

An invitation to...

Repent and Believe the Good News

Reflections for
the Season of Lent
Year C

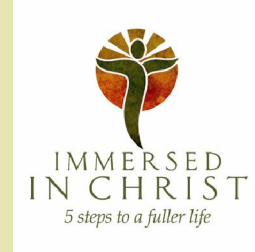


On the Theme of
Discipleship: Receiving the Word to Grow

By David M. Knight

To be immersed in Christ:

Use the Lenten season to grow into your baptismal consecration as **Disciple**. Focus on the call to “repentance,” a radical change of mind, heart and behavior, of attitudes and direction in life. Look more closely at your life in the light of what Jesus calls you to be. Devote yourself to interaction with Jesus as *Teacher*.



Prayer focus: The “prayer of discipleship” is meditation. To meditate on Scripture, take five minutes to read any passage you choose; ask questions about what it could mean for you; and respond with a decision.

At Mass: Listen to the Scripture readings intently, as a disciple (learner), determined to *get something out of them*.

Keep the season in the senses: Make a “prayer corner” in your house: a table with symbols like a Bible, crucifix, candle, palms, whatever you like. Be creative. Put a copy of the Bible in a prominent place in your house (and workplace, if you can) to remind you that God’s word calls us to constant conversion. Display palms in your house to say you reject the false power and promises of this world. Put smaller pieces of palm in various places at work and at home where you will see them all day.

Waking prayer: As soon as you awake, say the *Our Father*, conscious that these petitions are the priorities of Jesus’ own heart. As you say the petitions, will them to be the priorities of your heart and the goal of all you do in life. Make this a prayer of longing for total conversion to each of its petitions as the goal and desire of your life.

Morning prayer: Once out of bed, *begin the day* by reciting with renewed hope Psalm 51. Let it set the tone of your day.

Meditation on Scripture: You might want to use the reflections on the Mass readings given in this booklet.

Throughout the day: Before every action say, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12; Matthew 5:14) and add, “Lord, you are the Way, guide me; you are the Truth, enlighten me; you are the Life, fill me.”

Noon prayer: Sometime around noon, even if just while walking down the hall, take time to review your day so far. Try to answer one or more of these questions:

- Did I read Scripture today? Did it make a difference?
- Did I say frequently, “Lord, you are the Way, guide me; you are the Truth, enlighten me; you are the Life, fill me”?
- What is the best decision I made today? Was it guided by Christ’s words?

Say again: “Lord, you are the Way, guide me; you are the Truth....”

Evening prayer: Before or after supper, sit alone or with others in front of your “prayer corner.” Absorb the meaning of the symbols there. Take a moment of silence to ask yourself what you have “changed your mind” about today through reflection on God’s word. If you are praying with others, then after reflecting let all share their experiences. Recite reflectively Jesus’ *prayer for his disciples* (John, 17).

Night prayer: Before you go to sleep, recite with peace Psalm 130: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord....”.

Ash Wednesday

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? 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 Passion (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*" (Psalm 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

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).

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 assures 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 by following the “instructions on the bottle”? 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.

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

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 Mass. *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, 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,

The First Sunday of Lent

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 attitudes? 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 Rs” 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 if we call:

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 year’s crop, they are to take a basket of them to put 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.”¹ 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.²

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: “But Jesus replied, ‘Scripture says....’” He answered all three temptations by quoting the words of God in Scripture. 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 interaction 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 into. 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?³

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.⁴ And in using our wills we experience the Holy Spirit moving and empowering us by love. These are the three "Rs" 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 that fullness of life Jesus came to give.⁵

In his desert temptations Jesus taught us by example that it does no good to fill our stomachs with food for the body to draw on if we do not fill our minds with the word of God for our memories to draw on. And 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. And 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 — "confessing with your lips" (which is faith expressed in a physical "work") — and in action. 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.

¹James 2:26. ²Romans 5:5; John 14:16. ³John 10:10. ⁴John 1:1-14. We use "logos" with this meaning in "geo-logy," the intelligibility of the earth; in "biology," the study of physical life, etc. ⁵The New Testament word for "sin" is *hamartia*, which means "to miss" or "to fall short."

Insight: *Do I appreciate the value of the "three Rs" — 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.*

MONDAY, first week in Lent: ¹

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*.

