expectations dashed by our loved ones. This can lead to a resentment that can last for a long time because our expectations were not met. All of us know that it isn't always easy to live according to the expectations of the law of the Lord. When we fail to live up to the Lord's commandments, do we disappoint God?

The first reading stipulates expectations between two parties – the Israelites and the Lord God. It reads like a contract, but it is not a contract. Contracts are forged between two parties for mutual benefit. How can the Israelites ever offer benefits on the same scale as God? This is not a contractual agreement; it is a covenant. It is a sacred contract between two parties of unequal power. The Lord God bends down to the Israelites in order to lift them up.

The covenant is not final until Jesus himself enters the world. He brokers a new covenant on our behalf. His stipulation is not just that we love one another, but that we also love our enemies. It is easy to love those who mutually love you back. It is not as easy to love those who have no care for you. Knowing that his expectations are high, Jesus gives himself to us in the Eucharist to strengthen us. May the Eucharist help us be faithful to the covenant which God expects us to keep.

* * *

SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2019

**SECOND SUNDAY
OF LENT**

(Lec. 27)

- 1) Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18
- 2) Philippians 3:17-4:1 or 3:20-4:1
- 3) Luke 9:28b-36

Gospel related: CCC 516, 554, 556, 659, 697, 1151, 2583, 2600

FOCUS: Prayer opens our hearts to the life-changing power of the risen and glorified Lord.

One of the chief characteristics of Jesus' life is his commitment to prayer. At every key moment from baptism to death, Jesus shows himself as a man of prayer. As disciples, we, too, are called to be people of prayer, so this might be a good moment for us to review our life of prayer.

Like all relationships, our relationship with God takes time and effort – time to talk, share our lives and get to know him in all his glory and life-changing power. And just as God wants us to share our needs, he also asks that we stop and listen to his word.

With all this in mind, we read today Luke's account of the transfiguration. At first glance, it might seem an odd selection for Lent: why not a Gospel on healing or mercy? But this is no arbitrary choice; it is chosen to encourage and strengthen us as we undertake our Lenten practices, and to remind us that through them we hope to share in the glory of God, glimpsed here in Christ on the mountaintop. Lenten practices by themselves are meaningless if they do not have this greater meaning; indeed the whole Lenten season is without purpose if it does not ultimately lead to the glory of Easter.

Luke's account follows the other synoptic Gospels: Jesus leads his disciples up the mountain to pray. Suddenly, they are witnesses to something new as the glory of God shines through his humanity, and the prophets Moses and Elijah appear in conversation with him. These, too, were mountain men who in times of struggle sought solace in the high peaks. There they encountered God and were renewed and strengthened in their mission.

Glimpsing Jesus' glory, Peter begins to panic, and as so often happens in the face of what is new and unsettling, he falls back onto what is familiar and less threatening. His suggestion for three tents shows how much he has yet to learn about Jesus.

But from the cloud that covers the mountain comes the Father's voice: *This is my chosen Son, listen to him.* Here is the true purpose of this theophany, this "God-reveal": Jesus is more than just another prophet, he is God's *chosen* Son. Here are words that all must hear and accept if they are to be transformed and changed.

In the darkness of our sometimes sinful world, we need to hear these words again. We, too, must be willing to climb the mountain and to experience the glory of God. We need to hear again the words of the Father as Jesus is revealed as the one who speaks on his behalf and is worthy of our attention and obedience.

This Lent ought to signal a transfiguration in our hearts and communities. For as Peter said, *it is good that we are here*, it is indeed good that we are here today, for it is only when we are present to the Lord that we can be open to his word and to the glory he desires to share with us.

* * *

Monday, March 18, 2019

(Lec. 230)

1) Daniel 9:4b-10

2) Luke 6:36-38

MONDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Cyril of Jerusalem,
Bishop and Doctor
of the Church)

Gospel related: CCC 1458, 2842

FOCUS: We know God's mercy in the measure we give it to others.

The humble prayer we hear from the Book of Daniel expresses the sorrow of an exiled people for their sinful ways. They call upon God's mercy, confident forgiveness is in their future. Likewise, today's Gospel opens with Jesus' admonition to the disciples to be merciful as the Father is merciful.

