

Monday after Epiphany

The *Responsorial Psalm* promises the Messiah: “*I will give you all nations for an inheritance*” (*Psalm 2*). The truth of Christ can enlighten and shine through every culture on earth. Christ’s love can transform and bring to perfection every human endeavor. All of creation has been redeemed by Jesus, and all of creation can be the medium through which his glory shines. Jesus and the Church say with the Roman poet: *Nihil humanum mihi alienum puto*: “Nothing human is foreign to me.”

1John 3:22 to 4:6 warns us against thinking that what can be already is. We look for the good in everything human, but we still have to “test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” If we reject nothing, it means nothing when we accept anything. There is truth and falsehood, good and evil, right thinking and wrong thinking. How can we know the difference?

The first thing to look for is love. “Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them.” His commandment is that we should “love one another.”

His commandment is also, “we should believe in the

name of his Son, Jesus Christ.” But we have to bear in mind that John was writing specifically to the Christian community. We do not judge non-Christians by a faith they have not received, or perhaps have received but on a level deeper than words.

A test for Christians, however, is whether they “acknowledge Jesus come in the flesh.” Christians find Jesus in the down-to-earth reality of life and worship in his body on earth, the Church. Christians express Jesus by embodying his truth and love in the concrete expressions of daily life. A “spirituality” not embodied in the physical actions of “religion” is not the spirituality of the Incarnate God.

Matthew 4: 12-25 shows God’s divine optimism about the human race and his confidence in the winning power of grace. When John is arrested Jesus “withdraws” to Galilee to preach to a “people who sit in darkness... in a land overshadowed by death.” He follows his own later advice to his disciples, “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (*Matthew 10:23*). But continue preaching. We should never presume that any new person, group, culture or milieu is unable to hear God’s word — if we present it as we should. God’s promise is, “*I will give you all nations for an inheritance*”

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. Be an evangelizer. Offer him to everyone. Validate your words by the consistent witness of a life only faith can explain.

Tuesday After Epiphany,

The *Responsorial Psalm* foretells, “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you*” (*Psalm 72*). Picture it.

Adoration is total, all-unifying response to the overwhelming truth and beauty of God. Before the infinite Being of God, in whom all truth, all goodness are One, we ourselves are reduced to one act. There is nothing to say, nothing to do, nothing to add. All is before us. We simply condense ourselves into one silent, wordless word of affirmation. In our silence we become a single word expressed, a word for which there is no word. All that we are becomes eloquent in silence. There is no other way to recognize the full Being of God.

When “every nation on earth adores Him,” there will be no divisions between us, because we will all be focused just on what God is; not on what any one of us is not. The only goodness we will be aware of is God’s and our participation in it, and we will adore it in God and in one another. Outside of God — and of God’s beauty as found in the unique diversity of every person and culture — we will pay attention to nothing at all, because there will be nothing else. Everything good and true and beautiful — all that truly is — will be present in God. And in everything and everyone that is we will see God’s truth, God’s

goodness and beauty shining through the distinct life and characteristics of every being God has made.

1John 4: 7-10 tells us love is like adoration in this, that it silences everything within us that is not of God, and focuses only on what is of God in one another. True love does not blind us to the faults in one another, but they cease to be the focus. They are just the background out of which each one’s truth and beauty shine. “Let us love one another, because love is of God; and everyone who loves... knows God.”

On this earth our whole being cannot remain rapt and unified in one, silent act of adoration. We are here to grow and develop through interaction with all of creation. We have work to do, and we have to focus on many things that can distract us from the pure truth and goodness of God. So **Mark 6: 34-44** teaches us that *active love* can be the unifying focus in our lives. *To see good, do love.* Jesus was “moved with pity” for the crowds. He *taught* them, told his disciples to *feed* them, and made their eating a sign of *Eucharist*, where he assembles people to nourish them with himself as, by sharing themselves with each other, they share in his own act of giving life to the world. The unifying factor is nurturing love.

