

February

1 2 3 4 5 6
7 8 9 10 11
12 13 14 15 16
17 18 19 20
21 22 23 24
25 26 27 28
29

**YEAR A
WEEKDAYS II**

Saturday, February 1, 2020
(Lec. 322)

- 1) 2 Samuel 12:1-7a,
10-17
- 2) Mark 4:35-41

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

FOCUS: One way or another, Jesus will lead us out of our personal storms.

Today's Gospel from Mark, though only seven verses long, is very rich. It is a story of faith, or lack thereof. It is a self-indictment on the part of the disciples, who – like David in the first reading – fail to see how they themselves fit into the storyline. David unknowingly convicts himself after hearing a parable about the rich man [which he doesn't realize is his own story].

The story of the calming of the *violent squall* comes immediately after Jesus had spent a day of teaching the Jews along the shores of Galilee. Having taught from a boat for hours, Jesus tells his Apostles to head to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, crossing from west to east into the land of Gentiles for the first time.

Squalls come up quickly on the Sea of Galilee, even today, because of the topography of the region. The one in today's Gospel caused even the seasoned fishermen among the Apostles to be concerned, yet Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was asleep. They were frightened and they woke Jesus, saying, *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?* Jesus *rebuked the wind* and quieted the seas, and then asked the disciples, *Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?*

As with David, the disciples failed to see themselves in the parables they heard, and did not understand their own role in the mission of which they were a part. It is hard to blame them. David was blinded by lust and the power of his royal authority. The disciples were blinded by ignorance and fear. Each of us can be blinded by some sin or element of the human condition, and struggle to be who God wants us to be; we can struggle with the gift of faith.

Even in the violent squalls that arise in our lives, however, Jesus is there for us. He may not always quiet our storm, instead giving us the strength and courage to ride it out. Our faith grows when we ask him for help, and trust in his response. This is all part of life. It's also part of spiritual growth, and if we keep the faith, we will reap his reward.

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2020

(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 fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, and the light to reveal God's glory to the world.

At first this celebration may seem rather strange and out of sequence. We have long since taken down the Christmas decorations and put away the crèches. Indeed, two Sundays of Ordinary Time have passed during which the adult Jesus has been baptized, begun his public ministry and called his first disciples. This is where knowledge of Jewish custom and history helps us understand this momentary shift out of Ordinary Time and back to a feast.

The Gospel, says, *When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph took Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.* Mosaic Law set this time of purification as 40 days after the birth of a male child – and today is 40 days, inclusive, after Christmas.

What occurred on this holy day took place for countless other Jewish mothers and their sons. The rite of purification included a burnt offering to the Lord – for the wealthy the sacrifice of a one-year old lamb or goat; for the poor, two turtle doves or young pigeons, as Mary does here. As her firstborn son, Jesus is also consecrated to the Lord, and while this does not have to take place in a temple, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem for this purpose.

The symbolism of this ought not to be lost on us. In bringing Jesus to the Temple, his parents are giving back the very gift that God has given them. This gesture of whole-hearted thanksgiving to God, therefore, becomes the pattern of salvation and the way of all Christian living. This newborn child, the Father's gift to creation, will in turn offer his whole life back to God in another act of sacrificial self-giving at Calvary. The child who is presented in the Temple of Jerusalem will one day die in this same city, destroying this Temple and raising a new one.

Simeon and Anna, just and pious people, were also present in the Temple. Their hearts were full of expectant hope in the fulfillment of the promises God had made to Israel about her redemption. Together, they represent all who ever longed for the coming of the Messiah and for the redemption of humanity.

As Simeon says, this child is the revelation of God's glory. Jesus fulfills the title given to him in an earlier part of Luke's Gospel, where he is described as *Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father* (1:32). He is the very gift of God to us, long promised through the words of Malachi: the one who will fill the Temple with the very presence of God.

But this is not just any divine revelation, for Jesus shares with us our human condition, with all its trials and temptations, making him a true light and hope for all humanity. While Christians are no longer dedicated according to the Law of Moses, we are presented at baptism by name, and, through the grace of that sacrament, conformed to the very identity and sacrifice of Christ. The life we have been given by God is therefore best lived by our own loving, thankful and obedient service to him. With God's help, may we always do so.

Monday, February 3, 2020
(Lec. 323)

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

MONDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Blaise,
Bishop and Martyr;
Saint Ansgar,
Bishop)

FOCUS: The link between God's power and mercy is made manifest in Jesus Christ.

The tremendous power of God is made manifest in Christ, and it is important to note that this power is paired with mercy. In today's Gospel, upon being accosted by the young man possessed by Legion, Jesus out of mercy commands the demons to leave him. Mark writes that Christ wielded such immense power out of pity for the man. As such, Christ's power is not used simply to amaze the many bystanders. Rather, Christ is moved and saddened to witness the suffering of the young man, and he heals him out of mercy.

David, too, is accosted in today's Scripture. A member of Saul's family throws stones and curses at him. When David's servant requests permission to kill the man, David forbids it. He does so not out of the goodness of his own heart, but out of reverence for God and his ways: perhaps this was part of David's punishment. And perhaps, also, David says, the Lord will look with mercy upon him for these torments.

It would appear that the similarities of these stories have less to do with the situations and circumstances of the aggrieved and the recipients of their ire, but serve instead to reveal the mind of God. God is loving, compassionate, just and merciful. And despite whatever sickness or resentment fills our hearts, he has already provided us the antidote. Jesus Christ, whose paschal mystery cleanses us from sin and reunites us to the Father, is the manifestation of God's power and mercy. Nothing more needs to be added. We have only to grab ahold of this revelation of love and believe.

The young man in the Gospel is tormented by the legion of demons who are so powerful they have the strength to break chains and crush shackles. But Christ's power is stronger. That same power and that same mercy are available to each of us today through Jesus. May we give thanks for this gift through our faithful, lived witness to the gracious power and mercy of God.

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Tuesday, February 4, 2020

(Lec. 324)

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

2) Mark 5:21-43

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

TUESDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: God's love for us surpasses all things.

Jairus, a synagogue official, approached Jesus because his daughter was extremely sick. He fell down at Jesus' feet and begged him to lay his hands upon her so she would be healed. Jesus immediately went with this distressed father, but in the process was intercepted by a seriously ill woman who was in the crowd surrounding him. She believed she would be healed by merely touching his clothes. We heard that Jesus turned to see who had touched him, and marveled at her faith. She was healed by merely touching him.

By then, Jairus received word that his daughter had died, but Jesus told him not to fear. When they arrived at the official's home, the crowd assembled there was weeping with grief. We know what happened – the girl was brought back from the dead, which, of course, astounded everyone.

Both of these healings came through faith in Jesus, demonstrating the vast power of God.

We hear throughout our lives, and in our faith journeys, about those who have been healed even after Jesus left this earth. That is because he left his advocate for us, the Holy Spirit. Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Jesus remains with us, present in Word and sacrament, and responsive to the needs of his people. We may not be on the dusty road of ancient Israel, but we have the same access to him as Jairus and the woman who was ill.

God's love, and his grace for us, continues endlessly. We need him. And so we come with thanksgiving to Mass, knowing that God's love for all of us far surpasses any situation in which we find ourselves. Come with joy now as we receive him in the Eucharist.

