

An invitation to...

***Repent  
and  
Believe the Good News***

Reflections for the Season of Lent, Year C  
beginning with Weeks 4-7 of Ordinary Time

***A formation to discipleship***

By David M. Knight

# **INVITATION 2: TO BE A DISCIPLE**

Lent Year C

Daily Guide #2, in the *Immersed in Christ Faith Formation Series*—  
An Intensive, Five-Step Journey in Making Real the Promises of Our Baptism.

By David M. Knight

# **A Simple Solution to Save the World**

Has anyone tried to put together a simple plan of spiritual growth for all the people in the pews? Vatican II said “All the faithful of Christ . . . are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of love” (The Church no. 40). Immersed in Christ is a response to that.

What would happen if a million Christians, or just half the people in a thousand parishes, followed these five simple suggestions? 1. Insist always on personal, conscious interaction with Jesus Christ.

Practice, preach and teach awareness of this at home, in every parish and school activity. For starters: Teach and encourage the WIT prayer.

2. Insist on discipleship as essential to being a Christian. The lifelong study of God’s mind and heart, especially by reading, Scripture, should not be treated as optional. For starters: Urge all who believe in the word of God to put the Bible on their pillow and read one line a night.

3. Insist on constant changes in lifestyle that bear witness to the values of Christ because they are only understandable through the Gospel. To be prophets we have to be different. For starters: establish the habit of asking before every choice, “How will this bear witness to Christ?”

4. Insist on ministry to everyone. As priests we “offer our bodies” to give life by expressing faith and love to all. For starters: Smile, praise, thank, sing at Mass!

5. Insist on making changes in the world as stewards of the kingship of Christ. Take responsibility. Exercise leadership. For starters: Take notice of things that are not consistent with the “reign of God.” Work for changes. We would “renew the face of the earth!”

# Introduction

This booklet is meant to guide and encourage you as a “*disciple*” — that is, as an ongoing “student” of the mind and heart of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, through his words and example understood by the light of the Holy Spirit, we come to know the Father. “This is eternal life,” Jesus said, “to *know you*, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

This booklet is offered with St. Paul’s prayer “that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

These reflections are meant to be deep and challenging. They take us to the roots of our faith and call for fruits commensurate with the gift of divine life given to us. Some thoughts may be shocking. In *Acts* evangelization typically began with an event that shocked by raising questions that could only be answered by the Gospel. May God grant that these reflections will raise questions in our hearts that will take us deeper into the Good News that we can never sufficiently explore.

These reflections focus on whatever there is in the lectionary readings that speaks to the theme of *discipleship*, “*metanoia*,” the “complete makeover” of mind and heart and direction encouraged by Lent.

By living out our baptismal commitment to discipleship we experience the promise of *enlightenment* made to us at Baptism: “If you make my word your home, you will truly be my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

# THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR C

## Sharing the Good News

### Inventory

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

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

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

### Input

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

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

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

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

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

### “Stand up and tell them....”

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

each one of us exists to evangelize — as “prophets, priests and stewards of his kingship.” We are consecrated to this.

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

Oddly but predictably, there are a lot of people who

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

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

## The wind shifts

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

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

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

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

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

The true prophets don’t do that. God told Jeremiah,

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

## How to grow up

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

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

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

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

**Insight**

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

**Initiative:**

*Evangelize. See how you can make Good News out of all you say and do.*

## February 2: THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD

### also: THE PURIFICATION OF MARY and “CANDLEMAS”

#### A Link-up

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## “A Refiner’s Fire....”

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

The reason is that God purifies: “He is like a refiner’s fire.... He will purify the descendants of Levi, refining them like gold or silver.”

But we need to look to the end. With everything God does there is always a happy ending: “Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD.” We can’t help thinking of what that offering was actually going to be: “a lamb without blemish for the life of the world.” Or, in the literal translation of the first *Eucharistic Prayer*, “a victim that is pure, a victim that is holy, a victim that is immaculate, the holy Bread of eternal life and the Chalice of everlasting salvation.” What we have in Eucharist is worth the price of purification!

## “Now... peace”

In **Luke 2:22-40** we automatically assume that Simeon was an old man, because the Holy Spirit had promised him he “would not experience death before he had seen the Anointed of the Lord.” But that doesn’t follow: he could have been twenty years old! Whether he was, or whether he was eighty-four like Anna, the point is that life is not complete — for any of us — until we have met Jesus Christ. And the sooner we encounter him the

better. But we need to encounter him personally, with personal faith, real hope and active love. Until we do, we cannot really “experience” either life or death in any authentic way. If Jesus is not the “main attraction” in our living and our dying, neither one can be basically satisfying, much less “filled with joy” (see *Psalms* 126; *John* 10:10; *Galatians* 5:22). Simeon said, “Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace... for my eyes have seen your salvation.” If we are not deeply in peace, even in the midst of suffering and stress, our eyes have not seen, and our ears have not heard the Good News. In the last analysis, what more do we need in this life besides the assurance that we are in union with God “in Christ” and in present possession of everything we need to make us happy for all eternity?

## The Light of Peace

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

**Initiative: Think about the Bible.** Can you meet Jesus there? Find freedom? Do it!

**Fourth week of the Year (The reflections on Mark's Gospel are continued from the Third Week. See the booklet for Advent-Christmas that preceded this one).**

**Monday: Mark 5:1-20.** Year I: *Hebrews* 11:32-40; *Psalms* 31:20-24; Year II: *2Samuel* 15:13 to 16:13; *Psalms* 3:2-7.

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

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

In this story Jesus is “begged” (παρακαλεῖν) four times: first by “Legion” (or “Soldier,” *Jerome*

*Biblical Commentary*) who beg him 1. not to send them *out of* their “territory” (χωρά: used to designate a “place the seasoned soldier claims for himself,” Bauer, *Greek Lexicon*) and 2. to let them *go into* the pigs; then by the Gerasenes, who beg Jesus to *go out of* their “boundaries” (oros); and finally by the freed demoniac, who begs to *be with* Jesus. A lot of “in’s” and “out’s” here!

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

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

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

#### **Fourth week of the year:**

**Tuesday: Mark 5:21-43.** Year I: *Hebrews* 12:1-4; *Psalms* 22:26-32; Year II: *2Samuel* 18:9 to 19:3; *Psalms* 86:1-6.

Jairus the “synagogue official” is the first person Jesus cured whom Mark identifies by name, rank or status. Jesus didn’t ask who people were before doing them favors. Nor did he keep himself aloof. On the way to Jairus’ house “a large crowd followed, pushing against him,” so that a woman with an embarrassing illness was able to come up behind him in the crowd and touch his cloak, thinking, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be made well.” And she was. Jesus didn’t even see her!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **Fourth week of the Year**

**Wednesday: Mark 6:1-6.** Year I: *Hebrews* 12:4-15; *Psalms* 103:1-18; Year II: *2Samuel* 24:2-17; *Psalms* 32:1-7.

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

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

The problem is, we have difficulty believing it — at least in any “real” way that is not just abstract religious doctrine. Jesus said, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown... and in their own house.” Let’s take that even closer to home. We don’t sufficiently honor what we are, even in our own hearts! How do you feel about claiming to be the “light of the world”? About saying you can do the works that Jesus did; and, in fact, “greater works than these” (*Matthew* 5:14; *John* 14:12)?

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

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

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

And “renew the face of the earth.”

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

#### Fourth week of the Year

**Thursday: Mark 6:7-13.** Year I: *Hebrews* 12:18-24; *Psalms* 48:2-11; Year II: *1 Kings* 2:1-12; *1 Chronicles* 29:10-12.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So the apostles went out and used power against demons but “anointed with oil those who were sick.” For the “poor in spirit” their power was compassion.

**Initiative: Study Christian witness.** What does your lifestyle say to others?

#### Fourth week of the Year

**Friday: Mark 6:14-29.** Year I: *Hebrews* 13:1-8; *Psalms* 27:1-9. Year II: *Sirach* 47:2-11; *Psalms* 18:31-51.

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

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

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

The truth is, when members of the Church engage in ministry, it is the risen Jesus who is present and working in them. At Baptism we gave our bodies to Christ so that he might rise from the dead in us to

continue his presence and mission on earth (see *Romans* 12:1-2; *1 Corinthians* 12:1-27). Mark may be alluding to this in a vague way when he records the “near miss” of Herod's explanation.

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

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

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

#### Fourth week of the Year

**Saturday: Mark 6:30-34.** Year I: *Hebrews 13:15-21; Psalm 23:1-6*; Year II: *1Kings 3:4-13; Psalm 119:9-14*.

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

The good news here is that Jesus tried to give his hard-working disciples a rest. The bad news is that the crowds made it impossible. “People were coming and going in great numbers, making it impossible for them to so much as eat.” When Jesus and the disciples tried to get away in a boat, “many saw them going and hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.” So much for the day off!

As they went ashore, they found “a vast crowd” waiting for them. Stop the camera: What would most people do in a situation like that? Ask the folks to come back during office hours? Give a short token speech to be polite and then dismiss them? Mark says Jesus “had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” And he began to teach them “at great length.”

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

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

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

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

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

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK FOUR:

**Sharing the Good News:** The Good News is so good — so healing, life-integrating, life-extending, life-fulfilling — that those who have been evangelized can't stop evangelizing others.

### Invitation:

The Good News is an *invitation* to grow into the maturity of love. Mature love seeks to give life by “building up the Church,” helping others to grow in faith, hope and love.

### Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?

Each one of us exists to evangelize because we were “anointed” — physically, with chrism, on the top of the head — with the words, “*As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King, so live always as a member of his body.*”

Every one of us has the same claim to fame that Jesus had: the simple truth is, our Father is God. And because we share in his own life, we are divine.

When members of the Church engage in ministry, it is the risen Jesus who is present and working in them.

The first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life.

We don't have to do dramatic things like curing the sick instantly. We just have to let the power of God work in us and through us — through words, gestures, little, quiet details of lifestyle that, if thought about, don't make sense without the Gospel.

To work miracles by doing these little things, the first thing we have to do is just believe — and stay aware — that Jesus is living and acting in us.

To evangelize we don't have to change jobs or give up our family life. This is an interior change of focus and direction. It means that, whatever we are doing, we are intent on doing it in a way that establishes the “reign of God.” This becomes our priority

The Good News is as deeply different from good human advice as the bad news of the “world” is deeply different from the obvious “immorality” that it is so easy to preach against. We need to preach the life of grace; not just morality.

Evangelizers must live and work as a *community* united in mind and will and heart. In the words of John Paul II, We need “*to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle wherever Christians are formed.*”

### Decisions:

In everything you do, ask yourself, “How should the Good News of Jesus change way I see, do this?”

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



## THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF YEAR C

### Accepting the Call to Evangelize

#### Inventory

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

#### Input

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

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

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

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

#### Touched Lips

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

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

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

This is also true of us as we form our personalities, our souls. By every word of free decision we are choosing to “be” in some particular way. And what we “say” in our choices is what we are.

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

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

This frees us to sing with the angels, “*Holy, holy, holy! In the sight of the angels I will sing your praises, Lord*” (*Responsorial Psalm: 138:1-8*) and still go out to proclaim him as evangelists — with the

lips of Christ.

“From now on...”

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

A basic human problem. If we know how holy God is and how sinful we are — both good insights — it

keeps us from drawing near to him! But if we realize that the Most Pure chooses to be purifying, the Most Holy to be healing, and that transcendent Sanctity has become our incarnate Savior, we will not be afraid to “put out into the deep water” with Jesus and let him work with us, in us and through us to “catch people.” We will evangelize.

Not I but Christ

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

## Insight

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

## Initiative:

*Make an inventory of what you know about the Good News that you can share.*

## Fifth week of the Year

**Monday: Mark 6:53-56.** Year I: *Genesis* 1:1-19; *Psalms* 104:1-35; Year II: *1 Kings* 8:1-13; *Psalms* 132:6-10. (Note: The lectionary puts the skipped verses — Mark 6:35-52 — on January 8-9 or Tuesday and Wednesday after Epiphany).

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

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

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

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

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

**Initiative: Read** *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by the Carmelite “Brother Lawrence,” who died in 1691 in Paris. (Critical edition: ICS Publications, 1994).

## **Fifth week of the Year**

**Tuesday: Mark 7:1-13.** Year I: *Genesis* 1:20 to 2:4; *Psalms* 8:4-9; Year II: *1 Kings* 8:22-30; *Psalms* 84:3-11.

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

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

*Models of the Church* Expanded Edition, Doubleday Image Books, 1987, p.39).

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

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

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

**Initiative: Study Phariseeism** the way doctors study disease: to avoid it.

## **Fifth week of the Year**

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

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

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

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

The list itself is very interesting. The translators cannot agree on what all the words mean. Some are clearly actions — “theft,” murder,” “adultery” — but some seem to describe abiding states of mind, such as, “greed,” “malice,” “envy,” “arrogance,” and just an absence of moral values (“folly” or “an obtuse spirit”). The basic point, however, is clear: God looks,

not so much at a person’s actions, but at the person’s heart. No matter how bad (or good!) a person’s actions might be in themselves, objectively, what God sees and judges is the attitude and intention in the heart that is behind them. And we don’t always know what that is. Hardly ever for another; and much of the time, not even for ourselves.

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

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

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

**Initiative: Think the second thought.** Ask what feeling guilty says about you.

## **Fifth week of the Year**

**Thursday: Mark 7:24-30.** Year I: *Genesis* 2:18-25; *Psalms* 128:1-5; Year II: *1 Kings* 11:4-13; *Psalms* 106:3-40.

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

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

What was his tone of voice when he said this? Was he smiling? The words are shocking, but he was certainly leading her on. This woman was no wilting violet. Her response didn’t express any sense of being

inferior because she was not Jewish. She just gave Jesus’ words right back to him. If that was the way he wanted to play it, that was fine with her: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

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

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

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

**Initiative: Be open** to the goodness in everyone, no matter how it is packaged.

## **Fifth week of the Year**

**Friday: Mark 7:31-37.** Year I: *Genesis* 3:1-8; *Psalms* 32:1-7; Year II: *1 Kings* 11:29 to 12:19; *Psalms* 81:10-15.

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

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

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

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

and he interacts with us in human ways, through human means of communication. That is important. In Christianity “purely spiritual” interactions with God are possible and frequent, but not typical. The typically Christian way is through human words, gestures and contact.

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

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

**Initiative: Open your ears.** Read and reflect on God’s word. Take it seriously.

## **Fifth week of the Year**

**Saturday: Mark 8:1-10.** Year I: *Genesis* 3:9-24; *Psalms* 90:2-13; Year II: *1 Kings* 12:26-34; *Psalms* 106:6-22.

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

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

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

Messianic banquet); and the promise of the messianic abundance (6:42 & *Isaiah* 49:10, *Psalms* 132:15).

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

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

**Initiative: Appreciate Eucharist.** If you *listen to the words* at Mass you will.



## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK FIVE

**Accepting the Call to Evangelize:** Do you feel called personally, by Jesus himself, to evangelize? Do you hesitate because you think you are not good enough for this?

### **Invitation:**

God calls us to himself to send us out to others; that is, to evangelize.

### **Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?**

God is our *Father*. And so, like Jesus, we are committed to evangelize. We were baptized into the “family business” by being baptized into God’s family, the Church, which “exists to evangelize” (Pope Paul VI).

Humans are basically afraid to be too closely involved with God. The more we know how holy God is and how sinful we are, the more we hesitate to approach him.

By nature we are what we have become by our choices. But by Baptism we have “become Christ.” Jesus “erased” our words of evil choice and made us a “new creation” by taking us into his body on the cross and our sins down to the grave with him. Our sins are not just “forgiven,” but “blotted out.”

If we understand the Good News of our purification and sanctification “in Christ” we will not be afraid to “put out into the deep water” with Jesus and let him work with us, in us and through us to “catch people.” We will evangelize.

Jesus looks, not so much at a person’s behavior as at the person’s heart. In what he lists as bad actions he puts the focus on the attitude and intention behind them.

Having the “right” or “wrong” religion does not necessarily make someone the right or wrong kind of person.” Jesus looks deeper: at the faith, hope and love in each one’s heart. So should we.

In the Gospels the people who opposed Jesus the most were the ones officially identified with religion: the *scribes*, the *Pharisees* and the *priests*. Their abhorrence of Jesus alerts us to the corrupting force of *power*, of focusing on God’s *laws* instead of on God, and of rejoicing in *prestige*, whether individual or ecclesial.

Jesus’ enemies typically 1. listen to Jesus, not to learn from him but just to “check out” his orthodoxy; 2. cling blindly to the “customs of their ancestors” without evaluating these in the light of God’s loving will; 3. ignore words that call for deep changes of mind and heart to focus instead on external, even superficial behavior; 4. are more concerned about silencing those who oppose their narrow “orthodoxy” than about helping people grow in knowledge, love and life.

The whole of the Good News is contained in the Eucharistic celebration.

### **Decisions:**

*Listen to the words at Mass* to appreciate Eucharist and find the Good News in it.

*Be open* to the goodness in everyone, no matter how it is packaged.

## SIXTH SUNDAY OF YEAR C

### Seeing the Whole Picture

#### Inventory

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

#### Input

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

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

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

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

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

#### Placed and misplaced trust

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

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

It is true, our hourly choices — what to say, do, buy, sell or think about at this moment — are influenced,

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

The *Responsorial Psalm* (1:1-6), which is always chosen to sum up the first reading, declares “*Happy are they who hope in the Lord.*” No one would argue with that in the abstract. But how often have we made our daily choices based on conscious “hope in the

Lord”? When we were dating as teenagers and wanted to “fit in”? When we chose a college, joined a sorority or fraternity? Picked out the clothes we wear? Made the last phone call? Most recently fired, hired or sought employment? Decided what to do on Sunday morning — or, for that matter, when we got up every morning from Monday to Saturday? Did we get up for morning prayer? Daily Mass? Scripture reading? The stock market report?

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

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

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

## “Blessed are they”

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

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

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

Jesus didn’t try to sell it to the myopic. He took the

long-range view, looking both forward and backward. “When people treat you like that,” he said, “Rejoice. Leap for joy. For your reward is great in heaven. That is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”

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

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

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

## “But in fact...”

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

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

Second, if Jesus did not rise, then “all who have died in Christ have perished.” Baptism was a one-way street. Leading nowhere. And life itself is a dead end. “But in fact,” Paul concludes, “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”

The resurrection of Jesus was just the beginning, the preview of ours. When we proclaim in the *Gloria* at Mass that Jesus is “seated at the right hand of the Father,” we are rejoicing in our destiny. That is the Good News.

### **Insight**

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

### **Initiative:**

*Acquire “wisdom” defined as “the habit of relating everything to the last end.”*

## Sixth week of the Year

**Monday: Mark 8:11-13.** Year I: *Genesis* 4:1-25; *Psalms* 50:1-21; Year II: *James* 1:1-11; *Psalms* 119:67-76.

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

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

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

be rejected, then they have authentic Christianity, and Catholicism is Christianity plus add-ons.

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

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

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

**Initiative: Evaluate questions.** If people are sincere, explain. If not, just leave.

## Sixth week of the Year

**Tuesday: Mark 8:14-21.** Year I: *Genesis* 6:5 to 7:10; *Psalms* 29:1-10; Year II: *James* 1:12-18; *Psalms* 94:12-19.

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

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

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

Fourth question: “Do you have eyes that can’t see, ears that can’t hear?” Herod had been asking about

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Initiative: Open your mind.** Listen to God’s word. Ask what you are missing.

## Sixth week of the Year

**Wednesday: Mark 8:22-26.** Year I: *Genesis 8:6-22; Psalm 116:12-19*; Year II: *James 1:19-27; Psalm 15:2-5*.

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

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

Jesus saves by making the life-giving water of his word interior to us (see *John 4:14*: “The water that I will give will become *in them* a spring of water gushing up to eternal life”). Water does not give life so long as it remains in the clouds. Nor does God’s

word. We have to bring it down to earth through *discipleship*. Let it soak in. Bring it into contact with specific problems. Apply it to concrete decisions. Jesus shows this by literally applying the water of his mouth to bodily parts in need of healing. A preview of the sacraments!

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

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

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

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

## Sixth week of the Year

**Thursday: Mark 8:27-33.** Year I: *Genesis 9:1-13; Psalm 102:16-29*; Year II: *James 2:1-9; Psalm 34:2-7*.

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

And anyone who follows him must do the same.

Peter is quick to tell him how crazy that is: "People want a savior who is going to save them from suffering, not tell them to endure it with love!" Then Jesus, "turning and looking at his disciples," rebuked Peter more fiercely than he did anyone in the Gospels. "Get behind me, you devil!" He wanted them all to

know that Peter's attitude — undoubtedly common to them all — struck at the very heart of God's plan for redeeming the world. To see the "mystery of the cross" as bad news is to reject, render impotent and pervert the Good News at its core.

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

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

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

**Initiative: Get deep and pray.** Ask help to accept God's way of saving the world.



## Sixth week of the Year

**Friday: Friday: Mark 8:34 to 9:1.** Year I: *Genesis* 11:1-9; *Psalms* 33:10-15; Year II: *James* 2:14-26; *Psalms* 112:1-6.

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

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

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

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

That pretty much says it all. It is a very simple choice:

**Initiative: Do the numbers.** Add up what you get and lose by giving all to God.

lose all and live, or cling to what you've got and lose life itself. It's simple arithmetic: "How much do you make if you gain the whole world but lose your life by diminishing your soul?" We may find it hard to accept the truth of this, but we can't deny the logic.

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

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

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

Ultimately, the Good News is just love. To be a disciple is to grow into this.

## Sixth week of the Year

**Saturday: Mark 9:2-13.** Year I: *Hebrews* 11:1-7; *Psalms* 145:2-11; Year II: *James* 3:1-10; *Psalms* 12:2-8.

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

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

Peter got the number right, but the reality wrong. Jesus belongs to a Three beyond all bounds of creation. He is not just an interpreter of the Law and the Prophets. He is the Word itself, whose words are the words of God. The Father makes this clear by

speaking as he did on the day of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan (1:11):

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

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

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

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

**Initiative: Live in the past,** present and future. Christ died, rose, and will return.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK SIX

**Seeing the Whole Picture:** In what time-frame do you think about “happiness”?

### **Invitation:**

Does the Good News you have about happiness mean so much to you that you can share it with others?

### **Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?**

A very basic human choice is: Where do we place our trust? Every one of us has made and is making that choice right now, consciously or not.