The lesson? To be love, do love.

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. *Let love be your eyes.* Focus on God’s truth and goodness in everyone. And share.

Wednesday After Epiphany

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us, “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you*” (*Psalm 72*) as a support for *hope* that motivates us to *love*.

1John 4: 11-18 tells us that if we show love to one another, we will grow in love, and God’s love will be “brought to perfection in us.” What is the sign this is happening?

The way we know we are truly in union with Christ is that “he has given us his Spirit.” If we think like Christ and love like Christ, we must be alive by the Spirit of Christ.

To love is to help others *be and become* all they can be. But Christ’s Spirit tells us “the Father sent his Son as *savior of the world*.” “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you*.” So what holds us back from the loving act of sharing him with every person we deal with?

Fear. We are afraid of failure. We think either that people are impervious to religion or that we are inadequate to present it; that even if we are discreet in our way of embodying and expressing the Good News about Jesus, they will not respond.

Mark 6: 45-52 reminds us that the apostles felt this way in the early Church. Jesus had ascended into heaven (“gone up the mountain”) and left them alone

to take care of his people. The “wind was against them.” They were being “tossed about” in stormy seas of controversy and persecution. They were scared. And when “Jesus came toward them, walking on the sea,” they “thought he was a ghost... and were terrified.” When he got into the boat and “the wind died down,” they were “completely astounded.” They just didn’t get it.

The problem was, “they had not understood the incident of the loaves.” They did not understand that when Jesus *took* the loaves, “*looked up to heaven, blessed, broke, and gave* them to his disciples...” this was a preview of Eucharist.

There is a mixing of time-frames here. When Jesus multiplied the loaves, neither Eucharist nor the Church was yet established, and the apostles had no responsibilities. But the story is a commentary on the present. It tells us that if we understand *Eucharist*, we understand that Jesus is always with us, always in the boat, and no contrary winds of culture or contradiction can keep us from bringing “every nation on earth” to adore him. If we have faith to believe this, hope that overcomes fear, and love to keep trying, then through our efforts to give Christ to the world, we will see his love being “brought to perfection among us.”

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. Keep trying to bring people to him, asking him to work *with you, in you, through you*.

Thursday After Epiphany

The *Responsorial Psalm* persists with the Epiphany theme, “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.*”

John 4:19 to 5:4 concludes from this that we have to love the people of “every nation on earth.”

John argues, “Everyone who loves the Father loves also the one begotten by him.” This includes Jesus and all who have become “children of God” through belief in him. Therefore “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also,” all who are God’s children by grace.

It is only a logical extension of this to say that therefore we must also love all those to whom Jesus was sent; that is, “every nation on earth.” Those who love God love those whom God loves, which includes all those to whom he sent his only-begotten Son. All.

Oddly enough, we sometimes have the most difficulty loving those who are close to us: people we grew up with, people we live and work with.

This is because we lose the sense of the mystery that is in them. Because our dealings with them are so commonplace, we begin to think of them as commonplace also. We take each other for granted.

This happened to the people in Jesus’ home town.

Luke 4: 14-22 leaves out the end of the story, which

was that after “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth,” they began to ask each other, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” (end of verse 22). And from then on it was all downhill — literally, because “They got up, drove Jesus out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.” They just couldn’t accept divinity in a hometown boy.

Those who watched Jesus grow up, taking it for granted he was “the son of Joseph,” simply could not accept him as the Son of God. And we who deal with each other constantly as ordinary human beings find it hard to accept each other as children of God and as the body of Christ himself, who have “become Christ” by Baptism. We need to keep reminding ourselves to see and believe in the mystery of their being and ours.

Jesus “came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near” (*Ephesians 2:17*). That means we have to love equally those of “every nation on earth,” including our own. The background of all our dealings with each other should be, “*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.*”

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. See others as God does. Recognize the mystery of God’s presence and call in each one.