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Wednesday, February 5, 2020

(Lec. 325)

1) 2 Samuel 24:2, 9-17

2) Mark 6:1-6

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

Gospel related: **CCC** 500, 699, 2610 **CSDC** 259

FOCUS: May God in his goodness give us the grace to grow in faith and trust.

In the first reading, King David chose to call a census of the people of Israel. This was a grave sin, for which he repented. One of the traditional beliefs at that time was that it was only God who knew (or should know) the numbers of the people, for the people belonged to God, and not any king. It thus separated the temporal role of the king from the divine role and responsibilities due only to God.

In response, God gave him the choice of consequences for this decision. David chose three days of pestilence – and then, seeing how many people were harmed by this, he begged for the Lord to punish him only. His faith in God's mercy and power were once again evident.

The people of Nazareth faced consequences because of their reaction to Jesus visiting their synagogue. They closed their minds to the miracles Jesus worked in other towns, and to the stirring words of wisdom he proclaimed in their synagogue. Instead, they doubted his patronage and his authority. He was, after all, "only" the carpenter, the son of Mary, and a former neighbor of theirs. How could he be anything special? Jesus was *amazed* at their lack of faith, and as a result could perform only a few miracles there. Consequently, few in Nazareth were able to witness his power.

Saint Agatha, whom we memorialize today, is an example to us of someone who had great faith in God and made decisions in favor of him time after time. She did so even when the consequences were dire. She chose to be a consecrated virgin for Jesus, and refused time and again to marry a powerful man who wanted her – receiving more and greater forms of punishment and torture. But her many choices in favor of Jesus led her to the ultimate happy consequence – an eternity in heaven. Her faith appears never to have wavered.

We are not David, and we are not Saint Agatha. Yet each of us has been given the gift of faith, and each of us in our own way has the daily opportunity to express that faith and trust in God. We have the words of Jesus available for our consumption. We have the free will to make choices that lead us closer to God, or to reject God.

So, today, we pray for the grace to grow in faith and trust, especially when times are difficult. And may our choices lead us always closer to God who desired us first, that we may live with him forever.

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Thursday, February 6, 2020
(Lec. 326)

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

THURSDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM

Saint Paul Miki and Companions,
Martyrs)

Gospel related: **CCC** 765, 1506, 1673

FOCUS: We are all on a mission from God.

Like the titular characters of the 1980 classic *The Blues Brothers*, we are on a mission from God. Unlike Jake and Elwood, it probably doesn't involve getting the band back together to save an orphanage. It may, however, resemble the mission Jesus gives his disciples.

In today's Gospel, the disciples are charged with preaching repentance, anointing the sick and driving out demons. Throughout Christ's ministry, their mission will grow to include forgiving sins (John 20:23), and celebrating the Eucharistic sacrifice (Luke 22:19). While most of the Church is not made up of those who are ordained, all of us, by our baptism, have been anointed as priests, prophets and kings. Therefore, the wisdom inherent in Christ's directions to his disciples are also applicable to us.

We could interpret Jesus' strict instructions on how little the disciples could carry as showing us the importance of relying on God's providence to meet our needs. We might think of the Twelve staying at the same house as demonstrating that they were not constantly seeking something better. Similarly, we have the grace available to us to both practice gratitude for our current circumstances and be a faithful friend to others.

Today, the Church celebrates the Memorial of Saint Paul Miki and Companions, Martyrs. We honor the sacrifice of 26 native Japanese Catholics, and a few foreign missionaries, who, in 1597, underwent a forced march of 600 miles to Nagasaki, where they were then stabbed to death for their faith. Among them were children. As we honor their fortitude in never renouncing Christ, and the charity of Saint Paul Miki in forgiving his assassins, we see the wisdom of David's words to Solomon today: Take courage. Keep the mandate of the Lord. We may not face the trials these 26 did, but our trials are still our own, and they matter in living out our mission of discipleship.

As Saint John Henry Newman wrote: "God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do his work."

Saint Paul Miki and friends, and Saint John Henry Newman, pray for us that we may have the grace to carry out our mission from God.

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Friday, February 7, 2020
(Lec. 327)

1) Sirach 47:2-11

2) Mark 6:14-29

Gospel related: **CCC** 523

FRIDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: *Blessed be God my salvation!*

Today, we hear the stories of two kings, David and Herod.

The passage from Sirach provides a snapshot of King David's life: beginning as a youth when he battled the Philistine giant and ending as a king whose throne was established in Israel. In his lifetime, he extended the boundary of Israel and overcame all opposition, committed adultery and murder – yet repented humbly and publicly, and was forgiven by God.

The Gospel sets the kingship of Herod in the context of the preaching of John the Baptist, whose fame was growing. Even though Herod liked to listen to John's preaching, his passion for his stepdaughter led him to order his execution. This decision haunted his memory, for he believed in the holiness of John, and in the prevalent belief that departed spirits had powers.

No wonder Herod hoped that somehow John's death was not final, but that Jesus was actually John raised from the dead. For if this were true, John was the one performing the miracles, and Jesus was not who he said he was.

The lives of both these kings point to Jesus in some way. Herod is threatened by Jesus' existence, and afraid of who he might be. David, on the other hand – whose life was imperfect – prepared the royal lineage that paved the way for Jesus' birth.

Our lives, too, will somehow point toward Jesus. Either by negation, like Herod, or with hope, like David. Unlike Herod, we know of the kingdom Jesus founded through his ministry of hope, healing and forgiveness. Therefore, our choice ought to be easy: To direct our lives toward the one who first directed his life toward us, and to believe in, and live the Good News that Jesus brings us. For as the psalmist says today, *Blessed be God my salvation!*

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Saturday, February 8, 2020
(Lec. 328)

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

SATURDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.)

Saint Jerome Emiliani;
Saint Josephine Bakhita, Virgin;
Saturday in honor of BVM)

FOCUS: May the heart of Christ be ours this day and every day.

Solomon could have asked God for anything – riches, long life, the death of his enemies. But instead he requests *an understanding heart to judge [God's] people and to distinguish right from wrong*. God is pleased with Solomon's request and grants it, along with riches and glory, for which he did not ask. Solomon has God's favor, and will eventually be renowned for his wisdom and wealth. God has provided a king for his people who will have no equal.

Slightly less than 1,000 years later, God provides another king to lead his people, and he, too, will have no equal. God sends his Son, Jesus, who is wisdom personified, and whose own heart is compassionate and understanding. As did Solomon, Jesus comes to serve *in the midst of the people whom [God has] chosen, a people so vast that it cannot be numbered or counted*.

Thus, when Jesus notes the vastness of the crowd following him and his disciples as they tried to find a deserted place to get rest and food, *his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd*. Jesus abandons his quest for respite and begins *to teach them many things*. He stays with them, sharing from his heart of wisdom and understanding. Soon he will feed all 5,000 of them in a miracle of his gracious love. Like a good shepherd, Jesus feeds his flock, gathers them close and leads them with wisdom and compassion.