Like any of God's gifts to us, mercy is not earned, it is freely given. Admitting our faults and failures does not come easy to us. Judging and condemning, on the other hand, rear their ugly heads way more often than we care to admit.

Today's excerpt from Luke parallels a more familiar version we find in Matthew's Gospel that we know as "The Sermon on the Mount." The Sermon on the Mount is where we are given the eight beatitudes. In Luke, it is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain.

Jesus is quite clear about the Father's expectations. Stop judging and condemning; instead, practice forgiveness and know forgiveness. Forgiveness is a key ingredient in the recipe for being a faithful follower of Jesus.

The act of forgiveness is as much about the forgiver as it is about the forgiven one. When we practice true and authentic forgiveness, we are freed from the chains of bitterness and resentment that build up and overtake our loving hearts, when we refuse to forgive. Forgiving someone is not contingent on the person seeking us out for forgiveness.

When we have done the hard work of forgiving someone, we position ourselves to be ready for reconciliation with the person who has injured us in some way.

Offering forgiveness is one of the most important things we do as disciples. We all know situations where ongoing grudges have torn families, friends and neighbors – even countries apart. This cannot be a part of who we are.

Jesus makes a bold promise to us today. The bigger the measure we use in dispersing blessings on another, the greater the blessings will be in our lives to the point of "overflowing in our laps." Wouldn't you agree that is worth the risk and effort required?

* * *

Tuesday, March 19, 2019

(Lec. 543)

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

Gospel related: CCC 333, 430, 437, 452, 472, 486, 497, 503, 517, 531, 534, 583, 1507, 2196, 2599 CSDC 259, 378

**SAINT JOSEPH,
SPOUSE OF THE BLESSED
VIRGIN MARY
- SOLEMNITY**

FOCUS: In Saint Joseph, we see an example of a just man who fulfills his vocation from God.

On this Solemnity of Saint Joseph, spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we should reflect on just who Saint Joseph is. What do we know? The Gospel accounts tell us very little about him. He is the spouse of Mary and a just man. But we never hear him speak in the Gospels. What we know of him is what we learn only indirectly from non-canonical sources.

Saint Luke tells of the birth of Jesus through the eyes of Mary, but it is Matthew's Gospel that highlights the perspective of Joseph. Joseph is a man who dreams, very much in the same way the Hebrew patriarchs heard God through dreams. In his dreams, not only does he hear, but most important, he obeys God's angel. We know this story well. Joseph takes Mary into his house, protects her and the newborn Jesus on the flight into Egypt, and takes them home to Nazareth as Mary's husband and Jesus' father. After the return to Nazareth, though, Joseph disappears from the story of Jesus and is only referred to as his father when others speak about Jesus. Beyond that, the canonical Gospels tell us nothing more.

There is more we can know about Saint Joseph if we make additional connections with the biblical texts. For example, it is not accidental that Matthew's account of Joseph's genealogy begins with the patriarch Abraham. The Gospels tell us that Joseph is a direct descendent of David, Israel's greatest king. The Gospel of Matthew's genealogy depicts the coming of Jesus as the climax of Israel's history, and the events of his conception, birth and early childhood as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Joseph is an essential part of Jesus as this fulfillment.

There is more we can know about Saint Joseph if we look at how he's been celebrated in the liturgy of the Church. The Eastern Church has a longer tradition of honoring Saint Joseph in the liturgy, but it was only from the early sixteenth century that he was so honored in the Roman Rite. Pope Pius IX, in 1847, extended the Solemnity of Saint Joseph as a feast for the universal Church. And it was Saint John XXIII who inserted his name into the Canon of the Mass. Artists depict Saint Joseph only in later-second-century art. His name was added to the Litany of the Saints in the mid-fourteenth century. Of course, we know him best as the figure in nativity scenes or depictions of the Holy Family.

The Gospels' portrait of Joseph emphasizes his patriarchal ancestry and asserts he is a just man, and more modern reflection on Joseph singles out his occupation as a skilled worker. He was a craftsman and carpenter who showed Jesus the value of human hard work.

