Step One of the *Immersed in Christ* Faith Formation Series
An intensive journey in making real the promise of our Baptism

The Call to Be Christ
by letting Christ act with you, in you, and through you
in everything you do

*Daily Reflections*
Year C-1
Weeks 1 - 9 of Ordinary Time

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ORDINARY TIME
From the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Sundays Year C and weekdays for Years I and II
(These weekday reflections are the same for years I-II because they are on the Gospels only)

The daily Gospel readings for the first weeks of Ordinary Time give us a marvelous chance to reflect on the whole Gospel of Mark. The readings begin with Mark 1:14-20 on the Monday of Week One and continue almost without omissions through the Saturday of Week Nine (Mark 12:8-44). They stop just short of the beginning of the Passion narrative.

The reflections show how Jesus presents the Good News in Mark’s Gospel, and how his presentation develops as he interacts with the crowds, his disciples and his enemies.
The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

**New Life, New Identity, New Call**
Appreciating and Accepting Baptism as an Ongoing Experience of Mystery.

**Inventory**

How is your Baptism influencing your life right now? How was it taught to you? Did you grow up understanding Baptism as just a one-time event that “washed away” Original Sin and gave you “grace”? (How would you define grace?)

Or is Baptism the event that changed your whole life and transforms every action of your day, every day? An event that gave you a new sense of your identity, one that is with you all the time? In short, is Baptism for you, right now, a constant self-awareness that makes your every thought, word and action an experience of mystery?

**Input**

The *Entrance Antiphon* proclaims three things that happened both when Jesus was baptized and when we were: 1. “the heavens opened”; 2. “the Spirit came down”; and 3. the Father said, “You are my beloved Son.”

In the *Opening Prayer* we ask God who “revealed Jesus as your own beloved Son” to “keep us, your children born of water and the Spirit, faithful to our calling.”

In the *Prayer over the Gifts*, as we present the bread and wine to be placed on the altar as symbols of ourselves, we ask that the “offering of your faithful people” may “become one with his sacrifice.” At Baptism we “presented our bodies as a living sacrifice” (*Romans* 12:1) to be incorporated into the body of Jesus on the cross. We offered ourselves with him and in him, died in him and rose in him to live henceforth as his risen body on earth. Our Baptism was essentially a dying and rising with Jesus and in him as his true body (*Galatians* 2:19-20; 5:24). It changes everything we are and everything we do. We “present our bodies” anew in the *Presentation of the Gifts*. It is a re-affirmation of our Baptism.

In the *Prayer after Communion* we say to the Father “You feed us with the bread from heaven. By listening to your Son with faith (see the Transfiguration, *Luke* 9:35) may we become your children in both name and fact” — in other words, “be faithful to our calling.” Baptism gives us divine life. Eucharist nourishes it.

**Isaiah’s Prophecy**

The *Responsorial Psalm* (29:1-10) gives the key to the first reading. But the first reading on Sunday is always chosen to match the theme of the Gospel reading. So the *Responsorial Psalm* tells us what to look for in both readings. Today the theme is, “The Lord will bless his people with peace.” We will see how that is the fruit of Baptism.

*Isaiah 42: 1-7* prophesies that the Messiah is going to “establish justice on earth.” A current theme of “bumper sticker wisdom” is; ‘If you want peace, work for justice.” They go together.
But what is new in *Isaiah* is the way the Messiah will do this: “Not crying out, not shouting…. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.” On the individual level this means Jesus will have patience with us. He will not reject us because of our weakness and barely-smoldering faith. That gives personal peace.

On the global scale, he will “bring forth justice on the earth” without violence. Without using force. With no power but the power of truth and love. “The coastlands will wait for his teaching.” He came to teach, not terrify.

Jesus came as “a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind.” Baptism is called the “sacrament of faith,” or, in the Eastern Church, just “Enlightenment.” Faith is the mystery of sharing in God’s own knowing act. Its effect is “to bring out… from prison those who sit in darkness” (see *Matthew* 4:16, *Luke* 1:79; 11:34). Jesus said, “If you are truly my disciples, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (*John* 8:32). In this freedom there is peace.

### The Mystery

In *Luke* 3:15-22 John the Baptizer proclaims: “One more powerful than I is coming… He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Christian Baptism is a mystery. The *heavens open*: it is an act of God himself making contact with us. The *Holy Spirit descends on us* as on Jesus at the Jordan; not “in visible form,” but with visible effects. Baptism is not complete without the “gift of the Holy Spirit.” In the early Church recipients sometimes “spoke in tongues and prophesied” (*Acts* 2:38, 8:15; 10:46; 19:2-6). Today the Gift of the Spirit is just as visible, though not necessarily in the same way. The most universal way is in the effects of our baptismal anointing into the mission of Jesus *Prophet, Priest and King*. We will take up each of these anointings specifically, beginning with the reflections on the Easter readings, but we can say generally that we experience and express the Gift of the Spirit most unambiguously when we take on the *mission* of Jesus: acting “through him, with him and in him” as his risen body on earth, in the “unity of the Holy Spirit,” intent on giving “all honor and glory” to the Father.

At our Baptism the Father speaks to us the same words he said to Jesus: “You are my Son, the Beloved; on you my favor rests.” (Alternate translations; “with you I am well pleased”; “today I have fathered you”). In Jesus’ Baptism these words revealed his identity; in our Baptism they confer it. What Jesus already was, we become. This is for us a “new creation” (*2Corinthians* 5:17). In *Genesis*, the formula for creation was: “God said…. And it was so” (*1:1-24 and see Psalm* 104:30). At Baptism God speaks, and what he says “is so”: we become in deepest truth the sons and daughters of the Father.

We become this in the only way it is possible: by becoming one with, being incorporated into the body of him who is the *only* Son of the Father. We are children of God only as *filii in Filio*, “sons and daughters in the Son.” In Baptism we “become Christ” (see 4th Sunday of Advent. St. Paul uses the expression “in Christ” or its equivalent 164 times to express the mystery of our incorporation into Christ).

We have a new identity. We are no longer just human beings. We have become divine by “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (The word “grace” simply means “favor.” Grace is “the favor of sharing in the divine life of God”). We proclaim this at the beginning of every Mass. If we *listen* to the words at Mass, our self-awareness will gradually be transformed. Then “The Lord will bless his people with peace.”

### The “Good News of Peace”:

In *Acts* 10:34-38 Cornelius, a Gentile, invited Peter to his house where he and his “relatives and close
friends” were assembled. He said God had sent an angel to tell them to call Peter and “listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.” What did Peter think that was?

Peter said, “This is the message: God sent word to the children of Israel announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.”

What is this Good News? What Peter says of Jesus in the first recorded preaching to a group of Gentiles is first that he “went about doing good works and healing all who were in the grip of the devil.” Peter then goes on to speak of Christ’s death and resurrection, although today’s reading does not include this. If there is a lesson here, it may be that the first way to present the Good News to people unprepared to hear the whole mystery is just by “doing good works and healing” people from the painful consequences of sin: their own and the sins of others. Christianity is not all about suffering with Jesus. That can hardly be avoided, but we should not forget that the Way of Jesus is still the healthiest and happiest way to live on earth. We should try, by word and lifestyle, to make that evident.

We sometimes forget that Baptism by nature commits us to taking on the mission of Jesus. Paul VI said the Church “exists to evangelize.” By Baptism Jesus doesn’t just share his divine life with us so that we can share his joy in heaven; he takes our bodies to be his own so that in us he can continue his mission on earth. We are chosen to be sent. We are sent, not just to announce, but to be the Good News. If we are not “news” by our lifestyle, and by the visible “fruit of the Spirit” in us, beginning with love, joy and peace (Galatians 5:22), then, no matter what we say it will not be credible.

As we continue reflecting on the readings of Ordinary Time, we should be alert to what is “news” and what is “good” in the Good News. How did Jesus proclaim it? How did he present himself? What did people see in him? How did they respond and why? This will give us an understanding of the mystery of our Baptism — especially if we experience that mystery by living it out in action.

Insight

What do you understand better about Baptism after reading this?

Initiative:

Put a glass of water where you work to remind you of Baptism.
**First week of the Year** Readings are given for Years I and II, but the reflections are on the Gospel common to both.


In Mark, the headline proclamation of the Good News is, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near!” That is what Jesus preached. He invited people in response to do two things. First, “Repent,” which is the verb for metanoia, a complete change of mind, of outlook, of direction in life. The second specifies the first step in this “extreme makeover” of mentality: “Believe in the good news.”

This invites us to ask two questions of ourselves: 1. Do we believe in the Gospel as news — as something new and exciting that we wake up to every morning? 2. Do we believe it is good news? And if so, just how good is it?

The lead idea in Jesus’ proclamation of the Good News was, “The time is fulfilled!” This is to say there is a plan that God has been bringing to fulfillment in time, in human history. That in itself is good news.

How would you like to live in a world that was going nowhere — at least, nowhere with any purpose to it? A world that is just “there,” in which various human beings are trying to give directions and to shape history, but all guided by their own perceptions of reality and their own goals and desires? Would it make a difference in the way you experience your life? In the satisfaction you get from your activities?

That is a question worth spending some time on. Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” But the people of Socrates’ time sentenced him to death. It isn’t just religions that burn heretics at the stake. Anyone who calls into question the assumptions of any culture or peer group is in danger of anything from physical death to social exclusion. People like to feel secure in the house they live in, and don’t want anyone knocking about, testing the foundations.

Jesus didn’t just announce the Good News. The first thing Mark reports of him after he started preaching was that he invited four men fishing in the Sea of Galilee to get involved and help him proclaim it: He said, “Follow me and I will make you into fishers of people.” He invited them to play a part in bringing God’s plan to fulfillment by working to establish the “kingdom of God” on earth.

Every single one of us is being called today to take part in a “new evangelization.” What this is will be our focus as we read through Mark’s Gospel.

**Initiative:**

Those Jesus called “immediately left their nets and followed him.” Ask if you would have to “leave” anything to “fish for people” in your own way of life.
First week of the Year


In Mark’s Gospel, the first thing that the four men who followed Jesus saw him do was to “enter the synagogue and teach.” And the people who heard him “were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

What was your first experience of Jesus (besides being called by him at Baptism)? When you were taught your religion, were you aware you were learning from Jesus himself? Were you “astounded at his teaching”? Or did you just take it for granted?

What would it be like not to have anyone who could teach us about God and life “as one having authority”? What if all we had were the opinions of other people, even the wisest, or the worldview of our civilization, of our particular culture? Have you ever thought of what it would be like not to have any “revelation” from God such as we find in the Bible? What if we had no Church to interpret the Bible “as one having authority,” but just had to pick and choose among the opinions of the Scripture scholars, the “scribes”?

The authority of Jesus was confirmed by his act of setting free “a man with an unclean spirit.” As the demon was driven out it cried, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” And it felt threatened.

Is there any “unclean spirit” in you that feels threatened by Jesus? Or do you feel relieved and hopeful that he has the power — and the desire — to free you from anything that holds you back from the fullness of life and joy? And do you connect that power to free you with the fact he teaches “as one having authority”? Are you eager to know what Jesus says about everything? Do you accept it as “good news” that he has come to earth as “the Way, the Truth and the Life”? Or do you sometimes believe you will find more life by following your own way, which is really guided by our culture’s perception of truth?

Think of how you would feel if God were not present in the Scriptures and in the Church teaching “as one having authority”? Do you really appreciate the “good news” that he is? How do you show you do?

Initiative: Take another look at the way Jesus teaches us to live. Is there really anything he says that you don’t recognize as good and life-enhancing?
First week of the Year


After the synagogue, Simon and Andrew took Jesus home with them. There the “first thing they did” was to tell Simon’s mother-in-law about him. She was sick with a fever. Jesus went right over to her, took her hand and “helped her up.” That was the end of the fever. Then she fed them — which may or may not have been the reason they wanted her healed!

Naturally, the word got around, and by sundown “the whole city was gathered around the door” and Jesus healed “all who were sick or possessed with demons.” But as before he didn’t let the demons identify him.

His four followers didn’t know it yet, but Jesus was teaching them something. The next morning they found out what it was. The people were back, but Jesus had gone off to a “lonely place in the desert” to pray. When they found him, they were all excited. They told him he had been such a big success the night before that “Everyone is searching for you.”

But Jesus’ answer was, “Let’s get out of here.” He wanted to move on to the “neighboring towns,” so that he could “proclaim the good news there also.” And then came the punch line:

“For that is what I came to do.”

Jesus did not want to be known as a faith healer. That is one reason why he didn’t let the demons identify him. Once people knew he could heal, they didn’t let him do anything else. The preaching was over.

The miracles Jesus worked, besides being just the response of his love to people’s suffering, were meant to give credibility to his teaching. The real reason Jesus came was to show us the Way, teach us the Truth and give us the Life of God. This was the deep and lasting cure he offered for all of humanity’s problems. But people preferred the immediate and the lesser over what was long-lasting and greater.

What if you had perfect health but nothing to do with it — nothing of eternal value, anyway? What if you just used your health to mess up your own life and that of others? Jesus came that we might “have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). What we really need to be healed of is anything that holds us back from responding to the Good News without reserves.

To understand that is to be “evangelized.”

**Initiative: Give priority to learning** what Jesus teaches about life. Decide now on a time and place to study Scripture. Is there a group that can help you?
First week of the Year:


Jesus “went on throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons” (v. 39). But people still saw him as a healer. A leper came begging him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Then his disciples learned something else;

“Moved with pity,” Jesus reached out and touched the leper. That was not something people did. And he said, “I do choose. Be made clean!”

Jesus showed his human feelings. He also established a principle: Compassion calls for contact. We don’t just help the poor and afflicted; we go to them. And we let them come to us. Even if we cannot physically go to where the poor and suffering are, we can show authentic compassion by not ostracizing or trying to “keep our distance” from anyone. We try to avoid contact with some people. Jesus doesn’t.

Is this good news? Do you want a church — or any kind of community that restricts itself to the “right kind” of people? Or to the affluent” Or the socially acceptable?

At the base of the statue of Liberty is a plaque with the last five lines of Emma Lazarus’ poem "The New Colossus":

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame / With conquering limbs astride from land to land / Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand / A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame / Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name / Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand / Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command / The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame, / "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she / With silent lips. / "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

That is America at its best. If we lose that spirit we have lost the soul of our country and lost sight of Jesus.

Jesus begged the cured man to “say nothing to anyone,” but just to show himself to the priest as Moses commanded (Leviticus 14). Vain hope: he spread the word so widely that Jesus “could no longer enter a town openly.”

When Jesus called for deeper faith and greater love, the crowd began to thin out (see John 5:18; 6:66; 19:5-6; Matthew 16:22-23; 19:10-11 and 21-26). So what do you want: a Savior — or a Church —that makes you “feel good,” or one that challenges you to “Be perfect [in love] as your heavenly Father is perfect”?

Initiative: Make a point of making contact with anyone people tend to avoid: where you work, on the street, everywhere. Make eye contact. Smile. Speak.
First week of the Year

**Friday: Mark 2:1-12.** Year I: *Hebrews 4:1-5, 11; Psalm 78:3-8.* Year II: *1Samuel 8:4-22; Psalm 89:16-19.*

Jesus next took his disciples home with him, to Capernaum, where presumably his mother was. There he started teaching in his own house, and “so many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door.” But he didn’t get a chance to teach for very long.

“Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man….and when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him and… let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.” End of teaching.

But Jesus did something new. “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” This was not what they came for. And it shocked some of the local theologians (“scribes”), who were thinking, “This is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Then Jesus worked a miracle explicitly to back up his words: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’?” And he went one more step. For the first time, he said something identifying about himself: “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins…” and he healed the paralytic.

The paralytic did get the healing he wanted, but Jesus made two points: first, he gave priority to spiritual healing, and secondly, he gave evidence he had the power to take away sin as well as sickness, “so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’”

What do you ask Jesus for most of the time? To protect and provide for yourself and your family? To forgive your sins so you won’t suffer the consequences of them? Or do you ask mainly for spiritual growth, understanding of his word, motivation to live and love as perfectly as he did? Are you perhaps suffering from a paralysis you don’t recognize? One that keeps you from giving time to Scripture reading and prayer? To teaching your children and others about the person of Jesus? To making your lifestyle bear witness to the values of the Gospel? To ministering to others with love? To establishing the “reign of God” where you live and work by trying to bring about changes?

Would you say that the real “good news” is that Jesus calls you to “stand up,” pick up whatever you’re camped on, and go to wherever you will be “at home” spending yourself loving God and serving others? This is what it means to be free of sin.

**Initiative: Identify your paralysis.** In faith, break out of what is holding you back.
First week of the Year


Capernaum was near the Sea of Galilee/Tiberias. When Jesus went out for a walk on the seashore, Mark tells us, “the whole crowd gathered around him” again, and “he taught them.”

He taught in action as well. On the shore was a booth where a man named Levi collected a tax on the fish people caught. Levi was ostracized as a collaborator with the Roman government. He felt excluded from whatever enthusiasm the Jews “in good standing” felt about Jesus.

Jesus didn’t blame Levi, didn’t call him to clean up his act, and didn’t show him any condescending pity. Any of that would have turned Levi off completely. He just looked in Levi’s window and said, “Let’s go. Follow me.”

Levi invited him to dinner with him and his own friends, who were mostly other ‘tax collectors and sinners” — that is, Jews who were considered “unclean.”

Being “unclean” had nothing to do with morality. It simply banned one from participating in certain public acts of worship. It was incurred, not by guilt, but by designated physical actions (e.g. eating with non-Jews) and removed by set ceremonies. The closest thing to this in the Catholic Church is the frequently encountered pastoral practice of denying Communion to people who, though they may not, in their own consciences, be guilty of “mortal sin,” are nevertheless considered not in “good standing” because their actions would lead some people to judge that they are and be “scandalized” if they received Communion.

The religious experts of the Pharisee party were scandalized when Jesus himself became unclean by eating with “tax collectors and offenders against the law.” His answer was, “People who are healthy do not need a doctor. Sick people do. I have come to call, not the righteous, but sinners.” This was his second self-identifying statement in Mark’s Gospel. The first was that he had “authority to forgive sins.”

Jesus is bad news for those whose main concern is to keep the unworthy from appearing to be accepted by the Church — and for whom the “unworthy” are those who break explicit Church laws, not those who exploit and kill people in conventional ways that are legally and socially acceptable. But he is good news for the “poor in spirit” who are just looking for a Savior. Is this the kind of news you rejoice in?