¹Weekday readings are the same every year during the Lenten season.

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*” (*Psalm 34*). But the verses 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 this 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* — learning and living the word of God that teaches us the mind of God. This 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 this can happen. And when it does, 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 took ship, trying to flee from God’s presence — and wound up indigestible fish food!

But when he did proclaim that Nineveh was about to be destroyed, they converted. And they did it with a “broken, humbled heart.” The same thing can happen with us.

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.

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” — which 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 — or about his mind and 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!*” (*Psalm 138*).

Esther C (after chapter 4): **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 a *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? 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. Ask him to open for you the way to a fuller life, based on his guidance. Believe that if you seek you will find. 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 still going 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. This makes it against the New Law. The Sermon on the Mount makes every Commandment an instruction for living on the level of God. And grace empowers us to do this.

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 that comes from 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, 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 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.

The Second Sunday of Lent

Having Eyes That See

Inventory

What do I look to 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 the law of God? 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, law without love is a lie.

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. 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:

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 faith alone, without the good works that follow from 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.²

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, 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.³

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.⁴

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.”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, but 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.”⁶

¹Galatians 2:16. ²Matthew 5:16. ³John 17:3; Romans 15:13 (and see Galatians 5:5, Colossians 1:27, 1Peter 1:21); 1John 4:7-16; 1Corinthians 13:13.

⁴see Matthew 9:9-13, 12:1-7. ⁵Malachi 4:4-5. ⁶Philippians 2:5. Saint Augustine speaking to the baptized, said, “We have become not only Christians, but Christ. Marvel and rejoice: we have *become Christ!*” (see John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, nos. 20,21).

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, second week in Lent:

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, second week in Lent:

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 Church officials and authorities do our thinking for us: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you... but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.”

We have to distinguish between the teaching *of the Church* and the teaching of those *in* the Church. Unless it is simply a repetition of Church doctrine (without interpretation) the teaching of someone not deeply united to God is suspect. 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*).

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 as disciples

Initiative: Be a disciple. Try to learn constantly from Jesus himself — but with humility: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled...”

WEDNESDAY, second week in Lent:

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!*” (*Psalm 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. He will triumph by rising from the dead to 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. They must turn away from power and prestige. Those who are given authority in his Church must refuse to be treated with more 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. Present practice notwithstanding, 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: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Be uncomfortable with any signs of special respect given to you because of your rank or position.

THURSDAY, second week in Lent:

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 is the hope we *act on*. So the one who “hopes in the Lord” is one who “meditates on his law day and night” to understand 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, second week in Lent:

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 Joseph’s story (***Genesis 37:3-28***) we can only recognize “the marvels the Lord has done” with hindsight. Now that we know what Joseph did for his family later, we can see God’s guiding hand in the choice 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.

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.”

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees realized that in his parable “he was speaking about 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 to understand* and to *act*.

Initiative: Be a disciple. Make use of the treasure of God’s recorded actions in Scripture. From what he has done learn what to expect. Learn hope.

SATURDAY, second week in Lent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us courage to convert to God with our whole heart: “*The Lord is kind and merciful*” (*Psalm 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, 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 just filled with light and love as we sit around; or if we are, it has no effect until we make a choice.

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.

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

The Third Sunday of Lent

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 (the meaning of “repentance,” *metanoia*), changes our behavior. 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*” (*Psalm 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 human acts of virtue — but human acts made divine through union with God in grace. He says to Moses, “So come, *I will send you* to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.”

Moses is not stupid. He 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 you didn’t just know something generic about him, but 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 — 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 and procedures. Then I begin to *know* God

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

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

One for All, 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” or “conversion” asked of us is the decision to become committed students of Christ’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.¹

But notice that it was his “disciples” he sent out. It is only to those who *know* him that he gives the power to heal. His promise was and is: “I will do whatever you ask *in my name*, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If *in my name* you ask me for anything, I will do it.” To act with the healing power of Jesus on earth, we have to “know his name.” To do this we have to do whatever it takes to make his word bear fruit in our lives — dig around it and manure it — *read, reflect* and *respond* to what God reveals to us, whether through Scripture or in other ways. We have to be actively *disciples*.

Each one of us has to work to save all from the effects of sin. All of us have to work for (and as) 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.