We can't take for granted our daily choices are based on conscious “hope in the Lord.” For example, do we put more conscious trust in a physical fitness program, in schoolwork, professional formation, or in reading the Scripture every day? Which trust rules our priority in use of time?

Our motive for trusting in God's help does not depend on what we are but on what he is. And he is unchanging. In the Beatitudes Jesus promised “happiness” to people who had no hope of it, and said it is not to be found where people look for it.

This Good News will reach the “ends of the earth” only if we bring it there.

Jesus didn't try to sell happiness to the myopic. The short-sighted who look only at life in this world will probably choose to side with the rich and powerful.

Those who choose to “trust in the Lord,” hope in a happiness that consists essentially in *knowing God* — on this earth as well as in heaven.

There is no true happiness offered by Jesus that does not require a deep decision to renounce everything in this world, including life itself, in order to “love back,” no matter what one suffers from others. Ultimately, the Good News is just love.

To evangelize is to love. To love is to evangelize. This is a fulfillment of Jesus' command to love others as he has loved us.

We may have heard the Good News all our lives. But that doesn't mean we understand or really accept it. Even God cannot evangelize the inert! We need to take time to *think* about it. We need to be *disciples*.

Water does not give life so long as it remains in the clouds. Nor does God's word. We have to bring it down to earth through *discipleship*. Let it soak in. Bring it into contact with specific problems. Apply it to concrete decisions.

### **Decisions:**

*Seek “wisdom”* defined as “the habit of relating everything to the last end.”

*Do the numbers:* Add up what you get and lose by giving all to God.

*Live in the past, present and future.* Christ died, rose, and will return.

## THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF YEAR C

### Appreciating the Better-than-Good News

#### Inventory

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

#### Input

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

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

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

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

#### Be like God

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

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

order to live on the level of God.

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

#### Jesus is the norm

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

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

and hereafter: “eternal life,” the life enjoyed by God himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

John Paul sums up:

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

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

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

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

## The two Adams

In **1Corinthians 15:45-49** St. Paul gives the same teaching on a more metaphysical level: “Scripture says: ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul; the last Adam [Jesus] became a life-giving spirit.’”

Through Adam we receive the life of human nature: our bodies are the instruments of our *psyche* or “soul.” But “in Christ” we share in the divine nature of God. Our bodies become the instruments of our *pneuma*, our “spirit” as obedient to the Spirit given to us by grace (see the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*). Paul is talking about resurrection when he says, “Just as we resemble the man from earth, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” But he draws the practical conclusion: “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.... Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (*Colossians* 3:1-2). If we have “become Christ,” we should live like Christ.

## **Insight**

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

## **Initiative:**

*Don't be just human. Keep saying the WIT prayer: "Lord, do this with me, in me, through me."*

## Seventh week of the Year

**Monday: Mark 9:14-29.** Year I: *Sirach* 1:1-10; *Psalms* 93:1-5; Year II: *James* 3:13-18; *Psalms* 19:8-15.

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

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

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

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

that precedes and follows them. We do have faith. But the world is still suffering from our lack of faith.

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

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

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

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

## Seventh week of the Year

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

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

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

Without that, the demons accepted as the unquestioned rulers (ruling principles) of every human society would still keep casting one nation after another "into fire and water, to destroy it." So Jesus repeated, with emphasis: "The Son of Man is to

be betrayed. His enemies will kill him. And after three days, he will rise again."

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

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

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

**Initiative: Rethink power and prestige.** Start with Jesus and go from there.



## Seventh week of the Year

**Wednesday: Mark 9:38-40.** Year I: *Sirach* 4:11-19; *Psalms* 119:165-175; Year II: *James* 4:13-17; *Psalms* 49:2-11

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

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

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

Christians take sides against other Christians: Catholics vs Protestants, “conservatives” vs

“liberals,” Latin-Massers vs those who want contemporary liturgy, strict rule-keepers vs those who feel free to adapt. When is this a legitimate, or even necessary, defense of truth? When divisive?

Jesus did not forbid disagreement but hostility; argument can be simply inquiry. There is nothing wrong with arguing, so long as we accept each other and do not go to war against sincerity. The Pharisees who questioned Jesus did not wait for answers or respond when he gave them. They were just against him.

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

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

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

**Initiative: Pray together before you argue.** You may find you don’t need to argue.

## Seventh week of the Year

**Thursday: Mark 9:41-50.** Year I: *Sirach* 5:1-8; *Psalms* 1:1-6; Year II: *James* 5:1-6; *Psalms* 49:14-20.

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

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

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

When it comes to the radical teaching of Jesus, scandal can become the rule rather than the exception. The "doctrine of the cross," calling us to "love back"

even at the cost of our lives, is not reasonable; it goes beyond reason. God said, "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts" (*Isaiah* 55:9). Peter himself protested against it (8:32). Jesus' own disciples couldn't understand it (9:32).

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

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

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

**Initiative: Check your roots.** What are the deepest principles you live by?

## Seventh week of the Year

**Friday: Mark 10:1-12.** Year I: *Sirach* 6:5-17; *Psalms* 119:12-35; Year II: *James* 5:9-12; *Psalms* 10:1-12.

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

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

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

— something keenly felt by every disappointed person who has suffered through the experience of one.

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

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

**Initiative: Clarify why**, as an ideal, Church teaching on marriage inspires you.

## Seventh week of the Year

**Saturday: Mark 10:13-16.** Year I: *Sirach* 17:1-15; *Psalms* 103:13-18; Year II: *James* 5:13-20; *Psalms* 141:1-8.

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

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

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

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

The word "catholic," from *kata holos*, "throughout

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

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

**Initiative: Share, don't shove,** your faith. Show interest in others' beliefs.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: WEEK SEVEN

**Appreciating the Better-than-Good News:** Could the Good News be so good it is bad because it discourages us from the outset?

### **Invitation:**

Jesus' New Law offers us, not rules of good human behavior, but guidelines for living on the level of God. Jesus invites and calls us to a "wisdom and love" far beyond what is humanly intelligible, or even possible.

### **Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?**

If God asked what is humanly achievable, we might doubt our power to accomplish it. But since he asks the impossible, he has to do it with, in and through us.

The challenge of the Gospel would be too much for us if Jesus did not also make clear that he doesn't ask us to be perfect overnight; just to accept a glorious ideal, the goal of perfect love, and let him lead us to it.

To believe in accepting the cross instead of taking up the sword requires more than ordinary faith. Its absence through most centuries of Christianity explains why Jesus' disciples in the Church have not been able to exorcise society of the demons of violence and war, with all that precedes and follows them.

A Church of mediocre disciples, whether clergy or laity, who compromise with the culture, cannot save people from the demons of the culture itself. "This kind can only be driven out by prayer."

Jesus told his disciples they were to consider both power and prestige as dangers to the life of grace. He forbade us to attach prestige to any function in the Church: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

The essential dignity of all Christians is identification with Jesus in grace. To pretend that office or position increases that dignity is to deny it. But to accept this mystery, we have to become like little children, seeing with new and open eyes.

To "scandalize" does not mean to shock. People seldom imitate what shocks them. To scandalize is to cause others to lower their ideals. This usually happens one notch at a time. We scandalize by inches.

Jesus taught as a fundamental principle that we should see an ally in everyone not identified as an enemy. Disagreement is not hostility. Argument is simply inquiry so long as we accept each other and do not go to war against sincerity.

Faced with division among Christians, one thing we can always do is pray together until we know we are united in heart. Then we can focus on doctrinal differences.

### **Decisions:**

*Don't be just human.* Keep saying: "Lord, do this with me, in me, through me."

*Rethink power and prestige.* Start with Jesus and go from there.

*Share, don't shove, your faith.* Pray together before you argue.

## ASH WEDNESDAY (Years ABC)

### Lent is a time to change your mind

#### Inventory

When did you last call into question the goal of your life? When is the last time you decided to change your attitude about something? Or readjusted your priorities? What is the last significant change you made in your lifestyle, your way of living?

Do you feel you are going nowhere spiritually? That you are in a rut of religious routine? Do you feel trapped by your job or family obligations? Is your stress level high? Do you feel you are caught in a rat race, have your “nose to the grindstone”? Do you wish you could just get away and think for a while? Re-evaluate your situation? Make some changes?

*Lent* is a season built into the Liturgical Year to help you do this. It doesn't give you “time off” from your job or family obligations, but it does give you some help in “distancing yourself” mentally and emotionally in order to re-think, re-evaluate and re-tool.

#### Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* is a profession of faith. We affirm our trust in God's *mercy*, and declare to him with trust, “You hate nothing you have created.” God always desires our good. He doesn't want things to be bad for us on earth. Even if we are messed up by our own fault; we insist on believing, “You overlook the sins of all and bring them to repentance.” It is never “too late” with God; he is always willing to help us get control of our lives, redirect our course, change whatever needs changing. He is willing and *able*. We conclude the *Entrance Antiphon* saying that God is not just another helper or advisor. No, “You are the Lord our God!” (see *Wisdom* 11:24-27). You can accomplish what you promise!

In the *Opening Prayer* we ask that this “season of repentance,” — which means “season of mind-changing, of re-evaluation” — will “bring us the blessing of your forgiveness,” which we take for granted, but also “the gift of your *light*,” so that we will see more clearly how to walk in the path that leads to “life to the full” (*John* 10:10). We must *look* to see light, but the promise of it makes us willing to do that.

The *Blessing and Giving of Ashes* reminds us that this world, like our lives, is of relatively short duration. We get the ashes by burning the palms we carried in procession on Palm Sunday as the people did when they thought Jesus was entering Jerusalem to reign as king. He was, but not according to this world's understanding of kingship and power. And so we display the palms in our homes all year as a symbol of the illusory power and short-lived glory of this world. Then in preparation for Lent we turn them to ashes in a dramatic rejection of all that is false and seductive in our culture.

But the *Blessing* prayer's focus is on *hope*: hope that Lent will be for us a “preparation for the joy of Easter” just as all life prepares us “to live with the risen Christ” forever. For Christians, at death “life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.” And so “the sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality” (Preface I for Christian Death).

This is the theme of the Lenten Prefaces: *new hope* and *new life*. Speaking to the Father, the Church calls Lent “this great season of grace... your gift to your family, to *renew us* in spirit.” During Lent “you *bring the image of your Son to perfection* within us.” You raise our minds to you, you *help us grow* in holiness.” “You give us *strength* to purify our hearts, to control our desires, and so to serve you in *freedom*. You teach us to live in this passing world with our *heart set* on the world that will never end.”

No wonder the Church calls Lent “this *joyful season* when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery [of death and resurrection] with *mind and heart renewed*.”

The *Response* to the first reading is “*Be merciful O Lord, for we have sinned*” (*Psalms* 51). But the whole *Responsorial Psalm* encapsulates the themes of all three readings.

*“For I acknowledge my offense... I have done what is evil in your sight.”*

**Joel 2: 12-18** calls us to deep and honest soul-searching: “*Rend your hearts, not your garments....*” Lent is not just a time just to do some things that are traditional in the Church — even though these are very helpful. We can fast or “give up something” for Lent, or participate in “Lenten devotions” like the Stations of the Cross (*Via Crucis*) and still remain basically unchanged in our attitudes, values, priorities and basic way of living. This is not keeping Lent. To “do penance” means to do something that *expresses repentance*. And “repentance” (*metanoia*) means a “change of mind.” To repent” does not mean to be sorry for the same old faults we know are wrong but keep falling into. To “repent” means to recognize the wrong, the destructiveness, the mediocrity in things we are taking for granted. It means to *convert* to a higher standard of morality. “*For I acknowledge my offense... I have done what is evil in your sight.*”

*“A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me.”*

In **Matthew 6: 1-18** Jesus calls us to make our *religion* our *spirituality*. When authentic, the two are identified; but for many people today “religion” just means believing the right doctrines, keeping the right rules, observing the right practices. It can be an impersonal, even a routine, system involving very little personal interaction with God.

“Spirituality,” on the other hand, “is associated with the personal, the affective, the experiential, and the thoughtful.”

Spirituality is a certain awakening to life that relates us more deeply to life [and to God as person]. The imagination is opened to new possibility. Life can be seen and heard in a new way. There is recognition that there are deeper currents operating in life, There are dimensions of life yet to be explored, all of which offer greater depth, connection, centeredness and wholeness (David Ranson, *Across the Great Divide*, pp. 9, 17. St. Paul’s Publications, [www.stpauls.com.au](http://www.stpauls.com.au)).

Spirituality for Christians is a live, personal, dynamic, exciting, growth-producing life of *interaction* with Jesus Christ as Savior and Teacher. Jesus teaches to do our religious acts, not as conforming to what is “expected” of us as Christians, but as immediate, personal, conscious acts of saying something to God. “Pray to your Father in private.”

Jesus is not saying we should avoid praying with others or practicing what is traditional in our religion. He is saying if we *only* do what we are “supposed” to do, we will not know if we are doing it because we ourselves know and love God, or just because it is the “religious” thing to do. We need to express ourselves to God in some ways that are just personal to us. Then we know God is *our* God; not just the God of our family and friends. This brings “religion” to life: “*A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me.... Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me.*”

*“Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.”*

**2Corinthians 5:20 to 6:2** teaches the true mystery of our redemption. Jesus does not just “pardon” our sins (which would leave us basically unchanged), but “*takes away* the sins of the world.” He did this by the mystery of taking us, with all of our sins, into his body on the cross — by which “God made him who did not know sin to *be sin*” — so that in Baptism we could die in him and rise with him to live as his new, reborn, risen body on earth, a “new creation” with no “record” of sins committed in our previous life. “...*So that in him we might become the very holiness of God.*”

**Insight:** *Do I see Lent now as a time of exciting, encouraging possibility? Do I feel a desire to use Lent, to take a distance from my life and look at things from a new perspective?*

**Initiative:** *Read God's word during Lent with a searching mind and an open heart, listening for his Spirit. Reflect on what you read. Relate it to your life. Try to change some things in your attitudes, values and priorities.*



## Thursday after Ash Wednesday

The *Responsorial Psalm* assures us that loyalty to God will give us joy and happiness on earth — if we have enough trust to believe what God says: “*Happy are they who hope in the Lord!*” (*Psalm 1*).

**Deuteronomy 30: 15-20** tells us that the fullness of life and joy are ours to choose. No one has to lose out on life’s opportunities, because fulfillment and happiness do not depend on circumstances, or on anything others do, but on our own free choice. “Today I have set before you life and prosperity, death and doom.... Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him.”

These are the words of almighty God. Do we believe them? God, the designer of our human nature, is telling us how to make life work for us, how to get the most out of the body, the mind, the will he designed, and the time he has given us to use them. Do we think he knows what he is talking about?

This sounds like an obvious choice, but it is just as obviously not the choice many people base their lives on. How many teenagers really believe that *religion* will make them happy? (We are talking about authentic religion, religion that is “spirituality,” deep, personal interaction with God). How many believe they will have happier, more fulfilled lives *on this earth* by following the “instructions on the bottle”?

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Recommit during Lent** to learning from Jesus.

How many adults do?

In **Luke 9: 22-25** Jesus tells us frankly that, although the way to “the fullness of life” (on earth as well as in heaven) is very simple, it is not always easy!

It is “easy” in the sense that we cannot *fail* if we really want to follow the way Jesus teaches. It is easy in the sense that anyone who wants to can do it. But it will cost us, Nothing worthwhile comes cheap in this life. If we want the return, we have to invest. We can do it if we choose, but we have to choose to do it Christ’s way. He tells us up front we have to “go for broke.” We must give all for All; give ourselves for him; give the little we are for the everything he is; give up the little that is ours for the unlimited All he promises. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

Notice that Jesus says “daily,” “each day.” We don’t have to become heroes over night. All he asks is that we take one step at a time, trying each day to live as he teaches, learning by trial and error, not being discouraged by our failures and sins, but “each day” getting up and getting on the road with him.

If you think Jesus’ way is too hard, think of the alternative. “What profit” will we get from following the way of this world? Just look around at those who do.

## Friday after Ash Wednesday

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us we have to call our own ways into question if we want God to lead us into life: “*A broken, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn.*” (*Psalm 51*).

**Isaiah 58: 1-9** tells us to quit playing games with God. We ask God why he is not coming through for us: “Why do we fast, and you do not see it?” We think we are leading good Christian lives because we do all the “religious” things we have been taught to do. Why doesn’t our religion pay off for us?

Many people stop going to Mass because it “never meant anything” to them when they did go. God’s question is, “Did you think it was enough just to be there? That I just wanted your body in the pew? What did you *say* to me when you were there? Did you *listen* to what I was saying to you?”

He asks the same question of those who do go to Mass but whose lives don’t express what the Mass does. If we do not *offer ourselves* — all we do, all we have, all our time and energy — with Jesus on the cross, offering our bodies and all we do with them to help others, our “flesh for the life of the world,” do we think we have really participated in the Mass?

Lent is a time to *change our mind* and *change our ways*. We might begin by changing the way we take

part in the Eucharistic celebration. *Listen* to the words. Ask what the presiding priest is really saying to God up there in your name. Say the words with him in your heart — and mean them!

In **Matthew 9: 14-15** Jesus teaches us that the important thing in religion is not what we *do*, but what we are *expressing* through what we do. The Pharisees fasted just because it was “the thing to do” if you were religious. Jesus asks what they were expressing through their fasting? If it was *hunger for God*, the hunger of their hearts brought into conscious awareness through physical hunger, then his disciples did not fast because Jesus, whom they were really hungering for (consciously or not), was physically present to them. “How can the wedding guests go in mourning so long as the groom is with them?” But “When the day comes that the groom is taken away, then they will fast.”

In the Mass, before Communion, the Church awakens our desire for Christ as “bridegroom.” The liturgy quotes the book of *Revelation* which, like Jesus, describes heaven as a wedding feast: “The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.... *Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb*” (*Revelation 19: 7-9*). What are you thinking about when you receive Communion? Are you focusing your desire passionately on union with Jesus?.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Pay attention** to what God is expressing to you in the Mass and what you are expressing to God — and to the human race.

## Saturday after Ash Wednesday

In the *Responsorial Psalm* we acknowledge that we are “afflicted and poor.” We pray, “*Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may be faithful in your sight*” (*Psalm 86*).

**Isaiah 58: 9-14** promises that if we will call our lives into question and try to conform them more authentically to what God calls us to be, then “the light shall rise for you in the darkness.... Then the Lord shall guide you always.”

God will not fail to guide us. But we need a little humility. We need to admit that we might not know it all, or know enough to guide our lives by the light of our own judgment alone. It is humility to seek help.

Humility means not making *ourselves the criterion*: not making our opinion the standard for judging what is true or false, our desires the ruler of what is good or bad. Humility is “to be peaceful with the truth.” And the truth is, we don’t know it all. The truth is, what we want is not always what is good. It is humility to call our light and our love into question. To seek help.

God promises that if we seek help from him — from his word through reading and reflection, from his Spirit through prayer and discernment — then “I will make you ride on the heights of the earth!” “The Lord will guide you continually... satisfy your needs...

renew your strength, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose water never fails.” This is not a bad reward for just being honest with ourselves!

**Luke 5: 27-32** gives us a concrete example of this. Levi was a public official. He had power and prestige among those who supported the government — although his fellow Jews despised him for collaborating with the Romans.

Then he looked up one day and saw the face in the window — Jesus’ face looking into his customs booth. All Jesus said to him was, “Follow me.” And right then all the self-doubt and moral misgivings that had been unsettling Levi’s heart came into focus, and Levi just got up and left with Jesus.

He left his job, but not his friends. He “gave a great reception for Jesus in his house” — a pretty big house, we can assume — “in which he was joined by a large crowd of tax collectors and others.”

It shocked the Pharisees that Jesus would eat with people who were not in “good standing” with their church (“church” means “assembly,” the *kahal Yahweh* of Israel). Jesus basically answered that if they would call their own good standing into question, they could join them! Full participation in the Mass is not for the self-righteous, but for avowed sinners who can say, “*Teach me!*”

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Come humbly to Jesus** saying “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may be faithful in your sight.”

## HOW DO I WANT TO SPEND LENT?

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION for the “half week” between Ash Wednesday and the First Sunday of Lent.

**Lent is a time to change your mind:** To call into question the goal of your life, your attitudes, priorities, lifestyle.

#### **Invitation:**

Take time to get away and think. Re-evaluate your situation. Ask where you are going spiritually. Join a discussion group. Make some changes.

#### **Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?**

*Lent* is a season of grace. It is provided during the Liturgical Year to help us distance ourselves mentally and emotionally from life as usual. It is important to use it for this. If we do, God will help us re-think, re-evaluate and re-tool.

God always desires our good. He doesn't want things to be bad for us on earth.

It is never “too late” with God; he is always willing to help us get control of our lives, redirect our course, change whatever needs changing. He is willing and *able* to accomplish what he promises.

The Church calls Lent “this *joyful season*” because it is a season of “repentance,” — of “mind-changing” and re-evaluation — that brings the blessing, not only of forgiveness,” but also “the gift of *light*.” Lent promises we will be able to live life more fully with “*mind and heart renewed*.”

We must *look* to see light, Belief in Lent's promise makes us willing to do that.

The *Giving of Ashes* reminds us that this world, like our lives, is of relatively short duration. We received palms on Palm Sunday as a symbol of the illusory power and short-lived glory of this world. Then for Lent we turned them to ashes in a dramatic rejection of all that is false and seductive in our culture.

The focus of the *Blessing of Ashes* prayer is on *hope*: hope that Lent will be for us a “preparation for the joy of Easter.” Lent and everything else in life should prepare us “to live with the risen Christ” — both now and forever, here as well as hereafter.

Lent is not just a time to fast or “give up something” for Lent or participate in “Lenten devotions.” We can do that and still remain basically unchanged in our attitudes, values, priorities and basic way of living. Lent is a call to “*Rend your hearts, not your garments....*” It calls us to deep and honest soul-searching. Lent is a time to *change our mind* and *change our ways*.

#### **Decisions:**

*Recommit during Lent* to learning from Jesus by *reading God's word*.

*Pay attention* to what God is expressing to you and you to God in the Mass.

*Seek help* from Jesus and others. Call your light and your love into question.

# THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT (Year C)

## Discipleship is Remembering and Reflecting

### Inventory

How have the *celebrations* in our society formed you? Has celebrating Thanksgiving Day every year implanted any attitude in you? Does the Christmas Season affect the way you think and feel about life? About other people? About God? Does celebrating birthdays help you to appreciate people more? Why do Americans celebrate the Fourth of July? Memorial Day? Do these celebrations form us as a society? Have they shaped any attitudes and values in you?