Initiative: Rethink the standards by which you judge yourself or others to be “acceptable” to God or within the Church. Whom did Jesus exclude from what?
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR C

“Life To The Full!” — NOW: Appreciating the Good News

Inventory

How good is the Good News? Do you find the Gospel the most exciting thing in your life? (Don’t laugh; the first Christians did!) Do you think you will find your greatest fulfillment in religion? Your greatest joy? Why not? (It will be your greatest joy for the rest of your life after you die!)

Input

The Entrance Antiphon calls “all the earth” to “break into song” worshipping and praising God. If Christianity is such Good News, why hasn’t that happened? For that matter, why doesn’t the whole congregation in every parish “break into song” enthusiastically at the beginning of Mass? Has the Good News just never gotten through?

In the Opening Prayer we ask God to “show us the way to peace in the world.” If he answered, “I already have,” what would be your first thought? In the alternate Opening Prayer we ask, “Help us to embrace your will, give us the strength to follow your call, so that your truth may live in our hearts and reflect peace to those who believe in your love.” Maybe the Church’s first thought was that we have to be doers of the word instead of just hearers — for which we may have to listen in a different way!

In the Prayer over the Gifts we say, “When we proclaim the death of the Lord, you continue the work of his redemption.” At Mass, are you conscious of “proclaiming the death of the Lord”? How does that affect you?

In the Prayer after Communion we pray that the “bread from heaven” that we receive will “fill us with your Spirit, and make us one in peace and love.” In Communion we receive Jesus. How does that “fill us with his Spirit”? How does it “make us one”? Do you experience Communion as giving you “peace and love”?

The purpose of these questions is not to upset, but to make us realize there may be more thought-provoking content in the words of the liturgy than we have noticed. If we pay attention to the words we will never be bored at Mass. That will already be an experience of the Good News!

We “damn with faint — or no — praise”

The Responsorial Psalm (96: 1-10) invites us to “Proclaim his marvelous deeds to all the nations” If we listen to these words as we repeat them, we may wonder whether we ourselves have enough personal appreciation of his “marvelous deeds” to do that.

Isaiah 62: 1-5 gives us an example of how to do grow into this appreciation. Isaiah says, “I will not be silent.” It is a principle of human life that praise increases appreciation. What we do not praise we will not appreciate — at least not as much as we should. (Test this: how often do you praise your co-workers, friends, spouse, children? Does it affect your appreciation of them?)

Isaiah says, “For Jerusalem’s sake I will not be silent, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and
her salvation like a burning torch.” Do you think so many people would be so “turned off” of the Church if we who go to Mass were not so silent about the good things we experience in dealing with God? In prayer? In the sacraments? At Mass itself? How many of your family and friends have ever told you what they feel about Jesus Christ? (Not what they think; that can be just a recital of the catechism). Who knows what you feel about him? Do your best friends? Your children? Or would they say that is something you keep to yourself, are “silent” about?

Isaiah tells us God’s feelings about his People: “My Delight,” “Espoused.” ”As a bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so shall your God rejoice in you.” Are you conscious that God feels this way about you? Is that your relationship?

If we “Proclaim his marvelous deeds to all the nations,” perhaps the Church will be “vindicated,’ and the salvation she offers will “shine out like a burning torch.”

“They saw his glory”

In John 2: 1-12 the Cana story ends by saying that Jesus “revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

If they were his disciples, didn’t they believe in him already?

The answer is that they did, but not the way they did after they “saw his glory” in the changing of water into wine.

Who knows what the disciples thought of Jesus at first? A good teacher? A man of God? A reformer? They obviously thought he would do some good, but how much good? (Like we think our religion is good, but how good?)

There could not have been even a hundred people at that little country wedding feast. And Jesus added 90 to 136 gallons of wine after they had drunk all that was originally provided. They are still talking about that wedding reception in Cana!

Jesus “revealed his glory” by pouring out “new wine” beyond all expectations and bounds. And he did it at a wedding feast, which was his favorite image of heaven (Matthew 22:2, 25:1; Mark 2:19; Luke 14:8). Jesus came to call all of humanity into a relationship of love with God as deep, as intimate, as passionate as the love of bridegroom and bride. And it is meant to be intoxicating! If we haven’t experienced it that way, we have not yet experienced the Good News. We have not been properly evangelized.

Don’t be too shocked: the last four popes have been calling for a “new evangelization.” That is something exciting for us to get into. It is up to us — all of us — to make it happen.

“To each person…”

1 Corinthians 12: 4-11 tells us we can make it happen, and how: “To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

Of ourselves we can do nothing. But having “become Christ” by Baptism, we can say, paraphrasing Paul, “It is no longer I who work, but it is Christ who works in me” (Galatians 2:20). Jesus wants to act with, in and through each one of us in everything we do. If we keep ourselves conscious of this by inviting him all day long (e.g. by using the WIT prayer: saying before every action: “Lord, do this with me, do this in me,
do this through me”), we will find that he can and does guide us by his Spirit. This is a promise: “To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

The “new evangelization” has to take place everywhere. The Good News must be proclaimed — and credibly — at home, at school, at work, in our social and professional milieux, in every area and activity of business and politics. Proclaimed credibly, not simplistically. It isn’t a matter of talking about Christianity, unless in some appropriate circumstances, but of making the Good News visible in the manner in which we speak to others, deal with others, care about others, put up with others and serve the needs of others — even some needs they are not aware they have.

Paul says, “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service and activities, but it is the same God at work in all of them and in everyone.” One and the same God, one and the same Jesus, acts in each one of us, wherever we are and whatever we are doing. He acts to “give life and give it to the full” to everyone who is open to receive it, and in every way it can be given (John 10:10). If we will pour the water, he will change it into wine, until the whole world is drawn into the wedding feast.

Christians are everywhere, and everywhere they are, they should be like “yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened” (Matthew 13:33). In everything they say and do they should “Proclaim his marvelous deeds to all the nations.” There is no excuse not to: “To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” We who have the Gift of the Spirit must use it to give life to the world.

**Insight**

What are the five best things about being a Christian?

**Initiative:**

First resolve, “I will not be silent.” Then decide how you can best proclaim the Good News with your gifts and opportunities, in your situation.
Second week of the Year


This is the first time Mark shows us Jesus teaching, and the third time he says something identifying about himself. It is in response to a question about the behavior of his disciples: “Why do the disciples of John the Baptizer and of the Pharisees fast, but yours do not?”

Jesus answered by re-defining “religion” as “spirituality.” He took the focus off of what people do and put it instead on the person for whom they do it. For people who think of “religion” as a system of doctrines, rules and observances, fasting is just one of the things “religious” people do. Jesus explained fasting as an act of “spirituality” — that is, as a conscious interaction with God as Person. And he went further. He identified himself as the Person! Jesus himself (with the Father and Spirit) is the focus of every religious act. He is the one we should consciously interact with. This is a radical statement. Essentially, Jesus is saying he is God!

His words were, “How can the guests at a wedding fast while the bridegroom is among them?” Fasting is physical hunger embraced as a symbolic expression and experience of spiritual hunger for God. Jesus uses the wedding banquet as an image of the union we enjoy with God in heaven (see Matthew 22 and 25, Revelation 19:9). And he says he himself is the bridegroom!

This is news! It is something so new and different that Jesus says a transformation has to take place within people before they can accept it. “No one pours new wine into old wineskins. The wine would burst the skins, and both wine and skins would be lost. One puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

To accept the Good News we have to be given a new mind and a new heart. When the psalmist wrote, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; put a new and right spirit within me,” he was really asking for “grace”; that is, the “favor” of sharing in the divine life of God. We need to become “new wine skins” by sharing in God’s own life before we can receive the “new wine” Jesus came to give. To “love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind,” we have to know the Father as only Jesus knows him — which we can only do by “becoming Christ,” filii in Filio, “sons and daughters in the Son.” To accept Christ’s teaching we have to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds” and put on the “mind of Christ” (Psalm 51; Matthew 11:27; 16:17-23; Romans 12:2; 1Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 2:5). The Good News is so good we have to be made new to hear it.

Initiative: Ask explicitly for the grace of divine faith, divine hope, divine love.
Second week of the Year


For the second time Jesus is questioned about the behavior of his disciples. In response he gives a teaching about law and again says something about himself.

Jesus’ disciples were pulling heads of grain off the stalks and eating them as they walked through a field on the Sabbath. Some Pharisees said, “Look, they are working on the Sabbath! Jesus answered by reminding them that when in need David fed his hungry troops with the Temple bread “which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat.” Then he taught them how God thinks about his own laws: “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath!”

Phariseeism is defined as a religion whose focus and goal is law observance. Jesus teaches that laws are always just a means to an end, and we cannot keep any law as God desires unless we first ask what its purpose is. He goes further and teaches that the purpose of all laws is to help people. If we lose sight of this, we have lost contact with God’s mind and will. And that means we are misunderstanding God!

This is an important principle. We must always interpret laws in the light of what God reveals of himself. If we reverse the direction and form our idea of God from the way his laws are interpreted by people in our time and place, we can get a very distorted notion of God. Some have stopped believing in God because of this. And some have left the Church because they judged the Church by the blind way some Catholics, even priests, interpret her laws. God did not create people to keep his laws. He made laws to help people live “life to the full” (*John* 10:10). If we have a problem with some particular law, either we don’t understand the law or we don’t know God.

Jesus concluded from this, “so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” Since Jesus was sent by God as Messiah and Savior of the human race, everything God created for human beings — including the Sabbath observance — is subject to him. Jesus is not just a limited human savior with a limited mission and authority. Paul will say later that “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created… all things have been created through him and for him” (*Colossians* 1:16). The bottom line is that anything Jesus says, God backs. This may sound obvious to us who know that Jesus is God. But it is still “good news” — especially when we feel crushed by laws that are taught as if they were ends in themselves.

**Initiative:** Always ask what the goal of a law is so you will understand how to apply it to particular situations.
Second week of the Year


This is the only time in the Gospels that the word “anger” is used with reference to Jesus. (In Matthew 18:34, however, a king condemns a servant “in anger” for refusing to forgive a fellow servant). The reason is that the Pharisees refused to answer when he challenged them. They “remained silent.”

The question Jesus asked was, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” The Pharisees didn’t listen to yesterday’s teaching about understanding God’s law as always intending good for people. They were watching to see if Jesus would cure a man on the Sabbath, “hoping to be able to bring an accusation against him.” When Jesus tried to show them what they were doing, their response was stone silence.

This attitude exists in the Church today, as in every day. Every preacher or teacher who goes beyond doctrinal narrowness or moral legalism experiences it. The truth comes under attack by those who are threatened by change. Those who challenge sincerely will dialogue and accept an explanation if it is reasonable and demonstrably true to the teaching of the Church. Others choose to remain both deaf and dumb. They keep their mouths closed against dialogue and their minds closed against truth. They keep death alive in the Church by burying their hearts alive.

The good news is that Jesus invites all of us, “Stretch out your heart” as he invited the man in the Gospel, “Stretch out your hand.” If we do, we will be healed. For, as St. Paul wrote later, “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Romans 8:2). If we are truly disciples — students and learners — of Jesus, he has promised, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

The sad truth is, however, that freedom itself is a threat to many people. The reaction of the Pharisees was to “go out and immediately begin to plot how to destroy him.”

The good news is that their plot succeeded —and resulted in the salvation of the world! In the same way, the words of the true prophets who are stoned and silenced today will germinate in the “good soil” of those who have accepted them. Then one day, when enough hearts in the Church are sufficiently regenerated, they will rise and “renew the face of the earth.”

Initiative: Keep stretching out your mind and your heart. Use the time-tested “principles of spiritual discernment” to test your reactions to what you hear.
Second week of the Year


Mark reminds us again that people were coming to Jesus in droves — but mostly for the wrong reason.

Jesus couldn’t refuse to heal. He had the power and the desire to do it. His love and compassion were passionate. And as long as he was physically present and accessible, he couldn’t say no to anyone “who had afflictions.”

But he knew that every time he worked a physical cure he was sending out the wrong message about what the Messiah came to do. There was truth in it, of course: the truth that God cares; and his miracles gave proof he was sent and empowered by God. Some may have seen in his physical healing a symbol of the spiritual healing that was his real mission. But most didn’t. “They came to him in great numbers…. for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him.”

They still made it almost impossible for him to teach. So when “the unclean spirits… shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’ he sternly ordered them not to make him known.” He wanted to be known, not as a faith-healer, but as a Teacher. And more than a teacher; as “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6). He came, not just to heal physical diseases, but so that we might “have life, and have it to the full.” And he defined what this life is: “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 10:10; 17:3).

Have we really heard the Good News? Do we come to Jesus, not just to learn about God, but to get to know God — as Jesus knows the Father and the Father knows him? (Matthew 11:27). What do we ask God for most often in prayer? What do we go to church for? What do we ask our pastor to do for us? What invitations from the parish do we accept? Are the opportunities for spiritual growth the activities that draw us the most?

Is it our greatest desire to “lose our lives for Jesus’ sake, and for the sake of the gospel” so that we might come to “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Mark 8:35; Ephesians 3:19)? If not, we haven’t been truly “evangelized.” We haven’t heard Mark’s Gospel.

Fortunately, God knows the value of time. Evangelization is an on-going process. (Why else are you reading these reflections?) So persevere.

**Initiative: Keep reaching for more.** God is “greater than our hearts” (1John 3:20).
Second week of the Year


So far Mark has only mentioned four disciples of Jesus. But there must have been others following him, because now Mark shows us Jesus making a selection. He “went up the mountain and called the men he had decided on. He appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles.”

Mark says four things about these men: 1. They were to “be with” Jesus. For the importance of this, see Acts 1:21-22: the replacement for Judas had to be “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us.” 2. They were also going to be sent out (hence the name ‘apostle,” which means “someone sent”). 3. They were to “preach the good news.” And 4. They were to “have authority to expel demons.” That is, they were going to do just what Jesus had been doing.

Mark tells us three things here about the Good News. First, the important thing was that the message should be proclaimed; not that Jesus himself should be the one to proclaim it. In sending out the apostles Jesus was in some sense making the proclamation of the Good News independent of his own, human, physical presence. However, in giving the apostles authority to do just what he was doing, Jesus foreshadowed that mystical identification of Christians with himself that is the essential mystery of the Church and the core of St. Paul’s preaching. The truth is, in the members of his body on earth it is Jesus himself who is acting. Second, the message had to be grounded in human, historical contact with Jesus. The apostles were not teachers of an abstract doctrine; they were bearers of a message from Jesus himself. They were a link between the living Jesus and the people to whom they were sent. That is why St. Paul, even though he had direct mystical experience of the risen Jesus, also needed to be approved by the community of “the Twelve” lest in his work as an apostle he should be “running in vain” (Galatians 2:2). Third, the ministry of those sent was, like that of Jesus himself, to give light and life by preaching and by delivering people from any evil influences that hold them back from the fullness of graced life (see Psalm 56:19; John 1: 4-5, 8:12).

With the sending of the Twelve, Jesus makes it clear that he is not a Lone Ranger Messiah. The Kingdom is going to be established by Jesus working with, in and through others.

Initiative: Be Christ. But keep contact with the historical Jesus in his Church.
Second week of the Year


With the sending of the apostles Jesus’ ministry may have reached a turning point, although Mark doesn’t tell us much more about their activity.

The focus of opposition changes. Up to now the Pharisees and religious experts have opposed Jesus mostly because he wouldn’t conform to their narrowness and legalism. Now, however, there seem to be problems arising from the relationship of his humanity to his divinity. This may reflect a core problem in the Church, which begins with the sending of the apostles. The fact is, Jesus chooses human beings — who are not perfect in knowledge, practical judgment or virtue — to do his divine-human work. So now we find people, including Jesus’ own family, having problems with his human behavior.

The first problem comes with his family’s reaction to the way Jesus handled pressure. When he “went home,” the crowd gathered around him again, making such demands on his time and that of his disciples that “they could not even eat.”

Mark tells us, “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind!’” An interesting remark to make about the divine Son of God!

It is conceivable that Jesus did let himself get carried away. The Scripture does say of him that he was “one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). The Mass (Eucharistic Prayer IV) calls him “a man like us in all things but sin.” Nothing says Jesus never made mistakes in practical human judgment. No telling how many chairs he measured wrong in the carpenter shop while his mind was absorbed in thoughts about the Father — or perhaps just distracted by dinner!

So Mark may be alerting us that the work of the Kingdom is not going to be flawless in every way. We also say in the Mass (Sunday Preface III) “You came to our rescue by your power as God, but you wanted us to be saved by one like us.” That includes all those humans “like us” in whom Jesus lives and works as his own body on earth. We have a perfectly good Church, but no one would say it is a perfect one. Jesus could perhaps have done everything himself and done it perfectly. But that is not the way God wants it done. To accept Jesus we have to live with that.

Initiative: Accept the human in yourself and others. But recognize the divine.
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR C

A Birdseye View: Managing the Good News

Inventory

If someone asked you, “What, in a nutshell, is the Good News?” what would you say? Suppose we put it differently: “What is so good about being a Christian?” Do you have a ready answer? Have you ever thought about it? Do you see the value of condensing the Good News into a few clear and memorable gifts, promises and commitments?

Input

The Entrance Antiphon urges us to “sing a new song to the Lord.” What is new and different about Christianity? The verse mentions five things. “Truth and beauty surround him; he lives in holiness and glory.” We learn his truth as disciples, students of the Word made flesh. We see the beauty of his truth when it is embodied in the prophetic witness of actions and lifestyle. He shows us this by living in us, his body on earth, who have “become Christ” by Baptism. His holiness appeared above all when as Priest and Victim he gave his “flesh for the life of the world” on Calvary. His “glory” was previewed in his resurrection, and will be fully revealed when he comes again in triumph as King at the end of time.

In the Opening Prayer(s) we ask God to use “our efforts” to “bring the human race to unity and peace.” But this is no ordinary unity and peace. The goal and fruit of Christianity is a mystery. God is “greater than the human heart.” So we ask that our “faults and weaknesses” will not “obscure the vision” and cause us to settle for less than the full mystery of the “peace you have promised.” We have falsified the Good News if it doesn’t hold up to us something that “exceeds the furthest expression of our human longing.”

If all we had were….

In Nehemiah 8:2-10 we get some idea of how much it meant to the Jews to be given laws to live by that came from God himself.