Saint Joseph is many things. In him we see an example of a just man who fulfills his vocation from God. He is a model not just for men – for husbands and fathers – but for all who desire to do the will of God. For all who desire to bring Christ to others, to nurture a relationship with Christ, and to live a life of righteousness. May Saint Joseph intercede for us in our need as we strive to follow his example.

* * *

Wednesday, March 20, 2019

(Lec. 232)

1) Jeremiah 18:18-20

2) Matthew 20:17-28

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

WEDNESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Like Jesus, we must adhere to God's law and stand up for our faith.

Today's readings give us some insight into the consequences of standing up for what is right. Both Jeremiah and Jesus faced persecution for living and teaching God's law. Most of us here are unlikely to be called to their level of prophecy, of course. But we, too, must find the courage to stand up for our faith.

Our current social climate obviously differs from that of Jeremiah, who warns of the impending fall of Jerusalem in the early sixth century B.C. It is clear in the first reading that Jeremiah is in deep water with local authorities who are working to get rid of him. In the last two decades before Jerusalem fell, Jeremiah's prophecies, though from God, fell on the wrong side of the political fence. His words were heard by a divided people, and his opponents eventually drove him into exile, where he died.

In similar fashion, Matthew's Gospel reading cites Jesus' recognition that Jewish leaders *will condemn him to death*. Like Jeremiah, Jesus was aware that speaking the truth would have severe consequences. Also living in a hot political arena, Jesus knew the Roman authorities would listen to the Jewish leaders' cries against him. And so he was *mocked and scourged and crucified*. Like Jeremiah, he spoke the truth, anyway.

Now, fast forward to today. Our Christian beliefs are not always respected. This is where we must stand together and find the "Jeremiah" within ourselves. Like Jesus, we must adhere to God's law and stand up for our faith.

Looking closely, we see what it was that Jeremiah and Jesus had that we need to find – a sense of service. Immediately after Jesus tells his disciples for the third time about his passion and death, two Apostles vie for high seats in Jesus' kingdom. Jesus then teaches the Apostles that to be great, one needs to be a servant, as he himself *did not come to be served, but to serve*.

So let's take some time today to look at our lives and see where we can become better servants, and better defenders of our beliefs.

* * *

Thursday, March 21, 2019
(Lec. 233)

1) Jeremiah 17:5-10

2) Luke 16:19-31

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

THURSDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT

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

Today's first reading proclaims, *Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord.* His life, we are told, will be filled with blessing and free from fear. Let's keep this adage in mind as we take a closer look at today's Gospel in which Jesus tells the Pharisees a story that can challenge our modern-day sensibilities – and the way we live in a country that knows much wealth.

The story is of two men: the rich man who lives a life of plenty with abundant food and fine clothing, and the poor man – Lazarus – who lives in squalor, and is hungry and covered with sores. When they die, the poor man is welcomed by the angels into the arms of Abraham. The rich man finds himself across a great chasm, living in torment. When the rich man calls out to Abraham, he is reminded that he had what was good during his lifetime, while the poor man had nothing.

So many times in the Gospels, Jesus shows favor to the poor, the lame and the downtrodden. He often challenges his followers to reach out to them. And herein lies the fault of the rich man: every day he walked by Lazarus, refusing to help him, refusing even to truly see him. The rich man had “everything,” according to worldly standards, but he lacked the one thing that is most important: love for God and for neighbor. He failed to trust in the Lord.

We don't know much about Lazarus, but that he ends up in the arms of Abraham tells us he was a man who trusted in the Lord, and who had hope in the Lord. His earthly life was one of rags and tatters, but his eternal life is a treasure trove of God's abundant riches.

The message today is not one that says we are automatically doomed to an eternity in torment if we live in a world of richness, or have wealth in possessions. The message is “trust in the Lord,” for the story is not simply about the rich versus the poor. It is about our failure as disciples when we are more trusting of other things (wealth, status, lifestyle) before trusting God. It is about loving God, and loving our neighbor (the basic commandment), and whether we truly see the ones right in front of us who could benefit from our gifts and treasure.