To “celebrate” is to “single out for grateful remembrance.” How much has *remembering* contributed to shaping or sustaining your convictions? Your ideals?

### Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* promises God’s help to those who *call upon* God. We need to act, to interact with him. One element of “religion” is to *set times* for doing this, just as we set times and dates for celebrations. Schedules remind us to remember. Remembering keeps us conscious of God. Keeping conscious of God is a key element in *discipleship*. And discipleship — which is a commitment to keep *learning* — is a process of continual *conversion*. The word “disciple” means “student” — one who *learns* in order to live more fully.

The goal of learning is *change*. That is what *Lent* is all about.

Lent is just a scheduled season of remembering. It is a time when we use various means to focus our minds on some particular truths we tend to lose sight of. But we focus on these truths, not for the sake of abstract knowledge, but in order to *live* them. The “three R’s” of discipleship are *Remembering*, *Reflecting* and *Responding*.

In the *Opening Prayer(s)* we ask God: “Help us *understand* the meaning of your Son’s death and resurrection” so that we might “*reflect* it in our lives.” We ask God: “In this time of *repentance* [which means “a change of mind and direction”] bring us back... to the *life* your Son won for us.” Lent is all about living — living life to the full.

The *Prayer over the Gifts* asks, “May this sacrifice help us to *change our lives*.” The *Prayer After Communion* reminds us that to live “life to the full” means “to *live by your words* and to *seek Christ*, our bread of life.” The three prayers proper to this Mass urge us to *forward motion* and point us in the right direction. What Lent is all about is *conversion* guided by *discipleship*.

### God responds to calls:

The *Responsorial Psalm* echoes the *Entrance Antiphon* in reminding us that God answers those who *call on him* and rescues them (*Psalm 91*). We affirm our faith in this by praying: “*Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble*.” The readings show us how to live out this faith in action.

In **Deuteronomy 26: 4-10** Moses commits the people to a yearly celebration of remembrance. When they harvest the first fruits of the crop, they are to put a basket of them before the altar of God. Then they are

to recite out loud the history of God’s dealing with them. The key phrase is, “We *called on the Lord*, the God of our fathers.” This is why God delivered them.

We remember what God has done in order to increase our faith in what he will do. But this faith does not help us unless we act on it, because, as St. James says, “Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead” (*James 2:26*). We act out our faith in God’s willingness to respond to us by *calling on him*: “*Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble*.” If we do not do this, we will not be conscious of God or of our faith. Then, if he helps us,

we will not recognize the help as coming from him, and we will not grow in relationship with him. But relationship with God is what religion is all about.

Growing in relationship with God is what Lent is all about. It is what *discipleship* is all about. We *remember* and *reflect* on God's great deeds, and on his words, in order to *respond* to them out of greater knowledge and love. The goal of discipleship and of religion itself is *intimate knowledge and love of God*. The season and ceremonies of Lent are all to help us do what we ask for in the *Prayer After Communion*: "to live by your words and to seek Christ, our bread of life."

### "Scripture says...."

Jesus was a disciple. All his life he was a *student* of the word of God. In his human consciousness the knowledge he had of the Father was nourished by remembering and reflecting on God's words and deeds as recorded in Scripture. In his human consciousness as a man he did not always have full and automatic access to the divine knowledge he had as God — any more than you and I always have conscious and explicit access to the divine knowledge of God that is poured out into our hearts with the "gift of the Holy Spirit" (*Romans 5:5; John 14:16*).

Today's Gospel, **Luke 4: 1-13**, shows us the fruit of discipleship in Jesus. It was out of his knowledge of Scripture that he responded to the temptations of the devil: He answered all three temptations by quoting the words of God: "Scripture says...." If Jesus himself found knowledge of God's word useful, how much more useful — and necessary — must it be for us! Do we think we need to study the words of God less than Jesus did? How can we "call on the Lord" intelligently if we have no knowledge of him to call on? We *call on* God most effectively when we *call up* the knowledge we have of his words, of his actions on earth and his interactions with other people that reveal his heart and mind to us.

This is *discipleship*. This is the basis for enlightened *conversion*, for the life-giving changes of attitudes, values and behavior that Lent calls us to. Unless we *remember* and *reflect* on God's words, how can we *respond* to God in a way that will let Jesus lead us to that "life to the full" he came to give? (*John 10:10*).

Saint Catherine of Sienna, "doctor of the Church," says, speaking out of both study and mystical prayer, that we experience ourselves as being in the "image of God" in three ways: through *memory*, *intellect* and *will*. By the power of memory we can call something into existence in our consciousness just by saying, "Let it be!" the way the Father created the world. By intellect we perceive our rational compatibility with God the Son, called in John's Gospel the "Word" — in Greek *Logos* — which means the "intelligibility" of God (*John 1: 1-14*). And in using our wills we experience the Holy Spirit moving and empowering us by love. These are the three 'R's' of discipleship: *remembering*, *reflecting* and *responding* to the self-revelation of God. If we neglect them we fail to live consciously in the *image* of God (by nature) or on the *level* of God (by grace). This is to "fall short of" or "miss" (*hamartia*, the New Testament word for "sin") that fullness of life Jesus came to give.

In his desert temptations Jesus taught us by example that it does no good to fill our stomachs with food for the body to feed on if we do not fill our minds with the word of God for our *memories* to draw on. When the devil quoted Scripture to mislead him, Jesus taught us to use our *intellects* to interpret God's words. Particular words of God cannot be applied at face value to every situation, any more than particular prescriptions from doctors can be used to treat every disease. So Jesus refused to put God's promise of protection to a test based on any limited human perspective. When the devil offered him an apparent human fulfillment of all his desires — "all this power and the glory of these kingdoms" — Jesus focused and fixed his *will* on its only authentic object: "You must worship the Lord your God and serve him alone."

### Everyone who calls...

**Romans 10: 8-13** reiterates that faith, to be effective, must be *expressed*. Both in words and in action. "Confessing with your lips" is faith expressed in a physical "work." We are "saved," not just by our human conduct ("works" alone) but by conduct or "works" that are divine, because they are the *expression*, the embodiment of *faith*. To be like Christ is to give human expression to his divine life within us.

**Insight:** *Do I appreciate the value of the “three R’s” — using memory, intellect and will to absorb and respond to God’s words? Enough to do it?*

**Initiative:** *Reflect 5 minutes a day on the Mass readings used during Lent.*

## February 22: The Chair of Saint Peter

The *Responsorial Psalm* is the key to Church government: “*The Lord is my shepherd. There is nothing I shall want*” (Psalm 23).

We are celebrating the “chair” of St. Peter, which means his position, his job. Another word for it is the “see” of Peter, from *sedes*, “seat.” Whoever sits in the seat of the Bishop of Rome has the added responsibility of keeping all the bishops united and faithful to the teaching of the Apostles. That is why he has authority over the universal Church: he needs it to be able to do his job. If he uses it to do more than his job, that is an abuse.

The Pope has more people recognizing his authority than any person in the world. For that reason, he is probably both the most praised and most criticized man on earth. And Jesus himself began it! In **Matthew 16:13-19**, (add verse 23), Jesus praises Peter more significantly and, almost in the same breath, criticizes him more severely than any other person in the Gospels! The “rock” on which Jesus founded his Church is the sand of human weakness held together by the grace of God. Even without Jesus’ prohibition (*Luke 22:25-27*), there are good, humbling reasons why **1 Peter 5:1-4** says bishops and clergy should not “lord it over” those in their charge. To be in the “hierarchy” does not make one “higher”

than anyone else; just more responsible for decisions where the danger of mistakes is greater. Good pastors know they need support, not subservience.

We should keep the Pope in perspective. “Pope” is just a nickname. It means “Papa.” The Pope’s sacramental title is “bishop.” The primary and defining title that gives meaning to any other official titles he has, is “Bishop of Rome.” What makes him different from other bishops is the *place* he is bishop of. Fr. J. M. R. Tillard, O.P., tells us why.

Peter and Paul could have divided the early Church. Peter represented the authority of the original church. Paul, however, seems to have been raised up to bear witness above all to the primacy of an inward communion of faith and love, the perpetually new work of the Spirit. There we have what we might call ‘the primacy of Paul.’ But both Apostles remained united and died in communion with each other in the same city. The two ‘primacies’ met at Rome, intermingling in the blood of martyrdom. Thus the Christian community at Rome became the place of total, perfect confession of the apostolic faith, with no split in its faithfulness both to its roots in the historical group which Jesus had gathered during his earthly ministry through Peter and to the new experience of the Spirit of the resurrection through Paul. That is why the church in Rome has been entrusted with the special task of keeping all the churches in the world faithful to the unity to which their death bore witness (abridged from *The Bishop of Rome*, Michael Glazier, Inc., 1986, pages 74-117).

That is why we celebrate the “chair” of Peter.

**Initiative:** Look to the shepherds to find in them the Lord as “chief shepherd.



## MONDAY, first week in Lent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is a key to the readings: “Your words, Lord, are spirit and life” (John 6:63 and Psalm 19).

**Leviticus 19: 1-18** gives the guiding principle of all morality and the goal of discipleship: “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” This is the law of all laws, and these words are truly “spirit and life.” They give us a goal to aim at that is inspiring. And it is warm and personal, because the goal is to be like a *person* (three Persons, actually!) whom we love. As disciples (students) we should compare every particular commandment with this guiding principle and goal, seeing what each commandment teaches us about the person of God and how the commandment is clarified by what we know of God’s mind and heart.

**Matthew 25:31-46** shows us people being condemned for failing to do things that we were never specifically commanded to do under pain of sin. Most of us alive today were never taught that we had to make sure we fed the hungry and clothed the naked. We were taught these were good, Christian things to do — “works of mercy — but they were not on the “checklist” of sins we were given to help us examine

our lives and evaluate our behavior. Priests do not hear people saying in Confession, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned: I have not clothed the naked or visited anyone in prison since my last Confession.”

But Jesus says these are the acts we will be judged on.

There is a new spirit in the Church: a spirit inspired more by the Gospels than by laws; more by the words of Jesus than by the legalistic precisions of today’s “teachers of the law” (see *Luke* 5:17, 7:30, 11: 45-52, 14:3; *1 Timothy* 1: 5-7). It is a spirit that looks to the general, inspiring *principles* that Jesus taught — principles that call us to lift up our eyes and look toward the goal of being “holy, as the Lord, our God, is holy” instead of narrowing our focus down to the nitty-gritty of just what is and is not a “sin.”

John Paul II is an example of this. He wrote: “*Jesus’ way of acting* and his words, his deeds and his precepts constitute the *moral rule* of Christian life” (*Splendor of Truth* #20). This means that to live an authentically “moral” life we have to *know Jesus*, know his mind and heart, keep studying his words and example, his words of “spirit and life.” We need to be his *disciples*. This is challenging. But it is Good News.

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**Initiative: Be a disciple: Study Christ.** *Read and reflect* on the words of Jesus. Set aside a time for this. Be realistic: begin with just five minutes a day. But begin.

## TUESDAY, first week in Lent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* promises: “*God will deliver the just from all their afflictions*” (*Psalms* 34). But the verses of the Psalm make clear that God requires action on our part. Notice the words: “I sought,” “look to him,” “called out.” It is when the just “cry out” actively that “the Lord hears them.”

**Isaiah 55: 10-11** tells us three things: 1. The *initiative* comes from God. 2. God gives us life through his word. 3. God’s word *bears fruit*. If we really respond to God’s initiative by reading and reflecting on his words, his words will transform our lives, because they will teach us to know God, to know his mind and heart.

But something depends on us. Jesus explained what that is in the parable of the sower (*Matthew* 13:3 ff.)

**Matthew 6: 7-15** gives us Jesus’ answer to his disciples when they asked him “Lord, teach us to pray” (*Luke* 11:1). The “Our Father” tells us *what we are to pray for*. It tells us Jesus’ own priorities. If we make his petitions our own priorities in life, we will learn how to pray. And all the petitions in the *Our Father* are asking for the end of the world!

We are asking for Christ to come again, for his triumph to be complete. We ask God to hasten the day when the Father will be known and loved by the

whole world, and his reign will be accepted, when forgiveness and peace will be universal and all evil will be abolished. Even “our daily bread” refers to Jesus, the Bread of Life, the food of the heavenly wedding feast, given to us in Eucharist. We know his triumph is assured; Jesus won it by his sacrifice on the cross. And so in the Mass we make these petitions “with confidence” to the Father as we “wait in joyful hope.”

But we have to *act* as we hope. What will delay Christ’s coming in glory? Only the failure of his body on earth, the Church, to accept his word entirely, live it authentically, and make it known throughout the world. If we truly embrace discipleship ourselves, we will be able to “make disciples of all nations” (*Matthew* 28:19) and establish the reign of God on earth.

“*God will deliver the just from all their afflictions.*” But an essential condition for this is a commitment on our part to total and ongoing *discipleship* — to learning and living the word of God that teaches us the mind of God. There is a long-standing prayer that reflects the faith of the Church: “Send forth your Spirit *and our hearts will be regenerated*. It is the belief of the Church that our hearts can be regenerated. And when they are, God will “*renew the face of the earth*. “

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Cultivate God’s words** in your heart. Set time aside to reflect on Scripture in a way that leads you to *decisions* that affect your life.

### WEDNESDAY, first week in Lent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us the kind of conversion that gives us confidence: “*A broken, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn*” (Ps. 51).

If we convert to being authentic disciples of Jesus, will things really get better in this world? Will it make a real difference?

**Jonah 3: 1-10** gives us reason to trust that it will. Nineveh (in modern-day Iraq) was a city so bad that Jonah actually *wanted* it destroyed. When God told him to call its citizens to conversion, he refused and fled, took ship to flee from God’s presence — and wound up indigestible fish food!

But when he gave in and did proclaim that Nineveh was about to be destroyed, they converted. They did it with a “broken, humbled heart.” The same is possible for us. A “broken, humbled heart” — does *not* mean a sad or guilt-ridden heart! It means a heart “broken open” to the word of God because it is not smug in its self-righteousness or complacent in what it knows already about Christ’s teachings, his mind and his heart. It is the heart of a *disciple*.

In **Luke 11: 29-32** Jesus uses the example of Nineveh to call his own people to conversion: “The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!” We are called to respond, not to

the words of a prophet, but to the words of Jesus himself, God made flesh. How can we ignore his words? How can we neglect to read them all, reflect on them and try to put them into practice?

We may ask, “Isn’t it enough just to live by what we were taught in our religious formation as children, supplemented by the homilies we hear on Sunday? Why do we have to keep reading and reflecting on God’s word?”

The first reason is that no teacher or statement of doctrine can affect us as much as getting into contact with Jesus himself through his words. The goal of our religion is to *know God* and love him as a person. Secondly, as we mature and develop we are able to see more in Christ’s teaching than we could before. Learning from Jesus is a lifelong project. It is never complete.

Besides, no words, from any preacher, can ever match what the Holy Spirit can do in our hearts through prayer. We need to be dedicated to homilies but not dependent on them.

The “sign of Jonah” is the Church. The only risen body of Christ visible on earth today is Jesus manifestly alive in members of his body who are clearly and unambiguously living by his Spirit. Christians bearing this witness are the only Church that can call the world to conversion. This is the Church we have to be. This is a Church of *disciples*.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. During Lent cultivate a “broken, humbled heart.”** Be a *disciple*: set aside a time to sit at Christ’s feet and learn.

## THURSDAY, first week in Lent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us confidence in dealing with God: “*O Lord, on the day I called for help you answered me!*” (*Psalms* 138).

**Esther chapter C** (after chapter 4), **verses 12, 14-16, 23-25** shows us Esther risking her life on the basis of what she “used to hear from the people of the land and our ancestors... that you fulfilled all your promises to them.” Because she *listened, believed* and *acted* on what she heard she became a hero. She saved her people.

In **Matthew 7: 7-12** Jesus encourages us: “Seek... Knock...” If we do, we will find what we are looking for (or more than we dreamed of). And a door will be opened for us to enter. He says the Father is eager to “give good things to anyone who asks him.” But we have to ask. And we have to accept what we receive and act on it. The grace to do this will also be given us if we ask.

What are you seeking? What do you ask God for most often? What door do you want God to open for you? Where do you want to go with your life? How high have you set your sights?

If up to now you have asked mainly for things that satisfy nothing more than natural, human desires — health for yourself and your family, prosperity,

success, protection from physical dangers — you might use the time of Lent to work on a *conversion* to *higher desires*. Be more ambitious! Ask God for more than what a good, enlightened government might provide. Ask God for divine gifts. Set your heart on a life enhanced as only the life of grace, lived “to the full,” can enhance it.

Is your family life perfectly satisfying? Is it all you dreamed of? Does your student or professional life excite you so much you can’t wait to get to school or work? Is your social life something that builds you up in every way instead of tearing you down? Do you think that *interaction with Jesus Christ* can raise all these areas of your life to a new level? Do you really?

An obvious way to interact with Jesus is as *Teacher*. This — “Rabbi” — is what his disciples frequently called him. He came to save us by *teaching* us how to live and empowering us to live by his teachings. But to profit from a teacher we have to *read, listen* and *think*. Do you believe that if you “call for help” by doing this, God will answer you?

Ask him to open for you the way to a fuller life, based on his guidance. Believe that if you seek you will find. Jesus said it: “Seek, and you will find.” “*O Lord, on the day I called for help you answered me!*”

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Seek** greater knowledge and understanding of Christ’s teaching. Set aside time to read the Scripture.

**FRIDAY, first week in Lent:**

The *Responsorial Psalm* opens us to a deeper dimension of right and wrong: “*If you, O Lord, laid bare our guilt, who could endure it?*” (*Psalm 130*).

If we really knew the level of life to which God calls us — really saw in detail what we ought to be doing — would it just overwhelm us?

**Ezekiel 18: 21-28** tells us that the choice we have is life or death. This doesn’t mean God will literally kill the sinner. It is just a Scriptural way of saying that all sins — recognized or not, and whether we are subjectively guilty of them or not — destroy life and diminish the quality of life on earth. If we do bad things because we “don’t know any better,” we are not *guilty*. But we are still *destructive* — to ourselves and others.

That is why it is to our interest to learn everything God teaches about how we are to live. If we won’t look because we are afraid of what we might see, we are even more sure to fall into whatever pitfall is in front of us.

**Matthew 5: 20-26** shows us Jesus preaching his “new law” in the Sermon on the Mount. And the key to it is this: the *old* Law — the Ten Commandments, as the Jews understood them — were instructions on how to

live a good human life on earth. They were geared toward enabling human beings to live in peace with each other. That was the goal of the law. But in his *new* law, Jesus changes the goal. Now the goal is to *be like God*: to think like God, speak like God, act like God; in short, to live on the level of God.

Murder was against the goal of the old law, because (among other things) murder disrupts the peace. It is against the new law even to *think* disrespectfully of another (deliberately), because this is to be unlike God. The Sermon on the Mount makes every Commandment an instruction for living on the level of God. And grace empowers us to do it.

Should we find this threatening? No, we should find it promising. What if everyone treated everyone else as God does, with God’s own level of love? This earth would be a paradise!

As Jesus’ disciples we *want* to learn the highest level of ideals he teaches, because we know this is the way to the fullness of life — on earth as well as in heaven. We want him to show us where we are “falling short,” because then we will know what we need to do to reach the goal of “life to the full.” We have nothing to fear from the truth; especially truth revealed lovingly to us by God!

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Open yourself** to the highest ideals Jesus proposes. Read the Sermon on the Mount, expecting and hoping to be challenged. Think high.

## SATURDAY, first week in Lent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* assures us “*Happy are they who follow the law of the Lord*” (*Psalm 119*).

**Deuteronomy 26: 16-19** makes this a promise: “Provided you keep all his commandments, God will then raise you high in praise and renown and glory above all other nations... and you will be a people sacred to the Lord, your God, as he promised.”

Is this a motive for learning and living by God’s directions? We may not need “praise and glory” as a nation, but we do want the *Church* to stand out as true and holy, so that people will seek and find fullness of life through her ministry.

For this it is not enough for us just to “avoid sin” by keeping the Ten Commandments; we have to live lives so different, so strikingly good, that they cannot be explained without a real knowledge of the Gospel. This means that we ourselves must first go deeply into the Gospels to see the heights to which Jesus calls us. We need to be *disciples*.

In **Matthew 5: 43-48** Jesus says the sign and proof that we are his disciples will be the level of our love. All good human beings love their “own” — family, friends, fellow citizens, those who love them and good people in general. But Jesus tells us to love, not

as humans do, but as God does. “This will prove you are children of your heavenly Father....” So we must love our enemies.

By our enemies Jesus means people who are mean to us at work, who cheat us in business, talk about us behind our backs, betray our trust, insult, rob and kill us. He means terrorists and people with whom we are at war. These are the people he says we should love: our real enemies.

It is only when we love our enemies that we show how different Christianity is from all other religions. “*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*” (*John 13:35*). Love is the highest act of living. If our love is no higher than anyone else’s, what puts our life on the level of God’s? And if we are not living on the level of God, how can we be living by *grace*, which is “the favor of sharing in God’s divine life”? If we share in God’s life, we must share in God’s love. But God loves every person he has made and is constantly trying to help all of them.

If we love people who are doing bad things we may suffer more, because now we will care about them. We can’t just write them off with some demeaning label, as if they were not human or worthy of our concern. So do you believe they really are “happy” who follow *this* “law of the Lord”?

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Learn from Jesus’ own example** on the cross the kind of love to which we are called. At every Mass offer yourself with him to love like this.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: LENT WEEK ONE

**Discipleship is Remembering and Reflecting:** One element of “religion” is to *set times* for remembering. Scheduled celebrations remind us to remember. To “celebrate” is to “single out for grateful remembrance.” Think of how much *remembering* in civic and Church celebrations has contributed to shaping or sustaining your attitudes, values, convictions and ideals. Celebrations are a key element in *discipleship*.

### Invitation:

Lent is a scheduled season of remembering, not for the sake of abstract knowledge, but in order to *live* the truths we believe in. This is *discipleship*. The “three R’s” of discipleship are *Remembering*, *Reflecting* and *Responding*.

### Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?

We remember what God has done in order to increase our faith in what he will do. But this faith does not help us unless we express it by *calling* on him”

We *call on* God most effectively when we *call up* our knowledge of his words, his actions and interactions with people on earth that reveal his heart and mind to us.

The guiding principle of all morality is “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” As disciples (students) we should ask what each commandment both teaches us and is clarified by what we know of God’s mind and heart.