Imagine what life on earth would be like without them. Suppose we knew, as every normal human person, nation and culture has known for the millions of years of human existence all over the earth, that the universe owes its existence to some awesome Being, but did not know for sure what that Being expects of us. Would that cause us concern? Suppose we valued life as a precious gift but were left to figure out for ourselves how to get the most out of it. Suppose there were no “operator’s manual” or “instructions on the bottle” from the manufacturer. Where would that leave us?

In this context we can appreciate the exclamation of the Responsorial Psalm (19: 8-15): “Your words, Lord, are spirit and life.” If Jesus takes us beyond the revelation of the Law, how great must the Good News be?

“Fulfilled in your hearing”

In Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21, Jesus gives an outline of the Good News that was embodied in his person.

1. “To bring good news to the poor”: The Good News for our being is the gift of grace. “In Christ” we
receive the gift of divine life. The substance of the Good News was summed up by Paul: it is “is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). Because we died in him and rose in him, our sins are annihilated and we have become a “new creation.” “In Christ” we are children of the Father and temples of the Spirit, endowed with the “righteousness of God” himself (2Corinthians 5:17-21). By Baptism we “became Christ.” We are sent and empowered to “save” and lift up everything in the world that has veered off to destructiveness, distortion, mediocrity or meaninglessness. The Messiah is alive and active in us.

2. “To proclaim liberty to captives”: The Good News for our intellect is the gift of faith. Our minds have been taken captive by false worldviews, schools of thought, and historical distortions. Our culture has left us confined in a “low-ceiling world,” walled off from seeing the full dimensions of God’s being, truth and goodness, and of our human dignity and destiny. Jesus promises “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). He invites those who “sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79) to come out and be his disciples.

3. “Recovery of sight to the blind”: This is Good News for our power of perception — and by extension, of memory. Spiritual blindness is not an intellectual problem, nor something imposed from outside of us. It is an interior hardness of heart, an unwillingness even to look at truth. The worst blindness is that of the Pharisees in every age, who find their security in blind obedience to the law. With a chosen tunnel vision they absolve themselves from the risk and responsibility of looking at the goal of the law and making personal decisions about how to achieve the goal in particular situations. Jesus frees us from this spiritual handicap by calling us to focus on bearing witness to his values. This necessarily takes us beyond mere law-observance and opens us to new and creative insights into ways of living the Gospel more authentically. This is the gift and meaning of our baptismal consecration as prophets.

4. “To let the oppressed go free”: The Good News for our will is the gift of love. Until Jesus came the only escape from oppression was through violence fired by hatred. Jesus taught us to resist, but nonviolently: to “endure evil with love” by accepting whatever cross the sin of the world happens to drop on our shoulders and “loving back,” relying on no power but truth and love. We are to love our enemies and minister to them, even to sacrificing our lives. The call to ministry also brings us out of the self-imposed prison of selfishness that confines us within the narrowness of self-interest. By our baptismal consecration as “priests in the Priest” we are launched on the way of Jesus, Victim and Priest, to give our “flesh for the life of the world.

5. “To announce a year of favor from the Lord”: The Good News for the meaning in life we seek through activity is the gift of hope. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). Jesus is alluding to the jubilee year in Judaism, when debts were cancelled, land and possessions returned to their original owners, and slaves were freed. God commanded this first as Creator: “The land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.” By creation humans are only God’s stewards, charged to take care of his creation (Genesis 1:26-28). God also speaks as God of the Covenant: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan…. [Any slaves you have] are my servants…. You shall not rule over them with harshness, but shall fear your God….They and their children with them shall go free in the jubilee year” (Leviticus 25:8-55). Jesus is saying that the “reign of God” has begun, and the Good News is that we are consecrated by Baptism to bring about peace and justice on earth as “kings,” or stewards of his kingship.

That is the Good News that Jesus announced and wants to continue announcing with us, in us and through us until he comes again.
Who we are:

In 1 Corinthians 12: 12-30 Paul is keeping his focus on the central theme of all of his writings: “the mystery hidden throughout the ages but now revealed to his saints… this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:26). That, for Paul, is the Good News in a nutshell. And because of it, he says, there should be “no dissension within the body,” no jealousy, no special preferences, but “all the members should have the same care for one another.” There are all sorts of different gifts, functions, ministries and roles in the body of Christ, but none is “higher” or “lower,” because they are all functions of the same body and the body is a single whole. So “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all share its joy.” John Donne’s poem “No Man is an Island” captures it:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were.

Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.

And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

The Good News is that no one has any special dignity. There is only one dignity, the dignity of the Body of Christ, and all share in it equally.

Nor can we be indifferent to anyone’s pain. All pain is the pain of all. “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

If we truly live this out, we will evangelize the world!

Insight

Can you sum up the Good News in five sentences? Five words?

Initiative:

Adopt the WIT prayer: “Lord do this with me, do this in me, do this through me.”
Third week of the Year


Mark tells us that next some “scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘By the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’” The official teachers of the Pharisee party thought he was not just crazy but possessed!

Jesus responds with two teachings. First he says, “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. So if in me Satan is casting out Satan he is finished.” And second, “No one can enter a strong man’s house… without first tying him up.” So Jesus must be stronger than the devil, not in league with him.

So much for the argument of the scribes. But Jesus gives a third teaching addressed to all of us: “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never find forgiveness.” What is “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”?

Some people sin just out of weakness, or because they have been malformed by their culture. The truth is, most objections against the Catholic Church are objections against things she does not believe or teach — or against things her least representative members do, which can include priests and bishops! There is hope for people who “blaspheme” — or rail — against truth that has been presented to them distorted by the flawed ministry of humans. If nothing else, we can hope that when they die God will show them the truth — the things they misunderstood, the distortions they accepted, the counter-productive responses they made to situations they found themselves in — and say to them, “This is the real truth This is what I really am. Do you accept me now?” If this is the case, their “final judgment” about God will be their Final Judgment, even if they make it after the medical profession has pronounced them legally dead. Christians believe people are “dead” when God says they are; not when the doctors do!

But some people actually embrace evil as good, and abhor good as evil. Some reject the inspirations and enlightenment of God himself. God will forgive them if they repent, but there is less hope that they will. They are blocking God’s best shot. (Compare this with Mark 12:6).

Mark tells us Jesus said this “because they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’” If people can’t tell the difference between the devil and God himself, they are in serious trouble.

Initiative: Accept both what is human and what is divine in your experience of the Church and the Church’s ministry, but do not confuse one with the other.
Third week of the Year


In Mark’s next incident we can see how Jesus’ family could think he was crazy! Jesus wouldn’t stop talking even long enough to eat. “His mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, sent word to him” that he should come home to dinner.

We would expect a normal son to say, “Okay, mother, I’ll be home in a minute.” But Jesus said, “My mother? My brothers? Who are my mother and brothers?” And then, “gazing around him,” he said, “These are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother!”

We are tempted to think that when Jesus finally did go home, Mary may have said to him as any Jewish mother would have, even one “conceived without sin”: “So who is your mother? Who are your brothers? Go find some other woman who ‘does the will of God’ and let her give you your supper!”

Then, of course, she sat him down and made him eat until he cried for mercy.

Here again we have a very human Jesus saying something arrestingly divine. Would any of us dare to claim to be as close to Jesus, as much a part of his family, as his own mother was? But he is the one who says it. We just can’t bring ourselves to accept the mystery of what “grace” really is. Grace is the favor of sharing in the divine life of God. If we think we fully understand what that means, we don’t even understand what there is to understand!

By grace we “become Christ.” We become his real body. “In him” we are made true sons and daughters of the Father. His own Spirit bears witness to that within us: “Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:16; Galatians 4:6). Do we claim this?

How do we feel about claiming to be the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:14)? About claiming to be “one” with God and with each other “in God” as the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father (John 17:21)? About declaring that because we believe in him we can do the works that Jesus does; and, in fact, can do “greater works than these” (John 14:12)?

Don’t we feel crazy ourselves, making claims like that? But it is Jesus who says it, not us. We just have a hard time taking him seriously. The next passage we read in Mark will tell us why.

Initiative: Open your mind to mystery. Don’t think you understand what you were taught in “religion class.” Keep asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten you.
Third week of the Year


Until Jesus says we are his “brothers and sisters and mother” he has not taught anything very mystical except to identify himself as the “bridegroom” for whom our hearts are longing. Now, however, it is almost as if he realizes that people are not getting the message. They are not able to get it, because the real Good News is simply beyond human comprehension. It is to make this point, perhaps, that Jesus changes his style of teaching. Now he begins to teach “in parables.”

Later, to those who grouped with the Twelve, Jesus explained why. Simplistically put, a parable is a literary form that says something without clearly spelling it out. Jesus uses parables so people can “look, but not see” and “listen, but not understand” unless they look with eyes of faith and listen with hearts intent on living out what they hear. Parables don’t hit people over the head with their meaning. This leaves some excuse to those who aren’t ready to “turn away from sin and be forgiven.”

The “Parable of the Sower” explains why, so often, the words of Jesus, God himself, have so little effect. The reason is that salvation is a two-way street. God does his part, but we have to do ours.

The first obstacle is cultural conditioning. Counter-cultural words falling on the “beaten path” are lost by “bounce” and “pounce.” Some just bounce off without penetrating. Others are pounced on with such ridicule by peer groups and media that unless we emancipate ourselves from society’s enslavement what Jesus says will never even register. Strike one.

Even if we listen with initial attraction, the seed will not penetrate to decision depth unless we reflect on what we hear. Words only take root in choices. Strike two is shallowness.

What finally strikes us out is our attachment to what may be immediately urgent or appealing but is ultimately meaningless: “anxieties over life’s demands, the desire for wealth, and cravings of other sorts.” We can’t expect to understand, much less to live by, the divine life of God if our commitment to him has too many strings attached. Strike three: idolatry.

Initiative: Ask what fruit God’s words are bearing in your life. Be specific. If you can’t identify anything significant, check out the three obstacles above.
Third week of the Year


The “inner circle” of Jesus’ disciples may have thought they were privileged. He wanted them to understand that their privilege was preparation: whatever they got from him, it was so they could give it to others. If they were “brought in,” it was in order to be sent out: “Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand?” He explained things to them in private only because others weren’t ready to hear them yet. “Things are hidden only to be revealed at a later time; nor is anything kept secret, except to be brought to light.”

Having made clear by the commissioning of the Twelve that Christianity is a group endeavor to establish the “reign of God” on earth, Jesus makes it even more clear that an individualistic focus on private self-fulfillment has no place in his Church. Being “saved” and saving go together. Jesus has no sheep who are not called to be shepherds, and no disciples who are not required to teach. Love is by nature self-bestowing. We cannot accept love well without becoming loving. Any light not shining is extinguished. If we are not giving life to others we are dead.

All this is simply what it means to be created in the image of God and, beyond that, to be divinized by sharing in the life of God. God is by nature creative. God could not be God and not give himself: Father giving to Son, Son to Father, and both to the Holy Spirit, who gives himself in return. Likewise, God gives himself in and through creation. He gives himself in and through grace. He cannot stop giving or hold himself back. He “gives the Spirit without measure” (John 3:34).

How can we share in the life of God without sharing it with others? Jesus said, “Listen carefully; this is important: in the measure you give you shall receive....” And since God is God, who cannot be outdone in generosity, he adds, “and more besides.”

A principle is at work here: “To those who have, more will be given.” Any gift gratefully received from God arouses us to open our hearts for more, which impels us to give more to others (2Corinthians 5:14). This is to keep growing in love.

Those who think they “have nothing” to share — no truth, no witness to give, no love, no experience of God, —will be proven right, because what they have will be “taken away” from them — not by God, but by their failure to recognize it. We realize the grace we have when we try to share it with others.

Initiative: Share with someone one thing you know or (better) feel about God.
Third week of the Year


We can’t say Jesus did not practice what he preached. After hearing him urge others to share what was in their hearts, we see him doing it himself.

When Mark reports the next two parables about the “Kingdom,” he explains that in preaching to the crowd Jesus “spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them except in parables. But he explained everything in private to his disciples.” There may have been a reason for this that Mark doesn’t mention.

How could Jesus have preached the Good News as he understood it — fantastic news, a mystery beyond all human comprehension, a life-transforming invitation to the fullness of life, but which “gave all” only to those who were willing to “lose all” — without feeling discouragement? Even preachers today, who don’t have a fraction of the understanding Jesus had, and who are able to proclaim only the mitigated measure of mystery they have absorbed, feel discouraged by the obtuseness and apathy they encounter. Let’s face it: the authentic message of Jesus is not the hottest-selling item on the market. And the “Kingdom of God” does not appear to be approaching at warp speed.

Jesus felt this. And undoubtedly prayed about it. And shared what the Father revealed to him. He told the crowds only what they could understand, but to his disciples he unburdened his heart. What did the Father show him?

“The kingdom of God,” Jesus said (and saw) “is like a man scattering seed…. He goes to bed and gets up day after day…. The seed sprouts and grows without his knowing how it happens.” Little by little the soil produces: “first the stalk, then the head of wheat, finally the full grain in the head.” When the crop is ready he gathers it in, “for the time is ripe for harvest.”

He said the Kingdom is also “like a mustard seed, which, when sown… is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet once it is sown it grows up to become the largest of all shrubs, with branches big enough for the birds of the sky to build nests in its shade.” That is the future Jesus saw for his Church.

Jesus lived in hope. He didn’t see results. But he trusted in the Father. And he shared his feelings and his thoughts with us so that we could do the same.

The Good News is that, whether we see it or not, it is alive. We just have to keep waiting and working “in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Initiative: Be joyful, reminding yourself that the Kingdom is being established.

Third week of the Year


It is one thing to trust and keep working when the Kingdom doesn’t seem to be coming very fast. It is another to stay peaceful when everything is falling apart.

In the previous passage Jesus shared his own feelings of concern with his disciples. Now Mark shows us
the disciples feeling a concern that Jesus doesn’t appear to share at all. The boat they are in is sinking, and Jesus is sleeping right through it!

Mark undoubtedly meant us to see in this incident an allegory of the Church’s experience after Jesus ascended into heaven. (An allegory is a literary form “in which the characters and events are to be understood as representing other things and symbolically expressing a deeper, often spiritual… meaning.” Encarta World English Dictionary).

In this case the boat is a symbol of the Church. The storm is a symbol of the opposition the Church was experiencing: so great “that the boat was already being swamped.” (Mark was probably writing for Roman Christians undergoing persecution). Jesus “asleep” represented Jesus apparently absent and inactive, ascended into heaven and seemingly unconcerned about what was happening to his Church. The words the disciples said to Jesus when they woke him up may express exactly what the Christians in Rome were feeling when Mark wrote: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Mark’s point, however, is that whether Jesus appears to be present or absent, awake or asleep, he always has things under control. When Jesus woke up he “rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then “the wind fell off, and everything grew calm.”

But Jesus wasn’t finished. He looked at his disciples and said, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” He is teaching us through them that fear is contrary to faith, and that if we have enough faith we will fear nothing. Note that he is not talking about the emotion of fear, over which we have no control, but about fear we give intellectual assent to. To affirm an ultimate reason to be afraid of anything is to deny that Jesus is Lord of everything.

The disciples were apparently catching on to this. “They were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” Mark’s identification of Jesus is adding up.

Initiative: Rebuke fear in yourself as Jesus rebuked the storm. That won’t make it go away, but it will keep it from hurting you.
A Link-up

The Christmas season is over. Lent has not begun. In this feast we look backward to Christmas and forward to Lent. The Blessing of the Candles begins: “Forty days ago we celebrated the joyful feast of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today we recall the holy day on which he was presented in the temple.”

This feast has four names and a long history. It was first observed in the Eastern Church as “The Encounter.” In the Western Church it became known as “The Purification of Mary,” but in the 1970 reform of the liturgy after Vatican II the focus was restored to the “Presentation of the Lord.” It is also popularly known as “Candlemas” because we bless candles for a procession into the church that images Christ’s entrance into the temple — and into the world as Light of Life. Before Rome began celebrating Christmas on December 25, this feast was celebrated on February 14 and the “forty days” were counted from the feast of the Epiphany.

All of these names contribute to the meaning of this feast.

The “Purification” points us toward the penitential season of Lent.

“Candlemas” reminds us that our purification reaches fullness only if we “walk in the path of goodness” — and freedom — by the “light of faith.” We look ahead: “May we who carry these candles… come with joy to the light of glory.”

“The Encounter” (linked to Epiphany in the blessing prayer) identifies the Light with Jesus: “God our Father, source of all light, today you revealed to Simeon your Light of revelation to the nations.” Our purification began when we encountered Jesus. It continues every time we encounter him more deeply.

The Encounter was made possible because God the Son “became man for us” in his Incarnation, and “was presented in the temple” to be revealed to the world (Opening Prayer). He invited us in response to “present our bodies as a living sacrifice” (Romans 6:13; 12:1) together with him who “offered himself as a lamb without blemish for the life of the world (Prayer over the Gifts). This we did at Baptism, giving ourselves up with Christ and in Christ on the cross as he did for the Church, “in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the Church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle” (Ephesians 5:26-27). This feast, with its procession, reminds us that we are a “pilgrim Church,” ever moving toward greater light and love. In the Prayer after Communion we ask that encountering Jesus in Eucharist will “perfect your grace in us and prepare us to meet Christ when he comes.”

In this feast we celebrate the Presentation of Light offered to us in an Encounter with Jesus that leads to our Purification and the redemption of the world.

“A Refiner’s Fire….”

Malachi 3:1-4, like many passages in the Old Testament, makes encounter with the Lord sound scary: “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

The reason is that God purifies: “He is like a refiner’s fire…. He will purify the descendants of Levi, refining them like gold or silver.”
But we need to look to the end. With everything God does there is always a happy ending: “Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD.” We can’t help thinking of what that offering was actually going to be: “a lamb without blemish for the life of the world.” Or, in the literal translation of the first Eucharistic Prayer; “a victim that is pure, a victim that is holy, a victim that is immaculate, the holy Bread of eternal life and the Chalice of everlasting salvation.” What we have in Eucharist is worth the price of purification!

“Now… peace”

In Luke 2:22-40 we automatically assume that Simeon was an old man, because the Holy Spirit had promised him he “would not experience death before he had seen the Anointed of the Lord.” But that doesn’t follow: he could have been twenty years old! Whether he was, or whether he was eighty-four like Anna, the point is that life is not complete — for any of us — until we have met Jesus Christ. And the sooner we encounter him the better. But we need to encounter him personally, with personal faith, real hope and active love. Until we do, we cannot really “experience” either life or death in any authentic way. If Jesus is not the “main attraction” in our living and our dying, neither one can be basically satisfying, much less “filled with joy” (see Psalm 126; John 10:10; Galatians 5:22). Simeon said, “Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace… for my eyes have seen your salvation.” If we are not deeply in peace, even in the midst of suffering and stress, our eyes have not seen, and our ears have not heard the Good News. In the last analysis, what more do we need in this life besides the assurance that we are in union with God “in Christ” and in present possession of everything we need to make us happy for all eternity?