God never lost sight of how impoverished we were as a covenantal people. He never failed, in all of our human history, to give of his abundance – even to the point of giving us his most prized possession, his greatest “wealth,” his Son. And he continues to give of his abundance – most prominently in the Eucharist. May our partaking of that today help us to be more like Lazarus, regardless of our material status: to trust and hope in the Lord.

* * *

Friday, March 22, 2019

(Lec. 234)

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

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

Gospel related: CCC 443, 755, 756

FRIDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone ... and it is wonderful in our eyes.*

Our faith is full of hard truths, the people who speak the Truth, and the rejection of both. We see this in our readings today.

Joseph is the object of jealousy and hatred from his brothers. This is due in part to him being their father's favorite, as we heard, but also because of the dreams he had. These dreams, preceding part of today's narrative passage, were interpreted to mean that the eleven brothers and their parents would one day bow to him. The brothers thus *hated him so much that they would not even greet him*, and they initially plotted to kill him, before selling him as a slave for twenty pieces of silver.

We know from further passages in Genesis that Joseph reconciles with his brothers, and by his forgiveness of them restores the unity of the family. He is also integral to the growth of the Israelite nation, due to his wise administration of resources – including his management of food during a great famine.

Joseph's life, and Jesus' parable about the landowner, both foretell the trials that Jesus will undergo. Jesus, like Joseph, tells those around him the truth of what is to come. Both were betrayed for money. Both are cornerstones in different times of our salvation history. But where Joseph affected a temporal good, and helped to build an earthly nation, Jesus is the one whose life serves as the cornerstone of the kingdom of God. It is Jesus who, by his passion, death and resurrection, opens for us the gateway to this kingdom. *By the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes*, he quotes for us.

Indeed it *is* wonderful – for through him we are redeemed. Through him are we given charge of the vineyard, first prepared by Joseph and the Israelites and then passed down through time to be available to any and all who believe. We are called to be tenants who will care for it, yielding fruit at the proper time to return to our master, much like God through Jesus has revealed himself to all, Jews and Gentiles alike.

When Jesus says bluntly that the kingdom of God will be taken away from the chief priests, they react angrily. They want to arrest him. When Joseph told his brothers of his dreams, they wanted to kill him. But God's Truth never dies. He is our God, and we are his people; and his kingdom is at hand. Rejecting the Truth does not make it go away. Rejecting those who *speak* the Truth does not make it go away.

We are here today because we believe this Truth – and we desire for it to mean something in our lives. We desire for it to have an effect on the choices we make. So as we partake of this Truth in the Eucharist, may it empower us to share it with the world. For the cornerstone of our lives is meant for all.

Saturday, March 23, 2019

(Lec. 235)

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

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

SATURDAY OF

SECOND WEEK

OF LENT

(Opt. Mem.

Saint Turibius of Mogrovejo,

Bishop)

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

FOCUS: Our heavenly Father warmly welcomes us back when we have strayed from him.

Our two readings today work in tandem to help us focus on the great love God has for us, and his most generous forgiveness of our sins. The words from Micah paint a picture of a shepherd tenderly caring for his sheep. Micah then goes on to praise God, almost in disbelief, for his forgiveness of our sins. He poetically expresses how the power and wonder of God, who is Master of all things, delights in clemency and casts our sins *into the depths of the sea*.

The Gospel is no less beautiful. It is the parable of the prodigal son. Jesus tells this story in response to the Pharisees criticizing him for associating with sinners, and even eating with them. His mission on earth was to bring those who were lost back to the Father. If the Pharisees were honest with themselves, they would have realized that this included them. We all have been separated from the Father by sin. We all need reconciliation. Jesus brought about that reconciliation for all of humanity, and for each one of us as sinners who sometimes make bad choices and stray from the warmth, comfort and love of God's kingdom.

The *life of dissipation* described in Saint Luke's Gospel is seen as something terrible and wicked. And it was! For the young man, as a Jew, to tend to pigs – seen as unclean and unworthy of consuming – was about as low as one could fall in life. Not only was it physically dirty and difficult, it had ramifications for his ability to remain faithful to the Mosaic laws.