To live an authentically “moral” life we have to *know Jesus*, his mind and heart, by studying the “spirit and life” of his words and example This is to be his *disciples*.

We have to keep reading and reflecting on God’s word because no teacher or catechism can affect us as much as direct contact with Jesus through his words.

Learning from Jesus is a lifelong project because as we mature and develop we are able to see more in Christ’s teaching than we could before.

Lent is a time to work on a *conversion* to *higher desires*. To ask God for divine gifts, for a life enhanced as only the life of grace, lived “to the full,” can enhance it.

Daily *interaction with Jesus as Christ* can raise every area of your life to a new level. Home, work, social life. Do you really believe this? Enough to act on it?

It is to our interest to learn everything God teaches about how we are to live. We have nothing to fear from the truth; especially truth revealed to us lovingly by God.

The “Our Father” tells us *what we are to pray for*. It tells us Jesus’ own priorities. If we make his petitions our own priorities in life, we will learn how to pray.

### Decisions:

*Set time aside* to reflect on Scripture in a way that leads you to *decision*.

*Open yourself to the highest ideals* Jesus proposes. Read the Sermon on the Mount, expecting and hoping to be challenged. Think high.

# THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT (Year C)

## Having Eyes That See

### Inventory

To what do I look for guidance in my life? To what seems to be the norm in my profession or circle of friends? To what has been taught to me as God's "rules"? Or to the mind and heart of God as revealed in Scripture and in the life of Jesus?

### Input:

The *Entrance Antiphon* points us to God as a person: "My heart has prompted me to *seek your face*. I seek it, Lord, do not hide from me." It is only by studying the "face," the mind and heart of God as revealed in his action and interaction with his creatures, that we can understand the true intent of his laws. God is love, and all that comes from him is love. Therefore, laws without love are not God's laws.

The alternate *Entrance Antiphon* alerts us to do what we count on God to do: "Remember your mercies, Lord, your tenderness from ages past." The only way to understand God or anything God does or tells us to do is to *remember* his mercies and his tenderness.

In the *Opening Prayer(s)* we ask the Father, "Help us to *hear your Son*," and "enlighten us with your word." It is only through knowing God as he is, through listening to his own self-expression through his words, that we can "find a way" to his "glory." God's glory is the "fullness of truth and limitless light." It is found only in the person of God himself. So we ask him, "Open our hearts to the voice of your Word": the "Word," the *Logos*, the truth and intelligibility of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. When we ask the Father, "Restore our sight," it is so that "we may look upon your Son." God enlightens us by moving us to focus on the person of his Son, and to study his mind and heart. Through him we know the Father and the Spirit. This is the only authentic discipleship.

### Focus on a Person:

The *Responsorial Psalm* emphasizes, "*The Lord is my light and my salvation*" (*Psalm 27*). The Psalm continues: "*It is your face, O Lord, that I seek.*"

**Genesis 15: 5-18** tells us Abraham "put his faith in the Lord," and that the Lord "counted this as making him justified." St Paul quotes this verse in his letter to the Romans (4:3) to make the point that we are justified by "faith," not by "works." He insists on it against those who thought it was necessary to impose the religious rules of Jewish culture on Gentile converts:

We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law (*Galatians 2:16*).

What does this mean?

Paul is not saying that if we just affirm as true the statement that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, we are "saved." He is not saying that believing alone, without the good works that follow from divine faith, is enough to make us "justified," or "righteous" in God's eyes. He is taking good works, in the general sense, for granted. Jesus himself said to those who have the light of faith, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." And he promised, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." It is just that no human behavior, no matter how good it is, can make us divine. In Christianity, to be "saved" or "justified" means to be given the gift of "grace"; that is, the "favor" of sharing in the divine life of



God (*Matthew 5:16; John 14:12*).

God's life consists essentially in knowing and loving. If we have God's life we share in his act of knowing by the gift of *faith*. Jesus said, "This is eternal life, that they may *know you*, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

With the gift of divine life comes the gift of a *hope* that is also divine; a hope not based on any human assessment of possibilities, but which is the work and activity of the Holy Spirit within us:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope *by the power of the Holy Spirit*.

But the principal effect of God's life in us is *love* — not just human love, but the love that is a sharing in God's own life. If we do not love by God's grace, we are deceived if we think we know God by faith:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.... If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.... Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

To be "saved," then, means to live by faith, hope and love, which are the effects of God's life in us:

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (*John 17:3; Romans 15:13*; and see *Galatians 5:5, Colossians 1:27, 1 Peter 1:21; 1 John 4: 7-16; 1 Corinthians 13:13*).

What Scripture teaches us is that the *focus* of our religion should not be on keeping rules, even God's rules, but on "seeking the face" of the Lord and listening to his voice, in order to *know him* as a person; to know his mind and heart. This is the only way to truly know his will. Religious discipline without *discipleship* — the prayerful, loving study of God's mind and heart — inevitably degenerates into the legalism of the Pharisees (See *Matthew 9: 9-13, 12: 1-7*).

## Focus on Jesus

In **Luke 9: 28-36** the disciples were not consciously "seeking the face" of Jesus, but it was revealed to

them shining like the sun, changed beyond all human appearance, as Jesus was transfigured before them. And they saw Jesus talking with Moses — to whom God gave the Law on Mount Sinai (also called Horeb) —and with Elijah, the prophet God had promised to send back before the "day of the Lord" (*Malachi 4: 4-5*).

For the disciples, Moses embodied the Law and Elijah embodied the Prophets. Peter, who "did not know what he was saying," thought he was paying Jesus a compliment by equating him with these two great figures of Israel: "Let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Then the Father made it clear that Jesus was not to be compared with either the Law or the Prophets: "This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him!" Christianity is not based on the Law, the Prophets, or even on the inspired words of God in all of Scripture so much as on the unique Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. To be Christian is to listen to the living voice of Jesus, whether he speaks through Scripture, through the Spirit poured out in our hearts, or through his embodied presence in the Church. Our focus must always be on him.

## Focus on Fulfillment

**Philippians 3:17 to 4:1** urges us to look forward to our own transfiguration"

For us, our homeland is in heaven, and from heaven comes the Savior we are waiting for, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body.

God became human in Jesus Christ so that we, made members of his body, might be divine. The true secret and mystery of our identity is that we are called to "be Christ." For all the more reason we should focus our energies on trying to become like him in mind and heart and will. St. Paul exhorts us, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." This is the goal of *discipleship*. John Paul II said it simply: "Jesus' way of acting and his words, his deeds and his precepts constitute the moral rule of Christian life" (*Philippians 2:5*).

**Insight:** *Do I understand the difference between a religion of laws and a religion of relationship? Which do I prefer?*

**Initiative:** *Be a disciple. Ask how every rule you keep reflects Christ's mind and heart.*

## MONDAY, Lent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is an admission that we are always “falling short” of the (divine) level of life to which we are called: “*Lord, do not deal with us as our sins deserve*” (*Psalm 79*).

**Daniel 9: 4-10:** shows us why we fall short: “I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, ‘Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong... We have not *listened*...’”

We don’t live in an abstract world. We live in the concrete reality of a world in which God has spoken, Jesus has come to earth, died, risen and shared his divine life with us. For us, to live out anything less than the divine life of God is to “fall short,” which is a Scriptural word for “sin.” We have to live in a way that lets the glory of Christ’s life in us shine out to the world.

This is one of the reasons we assemble on Sundays to worship together: left to ourselves we will not enter sufficiently into the mystery of what we are and are called to be. Our best intentions to find and follow the right path will fall short. Why? Because we need the reinforced light of communal reflection, communal

sharing, communal celebration. Jesus did not come to be our personal guru. He came to call us into a *community*, his Church, in and through which he would guide and teach us, strengthen and encourage us, and constantly set before us the mystery of his continuing presence on earth.

All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ... The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me... so that the world may know that you have sent me... (*John 17:10-22*).

It is in the Church, with all her faults, that we find the glory of God.

In **Luke 6: 36-38** Jesus alerts us to focus, not just on what we do, but on the standard we are trying, perhaps unconsciously, to live up to when we decide what to do: “for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” We must not slip into the error of judging things on a scale of human goodness. The only appropriate standard for us to use is the life of God himself. We are called and empowered by grace to live on the level of God. When Jesus says, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,” we should understand, “Do *whatever* you do just as your Father does it.” If we do anything less, “we have not *listened*...” We are failing as disciples of Jesus.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Check the standard** you are using whenever you make a decision. Ask yourself, “What level am I trying to live on here? Human or divine?”

## TUESDAY, Lent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us: “*To those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God*” (*Psalm 50*). God is not setting conditions on his help; he is saying that if we *follow* his path he can show us where it *leads*. So we need to pay attention and learn.

**Isaiah 1: 10-20** calls us to discipleship: “Hear the word of the LORD... Listen to the teaching of our God...” If we are not intent on *learning* from God how to *live*, all our devotions, rituals, religious festivals and recited prayers are just pretense: things we do to make us feel better, “low cost” observances we think will keep God on our side.

What God wants is *action* in response to his *teaching*: “Learn to do good!” And we need to notice his priorities: “Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” It is easy for us to focus on obvious sins against conventional morality, the sins to which there are “easy answers,” while not even looking at the sins that naturally follow from deep attitudes and values that are evil: greed, ambition, indifference to the poor, arrogance and violence in defense of our cherished way of life — not asking what it is about our way of life, our business practices, our politics, that makes people hate us enough to kill themselves killing us.

Lent is an invitation to return to life. God will not reject us: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they

shall be like snow.... If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.” If not, it is understood that our sins will destroy us; we will die.

In **Matthew 23: 1-12** Jesus warns us it is not enough to let anybody else, including Church officials and authorities, do our thinking for us. When he said, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat,” he was talking about the acknowledged religious leaders of Israel. When he adds, “Therefore, do whatever they teach you,” he did not mean *everything* they taught, because he warned his disciples against “the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (*Matthew 16:12*), and many rejected his own teaching. We have to use judgment.

In every age we must distinguish between the teaching *of the Church* and the teaching of some *in* the Church. The teaching of anyone not deeply united to God is suspect unless it is simply a repetition, without interpretation, of undisputed Church doctrine. Jesus said to the Pharisees, “You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (*Matthew 12:34*). This applies to everyone.

Jesus says we only have one teacher. Those who teach in the Church are simply fellow-students sharing what they have learned from him. And we must always compare what they say to what we ourselves have heard from the Teacher. For this we must be disciples.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Try to learn constantly from Jesus himself** — but with humility.

## WEDNESDAY, Lent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is an act of trust in God in the face of opposition and danger: “*Save me, O Lord, in your steadfast love!*” (*Psalms* 31).

In **Jeremiah 18: 18-20** people are plotting against Jeremiah although he has done nothing but good for them. And he is outspoken to God about it: “Is evil a recompense for good? Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them.”

Being good does not keep us from being persecuted. There doesn’t have to be a valid reason for people to attack us. But we need a reason — one which Jeremiah didn’t really have yet (see verses 21-23) — to forgive those who return evil for good. And this is the lesson we learn from Jesus. It is a shocking one.

In **Matthew 20: 17-28** Jesus tells his disciples (for the third time) that he is going to save the world, not by overcoming his enemies with force, but by enduring what they do to him and *loving back*. He will love them as they crucify him. And God will save him, but not by saving his life. His enemies’ plot against him will succeed — at least as they understand success. Jesus will triumph by something beyond their

comprehension — by rising from the dead. He will continue his saving work in the world by living and acting with, in and through all who accept by Baptism to be his body on earth.

But for this to happen, his disciples must accept to put on the mind of Christ: “Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (*Matthew* 11:29). They must turn away from power and prestige. Those who are given authority in his Church must refuse to be treated with special respect, as if they were more important than others. “You know that those who exercise authority among the Gentiles... make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you.” In the Church dignity must be divorced from function: no one is to be considered “higher” or “lower” because of a position, office or role. In the Church greatness will be expressed and recognized in *service*, not through titles or protocols that mimic the pecking-order codes of corporations and politics.

Jesus’ response to his two disciples who wanted high position in the Church was, “Can you drink of the cup I am to drink of?”

That says it all.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Take seriously Jesus’ words.** Be uncomfortable with any signs of special respect given to you because of your rank or position.

## THURSDAY, Lent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us where to look for security: “*Blessed are they who hope in the Lord*” (*Psalm 1*). But the Psalm makes clear that this is not just blind hope. The hope that is real to us is the hope we *act on*. So the one who “hopes in the Lord” is the one who “meditates on his law day and night” to understand and live it. This is *discipleship*.

**Jeremiah 17: 5-10** says the disciple is “like a tree planted beside the waters, that *stretches out its roots* to the stream.” True conversion to Jesus is a conversion that reaches to the roots of our life, to the roots of all our choices, and extends those roots to God.

This can take time. We don’t always recognize clearly the attitudes and values, the real goals that guide and determine our choices. Jeremiah says, “More tortuous than all else is the human heart... who can understand it?” True discipleship is an ongoing effort to see with greater clarity what desires are active in our hearts. We grow to the “perfection of love” by continually trying to focus all our hopes and desires on the priorities of Jesus’ own heart: that the Father’s name will be revered, his kingdom come, his will done on earth as perfectly as in heaven.... Gradually we

surrender to letting the desires of Jesus rule every decision of our lives. This is to *stretch out our roots* to him.

**Luke 16: 19-31** is a story to make us think. The “rich man” in the story apparently did not have any realization he was seriously sinning. How many of us feel we are in “mortal sin” because we are not proactive in helping the poor? We find the same lack of awareness in Jesus’ description of the Final Judgment (*Matthew 25: 31-46*).

The rich man has five brothers who are as unaware as he was. He begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them, “so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” But Abraham answers, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” God urges us over and over, “*Listen!*” “Hear the word of the LORD... *Listen* to the teaching of our God....” (See above: *Isaiah 1*, Tuesday). “We have sinned and done wrong” because “we have not *listened*” (*Daniel 9*, Monday). The rich man thinks his brothers will listen if Lazarus appears to them. But Abraham responds, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

What will it take to make us *disciples*?

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Take a serious look at your priorities.** Give serious time to listening to your own heart and to God at the same time.

## FRIDAY, Lent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* encourages us to remember what God has done in order to trust in what he will do: “*Remember the marvels the Lord has done*” (*Psalm 105*).

In **Genesis 37; 3-28** we cannot recognize “the marvels the Lord has done” until we hear the rest of Joseph’s story and look back with hindsight. Once we know what Joseph did for his family later, we can see God’s guiding hand in the choices his brothers made: first not to kill him outright, then to sell him into slavery. But as Joseph was led off to a foreign country in chains he probably thought God could have done much better for him than he did! In reality, though, God was doing something greater than Joseph could have dreamed of. God used the brothers’ sin to put Joseph in a position that later enabled him to save his whole family (see *Genesis*, chapters 39 to 50).

In **Matthew 21:33-46** we see that Joseph was a preview of Jesus. Jesus too was betrayed by his own people, his family. The “chief priests and the elders of the people” in Israel did not want Jesus taking their place. In the parable they are the tenants who said, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” And God did not intervene to stop them from killing him.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Make use of the treasure** of God’s recorded actions in Scripture. From what he has done, anticipate what he will do. Learn hope.

To those who believed in Jesus, this appeared to be total defeat. That is because they failed to “remember the marvels the Lord has done.” If they had, they should have known that God is able to accomplish his purposes in spite of the opposition of his enemies, and even by using their victories against them.

Jesus was making the point that even if they killed him his enemies could not defeat God’s plan: “Have you never read in the scriptures:

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.”*

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard this parable they realized “he was speaking about them.” But they were too far gone to call themselves into question. That is scary. Warnings from God are a blessing. We should welcome them.

*Remembering* is a key element in discipleship. The Eucharist is remembering. To “celebrate” means to “single out for grateful remembrance.” If we recall (usually by reading or hearing) the great things God has done, reflect on them, and let them invite us to faith, hope and love, our assimilation of the past will prepare us for the future. But we have to remember *actively*. The formula for remembering through Scripture is “*Confront, ask questions, decide.*” We *remember* in order to *understand* and to *act*.

## SATURDAY, Lent week two:

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us courage to convert to God with our whole heart: “*The Lord is kind and merciful*” (*Psalms* 103).

**Micah 7: 14-20** tells us God will “cast into the depths of the sea all our sins,” and “shepherd” us, guide us to where we can “feed” on truth and grow into the fullness of life. When we turn to God, he doesn’t just accept us; he comes out and embraces us, and fills us with blessings that enrich our life.

This is what Jesus tells us in the story of the “prodigal son” (**Luke 15: 1-32**). The story is actually more about the father than the son, but it does show us very vividly a conversion taking place. And if we study it we can learn something about conversion as such.

The son’s conversion does not begin on a very high level; he is simply miserable. But he *realizes* it. He doesn’t just resign himself, pretending that what he has is just about all one can expect out of life. He faces the fact that there is something better, and that he does not have to put up with the misery he experiences. For us, conversion requires an act of *faith* that “something more” really is offered us.

And he *remembers*. He thinks back to how things were at home, and he sees his life there in a different light. He begins to appreciate what he had. For us,

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Set no limits** on the depth and breadth and length and height of the relationship you will cultivate with God.

conversion might involve getting in touch with *religious experiences* we had as children or later, experiences of God and of relationship with him that may have marked our First Communion or other moments in our life.

He makes a *decision*, and it is a decision to *act*. “I shall get up and go....” All true conversions take place in moments of decision, of choice. We are not filled with light and love just sitting around; or if we are, it has no effect until we make a choice to “get up and go.”

The boy’s decision was not just to stop some particular action in his life. It was to return to and embrace a whole *style of life*. He did not know yet that he could enter again into relationship with his father. But this is what he wanted, and when it was offered he accepted it with joy. For us true conversion is always the acceptance of a new or deeper *relationship* — with the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Church — that will affect everything else in our lifestyle.

Finally, the son *expresses* his conversion, not only by returning, but by *confessing* his sins for what they were: a rejection of relationship with his father. The father’s response is to restore that relationship amplified.

And this is what he does with us.



## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: LENT WEEK TWO

**Having Eyes That See:** We can look for guidance in life: 1. to the norms accepted in our profession or circle of friends; 2. to what was taught to us as God's "rules"; or 3. to the mind and heart of God as revealed in Scripture and the life of Jesus.

### Invitation:

"My heart has prompted me to *seek your face*. I seek it, Lord, do not hide from me." When our desires are an invitation from God they carry the promise of fulfillment.

### Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?

It is only by studying God's mind and heart as revealed in his action and interaction with his creatures, that we can understand the true intent of his laws.

To be "saved" means to live by faith, hope and love, which are the activities of God's own divine life in us

Scripture teaches us that the *focus* of our religion should not be on keeping rules, but on "seeking the face" of the Lord and listening to his voice, in order to *know him* as a person.

Discipline without *discipleship* inevitably degenerates into the legalism of the Pharisees. The only way to understand the true intent of God's laws is through prayerful, loving study of God's mind and heart.

To be Christian is to listen to the living voice of Jesus, whether he speaks through Scripture, through the Spirit poured out in our hearts, or through his embodied presence in the Church. Our focus must always be on him.

Jesus did not come to be our personal guru but to call us into a *community*. We assemble on Sundays to worship together because, left to ourselves, we will not enter sufficiently into the mystery of what we are and are called to be. We need the reinforced light of communal reflection, communal sharing, communal celebration.

It is in the Church, with all her faults, that we find the glory of God.

If we are not intent on *learning* from God how to *live*, all our devotions, rituals, festivals and recited prayers are just pretense: things we do to make us feel better, "low cost" observances we think will keep God "on our side."

The hope that is real to us is the hope we *act on*. So the one who "hopes in the Lord" is the one who "meditates on his law day and night" to understand and live it. This is *discipleship*.

True conversion to Jesus is a conversion that reaches to the roots of our life, to the roots of all our choices, and extends those roots to God. It requires *faith* that "something more" really is offered us.

### Decisions:

*Check the standard* you are using whenever you make a decision. Ask yourself, "What level am I trying to live on here? Human or divine?"

*Use God* to understand everything; use everything to understand God.

# THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (Year C)

## Disciples in Action

### Inventory

Why is there so much suffering in the world? Do the bad things that follow from sin only hit the people who are guilty of sin, or does everybody suffer from them? What is the Christian response to the sin and suffering of the world?

### Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* calls us to believe that God can and will free us from whatever diminishes human life on earth: “*My eyes are ever fixed on the Lord, for he releases my feet from the snare.*” God will do this, not by some thunderbolt of power from the sky, but by working through the groundlevel human actions of those who are the body of Christ on earth. — through us who act “through Christ, with him and in him.” God says (in the alternative *Entrance Antiphon*), “*I will prove my holiness through you.*”

How will he do it? First, by “*gathering you from the ends of the earth.*” We have to act as a community of faith, “in the unity of the Holy Spirit.” We have to live by the power of our Baptism: by the water which, like Noah’s flood, destroyed all that was evil and left a new world in its wake; by the water which, like the Jordan river for the Jews, was for us a passage from the slavery of human culture into freedom of the children of God: “*I will pour clean water on you and wash away all your sins.*”

If we act as the risen body of Christ on earth, reborn “by water and the Spirit,” then we will give “all honor and glory” to the Father. “*I will give you a new spirit within you.*” This is the hope and commitment we proclaim in every Mass: “*Through him, with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, forever and ever. Amen!*”

This requires something of us. In the *Opening Prayer* we say, “*You have taught us to overcome our sins by prayer, fasting and works of mercy.*”

We need to *pray* — but not just to “say prayers.” The prayer to which we are called is prayer that *changes* us, changes our *minds* and behavior (the meaning of “repentance,” *metanoia*).

This is what *fasting* expresses: a willingness to go against our merely natural appetites (and even more so against artificial desires programmed into us by our culture) to fix our desires on God and spiritual things.

“*...and works of mercy*” — The proof our prayer is authentic is that it leads to love; not just love of God, but love of others. When we look up to God, God directs us to look out to the world; to see the suffering sin is causing in the world and to do something about it. True discipleship involves both *reflection*, so that we might see with the eyes of God, and *response*, to respond with the love of God to what we see with our human eyes.

### “What is his name?”

The reading from **Exodus 3: 1-15** is summarized in the *Responsorial Psalm* “*The Lord is kind and merciful*” (*Psalms* 103). God says to Moses, “I have seen the miserable state of my people.... I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them.”

He is not going to do it, however, by a simple act of

power from on high. That is not God’s way. He wants to deliver people from the consequences of human sin by counteracting them through countless human acts of virtue made divine through union with God in grace. He says to Moses, “So come, *I will send you...* to bring my people out of Egypt.”