The Light of Peace

Hebrews 2:14-18 tells us stress is an experience of slavery. We do forced labor — at home, in our jobs, just as citizens sometimes — out of “fear of death.” Fear of what we will lose. (Jesus said that if we are afraid to give up our lives, or anything in them, we have already lost them: Matthew 16:25). Fear that our lives will have counted for nothing in the end. (Jesus guaranteed that if we work for him our lives will “bear fruit, fruit that will last”: John 15:16). What we need to be purified of is fear! If we meet Jesus, the Light of the world, he promises: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

Initiative: Think about the Bible. Can you meet Jesus there? Find freedom? Do it!
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR C

Undiscouraged Love: Sharing the Good News

Inventory

Would you feel a little strange calling yourself an “evangelist”? Do your friends and family think of you that way? If not, is that their fault or yours?

What do you think it means to “evangelize”? Do we only “evangelize” people who know nothing of Jesus or Christianity? Whom do you or could you evangelize? When? Where?

Match this against Pope Paul VI’s statement that “the Church exists to evangelize.” Who was he talking about? Isn’t “the Church” us? All of us? If there is a special group who are “evangelists,” who are they? How many do you know?

Input

In the Entrance Antiphon we ask God to “save us” so that we might “proclaim your holy name.” That implies they go together. And it continues, “and glory in [giving you] praise.” The Church assumes that those who are “saved” will praise God a lot; and “glory” in it. Were you taught this? Are you open to it?

In the Opening Prayer(s) we ask God to “help us love you… and to love all people as you love them.” We are used to that commandment. But how does God love people? How did he show it? The alternate prayer declares that God has “formed a people in the image of [his] Son.” Is the image of Jesus visible in what we do for all the people we deal with? How did Jesus show love for people in daily life?

In the Prayer over the Gifts we ask God to “make these gifts the sacrament of our salvation.” What does that mean? “Sacrament” means “mystery” or “pledge.” (In the seven sacraments God “pledges” to do what they express). When we put the bread and wine on the altar, what are we pledging? How does that save us?

In the Prayer after Communion we ask God to “give the true faith continued growth throughout the world.” Do we mean that? What are we doing about it? How is receiving Communion associated with this desire?

We ask these questions because sometimes people say they are “bored” at Mass. If we listen to the words we will never be bored. There is too much in them.

“Stand up and tell them….”

Jeremiah 1:4-19 is pretty encouraging for us if we want to live up to our baptismal commitment as “prophets, priests and kings” (stewards of Christ’s kingship). God doesn’t say anything to Jeremiah in this passage that he is not saying to every one of us: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” We were actually consecrated to do the work of God when we received Baptism and Confirmation. We were “anointed” — physically, with chrism, on the top of the head — with the words, “As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King, so live always as a member of his body.” The Church is the body of Christ. The Church “exists to evangelize” (Paul VI). Therefore each
one of us exists to evangelize — as “prophets, priests and stewards of his kingship.” We are consecrated to this.

God told Jeremiah this, not to crush him with a burden, but to encourage him. Jeremiah was sent as a “prophet to the nations.” So are we. Jesus said to the whole Church: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). And when Jeremiah said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak,” God answered, “Do not be afraid… for I am with you…. Gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you.” He says exactly the same thing to us.

Oddly but predictably, there are a lot of people who see the Good News as bad news. God told Jeremiah, “They will fight against you.” Jesus told us, “If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world — therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19). But God added to Jeremiah: “They shall not prevail.”

Our answer to that is not just that we will “proclaim your holy name” (Entrance Antiphon), but that we will “Sing of your salvation” (Responsorial Psalm: 71: 1-17). If people don’t want to listen, we will put the message to music!

The wind shifts

In Luke 4:21-30 Jesus was first accepted, then rejected by the same people. And they were the people he grew up with.

When Jesus spoke in his home town, at first the people liked what he said. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

But then the critics weighed in. They began to focus on who he was rather than on what he was saying. And they measured who he was by his family’s social standing. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” In Matthew (13:54) they say, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is he not the carpenter’s son?”

They also began to talk about the miracles he had worked. They fell into the pattern we see all during Jesus’ ministry: instead of listening to his teaching they wanted to see signs and wonders. They also preferred to have him do something for them — take away their pain — than let him call them to do something for God and other people. They tolerated his teaching as long as he was speaking “gracious words,” but when he got challenging they got hostile.

Things haven’t changed very much! Healers always attract greater crowds than teachers. And the preachers who attract the largest crowds are those who deliver a “feel good” message. This is characteristic of the “mega churches” and popular TV evangelists. The easiest way to get people to come to church is to tell them what they want to hear.

The true prophets don’t do that. God told Jeremiah, and Jesus told those he “sent out” (apostles) that the “world” would hate and oppose them. But let’s be honest: the evangelists start the fight by preaching against the distortions and destructiveness of the culture. We often explain the Good News by showing how it differs from the bad news people are immersed in. There is nothing wrong with that so long as we give equal time to what is so good about the Good News. And that is always going to take us into mystery! The Good News is as deeply different from good human advice as the bad news of the “world” is deeply different from the obvious “immorality” it is so easy to preach against. Jesus, if taken seriously, is closer to a revolutionary than to a moralizer.
How to grow up

The context of Paul’s famous “hymn to love” in 1Corinthians 12:31 to 13:13 is often not noticed. He is preaching love, yes, but in a context of growing into Christian maturity. The clue words are, “When I was a child, I used to talk and think like a child. But when I became an adult, I put childish ways aside.”

Paul is writing to the Christian community in Corinth. They were a charismatic Church. They all sat together and belted out the hymns at Mass with the enthusiasm of conscious believers. They spoke in tongues, stood up in the assembly and “prophesied” by saying whatever they thought God was inspiring them to say. They shared their knowledge of the faith and instructed one another. What God said to Jeremiah was not lost on them: “Do not be afraid…stand up and tell them everything that I command you.”

And Paul said this was good, very good: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good: wisdom… knowledge… faith… gifts of healing… miracles… prophecy… discernment of spirits… tongues… the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit.”

But some became more focused on feeling good and experiencing enthusiasm than on “building up the Church.” This, Paul says (six times! 14:3,4,5,12,17,26) is what love is: “building up the Church,” helping others to grow in faith, hope, love and life. Mature love seeks to give life. If we are just in church to get “turned on,” we are not yet mature Christians. Paul says, “Pursue love…. Let all that you do be done in love.(1Corinthians 14:1;16:14 and re-read the Opening Prayers).

Insight

Can we truly love others without sharing with them the Good News?

Initiative:

Evangelize. See how you can make Good News out of all you say and do.
Fourth week of the Year


When they were caught in the storm, Jesus and his disciples were either on the way or blown off course to Gerasa (or Gadara?) in a province (Decapolis, the “Ten Cities”) the Romans had established so that non-Jews who lived there and spoke Greek could live in peace. Compare this with Isaiah 65:1-5.

This is Jesus’ first encounter in Mark with “pagans,” and the demoniac is the only one who accepts him! One wonders if the possessed man simply made visible the unrecognized condition of the others. He visibly “lived among the tombs” and in chains, symbols of death and the domination of sin. But he, at least, knew it and was grateful when Jesus delivered him from the power of evil. His more respectable countrymen, however, when “those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine” told them about it, were “seized with fear” and “began to beg Jesus to leave.”

In this story Jesus is “begged” four times: first by “Legion” (or “Soldier,” Jerome Biblical Commentary) who beg him 1. not to send them out of their “territory” (χωρα: used to designate a “place the seasoned soldier claims for himself,” Bauer, Greek Lexicon) and 2. to let them go into the pigs; then by the Gerasenes, who beg Jesus to go out of their “boundaries” (ορος); and finally by the freed demoniac, who begs to be with Jesus. A lot of “in’s” and “out’s” here!

Perhaps the point is that the proper citizens were enclosed in the narrow “boundaries” of their fear — fear of the unknown, fear of losing their property — which by that fact became the proper “territory” of the demonic. They were sitting “in the region (ζωρα) and shadow of death” (Matthew 4:16), and didn’t know it. Like the demons, they wanted to stay there. Jesus was upsetting things, so they wanted him out of their lives. But the possessed man knew where he had been, so he wanted to leave and be with Jesus. Jesus told him to go “home” and be a missionary.

To appreciate the Good News of Jesus it helps to appreciate the bad news of life without him. Perhaps that is why Jesus said, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” and why he pointed out to the “chief priests and elders” who thought of themselves as exemplary Jews, “the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Mark 2:19; Matthew 21:23-31).

Initiative: Check your “boundaries.” Are you keeping Jesus out of any part of your life? Is part of the reason fear? Or do you just want to keep your pigs?
Fourth week of the Year


Jairus the “synagogue official” is the first person Jesus cured whom Mark identifies by name, rank or status. Jesus didn’t ask who people were before doing them favors. Nor did he keep himself aloof. On the way to Jairus’ house “a large crowd followed, pushing against him,” so that a woman with an embarrassing illness was able to come up behind him in the crowd and touch his cloak, thinking, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be made well.” And she was. Jesus never even saw her!

But “conscious that healing power had gone out from him” he began “wheeling about in the crowd asking, ‘Who touched my clothes?’” When the woman identified herself, he just said, “Your faith has made you well; go in peace.”

Mark shows that Jesus was not isolated or elevated by protocol. The crowds “pressed in” on him and “hemmed him in.” Jesus was a jostled Messiah.

People didn’t even hesitate to ridicule him. Before he reached Jairus’ house word came, “Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher any further?” — implying, “A lot of good he did you!” Overhearing it, Jesus told Jairus not to worry: “Fear is useless. Just trust.”

At the house he told the mourners, “Why do you make such a commotion? The child is not dead but sleeping.” And Mark says, “They laughed at him.”

The soldiers, priests and official interpreters of the law (“scribes”) also laughed at him when they crucified him (Mark 15:20-32). But they stopped laughing when he rose from the dead. And the mourners would have stopped laughing too when the little girl “rose” (same word) if he had not put them out of the house first. He preferred ridicule to being taken for the kind of Messiah they expected. “He strictly ordered them not to let anyone know about it.”

But in his Gospel Mark tells all. He is writing for people who already know the “messianic secret” that the commentators find in Mark, an adapted version of which is that Jesus did not want anyone to recognize him as Messiah until after his death and resurrection, because there was no way they could have expected anything but a victorious king who would take all pain and suffering out of life in this world.

But we, who know the whole story, need to reject all fear, trusting that nothing that happens to us on earth can keep us from true fullness of life, both now and forever. Even those who die are “not dead but sleeping” — in “life to the full!”

**Initiative: Don’t judge by appearances.** Mourn life that is death, not death that is life. Remember the Good News: it’s called “Resurrection.”
Fourth week of the Year


Jesus must have grown up in a pretty ordinary way. When he taught in his home town people were “amazed” and said, “Where did he get all this?” They just saw him as the “carpenter” whose family were people they all knew.

There is good news here for those of us who were not exactly child prodigies, and who can’t claim any famous relatives to give us status. Jesus was God himself, but nobody knew it. And every one of us has the same claim to fame that Jesus had: the simple truth is, our Father is God. And because we share in his own life, we are divine. It doesn’t get any better than that!

The problem is, we have difficulty believing it — at least in any “real” way that is not just abstract religious doctrine. Jesus said, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown… and in their own house.” Let’s take that even closer to home. We don’t sufficiently honor what we are, even in our own hearts! How do you feel about claiming to be the “light of the world”? About saying you can do the works that Jesus did; and, in fact, “greater works than these”?

In Nazareth Jesus could hardly work a miracle, “so much did their lack of faith distress him.” If he isn’t working miracles in us and through us today, it is because of our lack of faith.

We don’t have to do dramatic things like curing the sick instantly. We just have to let the power of God work in us and through us. Through words that speak truth, especially truth that affirms people and what they are called to be. Through small gestures that show people they are noticed and loved. Through little, quiet details of lifestyle that, if thought about, don’t make sense without the Gospel. Through inexplicably persevering efforts to bring about change where change is needed. Through faith. Hope. Love. Through grace made visible.

To work miracles by doing these little things, all we have to do is believe. Believe Jesus is living and acting in us. Believe Jesus is enabling us to think with his thoughts, speak with his words and act as his body on earth. Believe in a conscious way, remembering his presence within us. Remembering that he has sent us and accompanies us where we are sent — to home, to school, to work, to the ends of the earth! To believe and live out what we believe is to work for the “new evangelization.”

And “renew the face of the earth.”

Initiative: Use the WIT prayer: “Lord, do this with me, in me, through me.”
Fourth week of the Year


When Jesus sends the Twelve out on mission he gives them a short course on how to be effective in proclaiming and establishing the “reign of God.” This is important for us, because, as Pope Paul VI wrote: “The Church exists in order to evangelize.” And John Paul II, along with John XXIII and Benedict XVI, has summoned the whole Church to take part in a “new evangelization” (See Evangelization in the Modern World, nos. 14, 21, 41; At the Beginning of the New Millenium, nos. 40-46).

To “evangelize” it is not enough to proclaim the Good News with words. When Jesus sent his apostles out to do it, he hardly mentioned what they were to preach. But he gave minute details on how they were to live.

This is the key to evangelization. Again, it is Paul VI who says it:

The first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life. …. It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world.

So Jesus sent his apostles out “two by two,” to make it clear that the first concern of evangelizers must be to live and work as a community united in mind and will and heart. John Paul II wrote:

We need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle wherever Christians are formed…. [and] encourage a fruitful dialogue between pastors and faithful… uniting them a priori in all that is essential, and leading them to pondered agreement in matters open to discussion.

Jesus gave the apostles “authority over unclean spirits,” but instructed them to live lives of visible powerlessness, stripped of human resources, to show that they relied entirely on God for their support and the fruitfulness of their ministry. They were to “take nothing for their journey… no bread, no bag, no money in their belts…."

We have already seen that Jesus did not exclude the weak and sinful. “Good standing” was to be based more on faith and sincere desire than on performance. But when it came to preaching the radical principles and pure ideals of the Good News, they were not to make any compromises just to win support or acceptance. “If any will not welcome you… shake their dust off your feet!”

So the apostles went out and used power against demons but “anointed with oil those who were sick.

Initiative: Study Christian witness. What does your lifestyle say to others?
Fourth week of the Year


Jesus’ reputation was becoming widespread —due in part, perhaps, to the mission of the Twelve. People were beginning to wonder who Jesus was.

Some said he was “Elijah,” because the Lord had said through the prophet Malachi (3:23): “I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great… day of the LORD.” Others said he was “a prophet.” By this time Herod had put John the Baptizer to death, and some were saying, “John has been raised from the dead; that is why such power is at work in him.” When Herod heard the rumors, he drew his own conclusion: “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” No one was suggesting Jesus might be the Messiah.

He got the principle right: the only explanation for the divine work taking place in the Church in any day is that Jesus is alive and working in the members of his body. Herod was just wrong in his timing and in identifying Jesus with John the Baptizer.

The truth is, when members of the Church engage in ministry, it is the risen Jesus who is present and working in them. At Baptism we gave our bodies to Christ so that he might rise from the dead in us to continue his presence and mission on earth (see Romans 12:1-2; 1Corinthians 12:1-27). Mark may be alluding to this in a vague way when he records Herod’s “near miss” explanation.

Mark inserts here the story of John’s death. His reason probably is to prepare us for the death and apparent defeat of Jesus. People were shocked that God did not protect John, who was the chosen herald of the Messiah. John himself had a problem with it (see Matthew 11:2-3). The Messiah was supposed to be a winner, and all those connected to him should have been safe. The reason for Mark’s “messianic secret” was to keep Jesus’ identity quiet until he had risen from the dead, because until then his crucifixion could not have been understood as anything except total defeat at the hands of his enemies. Mark shows people projecting John’s resurrection as the logical answer to the problem of his apparent abandonment by God. Ultimately, they were right!

The good news here is that when Jesus rose, his victory was the victory of all who would die “in him” or for him. When he rose we rose. We live in him and he lives in us. The Christ of the “end time”— “the same yesterday, today and forever”—will be John and all the rest of us risen from the dead (see Ephesians 1:10; Hebrews 13:8).

Initiative: See the whole picture. When “the fat lady sings” it will be pure joy.

Fourth week of the Year


When the apostles returned from their mission they were really keyed up. They “gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.” So he told them to take a break: “Come away to an out-of-the-way place and rest a little.”

The good news here is that Jesus tried to give his hard-working disciples a rest. The bad news is that the crowds made it impossible. “People were coming and going in great numbers, making it impossible for them to so much as eat.” When Jesus and the disciples tried to get away in a boat, “many saw them going and hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.” So much for the day off!
As they went ashore, they found “a vast crowd” waiting for them. Stop the camera: What would most people do in a situation like that? Ask the folks to come back during office hours? Give a short token speech to be polite and then dismiss them? Mark says Jesus “had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” And he began to teach them “at great length.”

Jesus didn’t make token gestures. He didn’t give himself half way.

Part of the reason for this is that Jesus, being God, was whole and entire in everything he did. He couldn’t love half-heartedly or give himself with reserves.

But another part is that the Good News Jesus was proclaiming is so good — so healing, so life-integrating, life-extending, life-fulfilling — that those who have been evangelized can’t stop evangelizing others. If this was true of Paul (2 Corinthians 5:14), it was certainly true of Jesus. And when we have sufficiently heard the Good News, it is true of every one of us. If we are like God we will act like God. To live God’s life is to give God’s life. That is what Jesus did. If we are his body on earth, and if his Spirit is within us, that is what we will do.

We don’t have to change jobs or give up our family life. We all have to “leave boat and father” as those did whom Jesus called (Mark 4:22) but this is an interior change, a change of focus and direction. It means that, whatever we are doing, we are intent on doing it in a way that establishes the “reign of God.” This becomes our priority at home, at work, in our social and political life, in everything we do. When enough Christians accept this, the “new evangelization” will have begun!

**Initiative: Be an evangelizer.** In everything you do, ask yourself, “How should the Good News of Jesus change this? Change the way I see it? The way I do it?
THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF YEAR C

Who, me? Accepting the Call to Evangelize

Inventory

Do you feel called to evangelize? Have you an awareness of being called personally, by Jesus himself? Do you think you are not good enough for this?

Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* calls us to “worship,” to “bow down in the presence of our maker, for he is the Lord our God.” We will see both Isaiah and Peter taking this stance in the readings. But they didn’t stay there. God said they were *sent out* to do his work. Adoration shouldn’t paralyze; it should empower.

In the *Opening Prayer(s)* we ask God to “watch over’ us as his “family.” We declare our “hope” in him, based on “faith and love” (alternate prayer). Our faith tells us God is not just “the Lord our God.” He is our *Father*. This changes the kind of hope and love we have. We are members of God’s family. We feel at home with him. When we are in “our Father’s house” we go about “our Father’s business” (alternate translation of *Luke* 2:49) as his children. We are not servants or guests.

In the *Prayer over the Gifts* we ask our Father for “daily bread” that doesn’t just nourish our life on earth, but gives us “eternal life.” Our real “daily bread” is Jesus himself, the Bread of Life. Eucharist is our family table.

In the *Prayer after Communion* we recognize that God calls us to himself to send us out to others. We ask that Eucharist will “help us to bring your salvation and joy to all the world.” When God calls us to worship he sends us out to evangelize.

Touched Lips

*Isaiah 6: 1-8* takes away a common excuse people use for not evangelizing. Like Isaiah, we feel we just aren’t holy enough. God couldn’t be calling us.

Isaiah used a thought-provoking image: “I am a man of unclean lips.” Jesus will cast some light on its meaning: “Good people produce good out of the good treasure of the heart, and evil people out of their evil [hearts] produce evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart….” (*Luke* 6:45; *Matthew* 15:18).

It is not only through our lips that we express ourselves. Everything we do, every element of our lifestyle, every decision we make says something about who we are. Every “word” of choice creates us. Our “what,” our human nature, is something God created. But our “who,” which identifies us as *persons*, is something we are constantly creating by our free choices. In this we are like God. In creation, when God said, “Let there be… there was” (*Genesis* 1:1-25).

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth (*Psalm* 33:6).
This is also true of us as we form our personalities, our souls. By every word of free decision we are choosing to “be” in some particular way. And what we “say” in our choices is what we are.

Most of us don’t feel we are doing a perfect job of it. When Isaiah thought this, God’s answer was to send an angel to touch his mouth with a live coal: “Now that this has touched your lips… your sin is blotted out.”

Our own sins were, not just “forgiven,” but “blotted out” when Jesus baptized us “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” He “erased” our words of evil choice and made us a “new creation,” not just by touching our lips, but by incorporating our whole selves into his own body on the cross and washing away — that is, annihilating — our sins by his blood, by taking them down to the grave with him in death (Luke 3:16; Colossians 2:14; 2Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:3-4).

This frees us to sing with the angels, “Holy, holy, holy! In the sight of the angels I will sing your praises, Lord” (Responsorial Psalm: 138:1) and still go out to proclaim him as evangelists — with the lips of Christ.

“From now on…”

In Luke 5: 1-11 Simon, who wasn’t a “rock” yet, had an “Isaiah moment.” Isaiah had seen angels crying out “Holy, holy, holy, Lord… heaven and earth are full of your glory.” Simon saw Jesus fill his nets by miracle when he had “fished all night and caught nothing.” Both had the same reaction: they felt they were in the presence of someone too holy for them to be around. They were both moved to “worship and bow down” knowing they were “in the presence of… the Lord God.” But they were afraid. Peter said, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

A basic human problem. If we know how holy God is and how sinful we are — both good insights — it keeps us from drawing near to him! But if we realize that the Most Pure chooses to be purifying, the Most Holy to be healing, and that transcendent Sanctity has become our incarnate Savior, we will not be afraid to “put out into the deep water” with Jesus and let him work with us, in us and through us to “catch people.” We will evangelize.

Not I but Christ

In 1Corinthians 15: 1-11 Paul caught on. He admitted, “I am unfit to be called an apostle,” but added: “by the grace of God I am what I am…. It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” And so he evangelized. Or as he put it, “Not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

Insight

When you judge yourself unworthy of evangelizing, what are you forgetting?

Initiative:

Make an inventory of what you know about the Good News that you can share.
Fifth week of the Year


After the multiplication of the loaves (skipped in the readings), the disciples are caught in a storm, see Jesus walking on the sea, cry out to him and he saves them. Right after that, when they came to land and “got out of the boat” people at once recognized Jesus. And he healed them.

We see here that recognizing Jesus seems to be a key to getting help from him. The first time Jesus calmed the sea (4:35-41) he was in the boat with his disciples but asleep, apparently unaware of their problem and doing nothing about it. When they finally recognized that they needed to involve him and woke him up, he said, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” If they had really recognized him, they would have known he could help them just as much asleep as awake! In that story too, when Jesus “stepped out of the boat,” he was immediately recognized: this time by the demon in a possessed man. Jesus cast out the demon (5: 2,7,15).

In the first storm story, the disciples thought Jesus was inactive because he was asleep. Before that he had just explained that “the kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep… and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how” (4:26-27). Even when God seems inactive, the Kingdom is being established. In today’s storm story, the disciples think Jesus is absent. But he had just multiplied the loaves as a preview of Eucharist. The story ends, “They were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves.” They should have known: Jesus is always “in the boat,” present in the Church in Eucharist to give us peace. We need to recognize him there.

In both stories the disciples recognize Jesus first, if belatedly, and then he is recognized by others. If we are going to “step out of the boat” and evangelize others, we ourselves have to first recognize what we have in the boat. Jesus is always present in the Church, always active. If we recognize that, we can help others recognize him and be healed. But we have to make it evident that we recognize him first.

Is it really so difficult to be always conscious of Jesus present with us and within us? Use the WIT prayer.

Fifth week of the Year


It is disturbing to realize that in the Gospels the people who opposed Jesus the most were the ones most identified with religion: First were the scribes, who, though without official authority, “after long years of study, around the age of forty” were given the status of reliable interpreters of the Jewish Scriptures. Their word was generally accepted, literally, as law. Then came the Pharisees, who tended to make observance of laws the narrow focus and main goal of religion. Finally came the priests, whose leaders, the “high priests,” were “members of the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem” (Léon Dufour, Dictionary of the New Testament).

Their abhorrence of Jesus alerts us, first, to the corrupting force of power — especially, perhaps, of religious power — against which there is almost no defense. Second, it reveals the insidious infection inherent in focusing on religious laws. Third, it exposes the blinding delusion of rejoicing in prestige, individual or ecclesial. All three of these groups share the three undermining attitudes rejected from the outset by the bishops who gathered for the Second Vatican Council: juridicism, clericalism, and triumphalism. (See Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., Models of the Church Expanded Edition, Doubleday Image Books, 1987, p.39).

The Good News is by nature locked in a fight to the death against these three attitudes, as Jesus literally was. Isn’t it strange that the people most pre-occupied with religion in Jesus’ time were the ones who resisted most adamantly being evangelized by Jesus himself, Son of God and Word incarnate!

The “profile” of Jesus’ enemies appears in this reading. 1. They “gather around” Jesus, not to learn from him but just to “check out” his orthodoxy. 2. They cling blindly to the “customs of their ancestors” without evaluating these in the light of God’s loving will. 3. They ignore the commandments that call for deep changes of mind and heart and focus instead on external, even superficial behavior. 4. We have already seen (3:6) that they are more concerned about silencing those who oppose their narrow “orthodoxy” than about helping people to grow in knowledge, love and life. God says of them the worst thing anyone could hear: “their hearts are far from me.” They have been the entrenched enemies of the Good News from the time of Jesus until now.

Forewarned, we may find seeds of these attitudes in our own hearts. If we look.

Initiative: Study Phariseeism the way doctors study disease: to avoid it.
Fifth week of the Year

**Wednesday: Mark 7:14-23.** Year I: *Genesis* 2:5-17; *Psalm* 104:1-30. Year II: *IKings* 10:1-10; *Psalm* 37:5-40.

Do we see it as good news that Jesus calls us to focus on our hearts?

He had the Jewish laws about “clean and unclean” foods in mind when he said, “Listen to me, all of you: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out of a person’s heart are what defile.” But when his disciples asked him about it he expanded: “It is what emerges from within a person — that and nothing else — that makes one impure.”

Jesus puts the focus on **intentionality.** “It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” (Or “evil thoughts,” or “wicked designs”). The point is that all the things Jesus lists as bad behavior he is seeing as examples of something evil in a person’s heart, as revelations of something wrong inside of the person.

The list itself is very interesting. The translators cannot agree on what all the words mean. Some are clearly actions — “theft,” “murder,” “adultery” — but some seem to describe abiding states of mind, such as, “greed,” “malice,” “envy,” “arrogance,” and just an absence of moral values (“folly” or “an obtuse spirit”). The basic point, however, is clear: God looks, not so much at a person’s actions, but at the person’s heart. No matter how bad (or good!) a person’s actions might be in themselves, objectively, what God sees and judges is the attitude and intention in the heart that is behind them. And we don’t always know what that is. Hardly ever for another; and much of the time, not even for ourselves.

Oddly enough, falling into sin can sometimes be a positive experience! It is a common discovery among priests that in hearing confessions, it is not so much sins they hear as ideals. For example, someone says, “I have been using bad language a lot.” What is the person really saying?

The fact that someone cusses is hardly a revelation. The revelation is that this person, who may think of himself (or even herself) as just a dirty mouth, is aware in the act of confessing it that he really has a higher ideal than has been evident in his conversation. You can’t look down on anything unless something in you has risen above it. So when you call a sin a sin, that tells you — and the priest — that your ideals are higher than your behavior.

Jesus teaches in this reading that God would rather see us embracing his ideals from the heart, even if we fall down in living them, than see us doing good because of some external pressure or motivation, but not from the heart.

**Initiative: Think the second thought.** Ask what feeling guilty says about you.
Fifth week of the Year


When he sent his disciples out on mission, Jesus told them, “If they refuse to hear you, shake their dust off your feet as you leave, as a testimony against them” (6:11). This may be what he was doing when, after his last frustrating encounter with the scribes and Pharisees he “went away to the region of Tyre,” a Gentile province of Syrians and Phoenicians. Or he may have just been putting some distance between himself and the “clerical triumphalist legalists” (see Tuesday’s reflection) who were bent on silencing him at all costs, even through murder (3:6).

Jesus had “entered a house,” which may mean he had friends in that area, but he was keeping a low profile, because he “did not want anyone to know he was there.” Still, a Gentile woman came in and asked him to heal her little daughter. Jesus’ response seems rude and totally out of character. “It is not right,” he said, “to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.”

What was his tone of voice when he said this? Was he smiling? The words are shocking, but he was certainly leading her on. This woman was no wilting violet. Her response didn’t express any sense of being inferior because she was not Jewish. She just gave Jesus’ words right back to him. If that was the way he wanted to play it, it was fine with her: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

If we take her words at face value, what Jesus had led her into was a profession of faith! She acknowledged that God, for whatever reason, had chosen the Jews to be his special people. That didn’t make them better than her own people; it was just a fact. And Jesus left it at that. He didn’t exhort her to change religions and become a Jew (which also would have meant, at that time, changing her nationality and culture). He just complimented her on her answer and told her that her little daughter was healed.

When he used the word “dogs,” Jesus also may have been talking almost to himself, echoing the triumphalist attitude of those he had just left, for whom being a Jew “in good standing” was to belong to a religious elite. This is what they would have said. How would she answer?

The good news here is that Jesus accepts people as they are. So should we. Having the “right” religion does not necessarily make us the “right kind of people.” Jesus looks deeper: at the faith, hope and love in one’s heart.

Initiative: Be open to the goodness in everyone, no matter how it is packaged.
Fifth week of the Year


When Jesus left Tyre he went north around the Sea of Galilee into the province of Decapolis, which was also Gentile territory. There some people “brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him.”

Jesus must have thought this ironic. He was still oppressed by the fact that the leaders of his own people were deliberately deaf to what he had to say. And now some people wanted him to cure physical deafness.

He did it, of course. But he first “took the man aside in private, away from the crowd.” He didn’t want to put on a miracle show for the spectators.

Then he got very physical. He “put his fingers into the man’s ears, spat [on his finger] and touched his tongue.” Frankly, we find this a little off-putting in our super-sanitized society. A minor note of the Good News here is that Jesus is not as hung up about the body as we are, and not as afraid of physical contact with strangers. But the deeper meaning is symbolic. Jesus didn’t need physical touch or some chemical transfer through saliva to heal, any more than he needs the water, oil, chrism, bread and wine of the sacraments to give grace. But he is a human Savior, and he interacts with us in human ways, through human means of communication. That is important. In Christianity “purely spiritual” interactions with God are possible and frequent, but not typical. The typically Christian way is through human words, gestures and contact.

The people had only asked Jesus to “lay his hand” on the deaf man. This was not a gesture used for healing in the Old Testament, but some assumed Jesus had an “almost magical healing power that operated automatically on contact with him” (Jerome Biblical Commentary on 5:23,30). Jesus countered this by giving specific meaning to his touches. What was blocking his power to save was the chosen deafness of his people. So he put his fingers into the deaf man’s ears to show they are the channels for his life-giving words. It is as if he was saying that if we won’t listen, there is very little Jesus can do for us!

Often, people can’t speak because they can’t hear. And our spiritual response to God depends on our receptivity to his voice. In making the “saliva connection” between his mouth and the deaf man’s, Jesus shows that our only life-giving responses are the words we speak in union with him speaking within us by the grace of our union with him.

Initiative: Open your ears. Read and reflect on God’s word. Take it seriously.
Fifth week of the Year


(For quotes and references below, see Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1968).

Mark wrote for Gentiles (an “audience” because they couldn’t read, but heard his Gospel read to them). His first account of the multiplication of the loaves (6:35-44, skipped in the Mass readings), was filled with details that showed Jesus was feeding a Jewish crowd. His second account shows him in Gentile territory feeding the nations. Both accounts are previews and images of Eucharist. The parallel between the words and gestures of Jesus here and at the Last Supper is obvious in both, but the second is closer to Paul’s letter to the Gentile Corinthians (see 8:6 & 1 Corinthians 11:24).

What is the good news here? First, that Jesus extends to the Gentiles everything Eucharist was presented in the first account as being for the Jews: the promised “rest” (6:3 & Deuteronomy 3:20); God’s presence to them in the desert (6:31-44 & Exodus 16:1-35); shepherding and feeding his flock (6:34 & Ezekiel 34:5); leading them to “green pastures” (6:39 & Psalm 23:2); organizing them (6:40 & Exodus 18:25), as the Dead Sea scroll (1QSa) says he will at the Messianic banquet); and the promise of the messianic abundance (6:42 & Isaiah 49:10, Psalm 132:15).

Using the same word (απολύω: “send / sent them away”) at the beginning and end “brackets” the passage. In the opening Jesus does not want to send away the people lest they “give out” or “collapse” on the way. This verb is used only in Matthew 15:32; Galatians 6:9; and Hebrews 12:3,5, where it “has the connotation of slackening in one’s Christian faith.” At the end he sends them out in the spirit of the Ite, missa est at Mass. Eucharist is our strength.

We could say that the whole of the Good News is contained in the Eucharistic celebration. There, over a three-year cycle, passages from the whole Bible are presented to feed us with the word of God. There the mystery of our redemption — Christ’s dying and rising, and our inclusion in his sacrifice through Baptism — is made present to us so that we might be reminded of its promises, reaffirm our faith and recommit with unlimited hope and love to our responsibilities as the continuing presence of Jesus on earth. And there Jesus feeds us with the new “manna in the desert,” his own body and blood, the Bread of Life. The Mass is the renewal of the Covenant, on God’s side and ours, with everything that entails.

Initiative: Appreciate Eucharist. If you listen to the words at Mass you will.
THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF YEAR C

The Good News About Life: Seeing the Whole Picture

Inventory

When you think about “happiness,” what is your time-frame? Are you boxed in to the present, unable to see beyond today? This year? Youth? Middle age? Old age? Death? Is short-term happiness really happiness? What about long-term but delayed? Or do you ever think deeply about happiness at all? Do you have Good News about this that means so much to you that you can share it with others?

Input

The Entrance Antiphon starts with a focus on stability: “Lord, by my rock of safety, the stronghold that saves me.” Even the motive we appeal to for God’s help is unchanging: “For the honor of your name.” It doesn’t depend on what we are.

In the Opening Prayer(s) we note that God has “promised to remain forever” with those who do his will. When we say, “Help us to live in your presence,” we are asking to remain conscious of who he is and how long he will be there for us.

But we also note in the alternate prayer that in Jesus God’s eternal plan “took flesh” in time to become part of our human history and change it. The eternal is being realized in time. The Good News of salvation will reach the “ends of the earth” only if we bring it there through “our fulfillment of his command” of “perfect love.” To evangelize is to love. To love is to evangelize. Isn’t that what Jesus did?

In the Prayer over the Gifts we ask that this repeated offering will repeatedly “cleanse and renew us” in time and so “lead us to our eternal reward.” The repetition of religious acts is necessary in human time but leads to one all-fulfilling act of total absorption in love forever.

In the Prayer after Communion we ask that by tasting “food from heaven” we will keep earthly food in perspective and “always hunger for the bread of life.” The Mass focuses us on good that is lasting, happiness that is perfect and eternal.

Placed and misplaced trust

Jeremiah 17: 5-8 alerts us to a very basic choice that every one of us has made and is making right now. But we may not ever think about it. Where do we place our trust?

Don’t ask this in the abstract, as a theoretical question (we all know the “right” answers), but in practical terms. When we go down to the foundations and look at what our lives (that means our life’s choices) are actually based on, what are we relying on? From day to day. Remember, we only live from day to day; our “life” is the succession of choices we make during each waking hour. They are the ones that count.

It is true, our hourly choices — what to say, do, buy, sell or think about at this moment — are influenced, even determined, by deeper choices that we are hardly conscious of. What we have chosen to identify and pursue as “happiness.” What we have chosen to rely on for “success” in life. Or security. Or to win people’s love or good will. But the only way we can know what these deeper choices are is to see how
they “take flesh” in the decisions of every day. So take a minute to ask what you are counting on when you decide to stop, go, turn left or right, or just let yourself be swept along by the current of your culture from sunrise to sunset.