These two readings show some minor similarities between the reign of Solomon and that of Jesus. More importantly, they show the consistency and generosity of God. Despite our constant failure as his people, he never abandons us, nor does he forsake his promises. When the people needed a king, he gave them Solomon. When a series of kings, judges and prophets continued to be ignored, or at best, heard but not followed, God gave us a new kind of king. A king who would usher in a new covenant and open the gates to a new kingdom. One who was God himself, incarnate among us so as to redeem us from the morass of human sin and conform us to his divine nature. A king who would reconcile God's people to him, first those of the chosen tribes and then all of humanity.

An understanding heart is one not to underestimate. The wisdom it provides can be life-giving. Jesus came that we might have life – eternal life – and that we might also share the good news of that eternal life with others. To do that, we can ask, as Solomon did, for our own heart of understanding. One that is moved with pity for those in need, and capable of both leading and being a servant to others.

May the heart of Christ be ours this day and every day.

Saint Jerome Emiliani (1486-1537) – Jerome Emiliani was a former soldier turned priest, who ministered to hundreds of children in 16th-century Venice when war and famine left them orphaned. He cared for them at his own expense, eventually founding three orphanages. In 1532, he founded the Somaschi Fathers, dedicated to caring for orphans and educating youth. He died in 1537 from an illness he contracted while caring for others.

Saint Josephine Bahkita (1869-1947) – Kidnapped as a child and sold as a slave, Josephine was purchased at age 12 by the Italian Consul, and taken to Italy to serve as a nanny. While staying with the consul's children at a convent, she was baptized. She joined the Canossian Sisters of Charity in 1896 after the Italian government recognized her as a free person. She served the community for 25 years, and was beloved for her joyful nature and melodic voice. She is the first Sudanese saint.

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2020

(Lec. 73)

1) Isaiah 58:7-10

2) 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

3) Matthew 5:13-16

Gospel related: CCC 326, 782, 1243, 2821

**FIFTH SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: May we be salt for the earth and light for the world.

You are the salt of the earth ... and the light of the world, Jesus says to his disciples. And salt that has no flavor is good for nothing, while a lighted lamp under a basket fails to dispel the darkness.

No one here would deny there is too much darkness in the world. We also know how much we dread the dark days of winter and can't wait for the days to start getting longer again. Illness and depression are often linked to the lack of light. We all relish in the "bright sunny day" Johnny Nash sang about back in the seventies.

As faithful followers of Jesus, it is now our responsibility to disperse the darkness we encounter around us with the Light of Christ that dwells within each of us. As congregations and communities, we have to hold our civic leaders accountable for decisions that bring darkness to the world instead of light. We also need to praise our civic leaders when they buck what may be popular and choose to do what is right.

The prophet Isaiah says, *Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless; clothe the naked when you see them, and do not turn your back on your own*. These are all concrete ways in which we flavor the earth with God's goodness, and allow light to break forth in darkness. But these are not the *only* ways.

Jesus' metaphors do not have to frighten the introverts among us – we are not required to be a giant pillar of salt, or a strobe light on an airfield. Each of us has the opportunity to glorify God according to our gifts, our circumstances and our state in life. So even if all we can offer is a grain of salt, or a flicker of a match light, that is OK. Whatever we have been given by God is meant to be shared for the sake of the world. Whatever we have is worth giving.

May the Lord grant, as Saint Paul says, that our *faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God*, that we may be salt for the earth and light for the world.

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Monday, February 10, 2020
(Lec. 329)

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

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

Gospel related: **CCC** 1504

FOCUS: The Lord is here, and dwells among us.

Our readings today show the power of God's presence. In the first reading, the Lord's presence fills the Temple that Solomon built. The signs of his presence are powerful and dramatic – as all the people process to the Temple, the cloud fills it so fully that the priests cannot even remain inside. It is obvious for all present that this is where the Lord now dwells.

In our Gospel, too, people have come to recognize Jesus, and they believe in the healing power of his presence. Unlike other healing scenes in Mark's Gospel where we hear about the encounter between Jesus and an individual, this scene demonstrates the massive scope of Jesus' healing: Town after town, all the sick are brought to him, and as many as simply touch just the tassel of his cloak are healed. The people have found the Lord's healing power in Jesus, and by their faith in approaching him, they are acknowledging that the Lord is near.

Here, in our own church, truly the Lord is present. We come to worship him, to adore him and to proclaim his goodness in coming to dwell with his people. We claim this presence here, in the most profound and miraculous of ways, in the holy Eucharist that we are about to celebrate. The Lord is here, and as the Lord calls us to himself, he also calls us to be in the world. Uniting us to himself, the Lord then calls us to be channels of his healing presence, and to recognize him in all the places he dwells – in his creation, in the poor, in our enemies, and even in our own hearts.

The Lord is here and dwells among us. Let us give thanks to the Lord.

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Tuesday, February 11, 2020

(Lec. 330)

1) 1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30

2) Mark 7:1-13

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

Gospel related: **CCC** 581, 2196, 2218, 2247

FOCUS: Actions speak louder than words.

In today's encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees, Jesus calls them out for being hypocrites.

The Pharisees were quick to point out that Jesus' disciples were not obeying Jewish purity laws: They were eating meals with unwashed hands.

Jesus counters their criticism by invoking the words of the prophet Isaiah, *This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts*. This passage from the Hebrew Scriptures is echoed in a phrase familiar to our own ears: "Actions speak louder than words." Those with good intentions make promises. Those with good character keep them.

Jesus then expands on what he means: The Pharisees are preaching the law, but not following it – choosing to follow human tradition over God's commandments. They also fail to allow, or to help, those within the community to follow the law. For example, the Pharisees give tacit approval to the people to shirk their responsibility to their parents, if it endangers their support of the Jewish institutions and structures of the day. Jesus questions how the Pharisees can say they are guiding the people to follow the law of the Lord, if they are subverting the law for their own self-interests.

Jesus' accusation of the Pharisees is a fair one for each of us to consider as to whether, at times, it may apply to our own lives, and how each of us listens to and obeys God's command. If we are called to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, then our behavior needs to give evidence to what pours forth from our souls. If and when it doesn't – then taking heed of Jesus' criticism, and a good examination of conscience and confession, can help us get back on the right track.

We remember that actions speak louder than words. The call to live our faith is not accomplished only in our communal worship here at Mass. We live our faith every moment of our lives. With God's grace, may our actions truly reflect the love we have for him and for one another.

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Wednesday, February 12, 2020

(Lec. 331)

1) 1 Kings 10:1-10

2) Mark 7:14-23

Gospel related: CCC 574, 582, 1764

WEDNESDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: External practices reflect what is in our hearts.

Many of us have likely encountered someone whose reason for not practicing the faith is because they have known, or know, people who come to Church every week but are not very nice people. Based on today's Gospel, one can imagine Jesus saying, "Exactly so!" What is the point of outwardly practicing one's faith and following all its rules if none of this has touched the heart?

As observant Jews, Jesus and his disciples were required to follow God's commandments, and other religious disciplines that were a part of the *tradition of the elders* (Cf., Mark 7:5).

But, as Jesus points out, the observance of these religious and spiritual practices is meaningless if what lies within our hearts defiles us before God. And what is it that defiles us before God? Sin. God is pure and good, loving and forgiving, and we are called to be like God in our lives.