Moses knows how this idea is going to go down with his people! So he tells God he needs some

accreditation: “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

To have credibility as a messenger of God one has to *know God* — and be able to prove it. At the time of Moses, to reveal one’s name was something special. To know God’s *name* meant that God had revealed himself to you as the Person that he is. In our day we would call this the difference between “religion” and “spirituality.” My “religion” can tell me a lot about God generically — what to believe, what rules and practices God wants me to observe — but without really bringing me into personal familiarity with God. My religion develops into “spirituality” when I begin to *interact* with God in ways that are personal, unique to myself, “outside the box” of set patterns. Then I begin to *know God*.

When our religion becomes our spirituality we don’t *stop* interacting with God in the standard ways. We still say the common prayers, participate in communal worship and liturgy, and receive the sacraments. But we do it with a personal involvement, an attention, an investment of self that makes it more than just routine. Our spirituality the day we realize that *something is going on* between ourselves and God and decide to get involved in it.

If we want God to use us to counteract the work of sin in the world, we have to “seek his face” in a way that lets us know him. We have to “listen to his voice” as addressing us personally, and with the intention of responding to what we hear. When we begin to interact with God this way, we begin to know him personally — to “know his name.”

## One for All for One

In **Luke 13: 1-9** Jesus says two things that seem contradictory. First he says that bad things don’t happen to people just because they are “greater sinners than any others.” It is not just the guilty who suffer from the consequences of sin in the world; everybody does. Nevertheless, he then says, “But unless you repent you will all perish.” If our suffering is not caused by our own sins, why do we have to repent?

The answer is that people who sin mess up the world

for everybody; but to fix what is wrong we have to do more than just not sin ourselves. We have to let Jesus act with us, in us and through us in positive ways as Savior to bring healing to other people and to the world. This requires of us a “change of mind,” a *metanoia* or “repentance” that is more than just a turning away from sin. It requires us to convert our “religion” into “spirituality”; to go beyond being just “followers” of Jesus and become his *disciples*. A “disciple” is a “student.” The “repentance” asked of us is the decision to learn God’s mind and heart.

When Jesus, like Yahweh speaking to Moses, looked out and saw “the miserable state of his people” he “had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” And he did what Yahweh did: he decided to “send out laborers” to help them.

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness (*Matthew 9:36 to 10:1*).

But notice that it was “disciples” he sent out. It is only to those who *know* him that he gives the power to heal. To act with the healing power of Jesus on earth, we have to “know his name.”

We also have to change our own names, “repent,” do whatever it takes to make his word bear fruit in our heart — “dig around it and manure it” — *read, reflect* and *respond* until we are transformed into people who *know God*.

Each one of us has to work to save all from the effects of sin — and for the One who is the only Savior of the world. One for all; all for One.

## Forward Motion

In **1Corinthians 10: 1-12** Paul makes it clear that it is not enough just to be a member of the Church “in good standing.” Not everyone who followed Moses out of Egypt, who “ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink” made it to the Promised Land. “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” Just “standing around” in the “state of grace” is not enough. God calls for *forward motion*. We need to *read, reflect* and *respond* as disciples; *students* of the mind and heart of God.

**Insight:** *Do I “know” God’s name? Know him as a person?*

**Initiative:** *Decide to read, reflect and respond to God’s word systematically.*

## MONDAY, Lent week three:

The *Responsorial Psalm* teaches us to listen to our heart and follow it: “*Athirst is my soul for the living God. When shall I go and behold the face of God?*” (*Psalms* 42-43).

**Kings 5:1-15** shows us a common reason why we don’t make progress in the spiritual life: we won’t do the small, easy things because we think they won’t have any effect. So we do nothing.

Naaman was willing to invest a huge amount of time and money to be cured of his leprosy. But all the prophet told him was to go bathe seven times in the river Jordan. He expected some big ceremony, and was going away angry when his servants said, “If the prophet had told you to do something extraordinary, would you not have done it? All the more now... you should do as he said.” So he did and was healed.

Is there something in your soul that is *athirst for the living God*? Do you wish at times to be a *disciple* of Jesus, to sit at his feet and learn what he is really like, what he thinks and desires, how you can be like him? Does this seem out of your reach, something you would have to invest so much time and energy in that you could not do anything else? So are you just doing nothing about it?

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Do something**, no matter how small, to take a first (or further) step into discipleship. For starters, put the Bible on your pillow!

Suppose you begin small. Get a copy of the Bible, a cheap one you are not afraid to write in and underline. Don’t put it on a table; put it on your *pillow*, so you cannot go to sleep without picking it up. And tell God you will read *one line* every night before you go to bed.

Does this sound too difficult? Are you thinking, “What good will that do? It is too insignificant!”?

Why not try it? Experience shows that most nights you will read two or three lines (but if you only read one you have kept your commitment. Go to sleep satisfied!). And if you do, your whole life will begin to change. You will have begun to be a *disciple*.

In **Luke 4: 24-30** the people wouldn’t even listen to Jesus. Why? Was it jealousy toward a hometown boy? Did they feel threatened? Did they just resent the idea they needed to change anything in their lives? They may not have known why themselves.

If you feel resistance against beginning something as simple as reading a line of the Bible every night, ask yourself why. Are you afraid? Angry? Apathetic? Look for the cause. But finally ask yourself: *When shall I go and behold the face of God?*”

## TUESDAY, Lent week three:

The *Responsorial Psalm* calls us to believe that, whatever our starting point is, God will help us: “Remember your mercies, O Lord” (*Psalm 25*).

*Psalm 25* makes God’s mercy very concrete: “Your ways *make known* to me; *teach* me your paths; *guide* me in your truth....” To “have mercy” means to “come to the aid of another out of a sense of relationship.” God has mercy on us, not just by “zapping” us unilaterally from on high, but by *interacting* with us, guiding us, helping us to help ourselves. For Jesus to be our Teacher, we have to become his disciples, his *students*.

**Daniel 3: 25-43** begins with an admission that things aren’t as they should be: “For we are reduced, O Lord, beyond any other nation, brought low in the world this day because of our sins. We have in our day no prince, prophet, or leader....” Don’t we sometimes feel like saying this about ourselves as a nation, as a Church?

What can give us confidence? Three things: 1. if we come to God with a “contrite heart and a humble spirit”; 2. if we *want* “to follow unreservedly, with our whole heart”; and 3. if we *trust*, for “those who trust in you cannot be put to shame.”

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Do what you can do**, without assuming you are rejected by God because of what you are not ready to do. Show your belief in his mercy.

We must not lower our ideals or give up the goal. The goal is the “perfection of love,” total gift of ourselves to God. We hold to this. But we can admit our weakness, acknowledging that we are not yet ready to respond with our whole hearts. It is enough to respond with a “contrite and humble” heart, admitting our sins and hoping one day to do better, even if we are not able to do that completely now. Our *trust* is not in what we can do or can predict that we will do. Our trust is in what God can do. So we just keep interacting with him in every way we are willing and able to interact with him. And we trust. Our prayer is, “Remember your mercies, O Lord.”

**Matthew 18: 21-35** teaches us that what we won’t do for others we will have a hard time believing God will do for us. If we refuse to forgive without limits, it may seem incomprehensible to us that anybody would, even God. In the story, the first debtor’s real sin was not paying attention to the kind of person his master was. He was so focused on his need for money that he did not even notice what his master was doing for him. He didn’t get the point.

The focus in our religion (that is, in our lives) should always be on learning what God is like so that we can be like him. If we don’t do this we miss the point.

### WEDNESDAY, Lent week three:

The *Responsorial Psalm* invites us to focus on how good and life-giving God's teachings are, so that we will appreciate him: "*Praise the Lord, Jerusalem*" (*Psalm* 147). Praise will lead us to appreciation.

**Deuteronomy 4: 1-9** focuses, not just on the *requirements* of God's law, or on the difficulty of obeying them (both things we tend to focus on), but on how wise and life-giving they are. "Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may *live*." If we live by God's teachings we will "give evidence of our wisdom and intelligence to all the nations." Even non-believers will recognize that "this is truly a wise and intelligent people."

In **Matthew 5: 17-19** Jesus tells us he is taking us beyond the wisdom of the laws God taught the Jews. He is not contradicting or abolishing the earlier teachings of God; he is just going beyond them: "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

Jesus' teachings and his "new commandment" to "love one another as I have loved you" take us beyond the Ten Commandments. They can appear to be "foolishness" to minds unenlightened by Christian

faith. But with the help of God's word and God's spirit we can come to appreciate the wisdom in them (see *1 Corinthians* 1: 18-25; 2: 6-16; 3: 18-29; *John* 13:34).

This presupposes, however, that we are *disciples* who want to *reflect* on God's commands and *understand* them; not just "followers" who blindly obey without appreciation. Our goal is not just to do what God says, but to be *united* with God in mind and heart. He doesn't just want us to obey his laws, but to understand and embrace the principles, God's own attitudes and values, that inspired them. The goal is always to *know* God and to *love* him more by appreciating the truth and goodness of his being.

There are those in every religion who just want "the answers." They want clear and simple doctrines, clear and simple rules, and uniform adherence and conformity from all. They do not ask questions. They are not open to interpretation or adaptation of the rules to circumstances, and they discourage theological investigation. This is the spirit of the Pharisees and "scribes," the entitled "teachers of the law." Jesus says of them, "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others" (*Matthew* 23:4; *Luke* 11:46). But *disciples* want to *know God*.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Ask why** God commands what he does. Try to understand the "breadth and length and height and depth" of his teaching and of Church laws.

## THURSDAY, Lent week three:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is an unexpected response to the first reading. It urges us: “*If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts*” (Ps. 95).

But in the first reading, God tells **Jeremiah (7: 23-28)** that people do harden their hearts. When God commanded his people, “Listen to my voice... they obeyed not.” Nor did they listen to the prophets. And he warns Jeremiah, “When you speak... they will not listen to you either!”

God is painting a pretty dim picture of his people at that time. And we might feel in our discouraged moments that it is a pretty credible description of people in our own times!

So it is deliberate optimism when the *Responsorial Psalm* encourages us: “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” But this optimism is the whole point. God never gives up on us, and we should never give up on ourselves or on one another. The reason for optimism is that we don’t have only ourselves to rely on. Our hopes rest on what God can do to bring us to life in response to his word. If God hasn’t given up, optimism is the only stance that makes sense.

**Luke 11: 14-23** shows Jesus driving out a demon

who was making a man unable to speak. There is an intentional symbolism here. Physically, being deaf and mute often go together: it is difficult for one who cannot hear sounds to speak clearly. In the spiritual life, what makes us unable to *respond* to God is the simple fact that we haven’t really *heard* God — because we are not listening with desire to hear. “For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing... so that they might not... listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and convert — and I would heal them” (*Matthew* 13:15).

But Jesus can heal us. He does it by freeing us from the “demon,” from whatever force of evil or sin is closing our hearts and ears to him. He has the strength to do this. He can free us from anything that binds us.

There is a condition, however. We have to “gather” with Jesus. If not, we will be scattered like sheep attacked by wolves. “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” No one can be “neutral” toward Jesus. Not to belong to him is to oppose him, because if we don’t gather with him we will inevitably be swept off course by the currents of falsehood, fear, ambition and well-intentioned destructiveness in the world. Only Jesus is the rock of our salvation (see *Psalms* 18:2; 40:2; 62:2; *Matthew* 7:21-27). “*If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts*”

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Listen** to God’s word with alert faith and conscious hope.



## FRIDAY, Lent week three:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is an invitation to *wisdom*: “I am the Lord your God: hear my voice” (*Psalms* 81).

*Wisdom* is defined as “taste for spiritual things” (cf. the Latin *sapientia*, *sapor*, and the English “savor”). All three readings are encouraging us to seek our well-being through relationship with God: hearing his voice as disciples and loving what we hear. This is wisdom.

In **Hosea 14: 2-10** God reveals that his response to our guilt is love. God draws us to himself through love: “Return, O Israel, to the LORD, your God; you have collapsed through your guilt.” God’s promise is, “I will heal their defection, says the LORD, I will love them freely.”

The texts keep emphasizing that the one speaking is “the LORD your God.” The reason for believing in God’s love and mercy is that God is unlike any other. His love is unique. It is what defines God as God.

When God showed Moses his “glory,” Scripture says, “the LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love and faithfulness*” (*Exodus* 33:12 to 34:6).

*Steadfast love* (which appears 173 times in the Bible) and *faithfulness* — the Hebrew *hesed* and *emet*, which

we find translated as “grace and truth” or “kindness and fidelity” — are the traits most characteristic of God. The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* calls them “a virtual definition of God” (on *John* 1:14). If we understand God as “enduring love,” we will desire to enter into relationship with him. We will have a “taste” for God and for all that unites us to him. This is *wisdom*. It is the driving force of *discipleship*. If we know what “the Lord our God” is like, we will want to “hear his voice.” Hosea ends, “Let those who are wise understand these things.”

**Mark 12: 28-34** shows us Jesus praising a scribe for understanding that the beginning and end of our response to God is love. This is the “great commandment.” An authentic morality bases everything we do on response to God’s love for us. For the wise, the guiding principle behind every moral decision should be, “Does this show love for God and for other people?”

Vatican II teaches that *all* “the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the *perfection of love* (*The Church* no. 40). We are not there yet. That is why we have to embrace a program of *discipleship* so that we can *learn* to love God with *all* our hearts and live life to the full. To do this is *wisdom*.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Decide to be wise.** Make a plan for growing to “perfect love.” (*These reflections*, with the accompanying five booklets, are written to explain and support the plan *Immersed in Christ*, a concrete way to do this by living out the five mysteries and promises of Baptism).

## SATURDAY, Lent week three:

The *Response to Psalm 51* is from Hosea 6:6: “*I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.*” And the verse continues: “...*the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*” The theme of all three readings is that God looks to the heart, not to external actions. What he wants from us is deep, enduring love and the desire to *know* him, not just “orthodoxy” or acts of religious observance, no matter how good these are in themselves.

**Hosea 6: 1-6** is a call to conversion that tells us two things:

1. God will without a doubt “heal” and “revive” us.
2. For this to happen we must change our hearts, not just our behavior: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” Hosea’s exhortation is: “Let us *know*, let us *strive to know* the LORD.”

In **Luke 18: 9-14** Jesus gives this teaching in the form of a story. What we need to focus on is the contrast in *attitude* between the Pharisee and the public sinner (tax collectors were thought to be extortionists and collaborators with the Romans).

The attitude of the Pharisee is widespread in the Church today. We find it in those who feel they must defend the Church against the “rest of humanity,” the

“liberals” and the “lax” Catholics who do not adhere rigidly to all the rules and directives they themselves agree with. They are not only “convinced of their own righteousness,” but also convinced of their own rightness — so much so that when they listen to teaching and preaching, it is not so much to learn and respond as to check out the orthodoxy of the speaker. They have nothing new to learn, because they have narrowed down their interests to the “pat answers” that make them comfortable. Because they reduce the whole truth to just what they see, they can be convinced that what they see is the whole truth. So they listen to new thought in the Church only to compare what they hear to what they already believe, and to condemn whatever does not match.

This is the “idolatry of the cut-and-dried” that excludes all personal interaction with the mystery of the living God. It is “intellectual Phariseism” and a lethal rejection of *discipleship*.

By contrast, true theology — the burning passion of disciples — is defined as “faith seeking understanding.” When the wisest and most learned stand before the mystery of faith, the more they see, the more they are driven to say and pray the words put on the jester’s lips by Edward Rowland Sill (1841-1887):

O Lord,  
Be merciful to me, a fool!

**Initiative: Be a disciple. See yourself as a learner.** Do not judge before you understand.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: LENT WEEK THREE

**Disciples in Action:** Christians respond to the sin and suffering of the world.

### Invitation:

God wants to save the world from sin and suffering through the human-divine activity of the body of Christ on earth acting “through Christ, with him and in him.”

### Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?

To save the world as disciples of Christ requires 1. *prayer* that *changes* our minds and behavior (“repentance,” *metanoia*); 2. *fasting* that expresses willingness to *emancipate* ourselves from our merely natural appetites and the artificial desires programmed into us by our culture; 3. *works of mercy*: a love of others that moves us to look at the suffering sin is causing in the world and to do something about it.

To act with the healing power of Jesus on earth, we have to *know* him.

We begin to *know* God when our religion develops into “spirituality;” that is, when we begin to *interact* with God through personal *reflection* and *response*, thinking and acting “outside the box,” going *beyond* routine conformity.

One reason why we fail to make progress in the spiritual life is that we won’t do the small, easy things because we think they won’t have any effect. So we do nothing.

If you do not read Scripture already, there is *no reason* not to begin the “easy way.” 1. Procure a copy of the Bible, a cheap one you can write in and underline. 2. Put it on your *pillow*, so you cannot go to sleep without picking it up. 3. Promise God you will read *one line* every night before you go to bed. No literate Christian can find an excuse not to do this.

The true disciple focuses, not just on the *requirements* of God’s law, or on the difficulty of obeying them, but on how wise and life-giving they are.

If we believe God is “enduring love,” we will desire to enter into relationship with him. We will have a “taste” for God and for all that unites us to him. This is *wisdom*. It is the driving force of *discipleship*.

God never gives up on us, and we should never give up on ourselves or one another. Our hope rests on what God can do to bring us to life in response to his word. If God hasn’t given up on us, trusting confidence is the only stance that makes sense.

Vatican II teaches that *all* the “faithful of Christ” are “called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the *perfection of love*.” To respond to this we need to embrace a *concrete plan* of *discipleship*. Otherwise we are kidding ourselves if we think we are authentic Christians or serious about responding with love to suffering in the world. “To fail to plan is to plan to fail.” And Jesus has the only adequate plan.

### Decisions:

*Choose to be a disciple* of Jesus Christ. *Make a plan* for growing to “perfect love.”

*Take a first step* into discipleship. For starters, put the Bible on your pillow!

# THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (Year C)

## Seeking the Bread of Life

### Inventory

Who fed me when I was little? Who feeds me (earns my daily bread) now? Who first nourished me with the Bread of Life, with the word of God? Who is feeding me with this bread, teaching me about God, now?

### Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* tells us that those who “*rejoice with the Church*” (the new Jerusalem) and love her will “*find contentment at her consoling breasts.*” The Church is a nourishing mother. But we have to recognize her as such, be glad of what she offers, and seek the nourishment she offers. This is *discipleship*.

In the *Opening Prayer(s)* we declare to the Father that we are “*joyful in your Word, your Son Jesus Christ,*” because we recognize that he “*reconciles us to you.*” It is this recognition and this joy that make us “*hasten to our Easter*” — to the living presence of the risen Jesus in the Church today — “*with the eagerness of faith and love.*” If we love what Jesus offers us in the Church and believe in it, we will seek it as *disciples*, as *students* eager to learn and be nourished by God’s words.

What does Jesus offer us? He continues to “*speak peace to a sinful world.*” We ask him to “*teach us,*” so that “*our faith, hope and love may turn hatred into love, conflict into peace, death into eternal life.*” In and through the Church Jesus continues to “*bring to the human race the gift of reconciliation*” which, once accomplished on the cross, is made present and available to all in every age and place — and very concretely in the sacraments of *Reconciliation* and *Eucharist*.

In the *Prayer over the Gifts* we ask God to “*increase our reverence by this Eucharist*” — make us grow in awestruck appreciation of the mystery we celebrate — so that through us he might “*bring salvation to the world.*”

If we who recognize the Church as our mother keep seeking nourishment “*at her consoling breasts*” and let God “*fill our hearts with the light of the Gospel*” (*Prayer after Communion*), he will be able through us to “*enlighten all who come into the world.*” This is the fruit of *discipleship*. “*Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.*”

### Taste and see...

**Joshua 5: 9-12** tells us how God nourished his people with bread from heaven — “manna” — in the desert. All they had to do was reach down every morning and pick it up. But once they crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, “The manna ceased... and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan.” Now they had to feed themselves. The *Responsorial Psalm* urges us to do the same thing: “*Taste and see the goodness of the Lord*” (*Psalm 34*). If we want God to nourish us, we have to work at it. This is called *discipleship*: a commitment to *study* the words of God: to *read*, *reflect* and *respond*. If we want to experience “*the goodness of the Lord,*” we have to “*taste and see*”

(see *Exodus*, chapter 13 and *Deuteronomy* 8:3, quoted by Jesus in *Matthew* 4:4).

### So he left...

In **Luke 15: 1-32** Jesus tells the story of a young man who grew up, as we did, fed by his family. As a child, all he had to do was show up at mealtimes.

Presumably, this is the way most of us were nourished by the word of God as children. All we had to do was be there. Our parents taught us, took us to church or sent us to religion classes. It was ours for the absorbing.

And we may not have appreciated it, any more than the son in Jesus’ story did. He took what he was given

for granted. He left home looking for “more,” not realizing what he was giving up. It was not until he started to feel hunger and to “be in need” that he began to appreciate what his family had provided for him.

That is when he “came to himself” and said, “How many of my father’s paid servants have more food than they want, and here I am dying of hunger!” That is when he came to his decision: “I will get up and go to my father.” He recognized the “more” he had left.

“I will get up and go.” That is a turning point in the spiritual life. There comes a point when we realize, even if we have never “left our father’s house,” that it takes some “get up and go” to continue living authentically as Christians — or even as human beings.. We can’t just sit around any longer being spoon-fed like children, passively absorbing what is said to us in church or by others. Even though we are being fed the true “bread from heaven,” if all we have to do reach down and pick it up, we won’t appreciate it. The day has to come when we decide to feed ourselves. On the day we begin consciously and deliberately to “*Taste and see the goodness of the Lord*,” we take true possession of the Promised Land. We begin to be *disciples*.

## Made him to be sin...

The problem is, sometimes we “get up and go” in the wrong direction. If we grew up in the Promised Land without really taking personal possession of it, we may not appreciate what is there. So we get up and go elsewhere. We look for fulfillment — whether through truth or through pleasure — at the feet of other gurus or in the “world.” We fulfill in ourselves the lament of Jeremiah:

My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water  
(*Jeremiah 2:13*).

Sometimes this makes it more difficult for us to return. If, like the “prodigal son” we have “squandered” our spiritual heritage “in dissolute living,” we may feel ashamed to go home. We may even be blocked from admitting that what we did and are doing is wrong, for fear of what this would say about us. Especially if we have been good all our

lives, we may not know how to handle guilt. Unconsciously, we fear it will shatter us.