The Responsorial Psalm (1: 1-6), which is always chosen to sum up the first reading, declares “Happy are they who hope in the Lord.” No one would argue with that in the abstract. But how often have we made our daily choices based on conscious “hope in the Lord”? When we were dating as teenagers and wanted to “fit in”? When we chose a college, joined a sorority or fraternity? Picked out the clothes we wear? Made the last phone call? Most recently fired, hired or sought employment? Decided what to do on Sunday morning — or, for that matter, when we got up every morning from Monday to Saturday? Morning prayer? Daily Mass? Scripture reading? The stock market report?

A sample question: do we put more conscious trust in a physical fitness program or in reading the Scripture every day? Which trust rules?

We can trust in God and still rely on other people and things, of course. Or can we? Jeremiah says it is an “either-or” choice, and one of the most important decisions we make in life. “Cursed are those who put their trust in humans and rely on things of flesh…. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.” The key question is, which trust determines our day-to-day decisions. Which is more evident in our lifestyle?

When Jesus sent out his first “evangelizers,” he wanted their lifestyle to make a statement: “He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts…” (Mark 6:8). What does mine say about the resources I rely on?

“Blessed are they”

Luke 6:17-26, says that when Jesus preached his “sermon on the mount” a “great crowd of people” gathered “from all Judea, Jerusalem [Jewish territory], and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon [heavily Gentile].” They had come “to hear him and to be cured of their diseases.” Two different motives.

If they were trusting in Jesus primarily as a healer, they got a shock. He did heal: “power came out from him and healed them all.” But then he went on to overturn their whole value system — and ours. He promised “happiness” to people who had no hope of it, and said it is not to be found where people look for it. “Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, hated and excluded by other people, abused and denounced as criminal on account of the Son of Man.”

As the theme of a “How To Get Happy” book, Jesus’ approach wouldn’t sell.

Jesus didn’t try to sell it to the myopic. He took the long-range view, looking both forward and backward. “When people treat you like that,” he said, “Rejoice. Leap for joy. For your reward is great in heaven. That is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”

When the chips are down, what crowd do you want to be with? The ones who have always stoned the prophets and who are still trying to silence “the voices that cry in the desert”? The oppressors of the weak, the exploiters of the poor, the armed and booted who use military might to defend both freedom and financial interests? Or do you want to be identified with those whose “citizenship is in heaven,” and whose trust is placed in the Savior who comes “from there… the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20)? What association gives you a greater sense of security?

If you are short-sighted, looking only at life in this world, then you will probably choose, whether you
admit it or not, to ally yourself with the rich and powerful. Or, as Jeremiah said, to “trust in mere mortals and rely on things of flesh.” It won’t make you happy, but at least you will be able to afford some distractions from the emptiness of your life.

If you choose to “trust in the Lord,” your real hope is in a happiness that will last forever: the “eternal life” that is the “life to the full” Jesus came to give, and which consists essentially in knowing God: “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 10:10,17:3). It begins on this earth and gives happiness on this earth, even to those who suffer. But that happiness is conditional on faith and hope in the ultimate blessing of sharing in the life and happiness of God. In the last analysis, the Good News rests on a platform of resurrection.

“But in fact…”

St. Paul makes this clear in 1Corinthians 15: 12-20: “If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” Why?

First, because “if Christ has not been raised, you are still in your sins.” There is no mystery in being “forgiven.” But for Jesus to “take away” our sins, he has to incorporate us, with all our sins, into his body, so that we can die in him and return to the world as his risen body on earth: a “new creation.”

Second, if Jesus did not rise, then “all who have died in Christ have perished.” Baptism was a one-way street. Leading nowhere. And life itself is a dead end.

“But in fact,” Paul concludes, “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” The resurrection of Jesus was just the beginning, the preview of ours. When we proclaim in the Gloria at Mass that Jesus is “seated at the right hand of the Father,” we are rejoicing in our destiny. That is the Good News.

Insight

Do you trust more in the ground under your feet or in God’s promise of heaven?

Initiative:

Acquire “wisdom” defined as” the habit of relating everything to the last end.”
Sixth week of the Year


Mark tells us some Pharisees came and “started a discussion” with Jesus,” asking him for a “sign from heaven.” But they were not really looking for a reason to believe in him. They just wanted “to test him.”

This is an attitude believers frequently encounter today, both from non-believers and from people who, like the Pharisees, are believers in God or even in a partial Christianity.

Is the last sentence an insult to Protestants? With no offense intended, it is just a fact that, in general, the Protestant churches can be defined as “Catholics minus” whatever Catholic doctrines or practices they do not accept. There are a few things some Protestants believe that Catholics do not, such as predestination, or being “saved” forever and irrevocably by a single act of faith. But Protestantism began as a “protest” against things in the Catholic Church that the reformers rejected (the papacy, Eucharist, priesthood, devotion to Mary or the saints, etc.), so each new group can be identified fairly accurately by how much in the old Church they reject. Naturally, if what some denomination rejects should be rejected, then they have authentic Christianity, and Catholicism is Christianity plus add-ons.

Today the more historical Protestant churches and the Catholics are trying to get together in mutual understanding. Mutual respect is already a fact. Fruitful dialogue is taking place. The problem is not with them. The problem is with those both inside and outside the Church who start discussions, not to arrive at understanding or truth, but just to “test” believers as the Pharisees “tested” Christ: not “scientifically,” to learn from the results, but only to prove him wrong. If one gives an answer they cannot refute, they do not accept the answer; they just change the question. This is just as true of the “Pharisee party” in the Catholic Church as it is of pseudo-intellectual scoffers and fundamentalists. Phariseeism is non-denominational!

Jesus “sighed deeply in his spirit and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.’” He knew there was no sign they would accept, just as there are no answers that a questioner will accept if the purpose of the question was only to prove the questioned wrong.

Jesus didn’t argue. He “left them, and… went across to the other side.” It is fearful when God himself shakes your dust from his feet.

Initiative: Evaluate questions. If people are sincere, explain. If not, just leave.
Sixth week of the Year


When Jesus left his phony questioners to cross the lake, he commented to his disciples, “Stay on guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod.” They didn’t know what he was talking about (nothing new: see Luke 2:49-50; John 2:3-4). They guessed it was because they had forgotten to store enough bread in the boat. Jesus just rolled his eyes and asked seven questions in a row. First, “Why are you talking about bread? Do you have nothing more important to think about?”

Remember the setting. Jesus is about to reveal to his disciples (8:29) the “messianic secret” of his identity. They have just seen two “signs” greater than anything the Pharisees could have imagined (being, in fact, a preview of Eucharist: 6:41; 7:6). But all they were focused on was food! So Jesus jostled their minds: Second question: “Do you still not see or understand anything?”

Third: “Are your minds closed?” Hardened hearts were the “yeast of the Pharisees.” Their minds were completely closed: to signs, to Jesus himself, and to his message.

Fourth question: “Do you have eyes that can’t see, ears that can’t hear?” Herod had been asking about Jesus’ identity (6:14), but he and his crowd were too caught up in pleasures, prestige and power to perceive mystery. They had guessed that Jesus was everything but the Messiah — Elijah, a prophet, John come back to life. The “yeast of Herod” was spiritual myopia. They couldn’t see over the rim of this world.

Fifth: “Do you not remember? He calls them to open their eyes; think back; focus.

Sixth question: “When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets of leftovers did you collect?” They said, “Uh… Twelve… seven.”

Seventh question: “Do you not yet understand?” Jesus drew no conclusion. They would have to figure it out for themselves. He left them thinking.

We may have heard the Good News all our lives. In itself it might be as plain as day. But that doesn’t mean we understand. Jesus suggests we ask ourselves whether we do or not.

Is our focus too short? Are our minds just closed? Are we blinded by what we are caught up in? Do we make a point of remembering what we have seen and heard? (For example, do we pay attention to what the Eucharist recalls and celebrates?) Do we take time to think about it. Even God cannot evangelize the inert!

**Initiative: Open your mind.** Listen to God’s word. Ask what you are missing.
Sixth week of the Year


Jesus has just opened the ears of a deaf man — with a “sigh,” like the sigh the gave when, even after he multiplied the loaves, the Pharisees still asked for a “sign” (7:34, 8:12). Next Mark shows us Jesus giving sight to a blind man. As in the case of the deaf man, a simple word is not enough. Both times Jesus uses preliminary touches and his saliva (7:33, 8:23). Conversion is a gradual process.

God created the universe by a simple word. He said, “Let it be!” and it was (Genesis 1:1-21). But he did not redeem the world that way. The world was messed up by billions of physical, human actions. God chose to come into the world as a human being and start healing it by physical, human actions. This requires us to identify causes and apply remedies that specifically address them. To heal the blind man he touched his eyes. For the deaf man with a speech impediment, he touched his ears and his tongue. On both he used saliva.

Jesus saves by making the life-giving water of his word interior to us (see John 4:14: “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life”). Water does not give life so long as it remains in the clouds. Nor does God’s word. We have to bring it down to earth. Let it soak in. Bring it into contact with specific problems. Apply it to concrete decisions. Jesus shows this by literally applying the water of his mouth to bodily parts in need of healing. A preview of the sacraments!

Even the sacraments don’t heal by magic. They always have their essential effect if the minister has the right intention and the receiver is properly disposed. No special degree of sanctity is required. But the benefit of the sacraments themselves can be minimal or maximal, depending on how well the humans involved do their part.

And they achieve their full effect gradually, like Jesus’ healing of the blind man. At first he said, “I can see people, but they look like trees walking.” Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again and “he saw everything clearly.”

It is the same with sacraments. All require follow-up. We have to keep “remembering” them, thinking about them, growing into them. Baptism is not just a single event; like marriage, it is ongoing. Every sacrament is a launching pad that gives an impetus we must refresh, a direction to maintain, a goal to keep in mind.

Initiative: Think. What do the “sacraments of initiation” initiate? What do the other four initiate? What follow-up does each require?
Sixth week of the Year


This is a turning point in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus asks, as Herod did, who people think he is, and gets the same answer: John, Elijah, one of the prophets (6:14). But Peter, speaking for his disciples, identifies him as the Messiah. And Jesus accepts that, although he overturns completely their understanding of what it means. He reveals that he is going to win by losing: He will be delivered into the hands of his enemies and killed. He will not overcome human power by greater human power made invincible by God. He will not impose peace by war, stamp out violence by greater violence, teach respect for human life by killing those who kill, or use fear to convert those who do not believe in love. In short, he is going to save the world by 

*enduring evil with love*, accepting whatever suffering the sins of the world happen to drop on his shoulders and *loving back*.

And anyone who follows him must do the same.

Peter is quick to tell him how crazy that is: “People want a savior who is going to save them from suffering, not tell them to endure it with love!” Then Jesus, “turning and looking at his disciples,” rebuked Peter more fiercely than he did anyone in the Gospels. “‘Get behind me, you devil!’” He wanted them all to know that Peter’s attitude — undoubtedly common to them all — struck at the very heart of God’s plan for redeeming the world. To see the “mystery of the cross” as bad news is to reject, render impotent and pervert the Good News at its core.

Since Mark’s first chapter Jesus has been striving to keep people from thinking his role as Messiah is to take pain and suffering out of the world. He frequently did, and still does, of course, by working miracles of healing, just out of compassion. But healing bodies will not heal the world. Reducing poverty will not reduce selfishness and greed. Destroying enemies will not obliterate hate. There is no true wholeness, happiness or peace offered by Jesus Christ that does not require a decision on the level of the heart to renounce everything in this world, including life itself, in order to “love back,” no matter what one is made to suffer by others.

And this, take it or leave it, is the Good News! Mark has tried to prepare us for it by delaying the revelation of Christ’s identity. But sooner or later we have to accept or reject him as the Messiah he really is.

And now the story changes. The rest of Mark’s Gospel will offer repeated challenges and instructions on the “ultimatum of the cross.”

**Initiative: Get deep and pray.** Ask help to accept God’s way of saving the world.
Sixth week of the Year


Jesus spent the first half of Mark’s Gospel trying to keep us from accepting him as a false Messiah. He spends the second half showing us what we are up against if we accept him as the true one.

The gloves are off. We are not in “Christianity 101” anymore, getting what Paul calls “baby food” (1 Corinthians 3:1-2). Now Jesus is teaching us as people who want to accept him as the Messiah he really is and to hear the whole Good News, even when it sounds like bad news. His last words to Peter in yesterday’s reading were: “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Now he shows us how to think like God.

His first challenge and ultimatum to those who would accept him as Messiah contains all the rest:

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

That pretty much says it all. It is a very simple choice: lose all and live, or cling to what you’ve got and lose life itself. It’s simple arithmetic: “How much do you make if you gain the whole world but lose your life by ruining your soul?” We may find it hard to accept the truth of this, but we can’t deny the logic.

And, really, it is nothing new. From the beginning God’s “first and greatest Commandment” was: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (see Mark 12:29-31; Deuteronomy 6:4).

Again, it is simple arithmetic to conclude that all minus anything is not all. To love God authentically is to love him without dividing our love between him and anything or anyone else. As All. Our All. Our total Good. As All we desire.

The second Commandment is, “You shall love others as yourself.” Jesus teaches that the only real way to love ourselves is to surrender ourselves totally to God. To love others as ourselves we surrender them also to God. dedicating ourselves totally to their good. There is no greater love (John 15:13).

Ultimately, the Good News is just love.

Initiative: Do the numbers. Add up what you get and lose by giving all to God.
Sixth week of the Year


Jesus has just given the ultimate challenge of the Good News: Give all to get all. Stop clinging to life or anything life on this earth offers, and you will have “life to the full” forever (John 10:10). Now Jesus jumps ahead and gives us the ultimate assurance that he will deliver what he promises. He shows himself in a preview of his glory. “Six days later” [the “seventh day,” preview of the Sabbath?], Jesus took Peter and James and John, and “led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them.”

Jesus was shining with a glory beyond anything imaginable in this world. Moses and Elijah were speaking with him. Then Peter, always jumping to false conclusions, said, “Let us make three shrines here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He thought he was “promoting” Jesus up to the level of the two representatives of the Law and the Prophets, making him one of the “Big Three.”

He got the number right, but the reality wrong. Jesus belongs to a Three beyond all bounds of creation. He is not just an interpreter of the Law and the Prophets. He is the Word itself, whose words are the words of God. The Father makes this clear by speaking as he did on the day of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan (1:11):

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

God himself is saying Jesus is the Messiah. Whether we think he is Good News or bad news, he is God’s news, and we need to listen to him. His glory is hidden on earth and will be almost effaced during his passion. But Peter, James and John, who are the three who will see Jesus crushed and begging the Father for relief in his agony in the garden (Mark 14:33), are granted a preview of the glory that was, is, and will be his forever (see John 17:5). Mark reports it to give us courage to accept the challenges that are to come.

In answer to his disciples’ question, Jesus explains that the “Elijah” who was supposed to come before the Messiah was in fact John the Baptist, who was delivered up and killed. John defeated shows us a different kind of Elijah (cp. 1Kings 18:40; 2Kings 1:10-12) and Jesus will be a different kind of Messiah.

Christians can’t survive with just groundlevel insight. We have to be aware of Jesus in his glory to accept the scandal of what he calls us to be and do.

Initiative: Live in the past, present and future. Christ died, rose, and will return.
THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF YEAR C

Appreciating the Better-than-Good News

Inventory

Could the Good News be so good it is bad? Have you ever felt that what Jesus asks is impossible? That “the better is the enemy of the good” because it discourages us from the outset? Or do you just not take seriously some of the things Jesus says we should do? (What is the first one that comes to mind?)

Input

The Entrance Antiphon declares that our hope is in God’s mercy. If God asked what is humanly achievable, we might question whether we ourselves have enough power to accomplish it. But since he asks the impossible, our hearts “rejoice in his saving power.” If he asks what is impossible, he has to do it with us, in us and through us.

In the Opening Prayer(s) we recognize the divine “wisdom and love” the Father has revealed to us in his Son. And we pray “to be like him in word and deed.” The alternate prayer reminds us that the only “way to wisdom” is by pondering the words of Jesus with the divine gift of faith. We ask God to “open our ears” to hear his call so that our responses “may increase our sharing in the [divine] life you have offered us.” We need God’s gift to accept God’s gift and grow into its fullness.

In the Prayer over the Gifts we pray that presenting ourselves repeatedly with sincere intent — in “spirit and truth” — to be offered with Christ and in Christ during Eucharist will “bring us salvation”; that is, to the level of goodness God requires and to which only his grace can bring us.

The Prayer after Communion specifies that we need to live out “the example of love we celebrate in this Eucharist”; that is, the love of Jesus himself. His “new commandment” is “that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Nothing but the presence of Jesus himself in us can empower us to do that.

Be like God

1Samuel 26: 2-23 shows us David giving up the opportunity to kill the enemy who was trying to kill him. His reason? Saul, murderously demented or not, had been consecrated King by the prophet Samuel on God’s instructions (1Samuel 10:1). He was “the Lord’s anointed.” So David let him live, even though he thought, “I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul” (27:1). And, in fact, Saul kept trying to kill David. From a standpoint of human reason, it made no sense for David to spare him.

The “wisdom and love” to which Jesus invites us — and which he offers to give us — calls us far beyond what is humanly intelligible, or even possible. The Responsorial Psalm (103:1-13) echoes this reading by focusing us, not on what we find natural, but on what God is: “The Lord is kind and merciful.” That tells us what we need to be. The gift of grace is a call and an empowerment to give up life on the human level in order to live on the level of God.

The teaching “of many Church Fathers, particularly those of the East,” is the shocking statement: “Christian life consists not so much in being good as in becoming God” (Michael Casey, OCSO, Fully Human, Fully Divine, Liguori / Triumph, 2004). Is that Good News, or news so good we can’t hear it?

Jesus is the norm

In Luke 6:27-38 Jesus gives us his New Law, which consists, not in rules of good human behavior, but in
guidelines for living on the level of God. The standards of the Gospel presume the gift of grace. They are neither intelligible or possible without it.

In a nutshell, the “morality” of Jesus, which goes far beyond what we think of as morality, only makes sense on one condition: that we have deeply, radically accepted to “lose our lives” on this earth in order to find that “life to the full” which Jesus offers both here and hereafter: “eternal life,” the life enjoyed by God himself.

It’s an either-or choice. Jesus makes that plain in several places in the Gospel. To be his disciples we must give up all attachment to possessions, prestige and professional priorities, to family and social bonds (insofar as they are restrictive rather than just relational), to sex, shelter and security, to life itself. He is explicit about it. And radical (Luke 9:3-4, 23-26, 57-62; 10:3-5; 14:7-27; 18:22; 22:26; Matthew 19:12).