Jesus gives plenty of specific examples of sins that defile us before God, *From within the man, from his heart, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, [and] folly*. If our hearts are inclined away from God and toward these evil thoughts and deeds, external religious practice is not going to make us pure before God.

So how do we ensure that our religious observances do not remain external practices, but actually touch our hearts? We start by acknowledging that we can't make this happen on our own. We come to the sacrament of reconciliation, looking not only for forgiveness, but also for the grace we need to be better. We come to the Eucharist, grateful for the gift that is not merely bread, but Christ truly present among us and within us: Christ who can touch and transform our hearts, turning them toward God. We recognize that it is by grace that we have the gift of life, and of faith, and that our participation in the life of grace enables us to become less and less tempted by sin. The more we fill with grace, the more that virtues and gifts of the Spirit – and not evils that defile – will pour forth from us.

May we hear and understand Christ's words today, and accept the grace freely offered to live them.

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Thursday, February 13, 2020
(Lec. 332)

1) 1 Kings 11:4-13

2) Mark 7:24-30

Gospel related: CCC 2616

THURSDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: All of us are hungry, and no food can fill us better than the bread of life.

There is profound revelation that comes to us in a very subtle manner in today's Gospel: Jesus' saving mission is not just for the Jewish people, but for the Gentiles as well. That is, he comes for the salvation of all.

Jesus has entered *the district of Tyre*, and tried to do so without notice. But his efforts are thwarted by a desperate Syrophenician woman (a non-Jew) who had heard of him, found him and *fell at his feet* with a plea for the healing of her possessed daughter.

This is a woman, a Gentile and a mother of a daughter with an unclean spirit. She surely knows that she is breaking numerous cultural protocols to approach this Jewish Rabbi. But as a mother with a suffering child, she has the audacity to ask Jesus to help her anyway.

She has no claim to this assistance – which Jesus reminds her in their ensuing conversation, telling her that *it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs*. Those words are harsh (it was not exactly a compliment to be referred to as “dogs”) – but Jesus' intention is not. For in her response, he finds faith and understanding of who he is and what he is doing. *Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps*, she says.

The woman is not conceding that her people are dogs, or less than the children of God. She is speaking a truth about God and his mercy that far too many in the Gospels fail to acknowledge, or even see. And we who hear these words of Mark today realize that we have been privy to a radical revelation about God's redemptive plan – subtly expressed in their interchange. Jesus is indeed the Messiah foretold in the Scriptures by the prophets, who will show the Jewish people the way of salvation. He will also welcome the Gentiles who thirst for righteousness and healing.

With the courage of a mother with a sick child, she rejects unworthiness as an impediment to God's love and indicates a readiness for mercy. She is, in many ways, a model for each one of us. She falls at his feet, showing the utmost vulnerability in both demeanor and actual posture, and by doing so essentially says: “Lord, I am here, I am ready, and I am hungry now; I have come to you for even the morsels; the lowest position you can offer me is better than what I have.”

What better and greater example of faith could be shown? For everything she said about herself is true about us. None of us is worthy, but God's love and mercy depend on him, not us. All of us are hungry, and no food can fill us better than the bread of life. We live in this world, and God offers us a life in the next. Our vulnerability before the Lord allows his strength to fill us and lift us up.

May God continue to bless us as we receive him into our bodies, that we may take him out into the world for all who need him.

Friday, February 14, 2020

(Lec. 333)

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

2) Mark 7:31-37

FRIDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(OBL MEM

Saints Cyril, Monk,
and Methodius, Bishop)

Gospel related: CCC 1151, 1504

FOCUS: May we have the wisdom and fortitude of all the saints who have gone before us proclaiming the Good News.

In today's Gospel, the people brought to Jesus a deaf man who had a speech impediment. Jesus takes the man aside and, using both words and touch, cures him of his deafness and makes it possible for him to speak clearly. Yet, the first thing this newly healed man hears is, "Don't tell anyone."

This seems a bit cruel, no? Like putting a steak in front of a hungry person and saying, "Don't eat"; or a glass of water in front of someone who thirsts and saying, "Don't drink that!" This man has just, in essence, gotten his life back because he can now fully participate in society – working, providing for a family, attending synagogue, engaging in effective communication – and he's not supposed to celebrate it, explain it or share it.

But here is the best part: The people don't listen to Jesus. (Who knew we would sort of applaud that kind of behavior?). Mark tells us that the more Jesus *ordered them not to [tell anyone], the more they proclaimed it.*

Obviously, Jesus would never be cruel, and, all things considered, we ought not be glad when people disobey his commands. So what is really happening in this story as Mark recounts it? We might consider this question in light of our liturgical calendar and the saints we memorialize.

Despite the secular calendar telling us it is Saint Valentine's Day, the Church actually celebrates the memorial of two different saints today: Cyril and Methodius. Saints Cyril and Methodius were ninth-century Greek brothers who became missionaries along the Danube region; they are known by the title, "the Apostles of the Slavs." Among their many deeds, they translated the Bible into the vernacular of the people, and invented a Slavic alphabet that served as a foundation for modern Russian and other Slavic languages. In other words, their missionary work involved communication: Opening the ears of the people, giving them the Word in a form they could understand and creating a way for them to write and speak plainly in return. They did all of this amid conflict, exile, being forbidden to carry out their work or use their language, and myriad other obstacles.

This sounds a lot like what Jesus did in today's Gospel. And by Mark presenting the story as he does, our view of it so far may be a little too superficial. Perhaps the "best part," as offered above, is neither Jesus ordering the crowd not to tell anyone, nor the crowd disobeying the order. Perhaps it is the people's immediate recognition of Jesus as the Promised One, as they quote the prophetic Scripture concerning him (Isaiah 35:5), and their understanding that this is good news to be shared. And they do not let anything stop them from doing it.

This sounds like Saints Cyril and Methodius ... and every other saint! It sounds like the life of evangelization to which we are called. In that light, then, we pray that we may have the wisdom and fortitude of all the saints who have gone before us proclaiming the Good News, that we, too, may open the ears of others and give them words with which to praise God.

Saturday, February 15, 2020
(Lec. 334)

1) 1 Kings 12:26-32
13:33-34

2) Mark 8:1-10

Gospel related: **CCC** 1329

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

FOCUS: Jesus can take our gifts, no matter how small, and multiply them for the good of the world.

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

This quote, from the autobiography of Theodore Roosevelt, is a great motto for us when faced with troubles or challenges that overwhelm us. We may say, “I am only one person. What could I possibly do to help?” or “The need is so great, I could never make a difference.”

These may be the sorts of thoughts the disciples were having when Jesus first shares with them his concern for the crowd. Jesus has said, *My heart is moved with pity ... because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat.* But there was no command there. No direction for them to follow. It was simply an observation on Jesus’ part, and the disciples realize there is a problem to be solved.