Friday After Epiphany

The *Responsorial Psalm* sings, “*Praise the Lord, Jerusalem*” (*Psalm 147*).

1John 5: 5-13 tells us why: it is because we have the life of God in us, and we can know it. “And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever possesses the Son has life; whoever does not possess the Son of God does not have life.”

How do we know we really are in life-giving union with Jesus Christ? “There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood.”

If the experience of the early Church (*Acts 2: 41-47*) is a model, we receive the testimony of the *Spirit* when we “devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching,” to seeking felt, experienced growth in union with God through prayer and reflection on the Scriptures — individual and communal. We receive the testimony of “the *water*,” of the physical, visible life of the Church embodied in the sacraments, when we devote ourselves to “fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” with the community. And we receive the testimony of “the *blood*” when our actions bear witness that we have “died” to this world’s passing benefits and re-oriented our lives to seek fulfillment “in Christ.” Basic to this is our attitude toward

material goods. In the early Church some “would sell their possessions and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” What matters is not *how*, but *that* our lifestyle should be proof of radical detachment from selfishness and absorption in this world’s promises.

Luke 5: 12-16 encourages us. We may feel that we are too “unclean” to experience God. The answer to this is to go to Jesus as the outcast leper did and say, “Lord, if you wish *you can make me clean*.”

Jesus will give us the same answer he gave him: “I do will it. Be made clean.” But he will tell us we also have to do something. The leper was already cleansed, but for his experience to be complete Jesus told him, “Go, show yourself to the priest....” In the Church the sacrament of Reconciliation makes forgiveness a felt experience and carries forward the healing process. The same principle tells us we must choose to *act* if we want evidence that we do in fact have life through Jesus Christ. The basic choices are *prayer* (the “Spirit”), involvement in the *community* (the “water”), and *decisions* that bear witness to Christ’s values (the “blood”). If we choose to *act*, we will feel like singing “*Praise the Lord, Jerusalem*” because we will know we are alive. His love has extended to embrace us too.

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. Seek to experience grace. Do what you have to do to know your response is real.

Saturday After Epiphany

The *Responsorial Psalm* assures us, “*The Lord takes delight in his people*” (*Psalm 149*). That includes us.

1John 5: 14-21 keeps insisting that “we know” God takes delight in us because “we are... *in his Son Jesus Christ*.” Because we are “in Christ,” sharing in his divine life, God is able to “see and love in us what he sees and loves in Christ” (*Sunday Preface VII*). God’s own truth and love are in us, and they are our own. That is a fact more basic than our lapses in living by them. Our sins are failures to live up to what we are, but we still are what we are.

There is “deadly” or “mortal” sin that separates us from live union with Jesus. There is also sin that does not: “All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not deadly.” How can we know the difference?

Before Vatican II Catholics were taught that many things were “mortal sin” which in fact were not. These errors probably grew from a sincere pastoral concern to keep people from doing things that could be very damaging to themselves or others. Legal terminology like “grave obligation” and phrases like “serious matter” used by preachers and teachers were gradually assumed to be interchangeable with the precise theological term “grave matter,” which is an identifying element of “mortal sin.” Then all who

failed to keep any law labeled “grave obligation,” or through weakness engaged in any forbidden self-indulgence, especially sexual, thought themselves deprived of divine life, excluded from receiving the Body of Christ in Eucharist, and provisionally sentenced to eternal Hell. This is distorted “Catholic guilt,” and a long way from John!

John’s focus is on the mystery of the divine life we receive by believing in Jesus Christ. And God’s “steadfast love” will never withdraw this life from us. We can withdraw from the life by withdrawing from Christ — either by explicit rejection of him (which John equates with rejection of the Christian community), or by the cool, deliberate choice to act in a way so maliciously evil it is totally incompatible with Christ’s life in us.