¹Matthew 9:36 to 10:1. ²John 14:13-14

Insight: *Do I “know” God as a person? Do we know each other’s names?*

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

MONDAY, third week in Lent:

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?

Suppose you began 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?*”

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!

TUESDAY, third week in Lent:

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.”

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.

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.

WEDNESDAY, third week in Lent:

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 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, and 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 even the wisdom of these (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 "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, third week in Lent:

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 when he 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 think in our discouraged moments that it is a credible description of people in our 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, third week in Lent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* is an invitation to *wisdom*: “I am the Lord your God: hear my voice” (*Psalm* 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 defecation, 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.” (Suggestion: try the plan in *Reaching Jesus: Five Steps to a Fuller Life*).

SATURDAY, third week in Lent:

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 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 “theologians,” the “liberals” and the “lax” Catholics who do not adhere blindly to all the rules and directives that are sent out from various departments in the Vatican, and who do not blindly accept all the current doctrinal rulings of the “magisterium” as representative of the whole teaching of the Church. They are not only “convinced of their own righteousness,” but also convinced of their own *orthodoxy* — 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 answers” that persons in authority (a narrow and misleading definition of the “magisterium” of the Church) have given to current questions without seeing these against the background of the Church’s historical and truly universal teaching. Because they reduce the truth to just what they see, they can be convinced that what they see is the whole truth. So they are characteristically deaf to explanations and to answers given to their objections. They listen 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 Phariseism and a lethal rejection of *discipleship*.

Initiative: Be a disciple. Learn. Do not judge before you understand

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

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.*” As disciples 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 in *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*.”¹

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.”

“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 is 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.²

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 this. God does not just “forgive” our sins or “overlook” them, not “counting them against us.” No, we say that Jesus is 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.³ Because of it, we are not afraid to face or admit any guilt. Through Christ our sins are *taken away*.

¹ see *Exodus*, chapter 13 and *Deuteronomy* 8:3, which Jesus quoted in *Matthew* 4:4: “He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

²*Jeremiah* 2:13. ³see *Romans* 6: 3-11; *Colossians* 2:11-14.

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.*

MONDAY, fourth week in Lent:

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 **Luke 4: 43-54** we see Jesus healing a royal official's son — but not before he changes his 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, fourth week in Lent:

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 in fact, although Ezekiel didn’t know it, 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 grace and 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. For 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.

Luke 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 generated a “backlash” movement in the Church, a “new Phariseeism,” which is pressing for automatic (that is, unthinking) obedience to every directive from the Vatican. These people are insisting on an equally unthinking affirmation of every teaching that the pope or one of the Vatican departments has proposed as the “official” (but 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 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.

Initiative: Be a disciple. Follow the laws that give life. Remember that it is true obedience to try to achieve the *goal* of the law — which is always to give life.

WEDNESDAY, fourth week in Lent:

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 identify and propagate the incomplete but “official” answers found in catechisms and summaries of Catholic doctrine? These “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 “Cliff notes.” This is not discipleship; it is self-deception.

In **Luke 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, and 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, fourth week in Lent:

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 Mass *Response* 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 reacts to his people’s infidelity the way any normal human being would, and 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.”

Luke 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.

Initiative: Be a disciple. Express your faith by *interacting consciously* with Jesus at Mass, when you pray, when you act by his principles.

FRIDAY, fourth week in Lent:

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 tells us the mind set of those who are angered by people who try to live by the words and example of the Lord. The disciples are “obnoxious” to them, because their life “is not like that of others” and their ways are “different.” The disciples believe their life is headed toward fulfillment — that they have a “blessed destiny” — and that they 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 **Luke 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 that you are.

SATURDAY, fourth week in Lent:

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*).

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: family, our 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” (*1 Corinthians 3: 3-4*). 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 **Luke 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 or the propaganda of pressure groups.

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.

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Conversion to Being Divine

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 Christianity — but do not accept the reality of Jesus Christ. Like the “chief priests and the Pharisees,” the “elders and scribes” who opposed everything Jesus did and eventually managed to get him killed, the greatest enemies of Christianity are those within Christianity itself who reject *change*.¹

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? What is the one thing all three of these groups had in common?

They all had something to lose — or thought they did — if Jesus and his teaching became the focus of people’s religion. He was a threat to the *status quo* they had established, and of which they were the invested defenders.