That is when we need to understand what Paul is saying in **2Corinthians 5: 17-21**. When he says that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, *not counting their trespasses against them*,” he means much more than these words suggest. God does not just “forgive” our sins or “overlook” them, not “counting them against us.” No, we proclaim Jesus as the “Lamb of God who *takes away* the sins of the world.”

If we are just *forgiven*, we are not changed. God may have “changed his mind” about us, but we are just as guilty as we were before; it is just that God is not “counting our sins against us.” But when God reconciled us to himself “in Christ,” he *took away* our sins. They are no longer part of us or of our history. The mystery of our redemption, as Paul explains it, is that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a *new creation*: everything old has passed away; see, everything has *become new*!” How can this be?

The answer is in one line: “For our sake he *made him to be sin* who knew no sin, so that *in him we might become* the righteousness of God.” Jesus on the cross was “made sin.” He took into his body all the redeemed, from the beginning to the end of time, and all of our sins. Our sins became the sins of his own flesh. He “became sin” by incorporating us into his body by Baptism.

Then, when he died, we died in him, went down into the grave with him, and our sins were annihilated. When he rose, we rose in him. God returned us to earth as Christ’s risen body, as a “new creation,” without any past or record of sin.

When we repent of our sins, they are swallowed up in the waters of our Baptism. They become the sins of Christ’s flesh and are annihilated in his death and resurrection. They are no longer part of our history. We who committed them died. We have come back to life as a “new creation,” with no history of sin. This is the mystery and wonder of our redemption (See *Romans 6: 3-11*; *Colossians 2: 11-14*). Because of it, we are not afraid to face or admit any guilt. Through Christ our sins are *taken away*.

**Insight:** *Do I see the need to take an active, a proactive part in nourishing myself with the word of God?*

**Initiative:** *Decide on a time to read Scripture for five minutes a day.*

### March 19: St. Joseph, Husband of Mary, Foster Father of Jesus

It is through Joseph that Jesus is “Son of David” (*Matthew* 1:1; *Luke* 2:4, 3:23) and through him that God’s promise to David in **2Samuel 7:4-16** is realized: “I will raise up your offspring after you.... and establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” The liturgy echoes the theme of God’s *steadfast love* by praying “that the *Church will continue* the saving work of Christ” (introduction to the *Opening Prayer*) and asking God to “protect your Church *always*” (*Prayer after Communion*).

Joseph’s paternal relationship to Jesus was officially recognized as extended to the Church (Christ’s body) when in 1870 Pope Pius IX declared Joseph “Patron of the Universal Church.” John Paul II said that in our day Joseph’s patronage “must be invoked, not only as a defense against all dangers, but also, *and indeed primarily*, as an impetus for her *renewed commitment to evangelization* in the world and to re-evangelization in those lands and nations where...religion and the Christian life were formerly flourishing and...are now put to a hard test” (*Redemptoris Custos*, 1989). Joseph has an active and relevant role for us all: he is a concerned father.

The emphasis all three readings put on fatherhood invites us to see Joseph as a true father of Jesus. Biologically he wasn’t (*Luke* 3:23; *Matthew* 1:18-20), but Luke repeatedly calls Mary and Joseph the “parents” of Jesus (2:27,41,43,48). In **Luke 2:41-51**, Mary refers to him as Jesus’ father: “Your father and

I have been searching for you.” The people of Nazareth assumed it, as did his first disciples (*Matthew* 13:55; *John* 1:45).

Can we say Joseph was Jesus’ “real” father? First, we note that Jesus said we should not consider any human being our “real” father: “Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father — the one in heaven” (*Matthew* 23:9). When fathers bring their children to Baptism they yield primary parenthood to God and become for their own children what Joseph was to Jesus: “foster” fathers whose role is to represent God the Father and be for their children in a human way all that God is.

Adoptive parents, we should note, are a child’s true source of life more than biological parents are. Children “receive life” physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually more from the parents who raise them than from those who beget them. In **Romans 4:13-22** Paul calls Abraham the “father” of all who inherit his faith.

The parallel is true of husbands. Joseph was the true husband of Mary in every way but sexual. We don’t minimize the role of sex in a relationship, but it is an axiom among the married that “sex is only as good as the day that precedes it.” And its authenticity depends on the day that follows it. Joseph was for Mary everything a woman could dream of out of bed. That doesn’t say it all, but it says a lot. Husbands who are invalids, or who take care of invalid wives, are just as authentically husbands as anyone. And so was Joseph.”

**Initiative: Take relationships seriously.** Be toward every other what you truly are.

## MONDAY, Lent week four:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is an acceptance of God's way of saving the world: "*I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me*" (*Psalm 30*).

Not everyone praises God for the kind of rescue he offers in Jesus. Those in Jesus' own time who wanted a Messiah who would deliver them from Roman oppression did not welcome him. They wanted a Messiah who would fill their country with prosperity, peace and justice by stamping out evil — with force, if necessary, human or divine.

When they realized that Jesus was not that kind of Savior they shouted, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" (*John 19:15*).

And in our day many people think that if they observe God's laws and pray, God will keep their loved ones safe and give them a happy life on earth. When tragedy strikes them they turn away from God in anger and disillusionment.

**Isaiah 65: 17-21** seems to encourage this assumption about the way God rescues and blesses us. God promises of Jerusalem, "No longer shall the sound of weeping be heard there... or be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not

round out his full lifetime... They shall live in the houses they build, and eat the fruit of the vineyards they plant." But this is not what Jesus came to bring about. To accept Jesus as Savior we have to accept a whole new guidance system, a whole new way of judging what is good or bad for us, what is a blessing and what is a curse.

In **John 4: 43-54** we see Jesus healing a royal official's son — but not before he changes the father's guidance system. The official was making his faith in Jesus depend on his working miracles. Jesus reproached him, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe!" But when Jesus told him, "You may go; your son will live," the man "believed what Jesus said to him and left." He trusted, not in what he saw, but in the words of Jesus alone. This was a new guidance system.

To really understand and accept Jesus as Savior, we have to become his *disciples*. This means, not just accepting what he says, but making our acceptance depend on pure faith. We have to accept ahead of time that everything he says is true and everything he does is good — even letting us or others die. If we accept this with blind faith we will come to see. Then, no matter what happens, we respond, "*I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.*"

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Make faith your standard** for judging what is true or false, bad or good. Let Jesus' words be your guidance system, not your assumptions.



## TUESDAY, Lent week four:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is a profession of faith that all our good and protection lie in God: “*The Lord of hosts is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob*” (*Psalm 46*). This also provides us with a key to guide our *discipleship*.

**Ezekiel 47: 1-12** is a prediction about the fruits of Baptism. The true water that “gladdens the city of God” (*Psalm 46*) is the life-giving water of Baptism. “Wherever the river flows, every sort of living creature that can multiply shall live.” Jesus came that we might “have life, and have it to the full,” and he initiates this by giving us a share in God’s own divine life through Baptism. As we live out the commitments of our Baptism, this divine life in us increases, like the stream of water Ezekiel saw flowing out of the temple. If we have this divine life, we are united to Jesus Christ in one shared life, which means that nothing can really harm us. Even death is a blessing. It is our entrance into the party going on in heaven, the “wedding banquet of the Lamb” (*Revelation 19:9*). To know this is to see everything on earth through different eyes. It is to direct our lives by a different guidance system.

**John 5: 1-16** gives us a guide to discernment. There are many currents of thought in the Church, many voices we can listen to. At the present time there is a strong current running counter to the direction of the Second Vatican Council. The excesses of some who

called more things into question than the Council intended has launched a “backlash” movement in the Church. This has the characteristics of a “new Phariseism.” With an understandable but ultimately undermining concern for stability these new militants press for automatic (that is, unthinking) obedience to every minute directive of liturgy and law, while “neglecting the weightier matters” of the Gospel and papal encyclicals: “justice and mercy and faith.” They “strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!” (*Matthew 23:23-24*).

They insist on an equally unthinking affirmation of selected teachings that the “ordinary magisterium” proposes as the current and official, but deliberately not infallible teaching of the Church. How do we know whether theirs is the voice of the Holy Spirit?

Today’s story gives a key. Jesus’ adversaries totally ignored the fact that he had made a lame man walk. They focused only on the fact the lame man “violated the Sabbath” by carrying his mat home. And they “began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a Sabbath.”

When people focus more on laws than on what gives life, they are probably out of touch with Jesus and the true spirit of the Church. We need to look behind their words to the spirit that inspires them. This is the criterion Jesus used when criticized for healing on the Sabbath (*Luke 6:6-11*).

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Remember true obedience** is to achieve the *goal* of the law — which is always to give life.

### WEDNESDAY, Lent week four:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is the “identity card” of God: “*The Lord is gracious and merciful*” (*Psalm 145*). This is a touchstone that tells us whether teaching or conduct that claims to be done in God’s name is truly from God or not.

**Isaiah 49: 8-15** describes God as one who *frees* people who are bound up in darkness. In contrast to this, how many people feel bound up and prohibited from freely approaching God or the sacraments because of rigid teaching that misled them?

The God Isaiah describes guides people to grassy pastures and “springs of living water,” to teaching that responds to the thirst of our souls, that gives delight and nourishment to our minds and hearts. Is this what the people are doing whose concern is to reduce all teaching to the incomplete but “official” answers found in catechisms and in unofficial but doctrinaire leaflets published by pressure groups? Some “instant” answers have a usefulness as starting points for further investigation, or as “review” versions of truth already learned. But like dried fruits, they cannot substitute for the words of God coming fresh from the Scriptures or for the inspired teaching of the Councils of the Church (the sixteen decrees of

Vatican II, for example, which are available for us to read in their inspired and inspiring freshness). People who think they can know the teaching of the Church just by studying “the answers” listed in dry summarizing sources are like students who think they can experience English literature by studying “CliffsNotes.” This is not discipleship; it is self-deception.

In **John 5: 17-30** Jesus bases his case against the Pharisees on the fact that he *knows the Father*. He is in live, personal, direct contact with God as a person. He speaks out of his awareness and experience of the Father’s love for him. And because the Father “shows him everything that he himself does” — and this is the Lord who is “gracious and merciful” — the words and actions of Jesus are also gracious and merciful and life-giving. “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives life, so also does the Son give life” — not just to those who conform to the Pharisees’ ideas of morality, but “to whomever he wishes.” Jesus does not push away people who seek him. He does not reject those who are in situations not sanctioned by law. He is the Lord of life. The “identity card” of those who are acting in his name is that they are allowing him to bring people to life through them.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Read the documents of Vatican II.** Try to absorb the *spirit* and vision of the Church. Read the writings of the Saints.

## THURSDAY, Lent week four:

To understand the *Response* to the *Responsorial Psalm* we need to read it as it appears in the whole Psalm: “Remember *me*, O LORD, when you show favor to your people; help *me* when you deliver *them*” (*Psalm* 106).

The Psalmist takes for granted God is going to help his people; that is what God does. “For their sake he remembered his covenant, and showed compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love.” He is asking God to act in the same way toward him. In the *Responsorial Psalm* we are asking God to remember *us* as his people: to be consistent with himself, based on what we already know of him.

**Exodus 32: 7-14** is a kind of role-playing: Moses and God are reversing roles. God pretends to react to his people’s infidelity the way any ordinary human being would. Moses takes the role of God and reminds God to act according to his true nature. He asks God to remember his promises and what is unique about him: his “steadfast love” (*Psalm* 106: 1, 7, 45).

Moses is revealed as a good disciple here. When God tests him by taking the adversary role, Moses answers by reciting back to God what God himself has taught him. And we have to do the same. When we have questions or doubts, or when we “just assume” that God could not still be loving us, we look for the

answer, not in what we are but in what God is. And for the key to what God is we keep going back to the words “steadfast love.”

**John 5: 31-47** tells us what discipleship is all about, and what the essential requirement for it is.

Discipleship is simply the effort to grow in *knowing God through Jesus*. Jesus said, “I came that they might *have life*, and have it *to the full*.” “And 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).

The essential requirement for this is *faith*. Jesus said to those who did not accept him, “The Father... has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, *because you do not believe him* whom he has sent.”

To “know God,” intellectual knowledge is not enough. We have to “hear his voice” and “see” him, *experience* him. His word must settle in our *hearts*. But this only happens when we *choose to interact* with him with live, personal *faith*. We pray. We deal with him personally in the sacraments. We do things for him consciously. We praise and thank him. Through all this we get to *know* him. Then we know what to expect from him.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Express your faith** by *interacting consciously* with Jesus at Mass, when you pray, when you act by his principles.

## FRIDAY, Lent week four:

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us that when things are going badly all is well: “*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted*” (*Psalm 34*). Opposition from others can be a consoling sign that we are authentic disciples of Jesus.

**Wisdom 2: 1-22** explains the mind set of those who are angered by people who try to live by the words of the Lord. Disciples are “obnoxious” to them, because their life “is not like that of others” and their ways are “different.” God’s disciples believe their life is headed toward fulfillment — that they have a “blessed destiny” — and are in relationship with God as Father. All this arouses jealousy, which sometimes takes the form of persecution — anything from “trying their patience” to condemning them to death.

This kind of opposition is evidence that we are “different” in the right way. But it still makes us feel discouraged and even bad about ourselves when we experience abuse and rejection. Our consolation when we suffer this comes from knowing that “*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted.*” This is the pain and the joy of discipleship.

In **John 7: 1-30** we see a build-up of opposition to Jesus that will soon lead to his death. People were saying openly, “Is he not the one they are trying to

kill?” And they were divided in their opinion about him.

Some doubted him because they had been taught, “When the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from,” and they thought they knew where Jesus was from. Jesus tells them they are using the wrong standard of judgment. The real question is not where Jesus came from, but whether God sent him. Those who are in touch with God will be able to recognize the one he sent: “I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and *you do not know him.*” That is why they don’t recognize Jesus. It is also the reason why many don’t recognize the authentic teaching of Jesus.

Earlier Jesus had said, “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. *Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know* whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.”

Discipleship is not just knowledge. In spiritual discernment, knowledge itself depends on the *response of our hearts* to God (see *Matthew 13:15*; *Mark 8:17*: we “understand with the heart”). So if we want to understand the teaching of Jesus we need to *convert* to his values from, the heart and try to live by his ideals. This will make us “different” and arouse some hostility, but we will know the Lord — and know that he is close to us. “*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted.*”

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Do something different** to experience who you are.

## SATURDAY, Lent week four:

The *Responsorial Psalm* tells us where to look for support and confirmation when we feel alone in our faith: “*O Lord, my God, in you I take refuge*” (*Psalm 7*). Disciples need this.

In **Jeremiah 11: 18-20** the prophet has become aware that his enemies “were hatching plots” against him. He had not realized this, and it was a blow to him.

It is always hard to realize that people not only disagree with us but actually dislike and condemn us because of what we believe. We are members of the human race and members of particular communities that mean a lot to us: our family, circle of friends, our co-workers, our church. When these people, on whom we normally rely for support, turn against us, it can shake our confidence.

It can also drive us closer to God. This is what happened to Jeremiah. It made him turn to God, recognizing God as the “just Judge,” the true “searcher of mind and heart,” whose judgment about us is the only one that counts. St. Paul did the same thing later, when he said to his adversaries, “with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself... It is the Lord who judges me” (*1Corinthians 3: 3-4*).

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Look to Jesus for security** and the confirmation of your beliefs— prayerfully reflecting on his words, trying to read his mind and heart.

We need to keep this criterion in mind if we are going to be free and open disciples of Jesus, with our thinking unswayed and undistorted by public opinion.

In **John 7: 40-53** controversy is still raging about Jesus. And still people are asking the wrong question, making a big issue about whether he came from Nazareth in Galilee or Bethlehem in Judea. But the argument against him that his enemies appeal to most strongly is just the fact that none of “the authorities or the Pharisees” believe in him. The Pharisees were vocal and emphatic about their opinions, and since they made it their business to study up on the law — and to condemn anyone who disagreed with them — people were afraid to argue with them. The Pharisees dismissed the opinions of the rest of the people as worthless: “This crowd, which does not know the law, is accursed.” Uneducated members of the “crowd,” hearing that, would be hesitant to condemn themselves by voicing any disagreement.

If we are going to be disciples of Jesus, we have to make sure that Jesus himself, his words and example, are the criterion by which we judge truth — not popular opinion, the propaganda of pressure groups, or the opinions of those who are most vociferous in our parish.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: LENT WEEK FOUR

**Seeking the Bread of Life:** Vatican II teaches that the Church “offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table *both of God’s word and of Christ’s body*.” That is why the Council says, “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord” (*Divine Revelation*, no. 21).

### Invitation:

Jesus offers to “speak peace to a sinful world,” and to “teach us,” so that “our faith, hope and love may turn hatred into love, conflict into peace, death into eternal life” and “bring to the human race the gift of reconciliation.” If we love what Jesus offers us in the Church and believe in it, we will seek it as *disciples*, as *students* eager to learn and be nourished by God’s words.

### Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?

If we want God to nourish us, we have to work at it. This is called *discipleship*: a commitment to *study* the words of God: to *read*, *reflect* and *respond*. If we want to experience “the goodness of the Lord,” we have to “taste and see.”

In our day many people think that if they observe God’s laws and pray, God will keep their loved ones safe and give them a happy life on earth. When tragedy strikes them they turn away from God in anger and disillusionment.

To accept Jesus as Savior we have to accept a whole new guidance system, a whole new way of judging what is good or bad for us, what is a blessing and what is a curse.

To really understand Jesus as Savior, we have to become his *disciples*. This means, not just accepting what he says, but making our acceptance depend on pure faith that everything he says is true and everything he does is good — even if he lets us or others die.

If we are united to Jesus in one shared, divine life, nothing can really harm us. Even death is a blessing. It is our entrance into the party, the “wedding banquet of the Lamb” (*Revelation* 19:9). To know this is to see everything on earth through different eyes and to direct our lives by a different guidance system.

Opposition from others can be a consoling sign that we are authentic disciples of Jesus. When people on whom we normally rely for support turn against us, it can shake our confidence. It can also drive us closer to God.

To “know God,” intellectual knowledge is not enough. We have to “hear his voice” and “see” him, *experience* him. His word must settle in our *hearts*. But this only happens when we *choose to interact* with him with live, personal *faith*.

### Decisions:

*Make faith your standard for judging* what is true or false, bad or good. Let Jesus’ words be your guidance system, not your assumptions.

*Try to absorb the spirit* and vision of the Church. Read the documents of Vatican II and the writings of the Saints.

# THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (Year C)

## Openness to Change

### Inventory

What kind of people are the greatest danger to Christianity today? Who were the most vicious opponents of Jesus in his time? Am I like them in any way?

### Input

The *Entrance Antiphon* asks help against the “wicked... the deceitful and the unjust” (*Psalm* 43). These are the people who would block us from accepting what we ask for in the *Opening Prayer*: “*Father, help us to be like Christ your Son.*” Our worst enemies are not those who are against our leading virtuous lives. Even atheists accept many of the moral principles Christians profess, just because they make sense and are useful to society. Our most dangerous enemies are those who accept religion — even cultural Christianity — but do not accept the “new wine” of Jesus Christ. Like the “chief priests, Pharisees, elders and scribes,” the greatest enemies of Christianity are those within Christianity itself who reject *change* (see *Luke* 5:36-39; *Matthew* 16:21; 21: 42-45).

This may sound like an extreme statement. But why did Jesus excite frenzy in the Pharisees? Why did the “elders” and the priests with the most authority hate him? Why did the “scribes,” the “teachers of the law,” find him such a threat?

The one thing all of these groups had in common was that they all thought they had something to lose if Jesus and his teaching became the focus of people’s religion. He was a threat to the *status quo*, of which they were the invested defenders.

The “elders” (influential laity) and the power brokers in the Jewish hierarchy saw Jesus as a threat to their hold over the people. Jesus always supported authority, but exposed it when it was being abused to suppress leadership or to keep people from looking at the truth. The Pharisees and “teachers of the law” denounced and attacked anyone who gave a teaching or interpretation of the law contrary to their own. Jesus, by putting people into contact with the mind and heart of God, was opening a channel that by-passed them. He had to die.

Jesus came to give “new wine,” “a new teaching with authority,” a “new covenant” and a “new commandment.” For those who follow Christ “everything has become new.” It is not enough just to observe rules; but “a new creation is everything.” We must be “clothed with the new self, which is being *renewed in knowledge*....” In short, all Christian teachers must “bring out of their treasure *what is new and what is old*” (see *Matthew* 9:17, *Mark* 1:27, *Luke* 22:20, *John* 13:24, *2Corinthians* 5:17, *Galatians* 6:15, *Colossians* 3:10, *Matthew* 13:52).

### “A new thing”

**Isaiah 43: 16-21** makes us feel like saying God hates the *status quo*! The *status quo* is stagnation. Nothing God has created remains the same.

A forest ranger told a group of tourists on an observation tower, “You see that forest below us? It is all dying and rising.” There is no such thing as a static tree. Sands shift in the desert. Even the glaciers are moving!

God declares himself through Isaiah:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

God is always leading us forward, both as individuals and as a community. It is an axiom of the ancient spiritual writers: “Live fish swim upstream; dead fish float downstream.” If we are not moving forward we are losing ground. In religion, attachment to the *status*

*quo* breeds formalism, legalism, Phariseeism, all the things God rails against. None of our prayers and observances please him unless we “*Learn to do good!*” (*Isaiah* 1:10-18).

“*Learn to do good!*” Living by Christ’s heart is not something we can be taught once and for all; we have to keep learning it all our life. If we ever “settle for what we’ve got” we can be sure we are denying the faith! Suppose our slave-owning ancestors had done this? Suppose we had espoused the *status quo* in the days of racial segregation? Suppose the bishops at Vatican II had clung to keeping the Mass in Latin?

(*Uh-Oh!* Did I cross a line? Ask what the doctrinal implications are of conducting the Mass, defined as “communal worship,” in a language kept intentionally unintelligible to most of the participants. What does this *teach* about the true nature of the Mass as *communal prayer*?)

God’s focus is on *nourishing* us that we might *respond*, act and *grow*!

I give water... rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people... so that they might declare my praise.

We need to ask about everything we do in church: “How is this helping me develop?” Discipleship is learning. If I am not learning I am not a disciple of Jesus Christ. If I am opposed to learning and to doing what is new, I have to ask if I belong to the party of the “Pharisees, chief priests and teachers of the law” who could not stand the presence of the living Jesus among them.