John 3: 22-30 highlights the mystery of our salvation by contrasting the gesture of repentance through John’s baptism before Christ’s death with the sacramental Baptism through which we “become Christ.” The first gave benefits proportional to one’s repentance. The second gives a transformation on the scale of God’s infinite power and love. It is this God sees in us when “*The Lord takes delight in his people*.” It is also what we should see in one another.

Initiative: If you want to know Jesus, accept him as universal Savior. *Don’t exclude* people by uninformed judgments (which you have no right to make) that they are “in sin.” Don’t even be quick to judge your own sins as “mortal.”

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK AFTER EPIPHANY

Jesus Unites All People: Appreciating and accepting identification with Jesus as “*Lord of all nations*” — *who brings the world together in peace*

Invitation: To relate to all people, especially those of other religions, races and cultures, with consciousness of being identified with Jesus, “*Lord of all nations.*” The Christian desire is to relate to all, evangelize all, mix with all, get to know other cultures, others’ way of seeing and doing things. We are one family “in Christ.”

For prayer and discussion: How many of these statements do you believe?

Christians envision a world in which all people will be equal and united, not by cultural uniformity, not under one government, but under the reign of God. We delight in the “catholic” unity of embracing one truth, one love, in one Church, while expressing our faith and devotion in culturally different ways.

God called the Magi to Jesus through a star, a symbol from their own “pagan” religion. They were “saved” by their response of unconditional faith: not in the symbol, but in the reality, as yet unknown to them, to which it was leading them.

If the Church is to remain truly “catholic,” there must not be any attempt to impose uniformity, or one culture’s way of seeing things, one culture’s liturgical preferences or methods of government, on all the others.

Where “foreigners” are becoming less of a minority — as Hispanic and other immigrants are in increasing numbers — we are challenged, not just to tolerate, but to embrace and rejoice in diversity.

All of creation has been redeemed by Jesus, and all of creation can be the medium through which his glory shines. His truth and love can enlighten, transform and bring to perfection every authentically human culture and endeavor.

To love is to help others *be* what they authentically are and *become* all they can be.

What holds us back from sharing the Good News with every person we deal with is fear. We are afraid of failure. We think either that people are impervious to religion or that we are inadequate to present it in a way they will accept.

Decisions:

See yourself as identified with Jesus as universal Savior. Keep trying to bring people to him. Recognize the mystery of God’s presence and call in everyone.

Be an evangelizer. Focus on the truth and goodness in every person and build on each one’s experience of God to share your experience of Jesus with everyone.

Deliberately attend some Masses that are in other languages or traditions. When your parish sings bilingual hymns, join in like a catholic Catholic.

ORDINARY TIME

Sundays Year C and weekdays

(These weekday reflections apply equally to years I-II of Ordinary Time because they focus only on the gospel reading. We will read the Gospel of Mark for the next nine weeks).

This segment goes from the Baptism of the Lord through the 3rd week of the year C

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 first reading on Sunday is always chosen to match the theme of the Gospel reading. And the *Responsorial Psalm* gives the key to the first 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*” (29:1-10). We will see how peace 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 gives

personal peace. Jesus will have patience with us. He will not reject us because of our weakness and barely-smoldering faith.

On the global scale, he will “bring forth justice on the earth” without violence. Using no power but 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). This freedom gives

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. It is seen most commonly 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.*” 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 *Psalms* 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 being incorporated into the body of him who is the *only* Son of the Father. We are children of God only as *fili in Filio*, “sons and daughters *in the Son*.” In Baptism we “become Christ” (John Paul II, quoting St. Augustine). St. Paul uses the term “in Christ” or its equivalent 164 times. This is the mystery of our Christian identity.

We have a new identity. We are no longer just human beings. We have become divine by “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” “Grace” simply means “*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.*”

“Good News of Peace”:

In **Acts 10:34-38** Cornelius, a Gentile, invited Peter to his house, where he and others were assembled to “listen to all the Lord has commanded you to say.”