So the reconciliation the young man had with his father was not just physical, but spiritual. Just as it is in our physical life, and our spiritual life. After we have tried to go it on our own, this parable tells us we can return home to the Father who loves us unconditionally. Whether we have strayed in a big way or in more subtle ways, his arms are wide open to receive us back when we are ready.

This is the message Jesus offered the tax collectors, the Pharisees, the prostitutes and the high priests. The Father wants all of us in his kingdom, and his forgiveness is available to every one of us through the ministry and sacrifice of his son, Jesus.

* * *

SUNDAY, MARCH 24, 2019

(Lec. 30)

- 1) Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15
- 2) 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12
- 3) Luke 13:1-9

**THIRD SUNDAY
OF LENT**

FOCUS: Like the fig tree in today's parable, we must bear the fruit of Christian living.

Bushes, trees and soil figure prominently in the Scriptures we hear today. There is the burning bush that grows on holy ground, and of course we hear Jesus' puzzling parable of the fig tree. Metaphors about growth and "plant" words are some of our favorite ways of describing our lives. We know what someone means when they say they are "putting down roots," or when we describe our children as "growing like weeds." Although we do not live in quite the same agrarian setting as did Jesus, we still know what he means when the Scriptures speak to us using expressions and images that are about trees and soil.

Think for a moment about our lives as Christians. Our lives contain elements of the burning bush, the holy ground and even the fig tree. Take first the captivating image of the burning bush in the first reading. Our lives should be like that burning bush – we are called to be on fire with God's love. In other words, we should be radiant with God's love, a fire that burns within us. That love – God's love – should radiate out into the world through each of us, bringing warmth and light. That fire should be revealed in how we speak and act – a fire that does not burn yet which brightens the world.

As we gather here today, let us remember that we are standing on holy ground. In fact, wherever we stand is holy ground, because it is ground that has been created by God. Deeper still, by the ashes of Ash Wednesday, we were reminded that we are made of that holy ground. We are made by holiness and we are made for holiness.

Finally, there is Jesus' parable about the fig tree. In the end, it is not sufficient for the fig tree to simply be called a fig tree. It must bear fruit. The same is true of our identity as Christians. We, too, must bear fruit. Yet we also know that bearing the fruit of Christian living requires patient tending. We must allow God and others to care for us. We must also exercise Christ-like care for ourselves and for those around us. We, too, need nourishment – fertilizer – to energize us, to help us to grow, to fill us with life. God seeks to provide us with this nourishment as we gather here at the table of the Eucharist.

As we gather here, God shares with us the food that will see us through the cold and dark of our Lenten winter. Here God tends to us, helps us to grow and change in new and holy ways. Here we are nourished as we make our way to the springtime of Easter.

* * *

Monday, March 25, 2019

(Lec. 545)

1) Isaiah 7:10-14, 8:10

2) Hebrews 10:4-10

3) Luke 1:26-38

Gospel related: CCC 497, 706, 723, 2571 CSDC 59

**THE ANNUNCIATION
OF THE LORD
- SOLEMNITY**

FOCUS: As God's holy people, we bear Christ to others.

There is perhaps no greater joy than that of a young couple announcing the impending arrival of their first-born child. There is such radiance in their beings. Those who love the couple share in that contagious joy. No one can wait to welcome the hope of new life! We might consider this, magnified by infinity, as a way of understanding the Annunciation.

Imagine the videos that would have appeared on YouTube and Facebook showing these announcements, and relishing in the joy that we hear in the first reading: *Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel, which means "God is with us!"*

"God is with us." The angel Gabriel visits Mary and announces – the Annunciation – God's plan for salvation, and Mary's part in it. Mary has great faith, and she says yes to what God desires of her. We know that after this, Mary goes to see her cousin Elizabeth. She is welcomed by her cousin, and Elizabeth acknowledges aloud that Mary is blessed, that she is the mother of her Lord, that Mary is *theotokos* – the bearer of God.