The dynamic spirit of Christianity is echoed in the *Responsorial Psalm*: “*The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy*” (*Psalms* 126).

## “Moses ordered us”

In **John 8: 1-11** Jesus infuriates the “scribes and Pharisees” by refusing to apply the law of Moses according to their understanding of it.

In the book of *Leviticus* Moses ruled: “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death” (*Leviticus* 20:10). But Jesus refuses to condemn a woman they caught in the act of adultery. Instead of automatically following the letter of the law, he asks whether it would be according to the mind and heart of God to enforce it against this woman. This shakes

the whole security system of the scribes and Pharisees, for whom the literal interpretation of the law was a way to escape the responsibility of making personal judgments — not to speak of discerning the mind of God! They see that if Jesus is allowed to keep teaching, soon people will be thinking for themselves instead of blindly following what their official teachers tell them. People will start measuring laws by the breadth of God’s love instead of by the rigid narrowness of the legalists. Authorities will lose control. They won’t be able to predict what people might do. Many, well-intentioned or not, will make mistakes. Law and order will be weakened. This, for the Pharisees, is the worst evil imaginable.

Not for Jesus. He is more concerned with making the Father, and the Father’s love, known to people than with assuring the strict observance of every law. “This is eternal life,” he said, “that they may *know you*, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (*John* 17:3). If people learn to know and love God, they will probably interpret most of his laws correctly. And if not, it is still better that they should focus on God’s heart in trying to keep his laws than to leave God out of the picture and just observe the letter of the law.

The correct path for Christians is to start with *discipleship* focused on efforts to understand the mind and heart of God, and to understand God’s laws in the light of what we learn about his love. If we go the other way, which is to focus on the letter of the law and assume that they reveal to us the kind of person God is, we will not understand either God or the real intent of his laws.

The same is true of rules in the Church. We should never judge the Church by what we understand of her laws. Rather, we should interpret Church laws in the light of what we understand of the Church as the loving, nurturing body of the living Christ on earth.

Those who find this irresponsible or dangerous should ask themselves whether, in confrontation with the living Jesus, they would have sided with him or with the “teachers of the law,” the “chief priests and the Pharisees.”

## Knowing Christ

In **Philippians 3: (5-7 and) 8-14** Paul says he was a super-Pharisee in keeping the law and in his zeal for



attacking those who did not. But he changed. Now, he says, “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of *knowing Christ Jesus* my Lord.” By comparison, he “regards as rubbish” the security

and satisfaction he found in keeping the letter of the law. Now he says (echoing Isaiah) “I forget the past and I strain ahead for what is still to come.” This is life. This is change. This is discipleship.

**Insight:** *How do I feel about change in the Church? About strict observance of Church laws?*

**Initiative:** *In every rule you keep or enforce, imagine you are Jesus.*

## March 25: The Annunciation

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us the key to our existence: “*Here am I, Lord, I come to do your will*” (*Psalm 40*).

In **Isaiah 7:10-14** God offers Ahaz a sign that he is going to deliver Jerusalem from invading armies. The sign will be the birth of a child. This tells us two things: God’s plan is to save the world through the same thing that is ruining the world: human actions. And each one of us — every human birth — is a sign of hope, because God’s will is to use every human life to make the world what he intends it to be: the Kingdom of God. This is the key to human existence. If we don’t understand this, we don’t understand who we are.

We know that only one human being truly has the power to save the world. That is the one to whom the name “Emmanuel” applies literally: Jesus, “God-with-us.” The third *Preface* for Sundays declares the mystery of God’s will: “You came to our rescue by your power as God, but you wanted us to be saved *by one like us*.” In Jesus the Word took flesh to do it.

And the Word continues to “take flesh” in all who “present their bodies as living sacrifices” in Baptism. By being incorporated into Christ’s death and resurrection by Baptism, we become his risen body on earth, and the sign of God’s “steadfast love” (see March 19). In us Jesus continues to fulfill his mission as the heir promised to David in *2Samuel 7:4-16*. In us he continues to be the “Son of David” who is

Messiah, Savior and Emmanuel: “God-with-us. But only if the conscious cry of our existence is that of Jesus: “*Here am I, Lord, I come to do your will*.”

The words of Jesus in **Hebrews 10:4-10** apply to us: “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me.” We are Christ’s body. “By God’s will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” so that we might all say with St. Paul, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (*Galatians 2:20*). We have *become Christ* to be the sign of his “steadfast love” on earth until the end of time. But we have to believe it. Paul continued: “the life I now live in the flesh *I live by faith* in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Lent is a time to activate faith.

We can do nothing without active faith in the mystery of what God is accomplishing on earth. Isaiah said it: “If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all” (7:9).

In **Luke 1:26-38** it was in response to the angel’s statement, “nothing will be impossible with God” that Mary spoke her “word” of surrender and dedication: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.” “*Here am I, Lord, I come to do your will*.” “Let it be with me according to your word.” And at her word, “the Word became flesh” (*John 1:14*).

Like Mary, “Blessed are we who believe that the word spoken to us by the Lord will be fulfilled” (see *Luke 1:44*). It will be “made flesh” in our actions.

**Initiative: Believe the word** spoken to you and live out what you believe.

## MONDAY, Lent week five:

The *Responsorial Psalm* assures us that God is always present to help and protect us, even when things seem most dark: “*Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side*” (*Psalm 23*).

In **Daniel 13: 1-62** it seemed evident that no one could save Susanna. Two “elders of the people” who held the high rank of judges had testified against her and there were no witnesses for the defense. She was on the way to execution.

Then God “stirred up the holy spirit of a young boy named Daniel.” He cried out, “I will have no part in the death of this woman.” And God gave him the astuteness to prove that the elders were lying.

Often we feel that in our society we are walking in a “dark valley.” All around us we see lies and deception, from the false priorities pushed in commercials to the “spin” and cover-ups we take for granted in government officials. We can’t even trust the news anchors to tell us what is really happening in the world. What chance does the truth have of coming to light when those with money and power are committed to concealing it? How often, even in the Church, is the real teaching of our faith just not made known by those who are afraid of what people might do with it?

Our hope is in the Holy Spirit, who can “stir up” the most unlikely people to stand up and say, “I will have no part in this!” All it takes is for people to be attentive to God speaking in their hearts. To cultivate this attentiveness is *discipleship*.

Daniel was able to save Susanna by working within existing Jewish law, which imposed the death penalty for adultery. But in **John 8: 1-11** we see Jesus saving a woman by setting aside the Jewish law, a law God himself had given them (*Leviticus 20:10*). How do we explain this?

God taught his people gradually. While they were still immersed in their primitive insistence on revenge, he allowed the death penalty because they could not have understood or accepted God’s own attitude toward life, death and forgiveness. But with Jesus revelation was brought to fullness. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a *Son*... the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (*Hebrews 1: 1-3*). Jesus said, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you *everything* that I have heard from my Father” (*John 15:15*). This raises discipleship to a new plane: learning to live on the level of God himself.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Open your heart to divine truth.** Let God take you beyond human feelings, cultural assumptions and shallow arguments. Listen to God.

## TUESDAY, Lent week five:

The *Responsorial Psalm* accepts the reality that often we do not cry out to God until we are in “distress.” Still, we know God will hear us: “*O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you*” (*Psalms* 102).

In **Numbers 21: 4-9** the people “complained against God” because they were suffering. They asked Moses, “Why... “ but they didn’t really want or wait for an answer. All they wanted was relief from pain. But when they began to suffer worse, they were ready to listen.

God healed them by having them look at a serpent mounted on a pole. “Whenever those who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, they lived.”

The serpent is a symbol of sin, but not simply of sin. The serpent was a symbol and preview of all the sins of the world, our sins, taken within us into the body of Christ and “in Christ” raised up on the cross. The serpent represented Jesus whom God made to “be sin” so that “in him we might become the righteousness of God” (*2Corinthians* 5:21). “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (*Romans* 6:6).

The only way we can understand suffering or accept a

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Believe absolutely** everything Jesus says. Then try to understand it. Discipleship is “faith seeking understanding.”

God who has not eliminated suffering from the world is by looking at the mystery of the cross.

Jesus was a “stumbling block” and a Savior unacceptable to his people precisely because he chose to endure suffering and “love back” instead of stamping out evil and pain with divine force. The root of all rejection of him is in the words “If you are the Son of God, *come down from the cross.*” “Are you not the Messiah? *Save yourself and us!*” (*Matthew* 27:40; *Luke* 23:39; and see *Matthew* 4:6)

Jesus says in **John 8: 21-30**, “You belong to what is below, I belong to what is above.” We naturally see things with eyes of this world. That is why we have to accept Jesus absolutely as God — the meaning of “I AM” (*Exodus* 3: 13-14) — and accept whatever he says and does even if we do not understand it. Then the mystery of the cross, a way of saving the world beyond anything humans could “ask or imagine” (*Ephesians* 3:20), and beyond all human comprehension, becomes, not a problem but a proof that Jesus is God: “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM.” When we accept the mystery that the only way to save ourselves and the world from evil is to “endure evil with love” — to “love back” in Christ — we are graduate-school disciples.

## WEDNESDAY, Lent week five:

The *Responsorial Psalm* teaches us to look beyond the present moment and believe in what God can and will do. Then we will sing: “*Glory and praise forever!*” (*Daniel* 3: 52-56).

**Daniel 3: 14-95** is an example of unconditional faith and loyalty to God. When threatened with death, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, “If our God whom we serve can save us from the white-hot furnace and from your hands, O king, may he save us. *But even if he will not*, know, O king, that we will not serve your god and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” They believed without understanding and were committed unconditionally to accepting and doing God’s will. Because they believed even when they could not see, they came to see. And what they saw made them sing, “*Glory and praise forever!*”

In **John 8: 31-42** Jesus teaches that commitment also gives freedom. To bind ourselves to him releases us from enslavement to sin and error. To give him unconditional faith is the only way to see clearly: “If you *remain in my word*, you will truly be my disciples, and you will *know the truth*, and the *truth will set you free*. ”

We sometimes have the illusion that to be “free” is

to keep our options open to change what we believe whenever we please. We think it is a restriction on our intellects to be bound to any “creed” or profession of faith. That it is intellectual freedom to shop around among current or classical gurus and schools of wisdom, not committing totally to any particular one. Building instead our own spirituality, our own *Weltanschauung* or philosophy of life, from whatever appeals to us in any one of them. We downgrade the teachings of Jesus to let them contribute to, but not ultimately determine, what we will believe. We can actually perceive it as narrowing to say in the *Gloria* at Mass, “You *alone* are the Holy One, You *alone* are the Lord, You *alone* are the Most High.” This is to deny, either that Jesus is God, or that God is One.

The fallacy we are falling into here is to assume that we are not already ensnared by our culture — or that we can free ourselves from the attitudes and assumptions programmed into us by society just by the *fiat* of a one-sided emancipation proclamation — as if to *say* were to *be*. The truth is, we all live in the “darkness” of programmed light: the light of this world into which we were born, and which colors our perception of everything we see. Only Jesus, the Light of the world who is not of this world but who came into the world (*John* 1: 1-14), can free us from it. But he can only free us if we commit to him in faith. His truth is divine. We accept it as divine or not at all.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Commit unconditionally** to Christ as your Teacher.

## THURSDAY, Lent week five:

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us a motive to persevere in discipleship: “*The Lord remembers his covenant forever*” (*Psalms* 105). Discipleship is a covenant between teacher and learner. We are certain God will keep his side of the bargain.

In **Genesis 17: 3-9** God made his first covenant (the “old testament”) with Abraham and his descendants: “This is my covenant with you...” God promised human benefits: “You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.... And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now... for a perpetual holding....”

In return God asked faith in God and good human behavior: “On your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages.” This consisted essentially in keeping the Law, rooted in the Ten Commandments, which are instructions for living a good human life on earth.

Obviously, to receive what God promised, the People had to study and learn the Law in order to live by it. Fidelity to the covenant presupposed *discipleship*, sustained by the assurance that “the Lord remembers his covenant forever.”

In **John 8: 51-59** Jesus is speaking in the context of

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Study to be divine.** Don’t limit your focus to human behavior or human rewards. Open yourself to the mind and heart of God.

the new and “better covenant... enacted through better promises” (*Hebrews* 8:6). This was the “new testament” that brought the old one to perfection (see *Jeremiah* 31:31; *Luke* 22:20). What Jesus promises in this covenant is far beyond all that enhances human life in this world. Jesus says, “Whoever keeps my word will *never see death*.” What Jesus promises is something beyond all human power to give or even to comprehend. It is the gift of sharing in the divine, eternal life of God.

Those to whom Jesus was speaking got the point: no mere human could promise this. “Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? Or the prophets, who died? Who do you make yourself out to be?”

Jesus told them he was indeed what his promise implied: “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham came to be, I AM.” Jesus is God in the flesh.

If we are going to be disciples of this man, we must be motivated by more than the promise of a long and pleasant life on this earth. To us God promises eternal life, a share in God’s own life. But he also asks more: divine behavior. He asks us to live on the level of God. That is the goal and guide of our discipleship. And we pursue this goal with confidence based on his promise: “*The Lord remembers his covenant forever*”

## FRIDAY, Lent week five:

The *Responsorial Psalm* brings to mind a fundamental principle of the spiritual life, a truth we need to know: sometimes we enter into our deepest, most certain knowledge of God when he seems farthest away. “*In my distress I called upon the Lord and he heard my voice*” (*Psalm 18*).

**Jeremiah 20: 10-13** shows us Jeremiah surrounded by enemies: “Terror on every side!” Even his friends have turned against him: “All those who were my friends are on the watch for any misstep of mine.”

The effect of this was to make Jeremiah focus on his true source of security, and on the “steadfast love” of God which never fails: “But the LORD is with me, like a mighty champion.” When God’s help is least apparent, when no human evidence tells us he is caring for us, that is when we have to go into the very depths of our hearts and ask if we believe. “O LORD... you test the just, you probe mind and heart...” And there we experience that our faith and trust do not depend on any human signs that God is with us. We realize that we simply *know* God is reliable. In this we experience our faith as a divine gift.

**John 10: 31-42** gives three reasons for believing in Jesus, and the third is the rock-bottom one. The first is the way he *acts*, including his miracles: “Even if you do not believe me, believe the works....” The second is the *testimony* of those whose own lives make them credible witnesses to truth: “Many said,

‘John performed no sign, but everything John said about this man was true.’” And the third is simply Jesus himself, what he is. The others are just backups for this: “Believe the works” only if you do not believe because of the evident truth of what I am. The real reason you do not believe is “because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice” (10:26-27). “The Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf.... Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.... If God were your Father, you would love me” (*John* 4:48; 5:37; 6:45; 8:42).

The fundamental reason for believing in Jesus is simply that by the divine gift of faith, given to us if we are open, we *just know*. This is the test that reveals the deepest orientation of our hearts. If we truly love God, we will recognize truth and goodness in Jesus: we will believe and we will *know*. “Believe the works, *so that you may know and understand* that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” If we don’t recognize his truth it is a sign (one that enables us to judge ourselves but not others) that our hearts are not sincerely seeking truth and dedicated to love (*John* 3:18; 5:38, 44, 46; 10:26; 12: 35-50; *Galatians* 2:16; *1John* 5:10).

Sometimes we do not get in touch with the deepest level of our faith until all other levels fail us. In the absence of human motivation we realize our motivation is divine (cf. the “dark night of the soul”). *In my distress I called upon the Lord and he heard my voice.*

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Get in touch with the real reason why you believe.**

## SATURDAY, Lent week five:

The *Responsorial verse* is: “*The Lord will guard us as a shepherd guards his flock*” (from *Jeremiah* 31:10-13).

**Ezekiel 37:21-28:** is God’s solemn promise to restore unity among his People: “I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen.... They shall be my people.”

Unity in doctrine requires unity in government (religious, not civil). Some person or body must have the authority to determine what teaching is true and what is false. “My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd.” As the promised “Son of David,” it is Jesus who exercises this role forever in his Church. But for his direction to be real he must exercise his government through some identifiable and authoritative ruler or ruling body on earth. Otherwise people will argue forever about what Jesus really meant. And quite often, as we have seen, the arguments will be resolved by division into separate camps or churches. The promise, “I will make them one” requires the promise, “they shall all have one shepherd” — on earth as well as in heaven.

True *discipleship* in the Church is inseparable from *unity with the Church*. This unity is the sign of God’s presence: God said to Ezekiel, “My dwelling place shall be with them; and ... they shall be my people. Then the *nations shall know* that I the LORD sanctify

Israel....” Jesus said the same of his Church: “I ask that they may all be *one*. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you... *so that the world may believe* that you have sent me” (*John* 17:21).

**John 11:45-57** tells us how Jesus brings about this unity: “Jesus was about to die for the nation... to *gather into one* the dispersed children of God.” We are kept united, not just by human obedience to divinely established human authority, but by being *gathered into one* in the mystery of his living body on earth. It is through *Christ’s indwelling presence and action* in the Church, brought about by his death and resurrection.

The mystery of Christ’s death on the cross is that *when Jesus died, we died in him*. The mystery of Baptism is that we were “baptized into his death.” We were incorporated into his body on the cross, died in him and rose again in him to live as his risen body on earth (*Romans* 6: 3-4, 6:8; *1 Corinthians* 15:18; *2 Corinthians* 5:14; *Ephesians* 2:6; *Colossians* 2: 12, 20, 3: 1-3; *2 Timothy* 2:11). Our unity is the unity of one living body, maintained by the real presence of Jesus living, acting, teaching and governing through the members of his body, the Church. Jesus is the Shepherd in the shepherds. As disciples of the Church, we are his disciples. As his disciples we are disciples of the Church. “Whoever listens to you listens to me” (*Luke* 10:16). Then “*the Lord will guard us as a shepherd guards his flock*.”

**Initiative: Be a disciple of the Church.** Read the documents of Vatican Council II.



## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: LENT WEEK FIVE

**Openness to Change:** The most vicious opponents of Jesus in his time were those who resisted *change*. In our time they are still the greatest danger to Christianity.

### Invitation:

Jesus came to give “new wine”: “a new teaching with authority,” a “new covenant” and a “new commandment.” For those who follow Christ “everything has become new.” It is not enough just to observe rules; but “a new creation is everything.” We must be “clothed with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge....” In short, all Christian teachers must “bring out of their treasure what is new and what is old.” This is an invitation to *discipleship*.

### Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?

God is always leading us forward, both as individuals and as a community. The *status quo* is stagnation. Nothing God has created remains the same.

Living by Christ’s heart is not something we can be taught once and for all; we have to keep learning it all our life.

We need to ask about everything we do in church: “How is this helping me develop?” Discipleship is learning. If I am not learning I am not a disciple of Jesus.

We should never judge the Church by what we understand of her laws. Rather, we should interpret Church laws in the light of what we understand of the Church as the loving, nurturing body of the living Christ on earth. The same is true of God.

To refuse adherence to any creed in order to remain “free” to keep shopping around among all schools of wisdom

To believe non-adherence to a creed gives intellectual freedom is to forget that the purpose of seeking is to find. It is also the naïve pride of presuming we can free ourselves from enslavement to cultural conditioning just by the *fiat* of a one-sided emancipation proclamation. Non-adherence is not freedom; it is to cut the anchor chain that held us against the winds and currents of the times.

Jesus teaches that unconditional commitment to him as Teacher gives freedom. This alone releases us from enslavement to sin and error. To give Jesus unconditional faith is the only way to see clearly. We accept his teaching as divine or not at all.

Focus on God as Infinite calls us forward; on God as Incarnate preserves the past

What Jesus promises in his covenant is far beyond all that enhances human life in this world. What Jesus promises is something beyond all human power to give or even to comprehend. It is the gift of sharing in the divine, eternal life of God.

### Decisions:

*Discipleship is “faith seeking understanding.”* Believe absolutely everything Jesus says. Then try to understand it. Accept the mystery; search for the meaning.

*Study to be divine.* Don’t limit your focus to human wisdom, behavior or rewards. Open yourself to the mind and heart of God.

# THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT (Year C)

## Conversion to Unconditional Discipleship

### Inventory

What is your experience of being a “disciple” of Jesus?? What questions have you asked him? What has he said that you have paid attention to? Has your experience ever proved him right?

### Input

Today is called “Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion” and in this name we find the two complementary themes of the celebration. The Antiphon before the procession with palms proclaims Christ’s victory: “*Hosanna to the Son of David, the King...*” The *Responsorial Psalm* repeats the words of Jesus during his passion on the cross: “*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*” (*Psalm 22*). Taken together, they give us the focus of all the readings: that it is a basic Christian belief that, both for Jesus and for us, defeat is victory, and to be looked down upon is to be exalted. Even when our hearts cry out, “*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*” our faith sings, “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*” (We should note that the whole of *Psalm 22* is a song of trust and triumph: “In you our ancestors trusted... and you delivered them.... For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations”).

Authentic *discipleship* is to “believe and do” whatever Jesus says, and especially to reflect in our lives our faith-conviction that appearances can be deceptive. And so in the introduction and blessing of the palms, we ask that we might “follow Jesus with *lively faith*” and “reach happiness” by “*faithfully following* him who lives and reigns forever.” We ask to “honor God every day by *living* always in Christ.” Discipleship is to hear with faith and to carry out into *life* what we have heard.

In order to “live in union” with God we ask him in the *Opening Prayer(s)* to “*guide our minds by his truth and strengthen our lives by the example of his death.*” We are accepting Jesus as a model, and specifically as a “model of humility.” By accepting his self-emptying through humiliations and defeat as the pattern of our own lives we will be “worthy to share in his resurrection.” Discipleship is accepting what does not seem acceptable! Who wants to be a humiliated loser?

### Listen like disciples:

In **Isaiah 50: 4-7** the prophet says that each morning God “wakes me to hear.” But Isaiah says he is only able to “listen like a disciple” because God “has opened my ear.” Human common sense is not able to accept everything God says. Isaiah, like Christ whom he was imitating in preview, says, “I offered my back to those who struck me.... I did not cover my face against insult and spittle.” He was able to accept this because of his belief in what was not visible: “The Lord comes to my help, so that I am untouched by the insults.” Isaiah was evaluating defeat and victory, honor and dishonor, by another standard: God’s. This is what it means to “listen like a

disciple.” Isaiah may have *felt*, like Jesus after him, ““*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*” but he *believed* the rest of the Psalm:

The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord!...

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord....

For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations (*Psalm 22*).

### He “emptied himself”

**Philippians 2: 6-11** tells us that Jesus “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but *emptied himself*,

taking the form of a slave.”