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

The initial “Good News” about Jesus in this first recorded preaching to a group of Gentiles is that he “went about doing good works and healing all who were in the grip of the devil.” Only afterwards does Peter speak of Christ’s death and resurrection (not included in today’s reading). 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” to help heal them 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

Monday

Begin Mark's Gospel: 1:14-20. Year II: *1 Samuel* 1:1-8; *Psalms* 116:12-19.

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 the readings take us 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

Tuesday

Mark 1: 21-28. Year II: *1Samuel* 1:9-20; *Response: 1Samuel* 2:1-8.

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!" 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 your 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

Wednesday

Mark 1:29-39. Year II: *1 Samuel 3: 1-20; Psalm 40:2-10.*

After 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 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.”

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?

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.” To “evangelize” is to share it with others.

First Week of the Year

Thursday

Thursday: Mark 1:40-45. Year II: *1 Samuel* 4: 1-11; *Psalms* 44:10-26.

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 said, “I do choose. Be made clean!” And he reached out and *touch*ed the leper. That was not something people did.

Jesus not only showed his human feelings; he established a principle: Compassion calls for contact. We don’t just help the 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 II: *1 Samuel* 8:4-22; *Psalms* 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 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...” 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 you 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

Saturday

Mark 2:13-17. Year II: *1Samuel* 9:1 to 10:1; *Psalms* 21:2-7.

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?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: FIRST WEEK OF THE YEAR

Good News: New Life, New Identity, New Call: Appreciating and accepting identification with Jesus through Baptism as an ongoing experience of mystery.

Invitation: To understand the Good News by recognizing Baptism as the event that changed your whole life and transforms every action of your day, every day. Baptism gave you a new identity. You can develop a constant self awareness that makes your every thought, word and action an experience of mystery.

For prayer and discussion: How many of these statements do you believe?

Christian Baptism is a mystery. We are baptized “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” The *heavens open*: it is an act of God himself making contact with us. The *Holy Spirit descends* not in visible form, but with visible effects, which are seen most commonly in the effects of our baptismal anointing into the *mission* of Jesus *Prophet, Priest and King*. The Father speaks to us the same words he said to Jesus: “*You are my Son, the Beloved....*” In Jesus’ Baptism these words revealed his identity; in our Baptism they confer it.

The beginning of Mark’s Gospel shows Jesus, *proclaiming* the Good News that “The kingdom of God has come near,” *inviting* human people to help him, *teaching* “as one having authority,” and *healing*. Christianity is not all about suffering. That can hardly be avoided, but we should not forget that the Way of Jesus is still the healthiest, happiest way to live on earth. Our own lives should make that evident.

By Baptism Jesus doesn’t just give us divine life so 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* to announce and to visibly *be* the Good News.

The “headline proclamation” of the Good News was, “The kingdom of God has come near!” There is a *plan* for earth that God is bringing to fulfillment in time. And we are called to be involved in it. All day, every day. This is our life.

Decisions:

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?

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?

Ask yourself what, if anything, you would have to “leave” in order to be a “fisher of people” in your own way of life. Decide how to live out your identity as *sent*.

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 in writing this prayer was that to achieve peace 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 hearing “the death of the Lord” proclaimed? What does that mean to 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 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, something you 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 with him?

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 *120 to 180 gallons* of wine *after* they had drunk all that was originally provided. In Cana they are still talking about that wedding reception!

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. 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: four of the last 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...”

1Corinthians 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 milieus, 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 we are, we 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 we say and do we 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 you experience by 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

Monday

Mark 2:18-22. Year II: *1 Samuel 15:16-23; Psalm 50:8-23.*

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,” *fili 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*; *1 Corinthians 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

Tuesday

Mark 2:23-28. Year II: *1Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 89:20-28.*

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!"

Phariseism 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 of God, 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

Wednesday

Mark 3:1-6. Year II: *1Samuel 17:32-51; Psalm 144:1-10.*

This is the only time in the Gospels that the word “anger” is applied to Jesus. (In *Matthew 18:34*, however, a king condemns a servant “in anger” for refusing to forgive a fellow servant). He is angry because 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

Thursday

Mark 3:7-12. Year II: *1Samuel* 18:6 to 19:7; *Psalms* 56:2-14.