As God's holy people, we, too, bear Christ to others, including those who are vulnerable and weak. We, too, can *announce* the Good News of salvation, encouraging others not to be afraid – that God has found favor with us and has saved us. It is not hard to see why celebrating an announcement – the Annunciation – as a feast is an important part of our liturgical life. From that announcement, new life here on earth, and for eternity, eventually sprung forth.

Let us share in that joy, and give thanks to the Lord. For he is good, and his mercy endures forever.

* * *

The following readings may be used on any Lenten day this week, especially in Years B and C when the Gospel of the Samaritan Woman is not read on the Third Sunday of Lent: Ex 17:1-7/Jn 4:5-42 (236).

Tuesday, March 26, 2019

(Lec. 238)

1) Daniel 3:25, 34-43

2) Matthew 18:21-35

Gospel related: CCC 982, 2227, 2843, 2845

TUESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: We must forgive our neighbor, not just in words, but from the heart, just as God has forgiven us.

What does it mean to forgive someone? Or to be forgiven? Peter's question to our Lord sounds legalistic: *Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him?*

For Peter, forgiveness is an obligation. What are the rules? How many times do I have to forgive before I can stop? But for Jesus, it is a matter of love, not duty. Forgiveness must come from the heart, and we must model ourselves after the Father, whose mercy is infinite. As long as our brother or sister repents, we must forgive them.

In answer to Peter's question, Jesus tells the parable of a servant who was forgiven an enormous debt by the king, but refused to forgive a smaller debt owed to him by another servant. On hearing this, the king handed him over to the torturers. Why does Jesus use the example of a debt to illustrate how we should forgive one another? A debt is something that we owe to another person. It is not a favor. It is something they have a right to receive and we have a duty to give.

What do we owe to others? Love. The Lord has commanded that we love God with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind, and we must love our neighbor as ourselves. When we hurt our neighbor in any way, we have failed to give him the love he deserves from us. Likewise, when someone hurts us, we must be willing to forgive them, out of love. God's love is infinite. Our debt to him is like the debt owed the king in the parable. It is so great that we can never repay him for the love he has shown us. But time after time, he will forgive us. In the same way, we must forgive one another – not out of duty, but out of love.

This is why Jesus says that the Father will only forgive us to the extent that we forgive others. If we refuse to forgive, then we have closed our heart. A closed heart cannot receive the love and mercy of God. A closed heart means we have closed ourselves to his forgiveness.

This is not the time to be closed of heart; the world, the Church, needs us. That we are here today signals that we are open to forgiveness and reconciliation, even if we may still need perfecting in those areas. So let us pray for the grace to perfect us. Let us give thanks for the forgiveness of sins that Jesus' death and resurrection accomplished. And let us take him into ourselves with a firm desire to love and forgive others, as we have been loved and forgiven.

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Wednesday, March 27, 2019

(Lec. 239)

1) Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9

2) Matthew 5:17-19

Gospel related: CCC 577, 592, 1967, 2053

WEDNESDAY OF

THIRD WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: Jesus fulfills the law and embodies the closeness of God to his people.

Anyone who has ever tried to teach a younger person something – whether it be a child, a niece or nephew, a student, even a younger sibling – may have experienced a willing listener, an eager learner. It is possible, however, that we have experienced the opposite. Perhaps the younger person rolled his eyes, yawned or explained, matter-of-factly, that “you just do not understand,” or, “you are *too old* to understand” or that “things have changed since you were a kid.” No matter how we try to explain that our wisdom is *for the good* of the other, sometimes people do not listen. We may even behave this way ourselves. As adults, perhaps we think our parents couldn’t possibly have anything wise to offer us any longer. *We know* how to raise kids, manage our finances and deal with problems at work; *they* don’t understand; things have changed since they were in our shoes.

In today’s first reading, Moses tries to teach the people three important things about the God and his laws. First, the laws from God are fair. They are not arbitrary. They are just. Second, the laws are *for their good*; hear them, he says, observe them, that you may live, that you may prosper. Moses is the metaphorical adult in the room, trying to share with others that what God decrees is *for their own good*. Third, and especially important in light of the Gospel, God’s law signifies his closeness to his people: *For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?*

In the Gospel, Jesus affirms this teaching on the law. He does not come to do away with the law, to abandon the teaching of the prophets. He is not the newcomer who teaches that the older ways are outdated, obsolete or no longer valid. Rather, the laws are still binding. The one who obeys the commandments, who teaches them to others, will be called the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Moreover, and most important, Jesus himself will be the fulfillment of the law. He will show us, in his very person, in his very being, just *how* close God is to us.