They also immediately realize their own limitations, and ask a perfectly reasonable question (one we ourselves might ask): *Where can anyone get enough bread to satisfy them here in this deserted place?*

But Jesus does not give a direct answer to their question. He does not say *where* they can get what they need. He does not say *how* they will get what they need. Instead, he asks a simple question: *How many loaves do you have?* For Jesus, no matter how little, whatever they have is enough. The disciples collect what they have and offer it to the Lord. Jesus takes it, gives thanks for it, blesses it and distributes it. Moreover, what has been given has now been multiplied, so much so, that there are remnants left over.

In the face of our own challenges, in the face of what seems overwhelming to us, we can imagine that Jesus says something similar, “What do you have?” Whatever problems we face; whatever misery in the world we wish to alleviate; whatever problems seem so overwhelming that we don’t even know where to begin; whatever it is, it is enough.

Give this, no matter how small. For the Lord will take our efforts, our labor, our struggles; he can bless them, and he can transform them into something good, something holy, something that will multiply, feed and nourish those in need.

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

“What do you have?” Jesus asks. May we have the grace to respond openly and honestly with all that we have, and all that we are.

* * *

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2020

(Lec. 76)

- 1) Sirach 15:15-20
- 2) 1 Corinthians 2:6-10
- 3) Matthew 5:17-37 or 5:20-22a, 27-28, 33-34a, 37

Gospel related: CCC 226, 577, 581, 592, 678, 1034, 1424, 1456, 1967, 2053, 2054, 2141, 2153, 2257, 2262, 2302, 2330, 2336, 2338, 2380, 2382, 2463, 2466, 2513, 2528, 2608, 2792, 2841, 2845

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: *Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!*

Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord! This refrain from today's Psalm 119, part of a group of psalms known as "wisdom poems," or "wisdom psalms," is a beatitude that incorporates the explicit message of the other three Scriptures today.

Psalm 119 is not directed to God, but pours from the psalmist in a kind of joyful recitation of truth – in statements of wisdom borne through the history and experiences of the Israelite people. It reflects not a discrete situation of an individual, but a corporate one: this psalm is for all people, past, present and future. It is also in the form of an instruction rather than a typical prayer, and expresses a love of divine law, here defined as "all that had been revealed by God and handed on by the prophets" (Notes on the psalm from *New Jerusalem Bible*). In fact, it has been said that the psalmist does not just talk about *doing* the law, but *loving* the law.

Having this slightly broader picture of the psalm helps us understand today's refrain as a way of summarizing one aspect of the good news of the Gospel – *Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!*

In the first reading, Sirach instructs the people of Israel to trust in God and keep his commandments – for they will be saved by doing so. *Before man are life and death, good and evil*, Sirach says, *whichever he chooses shall be given him*. Our salvation, and life itself, are certainly blessings from God. Choosing to follow the ways of the Lord leads to these blessings.

Saint Paul speaks not of law, per se, but of the wisdom of God: *predetermined before the ages for our glory*. That is, he speaks of God's plan for our salvation, known always to God himself but revealed to us only in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit. Jesus, of course, is that plan dwelling among us. He is wisdom incarnate, and the embodiment of the good, placed before us, of which Sirach speaks. He is the fulfillment of the divine law that God revealed to our ancestors, and that the prophets handed on.

Jesus, in the Gospel today, says to his disciples, *I have come not to abolish [the law] but to fulfill [it]*. In his subsequent expounding upon the existing laws and behaviors using the "You have heard it said, but I say," structure, he is not placing more restrictions on his followers, but adding to their freedom.

As the fullness of the law, he is the source – love – from which all other laws and behaviors derive any force or meaning. Therefore, for example, in love do we refrain, not just from killing, but from any behavior toward another that beats down, injures or destroys. By following the law, and by imitating him, we are more and more free to both continue in such habits, and to receive the blessings that come with it. For as Jesus says, *whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven*.

Thinking about “law” as a topic often sets people on edge – perhaps because our modern context is one of prohibition and punishment. But that is not God’s law, which is given for our flourishing and *for our glory*. So as we prepare ourselves to receive Jesus, we give thanks for the divine law, and the freedom it gives us. This is *what God has prepared for those who love him*. Indeed, *Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!*

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Monday, February 17, 2020
(Lec. 335)

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

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

The Seven Holy Founders of the Servite Order)

FOCUS: God has generously and ungrudgingly given us his Son.

Jesus seems frustrated with, or perhaps angered by, the religious leaders of the day who constantly seek to test him and catch him in some violation of Jewish law. The Gospel says that Jesus *sighed from the depth of his spirit* as he responded to their demand for a sign. He tells the Pharisees that *no sign will be given to this generation*, and then he departs, venturing across the sea.

Jesus turns away from the Pharisees in their moment of doubt. For as James writes in today's first reading, *God gives to all [who ask in faith] generously and ungrudgingly ... but, for the one who doubts ... that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord, since he is a man of two minds, unstable in all his ways*. Jesus gives nothing to the Pharisees, for they do not seek wisdom or have faith. They seek only to argue with him and test him.

We who are gathered here today already know who Jesus is. We come not seeking a sign *from* him, but communion *with* him. A communion that helps us persevere when we *encounter various trials*, and helps us grow in wisdom and perfection.

As we turn now to the Eucharistic table, then, may we embrace the immense gift given so generously and ungrudgingly by God: his Son, who is the way to eternal life.

Seven Holy Founders of the Servite Order (13th century) – Today numbering more than 1,000 members, the Servites were founded by seven cloth merchants from Florence, Italy, in 1233 to promote devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows. At a time when Florence was rocked by political and spiritual upheaval, these saints left their families and their work to lead lives of poverty, simplicity, prayer and fellowship based on a literal translation of the Gospel. They were canonized in 1888.

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Tuesday, February 18, 2020

(Lec. 336)

1) James 1:12-18

2) Mark 8:14-21

Gospel related: **CCC** 1329

TUESDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: God is the source of every good in our lives.

When people are struggling, and we want to comfort them, we might say something like, “everything happens for a reason,” or “it’s all part of God’s plan.” While it is true that God plans for each and every one of our lives, we must be careful not to make it sound like God is the source of temptation or sin. As James points out in our first reading, God tempts no one. Rather, the source of temptation lies in our own desires.

As baptized Christians, we have been freed from original sin and its consequences (CCC 1263-64). However, the inclination toward sin remains. It is part of our human nature to desire what is not good for us. The desires themselves are not necessarily sinful, but when we give into them, they become sins, leading to death. However, when we struggle against these temptations for love of Christ, we receive eternal life.

God is not the subject of our temptations. He is the source of every good in our lives. God gives us everything we need, and more. Jesus reminds his disciples of this in today’s Gospel. When Jesus broke five loaves and fed 5,000, not only was everyone satisfied, but there were 12 baskets of bread left over. Our God blesses us abundantly.

This does not mean that God always grants us what we desire. We need to resist the temptation to make our belief in God conditional on getting what we want. This is the leaven of the Pharisees that Jesus warns his disciples against. Just prior to this, the Pharisees had demanded a sign from Jesus to prove that he is doing God’s work. Jesus denies their request. He gets in the boat and sails away with his disciples. When the disciples misunderstand his warning, he asks whether they have *eyes and not see, ears and not hear?* The disciples have been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry. They have seen Jesus feed thousands with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, but they do not yet realize that Jesus is the Bread of Life come down from heaven to be broken and shared with all.