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" if only 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

Friday

Mark 3:13-19. Year II: *1Samuel 24:3-21; Psalm 57:2-11.*

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 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 held 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. So in everything you do, say the WIT prayer: “Lord, do this with me, do this in me, do this through me.”

Initiative: Be the risen Christ. But keep contact with the historical Jesus in his Church.

Second Week of the Year

Saturday

Mark 3:20-21. Year II: *2Samuel* 1:1-27; *Psalms* 80:2-7.

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 began 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 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.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: SECOND WEEK OF THE YEAR

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

Invitation: To find the Gospel the most exciting thing in your life. To find your greatest fulfillment and joy in what your Baptism gives you — and calls you to.

For prayer and discussion: How many of these statements do you believe?

Your “religion” — what Baptism gives you — will be your greatest joy for the rest of your life after you die! It can be your greatest joy now.

If we are bored at Mass, it means we are *not paying attention to the words*. The words are exciting. If we listen we will experience the Good News.

It is a principle of human life that praise increases appreciation. If we consciously praise God for the elements of the Good News celebrated in Mass we will grow in appreciation of the Good News.

One reason why people are not drawn to the Church or leave it is that we are so silent about the good things we experience in dealing with God. In prayer. In the sacraments. At Mass itself. What convinces is shared experience.

What holds us back from sharing the Good News with the people we deal with is fear. We are afraid of how we will look, how they will respond. Afraid of failure.

For “new evangelization” the Good News must be proclaimed credibly by the laity who are “everywhere” — at home, school, work, in every area and activity of life.

The Good News is so good that to hear it we have to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds.” Jesus invites all of us, “Stretch out your heart.”

Jesus wanted to be known, not as a faith-healer, but as what he is: “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” Hearing the Good News means knowing him.

Jesus came to call all of humanity into a relationship of love with God as deep, intimate, and passionate as the love of bridegroom and bride. Until we know this we haven’t really heard the Good News.

By sending the Twelve, Jesus made it clear that he establishes the Kingdom by working with, in and through others. So in everything you do, say the WIT prayer:

Decisions:

Think about it until you can identify the five best things you have experienced in Christianity. Decide not to be silent about them.

Re-examine what you are looking for in life. What you ask God for most often in prayer. What you go to church for, look for from your pastor or parish.

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?” 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.

The “new song” of response to the Good News has five verses: we receive his *life* when we “become Christ” at Baptism. We learn his *truth* as disciples. We bear *witness* to him as prophets. We *minister* as “priests in the Priest” through Baptism. We work for his *glory* as stewards of his kingship. These five are the promises and commitments of our Baptism.

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.” The Good News holds 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 throughout the millions of years of human existence, that the universe owes its existence to some awesome Being, but did not know for sure what that Being expects of us. Or how to get the most out of life. Suppose there was no “operator’s manual.” Where would that leave us?

“Fulfilled in your hearing”

In **Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21**, Jesus gives an outline of the Good News. He came:

1. “*To bring good news to the poor*”: The Good News for our *being* is the gift of *grace*, the gift of divine

life. Paul summed it up as the mystery of “*Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (*Colossians* 1:27). Because we died “in Christ” and rose in him, our sins are annihilated and we have become a “new creation.” 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 and schools of thought. 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 laws. With 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 it in particular situations. Jesus frees us from this spiritual handicap by calling us to look for ways to make constant *changes* in our lifestyle, to make everything bear *witness* to his values. This draws 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 nonviolently: to “endure evil with love” by accepting whatever cross the sin of the world drops 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. This 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 joined to Jesus, Victim and Priest, and *freed* 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 announce peace and justice on earth as “kings,” or *stewards of his kingship*.