Moses had said, *For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it?* – and we can say, as Christians, “what a great God we have, so close to us that he became one of us, lived among us, knows our struggles, has been in our shoes, understands our experiences and teaches us in his great wisdom.”

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Thursday, March 28, 2019
(Lec. 240)

1) Jeremiah 7:23-28

2) Luke 11:14-23

Gospel related: CCC 385, 700

THURSDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: God is now here.

It is both ironic and tragic that the same people who had just witnessed Jesus driving out a demon in today's Gospel also ask him for a sign from heaven. One would think that suddenly hearing a mute man speak would qualify as a sign as obvious as a neon billboard!

But much like the Israelites in the first reading, the crowds following Jesus have also *stiffened their necks and walked in the hardness of their evil hearts and turned their backs, not their faces*, to the Lord. No matter what Jesus did, or what miracles he performed, they were unable to recognize and acknowledge the presence of the living God in their midst.

The truth is that we often make a big fuss about "seeking God" in our lives, as if he was lost in the first place. Often, when we focus on this "search" for God, we are no different than the crowds, missing the presence of God in the here and now.

What we are doing, in fact, is transferring the attitude, conduct and anxiety with which we direct everything else in our lives, and applying it to our spiritual lives and to our relationship with God. Even the questions we ask can get it wrong: Am I doing it right? How can I find God? What can I do better?

When this is our attitude, the best thing we can do is to take a deep breath, stop thinking about what we want or need or how to improve, and instead, turn our face to the Lord with arms and heart open, and pay attention to what God is already doing. God is already here. God is already saving us. God is already loving us. Let us simply love him in return.

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Friday, March 29, 2019

(Lec. 241)

1) Hosea 14:2-10

2) Mark 12:28-34

Gospel related: CCC 129, 202, 228, 575, 2196

FRIDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: The two great commandments require whole-hearted love of God, self and neighbor.

In the Gospel today, Jesus saw that the scribe had answered his question with understanding (an unusual event in Scripture!), and he tells the scribe that he is not far from the kingdom of God. Two aspects of this stand out. First, Jesus' words are a compliment to the scribe – another rare event – in his affirmation of his answer. Second, the compliment comprises a challenge: that he's not far from the kingdom also means that he is not yet fully there. There is still work to be done.

We are in the same place: the “already but not yet” of God's kingdom. A kingdom present here on earth, inaugurated for us in the Incarnation, but not yet complete in its fullness, which we will experience at the end of time. So our work is the same as that of the scribe's: to place God at the center of our lives. In doing so, our hearts will grow to love all that God has loved into existence.

This is how the second great commandment is related to the first. We will grow to love even our lowliest neighbors simply because God loves them. While God loves all creatures, we know from our biblical tradition that he has a special love for the poor and meek. Thus, Catholic social teaching tells us that if we want to love God and neighbor, we must add the corporal and spiritual works of mercy to our “to-do” list. The corporal works of mercy are: To feed the hungry. Give water to the thirsty. Clothe the naked. Shelter the homeless. Visit the sick. Visit the imprisoned. Bury the dead.

The spiritual works of mercy are: To instruct the ignorant. Counsel the doubtful. Admonish the sinner. Bear patiently those who wrong us. Forgive offenses. Comfort the afflicted. Pray for the living and the dead.

Certainly, at times, easier said than done.

Are our lives centered on God? If we love God with our whole being, then we will love all that God loves. And all *who* God loves. Let us take a moment to contemplate how we can solidly place the Lord first in our hearts – creating time, space and energy for God's love to manifest itself as an extension of ourselves to our neighbors.

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Saturday, March 30, 2019

(Lec. 242)

1) Hosea 6:1-6

2) Luke 18:9-14

Gospel related: CCC 588, 2559, 2613, 2631, 2667, 2839

SATURDAY OF

THIRD WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: This Lent, make a sincere and humble conversion.