Signs of God’s love are all around us. If we focus on what we lack, making demands of God, we risk missing the ways that God is already providing for us, and the ways we are called to provide for others. As we approach the Eucharist, let us remember that we are Christ’s Body. We can ask God to open our eyes, ears, and hearts to the ways we are called to be his hands and feet.

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Wednesday, February 19, 2020

(Lec. 337)

1) James 1:19-27

2) Mark 8:22-26

Gospel related: CCC 699, 1151, 1504

WEDNESDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: We put our faith into action by caring for others.

The Letter of James strongly emphasizes the need to put one's faith into action: *Be doers of the word and not hearers only*, he says. It is not enough to just listen to Scripture or even to talk about faith. *One must be a doer of the Word. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his own face in a mirror. He sees himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like.* What a great analogy! After all, who among us is so unfamiliar with ourselves that we would actually forget what we look like.

But, what does it mean to be a doer of the Word? How can we act on our faith? Expanding on his analogy, we might think of it this way: Just as we are intimately familiar with our physical appearance, so should we be with the *righteousness of God ... that has been planted in [us]*. So much so that that there is no distinction between who we are and what we do.

James provides the answer in a straightforward way: caring for orphans and widows while keeping oneself *unstained by the world*.

Jesus is the Word whom we are called to imitate. He who never tired of healing physical ailments, who never turned away a plea for help. Jesus, the Word made flesh, who literally gets his hands dirty and participates in the messy, bodily aspect of our world in order to cure others of blindness – as in today's Gospel – or leprosy, possession or deaf-muteness. The same consecrated hands that broke the unleavened bread for his disciples were also muddied by the earth and bloodied by Roman nails. And yet, in perfect sinlessness, he was *unstained by the world*.

We put our faith into action by caring for others. There is really no clearer way to say it. And while we need to muck about in the messiness of the world, we do not have to let its *filth and evil* excess stain us. May God look graciously upon us in our efforts to do so.

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Thursday, February 20, 2020
(Lec. 338)

- 1) James 2:1-9
- 2) Mark 8:27-33

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

THURSDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: See the world as God sees it.

In the Gospel, Jesus tells his friends about the passion and death he would have to undergo. This disclosure caused Peter to pull Jesus aside, and *rebuke him*. We don't know what he said, but it doesn't really matter. Because Jesus responds: *You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.*

It's easy to feel affinity for Peter's viewpoint. He was, after all, a human being. It seems only fair that he would think as a human. But Christ is calling him to a deeper truth, just as James is doing for his community.

James is writing to a community that is struggling with the sin of partiality. In their treatment of one another, they had *become judges with evil designs*. Judgment was a role reserved for God and his divine perfection, not for human beings who were burdened by self-interest and sin. In other words, the community was not "thinking as God does," but rather with the minds of humans.

The readings today call us to see the world as God sees it. To trust in God's plan when we cannot possibly see the whole picture. To follow the command to *love your neighbor as yourself* without reservation or partiality. To see the place of privilege held by the poor in the heart of God. And finally, as the grace of the sacraments are intended to help us do, to conform ourselves – our hearts and minds – to Christ.

May God open our minds and hearts to the lessons of Christ, which push us deeper than our human instincts.

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Friday, February 21, 2020
(Lec. 339)

- 1) James 2:14-24, 26
- 2) Mark 8:34–9:1

FRIDAY OF
SIXTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME
(Opt. Mem.

Saint Peter Damian,
Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

Gospel related: **CCC** 459, 1615, 2544 **CSDC** 260

FOCUS: Faith must be an integral part of our daily lives.

Faith without works is dead. That is a very straightforward and blunt message from James in our second reading today. If we claim to have faith in Jesus, it takes more than simply professing a belief. It takes living *out* that belief: Caring for those with *nothing to wear* and who have *no food for the day*.

Jesus' challenge to us in the Gospel is even more blunt. He tells us that as his followers, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, follow him, and not try to preserve our lives, but to lose it for his sake and that of the Gospel.

This can seem very difficult. After all, we are simple people trying to get by in a complex and sometimes overwhelming world. How can we pay for food and shelter for everybody in need when we're struggling to pay for our family's needs? What does my cross entail?

As followers of Jesus, we can have faith that we are not left alone to figure this out. We are disciples of Jesus, still learning from him and still depending on him – the way, the truth and the life – to show us the way. We have his advocate, the Holy Spirit, to empower us in word and deed. We have each other as Church, to worship with and support one another.

Perhaps one easy step would be to ask Jesus each morning to be our eyes and ears, so that he can show us who to reach out to that day. Our role is to listen to and pray to Jesus, bear the cross of hardship that he puts on us each day, and follow in the way that he points out to us, sometimes through prayer, Mass, spiritual reading or other people – our pastor, our spouse or a good friend.

As we follow Jesus and accept the cross and the call for each day, we will truly be followers of Christ. Our faith will not be dead, but a sign of justification by God that might just lead others to him.

As we approach Lent, may Jesus show us how to bear our cross this day and every day.

Saint Peter Damian (1007-1072) – Peter Damian emerged as a voice of truth and reform at a time when the Church was struggling with corruption and immorality. A reformist Benedictine monk, he founded several hermitages. He also wrote letters, sermons, hymns, prayers and liturgical texts, and was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1828.

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Saturday, February 22, 2020

(Lec. 535)

1) 1 Peter 5:1-4

2) Matthew 16:13-19

Gospel related: CCC 153, 424, 440, 442, 552, 553, 586, 869, 881, 1444, 1969

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

FOCUS: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

The Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls in Rome is famous not just as the resting place of Paul, but for its papal mosaics: icons of every pope right back to Saint Peter. Each icon recalls an individual responsible for shepherding the Church at a particular time during her long and sometimes difficult history. Together, they form a chain that celebrates the Church's Tradition and fidelity to Christ. It's an impressive lineup: Each one a different personality, with different life stories and faith journeys, but with one commonality – each was entrusted with the ministry of shepherding the Church and protecting her teachings and faith. Each has sat on the *chair* of Peter's confession of faith.

Today's Gospel is chosen specifically for the feast we are celebrating: the Chair of Saint Peter the Apostle. The passage we heard takes place in Caesarea Philippi, which was a city built along a spring flowing from a massive rock face of limestone bedrock. It is one of several key scriptural passages that both underpin and explain Catholic teaching about the institution of the Church, and the Bishop of Rome, the pope, as its head.

Jesus was a good and wise teacher, as we have come to know. And he often used geographic and agricultural imagery to underscore his parables and form his metaphors. But it is taking the Apostles some time to understand both Jesus' mission and their own role and authority in proclaiming the Kingdom. So, in today's passage, Jesus employs a very common pedagogical approach, by moving from the general to the particular: From what the people are saying about him, to what the disciples themselves actually believe and understand.

While we have only Peter's response, it is an extraordinary proclamation from one who is often depicted as unreliable and full of bluster and easy talk: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* Here, under divine inspiration, Peter not only speaks for the Twelve, but for all Christians of every generation and culture. His profession of faith becomes the foundation of the Church, the whole flock of which he is the shepherd (CCC 881).