The challenge would be too much for us if Jesus did not also make clear that “The Lord is kind and merciful.” He doesn’t ask us to be perfect overnight; just to accept a glorious ideal — surrender to perfect love — and let him lead us to it. His first command is not “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” What comes first is “Follow me” (Matthew 5:48; Luke 5:27-32). He will lead us at our own pace.

Read the passage for particulars. Bear in mind that Jesus is serious about everything he says here. We have to accept all of these instructions as the “norm” of our morality if we want to be authentically Christian. But even accepting them takes time. We just have to start by recognizing that this is in fact the Good News. Then grow into it as disciples — “learners.”

No one has expressed the radical nature of Christian morality better than John Paul II, who said (World Day of Peace address, January 1, 1993, and The Splendor of Truth, nos. 19-21): “Christ's example, no less than his words, is normative for Christians…. ‘Following Christ’ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality.” He continues:

This is not a matter only of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment. More radically, it involves holding fast to the very person of Jesus, partaking of his life and his destiny….

Jesus’ way of acting and his words, his deeds and his precepts constitute the moral rule of Christian life. Indeed, his actions, and in particular his Passion and Death on the Cross, are the living revelation of his love for the Father and for others. This is exactly the love that Jesus wishes to be imitated by all who follow him. It is the “new commandment.”

John Paul sums up:

“Following Christ” is not an outward imitation, since it touches humans at the very depths of their being. Being a follower of Christ means “becoming conformed to him” who became a servant even to giving himself on the Cross (Philippians 2:5-8). Christ dwells by faith in the heart of the believer (see Ephesians 3:17), and thus the disciple is conformed to the Lord. This is the effect of grace, of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us.

It is in this context that John Paul quotes the teaching of St. Augustine that is basic to our understanding of Baptism:

By the work of the Spirit, Baptism radically configures the faithful to Christ in the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection; it “clothes them” in Christ (Galatians 3:27): “Let us rejoice and give thanks,”
exclaims Saint Augustine speaking to the baptized, “for we have become not only Christians, but Christ. Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ!”

Jesus relates this to the Father. By living on the level he prescribes we will show that we are “children of the Most High.” If we want to experience our divinity, we need to live as divine: “For the measure by which you give will be the measure you get back.”

The two Adams

In 1Corinthians 15:45-49 St. Paul gives the same teaching on a more metaphysical level: “Scripture says: ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul; the last Adam [Jesus] became a life-giving spirit.’” Through Adam we receive the life of human nature: our bodies are the instruments of our psyche or “soul.” But “in Christ” we share in the divine nature of God. Our bodies become the instruments of our pneuma, our “spirit” as obedient to the Spirit given to us by grace (see the Jerome Biblical Commentary). Paul is talking about resurrection when he says, “Just as we resemble the man from earth, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” But he draws the practical conclusion: “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above…. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1-2). If we have “become Christ,” we should live like Christ.

Insight

Do you see it as Good News that you are called to live on the level of God? Why?

Initiative:

Don’t be just human. Keep saying the WIT prayer: “Lord, do this with me, in me, through me.”
Seventh week of the Year


When they came down the mountain after the Transfiguration, the disciples got a shock. A man ran up and said, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a demon. I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.”

Jesus had given the disciples power to heal and cast out demons (3:15). But they had failed! This put a strain on the disciples’ faith. The magic wasn’t working any more! Then Jesus “lost it”: “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me!”

The father did, saying, “If you if you can do anything… help us.” Jesus didn’t like that. “What do you mean, ‘If you can…?’ Everything is possible for anyone who has faith.” The father answered for us all: “I do have faith; help my lack of faith.” And Jesus cast out the demon.

Now that Jesus is preaching a tougher Gospel, Mark is showing us a tougher kind of demon. To believe in accepting the cross instead of taking up the sword requires more than ordinary faith. Its absence through most centuries of Christianity explains why Jesus’ disciples in the Church have not been able to exorcise society of the demons of violence and war, with all that precedes and follows them. We do have faith. But the world is still suffering from our lack of faith.

We do, in fact, choose to save our lives in this world rather than lose them. We will kill others — even and especially if we think they are so evil we might be sending them to hell — rather than let them send us to heaven. We are not willing to respond to evil with love. We will defend our “American way of life” to the death (doing our best, of course, to assure it will be others’ death rather than our own), rather than accept the yoke (that is, the cross) of domination by another nation or ideology. Don’t most Christians take this for granted?

And parents keep coming to the Church, saying, “I brought my children to Mass, to religious instruction, and asked you to protect them from the demons of our culture — from loss of faith, and from the peer pressure that often ‘casts them into fire and water’ — and you could not.”

True. A Church of mediocre disciples, whether clergy or laity — or of parents — who compromise with the culture, cannot save people from the demons of the culture itself. For this there is no remedy but to turn to God for help, acknowledging our weakness: “This kind can only be driven out by prayer.” And metanoia.

**Initiative: Go to the roots.** Re-examine the basic mystery of Baptism and Mass.
Seventh week of the Year

Tuesday: Mark 9:30-37. Year I: Sirach 2:1-11; Psalm 37: 3-40. Year II: James 4:3-10; Psalm 55:7-23.

As they walked back toward Galilee, Jesus was concerned about his disciples’ lack of faith. Not just ordinary faith: they had enough faith to believe in him as an impressive teacher and miracle-worker. But not enough to accept him as a Messiah who would let his enemies kill him rather than use power against them, human or divine, to save his life. Or theirs! The prayer of the father they had just left was still echoing in his ears: “I do have faith. Help my lack of faith.”

Jesus knew his disciples in the Church would not have power to cast out the real demons of society, of any human culture, unless they accepted the root principle of Christianity: the “doctrine of the cross.” They had to accept Baptism as a dying, with and in Christ, to everything this world offers, and a rising only as his risen, saving body on earth. They had to accept every Eucharist as a renewal of the covenant, joining themselves consciously to Jesus on the cross, saying with him to every member of the human race, “This is my body, given up for you.”

Without that, the demons accepted as the unquestioned rulers (ruling principles) of every human society would still keep casting one nation after another “into fire and water, to destroy it.” So Jesus repeated, with emphasis: “The Son of Man is to be betrayed. His enemies will kill him. And after three days, he will rise again.”

But they “did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” They didn’t want to hear it. So he shook another fundamental principle of cultural values. He told them they were to consider, not only power, but prestige as dangers to their faith. He forbade them to attach prestige to any function in the Church: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Another radical principle. In every area of life — business, politics, the military — those with more authority are given greater signs of importance and respect. Through titles, dress, rules of protocol. But in the Church that must not be.

We ignore this teaching. Jesus knew we would. So he “took a little child in his arms,” and said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” The essential dignity of all Christians is identification with Jesus in grace. To pretend that office or position increases that dignity is to deny it. But to accept this mystery, we have to become like little children ourselves, looking at life with new and open eyes (Matthew 18:1-4).

**Initiative: Rethink power and prestige.** Start with Jesus and go from there.
Seventh week of the Year


Probably most fights start over issues of property, power and prestige. But there is also something in us that makes us want to see anyone who is different as a threat. A sociologist once asked his class to make two columns listing “Them” and “Us.” In the “Us” column, no one included “the human race.” Jesus would have.

John, whom Jesus nick-named “Son of Thunder (3:17), said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” John didn’t look at what the man was doing — the fact he was “casting out demons” — but just at who he was. Because he didn’t officially group with the disciples, John wanted to stop him from giving people the impression that he had any relationship with Jesus.

Jesus said not to stop him. Then he taught another fundamental principle that Christians, with most other people in the world, have yet to accept: “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Jesus sees an ally in everyone not identified as an enemy.

Christians take sides against other Christians: Catholics vs Protestants, “conservatives” vs “liberals,” Latin-Massers vs those who want contemporary liturgy, strict rule-keepers vs those who feel free to adapt. When is this a legitimate, or even necessary, defense of truth? When divisive?

Jesus did not focus on error but on opposition. Opposition is hostility; argument is inquiry. There is nothing wrong about arguing, so long as we accept each other and do not go to war against sincerity. The Pharisees who questioned Jesus did not wait for answers or respond when he gave them. They were just against him.

Jesus told us to weigh results. “You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns?” (Matthew 7:16). If people are “casting out demons,” they are not people we want to cast out, even if they are partially in error. Not, at least, if they are “for us” in what we are basically trying to do.

Jesus said God will reward anyone who “gives you a cup of water because you bear the name of Christ” (9:41). Why should we not be grateful for all who accept us as believers and accept them in return?

One thing we can always do is pray together. And share our experiences of God. We can just not focus on doctrinal differences until we know we are united in heart. This lets the Spirit act.

Initiative: Pray before you argue. You may find you don’t need to argue.
Seventh week of the Year


Jesus liked children because they are still discovering the world; they haven’t got fixed ideas yet that rule out anything new. They are open to truth.

This also makes them vulnerable to error. If they see bad behavior and values accepted, they may accept what they see as normal. As adults we need to be aware that children are never just observing us; they are learning from us. And more from our actions than from our words. Jesus warns us not to “scandalize” them.

To “scandalize” does not mean to shock. People seldom imitate what shocks them. To scandalize is to cause others to lower their ideals. This usually happens when we do something not blatantly bad, but just a little less than what Jesus teaches. Usually it is some little thing that at first appears contrary to what Jesus has said, but which, on second thought, seems reasonable. Or at least not worth bothering about. We lower each other’s ideas one notch at a time. We scandalize by inches.

When it comes to the radical teaching of Jesus, scandal can become the rule rather than the exception. The “doctrine of the cross,” calling us to “love back” even at the cost of our lives, is not reasonable; it goes beyond reason. God said, “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9). Peter himself protested against it (8:32). Jesus’ own disciples couldn’t understand it (9:32).

But Jesus doesn’t back down. As we said, we are not in “Christianity 101” anymore. Jesus is not feeding us “baby food.” He is teaching us now what we need to know to accept him as the Messiah he really is. He is giving us the whole Good News, and he knows it sounds like bad news.

So he says, “If anything is holding you back, get rid of it. If your hand or foot is an obstacle to what I say, cut it off! If your eye is, pluck it out!” This is nothing new: he has already said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (8:35). It is simple arithmetic again: better to live lame than die whole.

Jesus is counting on his disciples to be the “light of the world” and the “salt of the earth” (4:21, Matthew 5:13-16). But if salt loses its taste, “It is no longer good for anything.” He ends, “Keep salt in yourselves, and you will have peace.”

Initiative: Check your roots. What are the deepest principles you live by?
Seventh week of the Year


Jesus cannot be accused of remaining abstract. Having established that the Good News is greater than anything humans could conceive of, both in what it promises and in what it demands — and having shown himself transfigured as the source of it — he goes on to show how the Good News transfigures two of the most basic values in human life: sexual love and (10:21) property ownership.

Some Pharisees introduce the first issue by asking what Jesus thinks about divorce. Knowing their legalistic mentality, Jesus asks, “What did Moses command you?” They answer, “Moses permitted divorce.” Jesus replies, “He wrote that commandment for you because of your hardness of heart.” Then he goes on to explain what marriage is in God’s eyes: “The two become one flesh. They are no longer two, but one flesh. So what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Jesus didn’t say Moses presumed to rescind a law of God or that God had even made a law about divorce. He explains how God sees marriage and points out (at least) that to divorce a wife just to marry another is the same as adultery. Divorce is not part of God’s plan; it goes against the way things are supposed to be — something keenly felt by every disillusioned person who has suffered through the experience of one.

Jesus is not making a precise law. He is holding up an ideal. In her pastoral policy the Church doesn’t have that option. She has to translate ideals into practical laws to keep the community united. Where Jesus just speaks of “divorce,” canon lawyers will specify “after a ratified and consummated sacramental marriage between two baptized persons.” Church law is strict, but does allow divorce and remarriage in certain cases and for the sake of a higher good: for example, the conversion of one of the parties. And laws have changed over the years (see the New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship, Liturgical Press, 1990; Code of Canon Law, 1141-1150; and google “Pauline, Petrine Privilege”).

Jesus’ focus was not on crafting a law, but on presenting marriage as God envisions and desires it. He is teaching us how to “be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). To be authentic Christians, this is the kind of marriage we have to believe in. Whether we are always able to live up to it in practice is important, but most important is our heart’s sincere desire to try and to never be comfortable with less.

Initiative: Clarify why, as an ideal, Church teaching on marriage inspires you.
Seventh week of the Year


Parents were bringing their little children to Jesus for him to touch. His disciples didn’t think they should bother him. Jesus didn’t see it that way: “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them.”

Jesus never lost his focus. He was immersed in the work of the Kingdom. That meant loving and ministering to people all the time. Later he would give Peter the First Commandment of pastoral ministry: “Feed my sheep!” (John 21:15-17). Day in and day out, whatever else we do or neglect, and whatever rules we have to rethink, bend or adapt, the one thing Jesus asks us to do is “Feed my sheep.”

He adds a warning: “Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Openness. Children are open to everything. To them the world is a wonderland to discover. The storytellers tell us the rivers run with wine “only to recall that first glorious moment when we discovered they ran with water!” (Chesterton). Little children take magic for granted. They haven’t yet drawn borders around their minds. “It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

The word “catholic,” from *kata holos*, “throughout the whole,” means that, as Catholics, in our spirit we should be without borders: nationalistic, social, denominational, historical, philosophical, theological, mystical. It does not mean we have no clear doctrines or defined answers. But we are always open to more: more truth, more clarity, new perspectives, the riches of different cultures. Vatican II declared, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in [non-Christian] religions,” praising specifically the insights of Hinduism, Buddhism, and the faith of Jews and Muslims. She urges us to “enter… into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions” and to “acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture” (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 2).

The Good News itself transcends all human thought and expression. If we ever get locked into the particular way we learned and were taught to do things, we will never experience “the breadth and length and height and depth,” and “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (*Ephesians* 3:18-19). If we have truly heard the Good News we will always be hungry for more.

**Initiative: Share, don’t shove**, your faith. Show interest in others’ beliefs.
THE EIGHTH SUNDAY OF YEAR C

“Life: Appreciating and Accepting Jesus

Input

In the Entrance Antiphon

In the Opening Prayer(s) we

In the Prayer over the Gifts, as

In the Prayer after Communion we

From the least…

Isaiah 62: 1-5 Bethlehem.¹

We

The Responsorial Psalm (96: 1-10) “Proclaim his marvelous deeds to all the nations” To

To

At

To

By

The blessing of

In John 2: 1-12, when

Whenever

They

But

We.

The mystery

1Corinthians 12: 4-11 makes

Compared
Insight

What do you understand better about Baptism after reading this?

Initiative:

Put a glass of water where you work to remind you of Baptism.
Eighth week of the Year


In this reading Jesus gives another example of how his Good News — which transfigures all of human life as Jesus was transfigured on the mountain top (9:2) — changes completely our view of money and possessions.

Everything starts at ground level. Well, almost. A young man asks Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He is already above ground level: only God’s divine life is “eternal — without beginning or end.” Jesus picks up on that and introduces the divine dimension of absolute Goodness: “Why do you call me Good? No one is Good but God alone.” We are beyond a merely human interchange here.

This is lost on the boy, of course, so Jesus meets him where he is — where all of us are before the Good News — and tells him how to live a good human life: “Keep the Commandments.” The young man answers that he is already familiar with that kind of religion: “been there, done that, got the tee shirt.” He knows there has to be more. Then Jesus “looked at him with love” and said, “There is one thing missing. Go, sell all you own and give to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven.”

The boy asked for “eternal life.” Jesus tells him how to get it. To enjoy the divine life of God in heaven, we have to live on the level of God here on earth. Ordinary human goodness won’t do it. We have to “lose” our human life to find divine life. “Die” to everything on earth to live only for the Kingdom of God (see Matthew 6:33). Jesus has just shown how this transfigures marriage (9:2-12). Now he shows how it transfigures ownership.

We don’t literally “sell all.” But John Paul II says that this invitation and promise “are meant for everyone, because they bring out the full meaning of the commandment of love for neighbor….” (The Splendor of Truth, nos. 18-21). As Christians we “own” only to give. We live only to serve God as Christ’s risen body on earth by helping others. Our goal in keeping every Commandment is to help our neighbor come into the fullness of life, because this is what Jesus lived for.

The boy “went away sad, for he had many possessions.” Wrong move. He should have stayed and grown out of them. He thought that impossible. Jesus said, “With God all things are possible.” The Good News is that Jesus accepts us as we are, where we are, and leads us — gradually — to where we need to be. He provides the “new skins” (2:22) we need to bear prophetic witness to him.

Initiative: Don’t set limits, and don’t think Jesus does. Let him lead and lift you.
Eighth week of the Year


After the young man “went away sad” because he thought Jesus asked too much, Peter was quick to capitalize on the situation. He said to Jesus, “Look, we have put aside everything to follow you.” Peter was not hesitant about claiming his due!

Jesus met Peter where he was at. He repeated the promise he had made to the young man: “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left [home or family or possessions] for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive… eternal life.” But he added to it. He promised “a hundred times as much now, in this age,… and in the age to come eternal life.” He also slipped in a clause Peter may have preferred not to notice: “and persecution besides.”

Peter and the disciples thought they had it made. And they did. But not in the way they thought. They should have known by now that Jesus didn’t exactly call things by the same names they did.

When he told the young man to “sell all,” and generalized this to say “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” he was talking about giving up interior attachment, not legal ownership. When he says that to be his disciples we must “hate father and mother, wife and children… yes, and even life itself” (Luke 14:26-33), he is really just re-phrasing the First Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength” (12:30). In our hearts God must reign without competition.

In the same way, when he speaks of receiving “houses, family and fields” multiplied a hundred times over “in this life” to replace what we have left for him, we should know better than to take this literally! Jesus means we will receive —yes, in this life — a hundred times more satisfaction from all we renounce or retain, if in our hearts we have “left all” for him in order to have and hold everything only to use in his service. This holds true even if we are persecuted for our stance. United to Jesus, we can’t lose for winning!

But Jesus doesn’t let Peter’s self-seeking pass. The disciples are still intent on honor and prestige. They keep arguing about who will be “first” in the Kingdom. So Jesus keeps telling them the way to be first is to be last. They should bear witness to new values. In his Church it is dishonor to seek honors, degradation to be given prestige. Those who desire and accept these are marked as “last” in the kingdom of God. When Jesus comes fit titles to truth, “the first will be last, and the last first.”