God's mercy is both simple and a great mystery. He offers his mercy freely and abundantly to each of us, but to receive it, we must recognize our own sinfulness and ask for that mercy.

Immediately prior to the passage in our first reading today, the prophet Hosea accuses the Northern Kingdom of Israel, called Ephraim, of breaking their covenant with God. After hearing Hosea's predictions which arise because of that breach, the people of Ephraim seem to have a conversion – and this is where we pick up the story today. They say, *let us return to the Lord*.

But God knows their hearts. He says through the prophet: *Your piety is ... like the dew that early passes away*. He desires to be known and loved rather than offered ritual sacrifices.

God knows their hearts. This seems to suggest that the Israelites are just going through the motions, making sacrifices in reparation and then returning to their sinful ways, expecting to be forgiven. They presume that God will forgive them. Maybe they think they deserve to be saved. In reality, our salvation cannot be earned. The catechism reminds us: "Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God" (CCC 1996).

Jesus speaks of a Pharisee who also seemed to believe he deserved God's favor. His prayer, disguised as thanksgiving, appealed to his own vanity. The tax collector, however, realized his own sinfulness and came to God in humility and sincerity. He recognized his sin and repented wholeheartedly; because of this, he went home justified. That kind of repentance wells up from our hearts when we realize that even though we all fall short of the glory of God, we are infinitely loved, valued and forgiven. None of us deserves what God offers freely. And yet he never ceases to give to those who humbly ask for his mercy and make a sincere effort to follow him.

Lent is an extraordinary time of grace to remind us of that redemptive mercy – a focused time for repentance and confession.

When we approach Jesus in the sacrament of penance, let us return with our whole hearts. Let our repentance be as sincere as our commitment to sin no more. May we seek to know and love God, and may that inspire loyalty for the King of Kings. May we learn true humility as we look not at others, but rather at the cross. And as we gaze at the face of Jesus who died for each of us, may we, too, be overcome as we pray, *O God, be merciful to me, a sinner*.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 31, 2019

(Lec. 33)

- 1) Joshua 5:9a, 10-12
- 2) 2 Corinthians 5:17-21
- 3) Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

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

**FOURTH SUNDAY
OF LENT**

FOCUS: God provides for us, but also gives us free will.

Today's readings remind us that we have a loving God who supplies all our needs but also gives us free will. He knows our weaknesses, and is always ready to receive us with forgiveness and mercy – when we turn to him with trust, repentance and humility.

The first reading in particular is a reminder that God provides for us. For years while the Israelites were in the desert, God had provided manna, which miraculously showed up in the desert so the people could keep up their strength during their journey in the desert. But once they arrived in the land that had been promised to them and had access to the fruits of the land, God ceased the necessity of providing the extraordinary gift of manna and allowed the people of Israel to be nurtured through their free cooperation with nature and the natural order of crops.

Similarly, Jesus shows us how God – through the character of the father in the parable of the prodigal son – takes care of us without forcing himself on us or preventing our turning away from him. The father honors the unreasonable request of his younger son (who by Jewish law has no claim on any inheritance) and divides his estate between the two sons. He doesn't prevent the younger son from leaving home to live a life of sin in a foreign country, but gives him the freedom to make mistakes. He doesn't chase after his son or send out detectives to find him and bring him back – but lets the son use his free will to embark on the path he has chosen. Once the son realizes his mistake and comes back home, however, the father meets him more than halfway and welcomes him whole-heartedly, without judgment or reproach.

God works the same way with us. He provides for us, but he does not force us into a relationship with him. By his grace we are invited; by our will and his grace do we respond. During Lent, we are invited in a special way to turn back to God in whatever way may be necessary – to take the first step of reconciliation with God or with others. God waits for us patiently in the sacrament of reconciliation, and is ready to absolve us and make us “new creations” as we confess our sins and ask for God's forgiveness and strength. Let us pray and encourage one another to live out God's call to us in Lent: to provide manna for one another and to turn back to God with all our hearts, minds and souls.

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