Jesus replies by blessing Peter, and then – within sight of the massive limestone rock face – he says: *You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.* These words signify the beginning of the Church, but are also an extraordinary metaphor that would have resonated deeply with those who were with him in that place.

In our own discipleship and vocations, our statement of belief should echo that of Peter: *You are the Christ.* And while we do not have the unique task given to Peter and his successors, (we are not "the rock"), by our baptism we have become "living stones" – shar[ing] in the priesthood of Christ, and in his prophetic and royal mission" (CCC 1268).

And, like the rocks and stones in Caesarea Philippi, we come in different shapes and sizes, colors and ages, with a variety of qualities, gifts and strengths – but we all are necessary for building "a spiritual house" and "holy priesthood" (1268). We are all necessary because, in his inscrutable ways, Christ has called each of us to a common identity that binds us together in a common faith – that God's love is revealed to us in his Son.

So as we come to share in that love, fully present in the Eucharist, may we not put anyone or anything in place of this central confession in our lives. May Christ always be the focus, and center, of our faith. Ultimately, everything else is passing – only love of and faith in Christ endures.

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2020

(Lec. 79)

- 1) Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18
- 2) 1 Corinthians 3:16-23
- 3) Matthew 5:38-48

Gospel related: **CCC** 443, 1693, 1825, 1933, 1968, 2013, 2054, 2262, 2303, 2443, 2608, 2828, 2842, 2844 **CSDC** 40

**SEVENTH SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME**

FOCUS: *Be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am holy.*

The word *holy* means “to set apart; to be consecrated to God; to be dedicated to a sacred purpose.” If asked, each one of us could probably name someone whom we think is “holy.” Perhaps it is a deceased person whose life was so exemplary that the Church has declared them a saint – Mother Teresa, or a courageous martyr, Saint Joseph, the Blessed Mother, or our patron saint. It may even be a living person whom we admire – a person who has shown great faith during times of trial. We tend to know a holy person when we see him, or her.

How did Jesus talk about holiness? These are some of the things he told his disciples in today’s Gospel: *When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well; Love your neighbor and your enemies; pray for those who persecute you; should anyone want you to go one mile, go two miles instead.*

It is a bit of a mix of things to do, and things to not do. In the end, he sort of summarizes all of this by telling his disciples *to be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.* Jesus lived in full communion with God, and he expected his disciples to do the same. Indeed, he asks *us* to do the same. It is our universal vocation: *All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity. All are called to holiness (CCC 2013).*

What he asks of us is not impossible, for God commands what we are capable of doing (Cf., Deut 30:11). Granted, we cannot do it without his help, but there is nothing set before us that we cannot achieve with his grace (Cf. Mt 11:30, 1 John 5:3). And in the matter of holiness – which is always a process – we have the Holy Spirit to guide us. Paul writes to the Corinthians, *Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?* Each one of us, by our very baptism, is sanctified [made holy] by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We are temples of God, belonging to Christ, and in whom Christ dwells.

As we prepare to receive Christ into our bodies, transforming us for the sake of ourselves and the world, may we embrace this call to holiness with our whole heart. For we are indeed temples in whom the Holy One dwells, and we are sanctified in this life so as to be perfect in the next.

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Monday, February 24, 2020

(Lec. 341)

1) James 3:13-18

2) Mark 9:14-29

Gospel related: CCC 162, 649, 1504, 2610

MONDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: *I do believe, help my unbelief!*

Who among you is wise and understanding? This question from James to his community could be asked of the disciples in today's Gospel – for they do not understand why they are unable to cure the boy *possessed by a mute spirit*.

The passage begins with a chaotic scene of the disciples arguing with the scribes while a father seeks healing for his son. As we hear the desperate cry of a father who longs deeply for his son to be cured, Jesus tells him that everything is possible to those who have faith. The father exclaims, *I do believe, help my unbelief!* This is a simple and yet deeply moving prayer, one that many of us continue to pray today.

Not only are the father and son struggling, but Jesus also sees the crowd and his disciples trying to help their unbelief. The disciples are unable to cure the boy before Jesus comes along. When they ask him why, he responds that it required prayer. Perhaps the disciples are also on the journey of believing, but still lack full trust in God, and in his power to work through them in Jesus' name.

Here James' words resonate again. Earthly, false wisdom shows itself in *jealousy and selfish ambition* – perhaps indicative of the argument among the scribes and disciples. True wisdom is from above, *full of mercy and good fruits*. The fruit of healing was not available to the disciples not just because it required prayer, but because they still lacked true wisdom.

As we gather together at this Eucharist, let us affirm our faith and also ask for God to help our unbelief. May the mystery we celebrate here today lead us to greater wisdom and understanding.

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Tuesday, February 25, 2020

(Lec. 342)

1) James 4:1-10

2) Mark 9:30-37

Gospel related: **CCC** 474, 557, 649, 1825 **CSDC** 379

TUESDAY OF
SEVENTH WEEK
IN ORDINARY TIME

FOCUS: As we draw close to Christ, may he draw close to us.

Today's first reading, an excerpt from the Letter of James to his community, sounds as if it could have been written last week rather than two millennia ago. *You covet but do not possess*, James writes. *You kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war*. While we personally may not have much influence over wars, we all have conflicts in our lives. Certainly some of these come from the place of envy of which James speaks: He has a better job, she has her life together, they have a nicer house

While it is understandable and good to want these things, especially insofar as they contribute to, rather than impede, our relationship with God, coveting anything is both sinful and poisonous to our souls and relationships. Envy and worldliness prevent us from reaching out to serve others. We can be so preoccupied with "getting" that we take no time to give. And when we become preoccupied by obtaining greatness by the world's standards, we miss the point.

Jesus' words in the Gospel are a refreshing, albeit challenging, point of view. *If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all*.

Jesus uses the example of a child to make his point. Children are wholly reliant on caretakers; they do not have power or status, and they are entirely vulnerable. They cannot repay someone for helping them or showing them kindness. Therefore, Jesus says, if a person welcomes a child in his name – for his sake – that person also welcomes Jesus and, in turn, the Father.

When we reach out to anyone – a family member, a new neighbor or a homeless person – purely for the sake of showing them the love of Christ and not expecting anything in return, God draws close to us. Saint James reminds us that when we draw close to God – when we put in real effort – God in turn draws close to us. When we humble ourselves and submit to God's holy will, rather than our own, God grants us grace.

As we go forward this week, we can ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us who we envy, and we can take that to prayer and ask God to help us overcome it. We might strive to show special kindness to someone who cannot repay that action, or find a particular opportunity to put others first. Any and all of this will allow us to see how the Lord works on our hearts in these conscious efforts.

Today, as we prepare our hearts to receive the beautiful gift that is Jesus in the Eucharist, may he strengthen us to love others, and increase our humility and spirit of service. As we draw close to Christ, may he draw close to us.

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Wednesday, February 26, 2020

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** 500, 699, 2610

FOCUS: Lent calls us to communal and personal practices of repentance.

As Saint Paul tells us, today is a very acceptable time, the day of salvation. Today we take the plunge into the beautiful but difficult season of Lent, perhaps after weeks of pondering what we will do for Lent, and after a day of feasting before the fast. Today we follow the encouragement of Joel. Whatever our pursuits may have been up to this point, we are called to proclaim a fast, to gather as an assembly, and to rend our hearts as we turn to God and ask for reconciliation and forgiveness.