Who we are:

In **1Corinthians 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*” (*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 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 this:

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 more or less dignity. There is only one dignity: being the Body of Christ, and all share in it equally. Nor does anyone suffer alone. All pain is the pain of all. “All, though many, are one body.” 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."

JANUARY 25 The Conversion of Saint Paul:

Acts 22:3-16 tells us of the encounter with Jesus that ruled all Paul did, said and wrote as an apostle. This same encounter should also shape everything we say, do and are. If we have heard the Good News.

Like us, Paul never saw the historical Jesus. The Jesus who spoke to him on the road was the same risen Jesus who speaks to us in prayer and through the Spirit in our hearts. And Paul did not see him; just a “great light from heaven.” And he “heard a voice.” The light he saw with his senses was not as real or as great at the light of faith given to us at Baptism. And the voice he heard was no more the voice of God than the voice that speaks to us through the Scriptures. In other words, although Paul met Jesus in a different way, his encounter was not more real than ours is. So our encounter with Jesus should have the same effect.

Paul was enlightened, yes. From that moment he knew two things that ruled the rest of his life: 1. He was *sent*. 2. Christians are “in” Christ and Christ is in them. The Jesus Paul met on the road is present in and identified with every person who becomes a member of his body by faith and Baptism. The Jesus Paul preached was the Jesus of mystery, the Jesus who is the “head of the body, the Church; the beginning, the firstborn from the dead” (*Colossians* 1:8). He is the Jesus into whose death and resurrection we were incorporated by Baptism. Paul was perfectly clear about his mission. It was to proclaim:

the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known... the glory of this mystery, which is *Christ in you, the hope of glory* (*Colossians* 1:26-27).

Don't we know all this? Don't we know it just as certainly as Paul? The light of faith in us is just as much a “great light from heaven” as the one Paul saw. But he was blinded by his until, like us, he presented himself to the Church and was baptized (*Acts* 9:17-19). And don't we know we are *sent* to proclaim what we have seen? Pope Paul VI said, “The Church *exists* to evangelize.” We are the Church.

In Mark 16:15-18 Jesus tells his apostles, and through them every member of his body on earth, “Go out to all the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation.”

“The whole creation” means every place where people are: at home, at work, at sports events and parties, on dates and business trips, in professional life and politics. This is the “apostolate of the laity” who “live in the midst of the world and its concerns [and so] are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven” (Vatican II, Lay Apostolate, no. 2).

These “signs” will make their witness credible: They will be immune to the “poison” they drink in daily from the culture, speak a “different language” than their peer group, and “heal” situations they have a hand in. In other words, they will be different.

Initiative: Acknowledge your encounter with Jesus. Proclaim what you know.

Third Week of the Year

Monday

Mark 3:22-30. Year II: *2Samuel 5:1-10; Psalm 89:20-26.*

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 Jesus was not just crazy but possessed!

Jesus responds with two teachings. First he says, “If a kingdom is divided against itself, it 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 example 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 absorbed, 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 that 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 may 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 already blocking God’s best shot.

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

Tuesday

Mark 3:31-35. Year II: *2Samuel 6:12-19; Psalm 24:7-10.*

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, making claims like those? 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

Wednesday

Mark 4:1-20. Year II: *2Samuel* 7:4-17; *Psalms* 89:4-30.

Until Jesus said we are his “brothers and sisters and mother” he had 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 “were around him and 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 live by the divine life of God if our response to it has too many human 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

Thursday

Mark 4:21-25. Year II: *2Samuel 7:18-29; Psalm 132:1-14.*

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 others go together. Jesus has no sheep who are not called to be shepherds, and no disciples who are not sent 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 himself. 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

Friday

Mark 4:26-34. Year II: *2Samuel 11:1-17; Psalm 51:3-11.*

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, seen or unseen, the seed 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

Saturday

Mark 4:35-41. Year II: *2Samuel 12:1-17; Psalm 51:12-17.*

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. 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" represents Jesus apparently absent and inactive, ascended into heaven and seemingly

unconcerned about what is happening to his Church. The words the disciples say to Jesus when they wake 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.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: THIRD WEEK OF THE YEAR

A Birdseye View: Managing the Good News

Invitation: To condense the Good News into a few clear and memorable mysteries, promises and commitments so that you will be able to say what, in a nutshell, is the Good News for you and what you think is so good about being a Christian.