We can say that Jesus, becoming one of us, a human, also became a disciple. He *listened, believed and lived out* what he heard. “He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.” And as promised, God turned his apparent defeat into victory: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name”:

so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

His path to this glory, however, was the way of the cross.

## Triumph by defeat:

Luke’s account of the Passion (**Luke 22:14 to 23:56**) is introduced by the first Gospel reading of Palm Sunday (*Luke 19:28-40*), in which Jesus asks his disciples to take his word that the owners of the colt they were sent to take would let them have it if they said, “The Lord has need of it.” They believed in his promise, took the risk, and it came true. Right after that the “whole multitude of disciples” believed in the promise made of him as Messiah and escorted him euphorically into Jerusalem.

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!

Their faith, however, was based on “all the deeds of power they had seen.” They would have to learn to keep believing in the promise when they saw no “deeds of power” — just defeat and humiliation. Christian hope does not depend on the here and now. It is “bottom line” confidence in the ultimate outcome.

Today’s Gospel begins with the first *Eucharist* as a preview of the “end time” when Christ will come in glory:

I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it [again or]... drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.

The Mass is a “making present” of three moments as one. When we proclaim, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!” we know that in the host held up before us Jesus is present simultaneously

offering himself on the cross, rising from the dead and returning in glory at the end of time. For God there is no before and after, just one eternal “now,” in which we are immersed during the celebration of Eucharist. In Eucharist we give thanks for what was, what is, and what will be, all made present in the body of Christ.

Because, as disciples, we see the present in the light of what was and what will be, our attitude toward what seems important in this world is radically different. Specifically, Jesus tells his disciples to shun like a plague all prestige and symbols of honor.

Among pagans the kings lord it over them; and those who have authority are given [titles]. *This must not happen with you.* No, the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.

This is a teaching of Jesus that his disciples almost universally ignore. We have never understood the danger of prestige. We accept it as the natural accompaniment of power. We are not deeply worried when we are forced to play by the rules of this world. Military officers and corporate executives must accept titles and distinctions of rank as part of their job. Even in the protocol of the Church — determined historically by the etiquette of royal courts and worldly society, not by any religious principles or values — those who “have authority over us” are still dressed and addressed in ways that presume power and importance.

We may accept prestige unwillingly, but we cannot escape the effect it has on us. The GPS of spiritual tradition positions prestige within a three-step strategy of the devil: to stimulate a progression through *prosperity* to *prestige* resulting in *pride*. He urges first an *affluent lifestyle*. This confers *status*, which gives a sense of *superiority*. We then pass subtly from seeing ourselves as the “right kind” of people into assuming that we are the *criterion* of what is right, which is the essence of pride.

Jesus urges us to lean toward the lifestyle of the *poor*, because then we will be *taken for granted* as they are, and this will help us keep ourselves in *perspective* (Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, nos. 142, 146). We see this dynamic of *poverty-humiliations-humility* in the life, and above all in the passion, of Jesus.

Read the rest of the Passion in Luke, noticing who

believes in appearances instead of in Jesus; who believes what Jesus says but does not act on it; who asks him questions but refuses to accept (or respond

to) his answers; and who is still able, in spite of everything, to believe in him, even when Jesus himself feels abandoned by God.

## **Insight**

*In my ordinary life, how many decisions do I consult Jesus about? How much do I draw on my knowledge of his word? What have been the results when I did?*

## **Initiative:**

*Be a disciple. Decide what will help you most to “hear and do” what Jesus says.*

## MONDAY of Holy Week:

The *Responsorial Psalm* associates salvation with knowledge of the truth: “*The Lord is my light and my salvation*” (*Psalm 27*). To grow into the fullness of the divine life Jesus gives us, we need to be *disciples*.

In **Isaiah 42: 1-7** God proclaims the wisdom of the Messiah “upon whom I have put my Spirit.” With gentleness and patience he will “establish justice on earth; and the coastlands will wait for his *teaching*.” He will give life through light: “I set you as a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out... those who live in darkness.”

Humanity first fell into sin through deception: “God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate’” (see *Genesis 3: 13*). Jesus himself said that the devil “does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (*John 8:44*).

Jesus came to “teach the way of God in accordance with truth” (*Matthew 22:16*). And he said it was precisely “because I tell the truth, that you do not believe me.” This is why he was killed (*John 8: 40, 45*).

The mark of Jesus’ disciples is that they truly desire to know the truth. Jesus said this to Pilate: “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (*John 18:37*). Jesus prayed for his disciples because “they have received [my words] and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.” What he asked for them was that they might be dedicated to the truth and made holy by it: “Sanctify them in the truth” (*John 17: 8, 17*).

**John 12: 1-11** shows us that those who do not want to accept the truth will deny it in spite of all evidence. And they will go to any lengths to prevent others from accepting it. The “chief priests” and the power structure in Israel refused to believe even after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead; and they “planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.”

Discipleship can lead us to death, including the small “deaths” of the sacrifices it calls us to make, but it is the only way of life. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (*John 14: 6*). If we believe in his *truth* enough to follow his *way* through many small deaths into the fullness of *life*, we will be able to say, now and for all eternity, “*The Lord is my light and my salvation*”

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Commit yourself to the truth,** regardless of consequences. Believe that the truth of Jesus is the only way that leads to life.

## **TUESDAY of Holy Week:**

The *Responsorial Psalm* invites us to proclaim and celebrate the triumph of God's saving truth, even when the world seems deaf to it: "*I will sing of your salvation*" (*Psalm 71*).

**Isaiah 49: 1-6** is an act of confidence in the face of apparent failure: "Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly spent my strength, yet... I am made glorious in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength."

When it is sufficiently clear to us that our human strength is not enough, we are able to realize that God is our strength

Isaiah's words apply prophetically to Jesus, who is about to win total victory by what is apparently total defeat. He has entered Jerusalem in triumph, acclaimed as successor to King David with shouts and waving palm branches, but he is entering to die. Yet his death and resurrection will extend his mission beyond the chosen people of Israel to include the whole earth: "It is too little for you to raise up the tribes of Jacob. I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

**John 13: 21-38** shows us Jesus feeling the same sense of failure that Isaiah describes. "Reclining at table with his disciples, Jesus was deeply troubled and

testified, 'Amen, amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me.'"

And it wasn't just Judas. To Peter, his trusted friend whom he had charged to keep the other disciples faithful to him (*Luke 22: 31-32*), he had to say, "The cock will not crow before you deny me three times."

Yet Jesus is able to believe that God will triumph, not only in spite of these defeats, but even through them. When Judas went out to betray him, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him... God will also glorify him at once." Jesus is on his way to death, resurrection and glory. His work on earth is about to be accomplished. Still he can say, "*I will sing of your salvation*."

Sometimes when we reflect on the awe-inspiring ideals Jesus proposes to us — ways of thinking and acting that would renew the earth — we wonder if it is of any use: will people on this earth ever accept his truth and begin to follow his way? In answer God tells us to contemplate the glory of the risen Jesus and trust; just persevere in discipleship and trust. Discipleship is not perfect until it is an unconditional commitment to keep learning and reflecting on God's words regardless of results or reward. "The good soil, are the ones who, hear the word, hold it fast... and bear fruit with patient endurance" (*Luke 8:15*).

**Initiative: Commit to lifetime discipleship** based on pure faith in God.

## WEDNESDAY of Holy Week:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is the cry of a disciple who is also a teacher, but whose message is meeting with stubborn resistance and even arousing hostility. His response is a cry to God: “*Lord, in your great love, answer me*” (read all of *Psalm 69*). We do not prevail with human arguments against those who reject God’s teaching. It is God who must and does reply.

**Isaiah 50: 4-9** tells us first that to communicate God’s message to others we need to be *persevering disciples*: “Morning after morning he opens my ear....” God doesn’t use us as pipelines but as *fountains*: we have to be filled to overflowing ourselves to nurture others. “It is out of the *abundance of the heart* that the mouth speaks” (*Luke 6:45*).

Secondly, it is God himself who empowers us; human study and talent are not enough: “The Lord GOD has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak...” The essential element in all ministry is *union with God* that lets his Spirit speak and act with us, in us and through us.

Thirdly, even when the Spirit is speaking in and through us, some people will reject God’s teaching and turn on us. The prophet says that he himself (and prophetically, Jesus) endured beatings, blows, insults and spitting.

But God eventually vindicates the prophet: “The Lord God is my

help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.” Sometimes people scorn and mock the truths of our faith so much that it makes us feel like we are the fools. That is when we have to keep saying to ourselves, “The Lord God is my help; who will prove me wrong?”

**Mathew 26: 14-25** teaches us that our faith must be strong enough to survive rejection and betrayal even by those we have accepted as closest to us or to Jesus. The first to betray Jesus was one of the chosen Twelve, one selected to be an apostle, to hold the office exercised today in the name of the Twelve by the bishops.

When Jesus said, “One of you will betray me,” meaning Judas, the other apostles were “deeply distressed.” It was a shock to them, just as it is to us when someone we have trusted, and in whom the Church has placed trust, betrays us all by betraying Jesus. But it is nothing new, nothing that should shake our faith. Jesus said of Judas, “It would be better for that man if he had never been born,” but that is no reason for us to give up the gift of our own rebirth in Baptism and to turn away from the Church. Jesus does not prevent sin by taking freedom away; he simply overcomes sin. As his disciples we need to remind ourselves of that. Our focus is on God, not on people: “*Lord, in your great love, answer me.*”

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Focus on God’s truth, not on people’s sins.**

## HOLY THURSDAY

### Mass of the Lord's Supper:

**NOTE: The Holy Thursday liturgy begins the three-day Easter "triduum," and so should be included with the Easter reflections.**

The *Responsorial* (*Psalm 116* and *1 Corinthians 10:16*) instructs us to respond to God through *celebration*: "*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?*" A key element in discipleship is to participate *fully, actively* and *consciously* in the liturgical celebrations that bring home to us the reality and meaning of the events they recall. To *celebrate* adds physical, communal and affective dimensions to truths that otherwise might remain abstract.

**Exodus 12: 1-14** prescribes a celebration to mark the night God delivered his people from Egypt. The Jews were to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on their houses as a sign to God to "pass over" their houses when he struck down all the firstborn of Egypt. This initiated the annual Passover celebration, when every Jewish family ate the "paschal lamb" to embed deeply in their hearts the fact and implications of God's saving action in their history. Christians continue this custom in the celebration of the "Easter triduum" — Thursday, Friday and Saturday/Sunday of Holy Week. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus at Passover time revealed him as the true "Lamb of God" whose blood saves all humanity. We celebrate to absorb this mystery.

**Initiative: Be a disciple. Celebrate the Eucharist** fully, actively and consciously, seeking to absorb the mystery being celebrated.

**1 Corinthians 11: 23-26** holds up to us the mystery of the Mass. Eucharist makes present, not just the static body of Jesus on the altar, but the actual event, the *action* of Christ's sacrificial death on Calvary and his resurrection. In Eucharist Jesus becomes present in the act of offering himself for us on the cross. That sacrifice is never repeated, but it is *made present* every time Mass is celebrated. And when this happens, all who are at Mass are present at the sacrifice of Jesus, just as truly as if we were physically standing under the cross on Calvary. Eucharist allows us to *join in* Christ's offering of himself on the cross and to *offer ourselves with him*. Eucharist is not something we watch; it is something we do: "*Do this* in remembrance of me." By *full, conscious, active* participation we absorb the meaning of what we celebrate.

**John 13: 1-15** shows Jesus teaching by the ritualistic gesture of washing his disciples' feet the lesson we learn Calvary: "As I have done for you, you also should do." With him we are to "offer our bodies as a living sacrifice" in service to others, our "flesh for the life of the world." On a daily basis we do this by physically expressing faith, hope and love to mediate God's divine truth and life to others. We make ourselves the servants of all by *ministering*, using our bodies to make life a little easier for others, to communicate to everyone we deal with our love and God's love indistinguishably blended in our graced actions. This is our *sharing in the blood of Christ* made visible.



## GOOD FRIDAY:

The *Responsorial Psalm* encourages us to entrust our lives totally to God: “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*” (*Psalm 31*).

**Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12** is a song of victory that reveals the strategy of God. Jesus saves, not by using divine force against his enemies, but by surrendering himself into their hands in apparent weakness — a weakness that is stronger than any force: the invincible weakness of “enduring love.”

We saw on the first Sunday of Lent that there is only one cause of all the pain and suffering in the world: *sin*. Sin is disobedience, the choice people make not to trust God and follow his instructions, but to do what they themselves think will make them happy. In reversal of this Jesus redeemed the world by an act of supreme obedience in which he abandoned himself to God with absolute trust, even though it seemed he was delivering himself to total destruction. “We accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.” But his trusting obedience saved the world: “Because he surrendered himself to death...he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses.” His final words are the response that will bring our faith, hope and love to perfection when we are called to surrender ourselves totally and irrevocably to God in death: “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*” To be able to say this peacefully at death, we need to say it repeatedly every

day of our life.

**Hebrews 4:14 to 5:9** focuses on obedience as the key that won and admits us to redemption: Though he was the Son of God, Jesus realized what obedience really is “through what he suffered.” By bringing his obedience to perfection through the total surrender of himself on the cross, “he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” Our first parents’ disobedience brought death into the world. The obedience of Jesus restored life. These examples summon us to *obey him*, growing to perfect obedience as his disciples.

**The Passion Narrative, John 18:1 to 19:42**, shows us Jesus obeying the will of the Father from his first step along the way of the cross: “Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to him, went out...” And when he died, he was able to say, “It is finished; I have finished the work you gave me to do” (see *John 17:4*). Through his obedience he saved us all — and did so at the very moment when his enemies, speaking for all who would reject him, rejected all obedience to the Father in favor of enslavement to the power of this world: “We have no king but Caesar!” There is the choice: disobedience, sin and death, or obedience, grace and life. *Discipleship* is the choice to live life fully by obeying fully: “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*”

**Initiative: Seek perfect obedience** by learning God’s whole heart, mind and will.

## HOLY SATURDAY:

The themes of the Easter Vigil are *light, word, water* and *commitment to the risen life*. The *Responsorial Psalm* that sums up all the readings is simply: “*Alleluia, Alleluia Alleluia*” (with *Psalm* 118).

**The Light Service** begins in darkness. We kindle and bless the *new fire*, symbol of the new light of Christ that dispels the darkness of all ages. We inscribe in the Easter candle the *Alpha* and *Omega*, first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, to say Christ is “the beginning and the end.” Then we inscribe the number of the current year, saying, “All time belongs to him, and all ages.” And we insert five grains of incense to recall his five wounds. Then we light the Easter candle from the new fire, and the candles of all present from the Easter candle, symbol of Christ. We sing the *Exsultet* (Easter Proclamation), celebrating the victory of Christ over all darkness and division from God. As *disciples* we draw our light from Christ, and we ourselves are the “light of the world” (*Matthew* 5:14).

**The Liturgy of the Word** is light made audible. *Seven readings* proclaim; 1. *creation* (*Genesis* 1:1 to 2:2); 2. the *covenant* with Abraham (*Genesis* 22:1-18); 3. the *exodus* from Egypt with Moses (*Exodus* 14:15 to 15:1); 4. God’s *fidelity* to spousal love for his people (*Isaiah* 54:5-14); 5. the abundant *blessing* and fruitfulness of God’s word (*Isaiah* 55:1-11); 6. the wisdom, and *secure guidance* of God’s word (*Baruch* 3:9 to 4:4); and 7. God’s promise to *recreate our hearts* by the *gift of his Spirit* (*Ezekiel* 36:16-28).

Then we read **Romans 6: 3-11**, which presents Baptism as the mystery of our dying and rising in Christ to live “in newness of life. This gives the key to our Christian existence.

The true mystery of our redemption is that, through Christ’s death as “Lamb of God” our sins were not just forgiven but *taken away* (*John* 1:29). By Baptism we were “baptized into his death” and “buried with him.” Jesus on the cross took us, with all of our sins, into his own body on the cross. “For our sake God made him to *be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (*2Corinthians* 5:21).

When Jesus died, we died in him. Our “sinful self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be

destroyed” with all the sins we had ever committed or would commit. “Whoever has died is freed from sin.” Our sins no longer exist. They are no longer part of our past, no longer part of our history. The one who committed those sins died and was buried with Christ.

Then, when Jesus rose from the dead, we rose in him, so that we might “live a new life” as his risen body on earth. “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” Letting Christ live in us — acting with us, in us and through us in all we do — is all we have to live for in this world.

**Matthew 28: 1-10** (Year A) tells us to *look ahead*. Jesus tells the disciples not to look for him by going *back* to the empty tomb, but in Galilee, where he is “going *before* you,” alive and active. As disciples we will meet the risen Jesus by recognizing him alive in ourselves and others, looking for him in our daily lives, listening for his voice in our thoughts, discerning his action in what we feel and experience.

**Mark 16: 1-8** (Year B) tells us to *look past* obstacles. The women went to the tomb even though they saw no way to enter it: “Who will roll back the stone for us?” But when they got there, it was done for them. As disciples, we keep reflecting on Christ’s words even when it seems impossible to live by them (see *Mark* 10:27; 14:36; *Luke* 1:45).

**Luke 24: 1-12** [Year C] tells us to *look inside* our hearts. The women are asked, “Why do you search for the living One among the dead?” We should not look for Jesus by dredging up the dead works of our past, but by discerning his action in our hearts right now. It may “seem like nonsense” to us that God does not remember or pay any mind to our past sins, but it is true. We died in Christ and rose as a “new creation” (*2Corinthians* 5:17). We live for a new future when “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the old order has passed away” (*Revelation* 21:4). We have God’s eternal life within us; nothing can dismay or discourage us.

We begin the **Liturgy of Baptism** by celebrating the “Communion of Saints.” By praying to those in heaven we acknowledge that they are alive and in communication with us, as we shall be with them for all eternity. Christ has overcome death.

*The Blessing of the Water* reminds us that:

- water was the matrix of *life* at creation;
- through the waters of the great flood God “made an end of sin and a *new beginning* of goodness”;
- through the waters of the Red Sea God delivered us from slavery and set us *free*;
- in the waters of the Jordan Jesus was “baptized and *anointed* with the Spirit”;
- from the blood and water that flowed from Christ’s side on the cross the *Church* was born;

*The water of Baptism* does all of these things for us: We *become Christ* through “rebirth” as Christ’s body and sharers in his divine life. It “makes the seed [of

God’s word] to grow in us” as *disciples*. It “sets us free” from sin and slavery to our culture that we might be *prophets* “anointed” with the “power of the Spirit.” As the “wellspring of all holiness” the “water and the blood” consecrate us as *priests* to “go out and teach all nations” by giving expression in our flesh to the divine faith, hope and love within us. It commissions us to “make an end of sin and a new beginning of goodness” as *stewards* of his Kingship, sent and empowered to “renew the face of the earth.”

We recommit ourselves to this in the *Renewal of Baptismal promises*, promising to “serve God faithfully in his holy Catholic Church.”

**Initiative: Renew your Baptismal promises** during the Easter Vigil as a *conscious commitment* to live out the five mysteries and commitments of your Baptism.

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION: HOLY WEEK

**Conversion to Unconditional Discipleship:** Authentic discipleship is to “believe and do” whatever Jesus says, even when unacceptable to human common sense.

### Invitation:

Holy Week invites us to accept Jesus as a model, and his self-emptying through humiliations and defeat as the pattern of our own lives. It promises we will “reach happiness” by “faithfully following him who lives and reigns forever.”

### Our faith: How many of these statements do you believe?

Jesus, by becoming one of us, also became a disciple. As a human he *listened, believed and lived out* what he heard. He “became obedient to the point of death.”

Disciples whose faith is based on “deeds of power” must learn to keep believing when all they see is defeat and humiliation. The “bottom line” of Christian faith and hope is confidence in the ultimate outcome.

Our attitude toward what seems important in this world is radically different because, as disciples, we see the present in the light of what was and what will be.

The strategy of the devil is to stimulate a progression through *prosperity* to *prestige* to *pride*. *Affluence* confers *status*, which gives a sense of *superiority*. We see ourselves first as the “right kind” of people, then as the *criterion* of what is right, which is the essence of pride. Jesus urges us to lean toward the lifestyle of the *poor*, because then we will be *taken for granted* as they are, and this will help us keep ourselves in *perspective*, which is the essence of humility.

Discipleship can lead us to death, beginning with the small “deaths” of the sacrifices it calls us to make. But it is the only valid way to follow Jesus who alone is “the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.”

There is only one cause of all the pain and suffering in the world: *sin*. Sin is disobedience, the choice people make not to trust God and follow his instructions, but to do what they themselves think will make them happy.

A key element in discipleship is to participate *fully, actively and consciously* in the Mass in order to experience the reality of the mystery which is the “source and summit” of Christian life.

As disciples we meet the risen Jesus by recognizing him alive in ourselves and others, looking for him in our daily lives, listening for his voice in our thoughts, discerning his action in what we feel and experience of God.

### Decisions:

*Commit to lifetime learning* based on pure faith in God. This is discipleship.

*Celebrate the Eucharist* fully, actively and consciously, seeking to absorb the mystery being celebrated.

## What has this booklet done for you?

These reflections were designed to help you deepen your appreciation of *conversion to Jesus Christ*, and specifically conversion to *discipleship*.

It will help to look back and review what you have seen, asking what your response has been so far. Remember, the effectiveness of input is measured by the authenticity of output.

- How much time did you give to reading and praying over these reflections? Did you find yourself looking forward to doing this?
- What do you know about *conversion* now that you didn't know before?
- Did these reflections confirm you in your choice to be a *disciple*?
- What do you know about *discipleship* now that you didn't know before?
- Did these reflections lead you to make any *changes*; for example, to change something in the way you spend your time or make decisions?
- **More specifically...**
  - Do you have a clearer and deeper appreciation of the connection between *discipleship* (especially reading and reflecting on God's word), and *conversion* to a more authentic living of the Gospel?
  - Do you see more clearly how the *event* of Christ's Incarnation, death and resurrection changes our whole perception of the purpose, principles and priorities that should direct our choices on earth?
  - Do you see more clearly that discipleship is a *gradual process* of growing into understanding of God's laws and coming to embrace them fully?
  - Do you see more clearly that discipleship is an acceptance to live by a different *guidance system*? One that is beyond human wisdom?
  - Do you understand that as a disciple of Jesus you must expect to be led beyond human reason to live and love on the level of God?
  - Are you determined to persevere in discipleship by pure faith, regardless of cost or consequences, even when it seems unrewarding?

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