The ashes that we will wear on our foreheads after today's liturgy are a sign that we're part of a community that is beginning together a sacred time of repentance – of turning back to God. We continue this sacred, communal time of penance with special days of communal fasting and abstinence called for by the Church. This is an important aspect of Lent, as we, the people of God, turn back to our Father as the people in Joel's day did, changing our ways and asking forgiveness. As we celebrate the Sundays of Lent – and especially as we encourage our brothers and sisters who will be joining the Catholic Church and our parish during the Easter Vigil – we draw nearer to our celebration of Holy Week and the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But Jesus calls us to go deeper into our own hearts during Lent, as well as participating in our communal liturgies and practices. Each of us has an area in our own lives that tends to stand in the way of our coming closer to Jesus and to truly following his way of the cross. Jesus invites us to quiet time, time in the wilderness and the desert of our busy lives, to discover from him what we need to let go of and what we need to practice in order to draw nearer to him and to radiate his life and love to others.

As we begin the season of Lent, let us go to our rooms – or to our inner hearts – close the door, and spend time alone with God. Let God speak to our hearts about our particular call to draw closer to him, to turn away from any hindrances in the past, and to follow whatever form of prayer, fasting and almsgiving will draw us closer to God and to the people of God.

Now is an acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation.

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Thursday, February 27, 2020
(Lec. 220)

- 1) Deuteronomy 30:15-20
 - 2) Luke 9:22-25
- Gospel related: **CCC** 1435

THURSDAY AFTER
ASH WEDNESDAY

FOCUS: Obeying the commandments brings us abundant life and prosperity.

“The glory of God is the human person fully alive” (Saint Irenaeus). God wants us to live, to have life and to have it to the full. And so God teaches us how to find it. In the first reading, Moses reminds us that God gives us his commandments, statutes and decrees for this purpose, so that we might live.

How easy it is to lose sight of this, though, to be led astray; to experience God’s commands as a burden imposed on our freedom, as a limit which impairs our happiness and prevents us from living life to the full. Then we doubt that God’s plan and desires for us are really all that good – we doubt that *holding fast to him ... will mean life*. Instead, we think that following God leads to a boring, limited and joyless life. And we might believe, even if just for a moment, that doing things our way will be better for us than doing things God’s way. Indeed, this is exactly why any one of us might choose to sin at all!

But this could not be further from the truth. God knows us better than we know ourselves: He knows how and for what we were made. When we sin, we not only separate ourselves from him, but also from the truth about ourselves. The commandments of God do not impose random limits designed to somehow test our loyalty. No, they are a description of the good life. They tell us how to have life. Thus, the choice to follow the commandments or not literally is a choice between *life and prosperity or death and doom*.

Yet the life that God wants to give is not the life of the world. It is not always comfortable, not always easy. This Lenten season, then, is truly a season of great joy, and great life. In this time, especially, we meditate on the mystery of Christ’s life: a life that was truly good – but very difficult. “If we drink the cup each of us is poured and given, we servants will fare no better than our master. But if we shirk the cross, gone too will be our hope” (*Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross*). Therefore, let us this Lent joyfully turn away from sin, and choose life. For, *what profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?*

Friday, February 28, 2020
(Lec. 221)

1) Isaiah 58:1-9a

2) Matthew 9:14-15

Gospel related: **CCC** 649

FRIDAY AFTER
ASH WEDNESDAY

FOCUS: God is drawing us more deeply into relationship with him and our neighbor.

As we enter into this holy season of fasting and penance, today's readings offer us important insight into what can make this Lent fruitful. We begin with a serious challenge. How often do we approach Lent like the Israelites in our first reading, ready to make a deal? We will make ourselves (and maybe those around us, too!) miserable in some way, and in return we will *gain access to God*, as Isaiah puts it. Can we heed the prophetic words we hear today? They are spoken to us as truly as they were to the Israelites.

This, rather, is the fasting that I wish, God tells us: releasing those bound unjustly ... setting free the oppressed ... clothing the naked when you see them.

This is a fast that honors God. It is a discipline that rejoices in the coming of the bridegroom, and takes place in anticipation of his return. We might take a few moments to consider our Lenten disciplines in light of this exhortation – in light of its meaning. We can ask what penance and fasting God is asking of us this Lent. We can determine whether our abstaining from meat is turning us toward relationship with others and with God. We can consider whether anything we have given up is actually drawing us more deeply into relationship with God and our neighbor.

In doing so, we may begin to view Lent as less of a burden and more of a season directed toward Christian joy, “as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ” (Order of Mass). Of course, here at this Mass, Jesus *is* present, giving himself to fill our deepest needs, to strengthen us in the challenges we confront, to give us all we need to do this work of self-sacrifice. But in Lent, we also prepare for his final coming.

Thus, we are invited to feast today at the banquet of the Lamb, celebrating our unity with God, given to us in Christ. And, as we are drawn closer to Christ in this celebration, we are drawn closer to his people, especially those who are oppressed, bound unjustly, hungry, homeless or in need. God invites us in this banquet to a penance that transforms us and our world, leading us to deeper love. May this feast nourish us in drawing nearer to Christ in this holy season.

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Saturday, February 29, 2020
(Lec. 222)

1) Isaiah 58:9b-14

2) Luke 5:27-32

Gospel related: **CCC** 588

SATURDAY AFTER
ASH WEDNESDAY

FOCUS: Lent is a time for renewal, repentance, fasting and penance, as we try to move closer to God.

*The Lord will guide you always.
Follow me.*

These two sentences from today's Scriptures provide a sort of *CliffsNotes* insight into the Good News of Jesus Christ. Isaiah's sharing of the Lord's affirmation that he will guide his people always is both a comment on salvation history to that point, and a prophetic promise of redemption. Christ's simple command to follow him is literally *the way* to eternal life, and the embodiment of God's affirmative guidance.

Lent is a graced opportunity to grab ahold of these two truths and live them anew. It is a special season the Church gives us to repent, to renew, to fast and to do penance. All of this is done in a quest to live out more fully a belief in a God who not only promises to guide us always, but provides everything we need to ensure we never lose sight of that guidance.

It is our Triune God who says, "I will guide you always; follow me." God created us out of love, to love him in return, and longed for us to be reconciled to him from the first moment of disobedience. He promised our ancestors he would never abandon them. The Father sent his Son as a fulfillment of that promise; the Son walked among us and invited us, *follow me*; and the Spirit remains with us to give us the grace we need to respond to that invitation.

So, as we continue our Lenten journey, we reflect on the necessity of our spiritual practices. Fasting from worldly things so as to hunger more for the sustenance of God. Praying so as to nurture and strengthen our relationship to him. Giving alms so as to share the goodness we have been given with others, and to be a light in the darkness for those who may not have any. We do all these with a spirit of repentance, turning away from sin and in the direction of God so as to grow stronger in our desire for, and ability to live a life of holiness.

*The Lord will guide you always.
Follow me.*

It doesn't get any simpler than that.

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