**Initiative: Rethink your honors.** Refuse all you can. They infect.
Eighth week of the Year


It should encourage us to realize what slow learners Jesus’ first disciples were. He has already told them twice that he is going to be killed and rise again (8:31, 9:31). It had some effect, because “their mood was one of wonderment,” but Jesus feels he has to tell them again. As soon as he does, James and John show they haven’t understood anything, not even the warning he has just given against desiring to be “first” (10:31). They come up and ask Jesus to give them the first places in the Kingdom! “Let us sit at your right and left hand when you come into your glory.”

Jesus must have wanted to shoot them on the spot! But he was extremely patient. He just said, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” meaning the cup of his passion that in his moment of weakness he was going to ask the Father to spare him (14:36). The two brothers, not having any idea what they are saying, answer, “We can.” Jesus assures them that they will, but tells them it is not his job to hand out honors.

The other ten apostles are furious with James and John for trying to get ahead of them. So Jesus repeats what has already told them twice (9:35, 10:31): in his Kingdom, if you want to be on top, put yourself at the bottom.

Then he says something so radical that even today we do not understand or accept it, much less bear witness to it. Like the apostles, we are slow learners! Jesus calls them all together and says to them, “You know how among the Gentiles those in authority lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt.”

Of course. It is a basic principle in business, politics and the military: the more authority you have, the more respect you get. Executives have more prestige than janitors. Officers are not called by their first names. Jesus says it is not to be that way in his Church. In the community of the believers, function is divorced from prestige. All get equal signs of respect. No one, even those with greater authority, should be regarded or treated as “higher” than anyone else. Just as “power corrupts,” protocol blinds. It makes us forget the one dignity that overrides all others: the dignity of being divine. We are sons and daughters of God. Nothing can be added that makes anyone greater than that. If we treat some as if they were more important than others, for any reason at all, we implicitly deny the faith.

Jesus came to serve: to live and die for us. If we can’t drink that cup we deserve the lowest place at his table.

**Initiative:** Think what would happen if you treated all as equals in the Church.
Eighth week of the Year


The disciples are blind to what Jesus is telling them about his death and resurrection — and about not seeking power and prestige. Jesus is patient. These are hard lessons to learn. They are the root mystery of God’s way to establish a Kingdom “of justice, love and peace.” It is not the way of our human culture. But is essential that we accept them, as Jesus pointed out forcefully to Peter (8:33).

So now Mark shows us a blind man recognizing Jesus. It is the first time he is publicly acclaimed with a messianic title (“Son of David” — see 2Samuel 7:12-16) by anyone who is not a demon (see 1:24,34; 5:7). And Jesus does not tell him to be silent as he told the demons. The time for recognition is at hand, even if his disciples are slow to see what he is trying to teach them.

Jesus calls the blind man over and asks him the same question, using identical words, that he asked James and John when they wanted a favor (10:35-36): “What do you want me to do for you?” But the blind man asks for the right thing: “Teacher, I want to see!” The Jerome Biblical Commentary (1968) remarks that the contrast between what he asks and the apostles’ request for seats of honor “shows the blind man has seen better than they the nature of Jesus’ kingly authority: it stoops to serve.” Bartimaeus is asking for physical sight, but by giving Jesus the title Rabboni, “my teacher,” he is asking, whether aware of it or not, for spiritual vision as well. He wants to know truth.

Jesus told his disciples, “You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students” (Matthew 23:6-10). Jesus alone is Teacher. We teach only as pupils repeating what we have learned from him. Fr. John McKenzie, S.J. (under “Rabbi,” Dictionary of the Bible, 1979), after pointing out that “Jesus finds fault with the pride which demands exaggerated respect” comments with uncharacteristic restraint, “The practice of Christians toward honorific titles has from early centuries treated this saying [of Jesus] as a pious and somewhat impractical hyperbole.” So much for radical witness!

The Good News fails to impress people as good because Christians fail to live it as news. Paul VI said to “witness” means to live in such a way that our lifestyle “raises irresistible questions” that only the radical vision of Jesus can answer. When we interpret his words to make them fit our cultural assumptions we betray the Gospel. If we are not different we are defectors.

Initiative: Look at your lifestyle. What does it tell people about the Gospel?
Eighth week of the Year


This is an “overturning” Gospel. It overthrows assumptions, customs and values. But the key to it is prayer.

It begins with “Palm (Passion) Sunday.” Jesus entered Jerusalem with people shouting, “Hosanna!” (11:1-10). Then he “went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything” he “went out to Bethany with the Twelve.”

He must have thought about what he saw, because the next day he went back and “began to drive out those who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers.” He said, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer…’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” Apparently the priests didn’t want to alienate business interests by keeping priorities pure — just as we often give athletic events and fundraising priority over spiritual activities. Jesus overturned their triviality together with their tables.

Prayer is the key to this reading. Going into Jerusalem Jesus wanted figs but found “nothing but leaves” on the tree. Disappointed, he said, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” The next day “they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.” When the disciples asked Jesus about it he said, “Have faith in God…. I tell you, all that you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and it will be yours.”

Jesus was fighting discouragement — in himself and in his disciples. The crowd had acclaimed him as Messiah, but when they realized the kind of Messiah he really came to be they were going to turn on him and shout “Crucify him!” (15:13). The “chief priests and scribes were seeking a way to put him to death.” Their religion was all show: leaves without fruit. The travesty of the temple was a sign of it. It was not the “house of prayer” it was meant to be. His Chosen People were not responding. They were doomed to wither.

Jesus’ response was to call his disciples, to be a true “house of prayer” and “for all nations.” He would replace the temple in Jerusalem with the living temple of his Church, his risen body on earth (13:14; 14:58; 15:29,38). He would have to “move mountains” to do it, but he said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.”

The work of the Kingdom is the work of God. We have to believe that and show it by prayer that bears witness to faith.

Initiative: Rethink your priorities. What keeps you from giving time to prayer?
Eighth week of the Year


This reading teaches us a very important lesson: Jesus cannot deal with people who refuse to enter into dialogue.

The “chief priests, scribes and elders” ask Jesus a legitimate question. He has just thrown out the merchants they allowed in the temple. They demand, “By what authority are you doing this?”

Jesus knows they are closed to the answer, so he tries to help them get in touch with their own hearts: “Was John’s baptism of divine origin, or was it merely human? Answer my question, and I will answer yours.”

They got in touch with their hearts, and fast. They realized, “If we say ‘divine,’ he will ask, ‘Then why did you not put faith in it?’ But they knew that if they said, ‘Merely human,’” the crowd might turn on them, because the people “all regarded John as a true prophet.” So they took the coward’s way, and knew with crystal clarity they were doing it: They answered, “We do not know.”

Jesus made them face the fact that they were insincere. In thinking how to answer him they didn’t ask what was true, or even what they themselves deeply thought was true. They were not looking for truth and never had been, even when listening to John. All they were trying to do was defend their position — their power, their prestige, the status quo of doctrine that called nothing of theirs into question. So they refused to discuss the issue.

And in response, so did Jesus. He said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

Every teacher and preacher in the Church who openly asks what authentic Catholic doctrine is meets the same opposition. Sometimes it is from authorities blindly defending the status quo. Sometimes from the perennial “Pharisee party” who cling to the simple and static religion of uncontextualized rules and unexamined catechism answers. If asked whether a rule, observed to the letter under particular circumstances, will “do good or evil” (3:4), they refuse to answer. They are not interested in the intention of the lawgiver or the mind of the Church. Nor do they want to know the source or limits or direction of the Church’s current teaching. Stagnancy serves their purpose and they cling to it. Even Jesus cannot talk to them.

The Good News is that eventually Jesus wins. At first the prophets are stoned. But eventually the “pilgrim Church” catches up with them.

**Initiative: Distinguish between** teaching in the Church and Church teaching.
THE NINTH SUNDAY OF YEAR C

“Life: Appreciating and Accepting Jesus

Inventory

How

Input

In the Entrance Antiphon

In the Opening Prayer(s) we

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Ninth week of the Year

Monday: Mark 12:1-12. Year I: Tobit 1:3 to 2; Psalm 112:1-6. Year II: 2Peter 1:2-7; Psalm 91:1-16.

After the confrontation in the temple, Mark’s Gospel presents one hostile confrontation after another between Jesus and his enemies. We are approaching the end, when Jesus will come into his glory by being crucified.

Jesus now presents another parable. Mark specifies that he is “addressing the chief priests, scribes and elders,” the power structure of Israel, and the same ones who “were seeking a way to put him to death” (11:18).

Up to now Mark has reported three parables, all concerned with the sowing and growth of the Kingdom (4:3,26,31). This one is about active resistance to the Kingdom, still presented as a living, growing thing: a vineyard.

The parable is about a man who “planted a vineyard, put a fence around it… then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.” He sent one servant after another to them to collect his share of the produce, but they rejected them. “Some they beat; others they killed.” Finally the owner sent his “beloved son,” saying, “They will respect my son.” But they didn’t: they killed him too, thinking “This is the heir… the inheritance will be ours.” So Jesus asks, “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.”

But the real point of Jesus’ teaching is not the defeat of his enemies. It is the victory of God. He turns to the promise of Scripture: “The stone rejected by the builders has become the keystone of the structure.” Jesus is experiencing rejection. He is going to be killed. But the new temple he has spoken of (see Friday above, 11:17,20) is going to replace the old, and he will be its cornerstone. Instead of looking at his human enemies and what they are doing in the present, he looks at God and how things will be when he has finished his work: “It was the Lord who did it, and we find it marvelous to behold.”

Imagine yourself camped out with Jesus and the Twelve at this time, sleeping next to him. You are worried by the way things are developing. You hear Jesus stirring and you ask him: “Are you awake? What is going to happen?” He answers, “They are going to kill me; probably very soon, during Passover.”

How would you feel? How would you think Jesus was feeling? How could he sleep? How could you?

We know the answer. He gave it when the plot began: “Have faith in God” (11:22). Just trust.

Initiative: Change your focus. When worried, look up and ahead, not just around.
Ninth week of the Year


Jesus’ proclamation of the Good News produces confrontation, hostility and his death. Mark records that in his last interactions with his enemies before his passion, he is asked about three basic issues of human existence: the relationship of religion to patriotism, life after death, and life’s greatest value.

First the authorities (priests, scribes and elders) who wanted to kill him “sent to him some Pharisees and Herodians to trap him in what he said.” It was a classic passive-aggressive maneuver. They begin with compliments: “Teacher, we know you are a truthful man, unconcerned about anyone’s opinion… you teach God’s way of life sincerely.” Yeah, right. Then comes the dagger: “Is it lawful [for a Jew] to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” They just want him to take sides on a political issue.

He won’t. It is not a sincere question, and Jesus really doesn’t answer it. He puts the whole issue in a context without drawing any conclusions. First he asks them to show him a Roman coin. “Whose image is this? Whose words are engraved on it?” They answer, “Caesar’s.” “Then,” Jesus says, “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Jesus is just recalling the First Commandment: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone…. Do not follow any of the gods of the peoples around you…. His hearers, looking at the image of Caesar in their hand, had to be hearing God’s charge: “The images of their gods you shall burn with fire…. Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 6:4,14; 7:25; Leviticus 1:4).

Jesus isn’t suggesting that we divide our loyalty between God and Caesar, or between Church and state. If we give to God what is God’s, there is nothing left for Caesar! “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart….” God doesn’t accept any divvying up.

By Baptism Christians “die” to this world and everything in it. “Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). Our trust is not in the government, its military might or its Homeland Security tactics. Nor in its economic stability or financial soundness. “Here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” — and doing our best to build it here below (Hebrews 13:14; Revelation 21:2). We serve the state when we see it as service to God.

Initiative: Reject idolatry. Do everything for one reason only: God’s.
Ninth week of the Year


The first of the last three hostile questions Jesus is asked in Mark’s Gospel before his passion dealt with the Christian stance toward government. The proper concern of the state is to protect and promote the common good of all its citizens on this earth. And Christians’ conscientious participation in this endeavor should give a special character to all our activities and relationships in this world.

The second question raises the issue of life after death. If there is none or, as Plato observed, if there is no God, then the highest of all human occupations is to seek the greatest good for the greatest number through politics. But if life has a higher ceiling than that, we need to know it. So we are interested when “some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus and asked him a question.”

Not believing in resurrection, angels or spirits (Acts 23:8), the Sadducees could not believe in much of an after life. “Less devout than the Pharisees and more politically-minded” (Bible of Jerusalem, Matthew 3:7 note), they were the priestly aristocracy. Not surprising. Those who live for this world frequently rise high in it.

Their question, meant only to make resurrection look ridiculous, was about seven brothers married successively to the same woman. “In the resurrection whose wife will she be?”

Jesus just told them they didn’t have a clue about what life after death was like. “You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.” When people rise from the dead they don’t pair off in marriages. They “are like angels in heaven” — not, we should note, because they don’t have bodies, but because they are not limited by them.

Is that a clear answer? No. What it does make clear is that there are some things beyond human comprehension, and if we are interested in truth we should seek it without restricting it to what we find. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9). Paul said of heaven, “No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1Corinthians 2:9).

Do we really think God enters into relationship with persons on this earth (simply giving them life is a covenant), just to let them drop into non-existence after a few years? Jesus said God is “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [add names you know]. He is God not of the dead, but of the living.” We know that.

Initiative: Open your eyes. Myopic, yes, but what you see reveals what you don’t.
Ninth week of the Year


The last question Mark tells us Jesus is asked before his passion may have been sincere rather than hostile. At least the questioner responds to Jesus’ answer, which the Pharisees never do. And Jesus tells him “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

The question sets up a great conclusion to Jesus’ teaching. A scribe asks him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” He may have been thinking in terms of the first in a series, but Jesus isn’t. Just as God is not the first and highest in a series of gods, but the One and All transcendently above everything created, so there is no graded series of responses we can make to God, one higher or better than the other. To the One God there is only one acceptable response, and Jesus declares it: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

This is about the only moral teaching Jesus gives in Mark. He really did not make any “rules” as we understand rules. His most radical demands — to “sell all,” lose life in order to find it, reject power and prestige — are simply the Great Commandment translated into practical choices. In his teaching on divorce, for example, he is just matching the ideal of monogamous marriage to “the image of a monotheistic God.” That is Benedict XVI’s insight. “Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people... God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love” (God Is Love, no. 11, 2005).

John Paul II says Christ’s invitation “Come, follow me” is “the new, specific form” of living out the Great Commandment that gives it a human “how.” And the invitation, “Go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor” simply “brings out the full meaning of the commandment of love for neighbor” (The Splendor of Truth, nos. 18-21; see Monday, Week 8).

Jesus’ “second” commandment is simple: all we have and are should be at the service of others, just as “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus “broke” the law by touching lepers, eating with sinners and healing on the Sabbath to show that we misunderstand God’s laws unless we see their goal as helping people.

That is the Good News about morality. It is rooted in the mystery of sharing in the life of Christ. By dying and rising with him in Baptism.

Initiative: Simplify your life. Just focus on loving God and others in all you do.
Ninth week of the Year


In his answer to the last question he was asked, Jesus summed up the Good News of his moral teaching. Basically, it comes down to “be like God.” Love God the way God loves himself: with total, undivided love of him as All: all Goodness, all Truth, all Life. Jesus would later claim this for himself: “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (*John* 14:6). And love others the way God loves them. Here again, Jesus made himself the criterion: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (*John* 13:34).

To make oneself the criterion — of truth, of goodness, of “life to the full” (*John* 10:10)— is to claim to be God. To think oneself smarter or better than others in some particular way is just vanity; or a mistake in judgment. But to make oneself the criterion — thinking “I am so smart that what I think must be true,” or “so good that what I want to do must be good” — is the sin of pride. It is the worst sin of all. Unless, of course, one actually is God.

When Jesus raises the question of his identity: “How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?” he is pointing us toward the real mystery of the Good News. Paul identifies it as the mystery of God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.” Or more simply, “this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (*Colossians* 1:27). The essence of the Good News is that, by dying and rising with Christ in Baptism, we have become a “new creation.” Our sins have been, not just forgiven but annihilated in the death of the “Lamb of God” who “became sin” for us, taking us into his own body to die, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (*2Corinthians* 5:17-21). In short, the Good News is that each of us can say with Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (*Galatians* 2:20). That is news — even to most of us who were brought up in the traditional but truncated teaching we received as children — and it is good news; better than we can imagine!

Jesus doesn’t explain this by the question he poses. All he does is point out that if David, in the Scripture, calls the Messiah “Lord,” how can he be just his human son? Fathers, especially if they are kings, do not call their children “Lord.” So there must be more to the Messiah than meets the eye.

There is always more to Jesus than meets the eye. No one appreciated this better than Mark, who tried to make him known.

**Initiative: Take another look** at the Good News. At Jesus. The Church. Yourself.
Ninth week of the Year


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Ninth week of the Year


This is the last weekday reading from Mark in Ordinary Time. We have reached the end of Christ’s public preaching. He will speak to his disciples about the “last days” (chapter 13), and then enter into the final stage of what he had to accomplish during his human lifetime, bringing all to its climax in his passion, death and resurrection.

It will not be the end of his mission. He will continue it living in his risen body on earth, the Church. As the liturgy sums up in praise to the Father:

In fulfillment of your will he gave himself up to death;
but by rising from the dead he destroyed death and restored life.
And that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him,
he sent the Holy Spirit from you, Father
as his first gift to those who believe,
to complete his work on earth
and bring us the fullness of grace

(Fourth Eucharistic Prayer).

What was the final theme of Jesus’ preaching? It is no great surprise. He warned his disciples over and over again to shun power and prestige (9:35; 10:31; 10:44). But they never got the message. So he makes it his final plea to them: “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!”

Why is Jesus so concerned about this? Isn’t it commonplace to give respectful titles to the modern “scribes,” the clergy and hierarchy who are official teachers in the Church, and to seat them up front in church and at banquets? Haven’t we taken this for granted for centuries? At least since church officials were given political status, authority and accompanying protocol in countries where Church and state exercised overlapping roles. Should we be concerned about this?

Few modern churchmen can be accused of “devouring widows’ houses.” But when any group of officials, secular or ecclesiastic, accept an isolating protocol that separates them from the common folk, then only a few people will speak to them frankly, especially to criticize. The result of this is deadly. At least Jesus thought it was for his Church.

Whom does Jesus praise as contributing most to the Church? “A poor widow who put in two small copper coins, worth about a penny.” That is what the Church leaves us to think about at the end of the readings from Mark.

Initiative: Don’t take protocol for granted, at least in the Church. React to it.
What has this booklet done for you?
These reflections are based on themes from the book
Until He Comes,
which develop Step Five in
Reaching Jesus — Five Steps to a Fuller Life
by David M. Knight

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