For prayer and discussion: How many of these statements do you believe?

The five gifts Jesus promises in Baptism are:

1. “*To bring good news to the poor*”: The Good News for our *being* is the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,” the gift of divine life, by which we “become Christ.”
2. “*To proclaim liberty to captives*”: The Good News for our *intellect* is the gift of *faith*. Those who perceive nothing beyond this world live in darkness. Our minds have been taken captive by false worldviews and unquestioned assumptions programmed into us by our culture, both secular and religious. But if we study and reflect on God’s word (writing is just recorded memory) as *disciples*, new dimensions of truth will be revealed to us. Jesus invites those who “sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (*Luke 1:79*) to come out and *be his disciples*. Our eyes will be opened. We will “know the truth, and the truth will make us free.”
3. “*Recovery of sight to the blind*”: This is Good News for our power of *perception* and *memory*. Spiritual blindness is not an intellectual problem, nor something imposed from outside of us. It is an interior hardness of heart, an unwillingness to look beyond blind observance of laws. Jesus frees us from this spiritual handicap by calling us to be *prophets*: to look for ways to make constant *changes* in our lifestyle, to make everything we do bear *witness* to his values.

The gift of the Holy Spirit calls us to think for ourselves in the light of faith and to bear *witness* as *prophets* in the freedom of the Spirit.
4. “*To let the oppressed go free*”: The Good News for our *will* is the gift of *love*, which is the only saving response to oppression. By “presenting our bodies” constantly as a “living sacrifice” to every person we deal with in *ministry* as *priests* by Baptism, we escape the selfishness that imprisons us within the narrowness of self-interest.
5. “*To announce a year of favor from the Lord*”: The Good News for the meaning and value we seek through *activity* is the gift of *hope*. “The time is fulfilled,” and every year will be “*a year of favor from the Lord*” for us who work as *stewards* of Christ’s kingship to establish the reign of God on earth until Christ comes in glory.

Decisions:

Sum up the Good News for yourself in five sentences. Reduce them to five words.

Use the WIT prayer: “Lord do this with me, do this in me, do this through me.”

Open your eyes to divine truth. Reflect on God’s word as a disciple.

Ask what makes your response to the Spirit visible in your life. Be specific.

Share with someone one thing you know or (better) feel about God.

Work for change. Be joyful and fearless, reminding yourself that the Kingdom is being established, whether we see results or not.

What has this booklet done for you?

These reflections were designed to help you do deepen your appreciation of *Jesus as Savior*.

Did they work?

When we are on a journey it encourages us to look back and see how much ground we have covered, how far we have advanced. So let's do that.

- Did you read these reflections:
 - at least once a week? • three or more times a week?
- Did they help you understand and appreciate Jesus more as Savior?
- Did they help you get more out of the readings at Mass?
- During this season have you read Scripture more often than you usually do?
- Did these reflections lead you to make any *decisions*; for example, to change something in the way you are living or acting?
- **More specifically** (*if you have a little more time...*)
 - Do you see better how to use Jesus *Son of David* to find fulfillment:
 - in your personal life?
 - by contributing to the good of the human race?
 - Do you see better how you can use Jesus *Savior* to keep your life on earth from being diminished by corrupting influences in society?
 - Do you see better how Jesus *Son of God* enables you to live your life on another level, the divine level of God?
 - Do you see better how you can interact with Jesus *Emmanuel* in human ways to get to know him and appreciate him more?
 - Do you see better how Jesus *Lord of all Nations* unites the world in peace?