The “elders” (respected, 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* according to the image of the Creator.” In short, every Christian teacher must be one who “brings out of his treasure *what is new and what is old*.”²

¹see *Matthew* 16:21; 21:42-45. ²see *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 inspires us to say — at the risk of sounding like wild liberals! — “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!*”¹

“*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 with you? Ask what the doctrinal implications are of conducting our communal worship in a language kept intentionally unintelligible to the laity. What error does this *teach* about the nature of the Mass?)

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 have to ask about everything we do in church: “How is this helping me to develop and grow?” 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*” (*Psalm 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”². 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.”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*.

¹see Isaiah 1:10-18 . ²Leviticus 20:10. ³John 17:3.

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.*

MONDAY, fifth week in Lent:

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?

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 **Luke 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, assumptions and arguments. Listen to God.

TUESDAY, fifth week in Lent:

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*” (*Psalm 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 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; see Matthew 4:6*)

Jesus says in **Luke 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.

Initiative: Be a disciple. Believe absolutely everything Jesus says. Then try to understand it. Discipleship is “faith seeking understanding.”

WEDNESDAY, fifth week in Lent:

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 **Luke 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, but building 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.

The fallacy 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, fifth week in Lent:

The *Responsorial Psalm* gives us a motive to persevere in discipleship: “*The Lord remembers his covenant forever*” (*Psalm 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 **Luke 8:51-59** Jesus is speaking in the context of 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*”

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.

FRIDAY, fifth week in Lent:

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! Denounce! let us denounce him.” 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.

In **Luke 10: 31-42** Jesus gives three reasons for believing in him, 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, the most important reason is simply Jesus himself, what he is. The others are just backups for this: “Even if you do not believe me...” (see *John 4:48*). The fundamental reason is just 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*. If we don’t recognize his truth it is a sign 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*).¹

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. *In my distress I called upon the Lord and he heard my voice.*

¹ This doesn’t enable us to judge others. Many are surrendered to God in faith, but have a mental or emotional block against what they perceive as Christianity. They believe in Jesus without knowing it.

Initiative: Be a disciple. Get in touch with the real reason why you believe..

SATURDAY, fifth week in Lent:

The *Responsorial verse* is: “*The Lord will guard us as a shepherd guards his flock*” (see 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.”

But unity in doctrine requires unity in government. 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 and practical, not just matter for speculation, 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 or desires. And quite often 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.”

True *discipleship* in the Church is inseparable from *unity with the Church*. This unity is the sign of God’s presence: “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).

Luke 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 the mystery of *Christ’s indwelling presence and action* in the Church.

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 must be disciples of the Church. 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.

The Sixth Sunday of Lent

Conversion to Unconditional Discipleship

Inventory

What do you think it means to be a “disciple” of Jesus? What is your experience of it? What questions have you asked Jesus? What has he said that you have paid attention to? Has your experience ever proved him right?

Input

Today is called both “Passion Sunday” and “Palm Sunday,” and in the two names 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 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. It is a basic Christian belief that, both for Jesus and for us, defeat is victory, dishonor is glory, 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!*”¹

In the introduction and blessing of the palms, we ask that we might “follow Jesus with *lively faith*” and “reach one day the happiness of the new and everlasting Jerusalem by *faithfully following* him who lives and reigns forever.” We ask that we might “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.” This is discipleship accepting what does not seem acceptable at all! Who wants to be a humiliated loser?

¹ 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.”

To listen like a disciple:

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 spit-tle.” 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 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; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations (*Psalms 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.

The rock-bottom source of our confidence is that this same Jesus, by taking our bodies to be his own, took on our weakness and gave us his strength.

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 *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," which is present to us and in which we are immersed in 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. There may be no completely consistent option 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, although the wise among them try to remove the barriers this inevitably erects between them and those under their authority. But 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 given pretentious titles like "excellency," and "your eminence," and dressed in outlandish costumes that project power and importance. This is in direct contradiction to the instructions of Jesus, who made the radical innovation of divorcing *function* from *prestige*. Those whose function it is in the Church to exercise authority should depend for its support on the faith of the people, not on the impressiveness (or intimidation) of worldly symbols of importance.

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 and refuses to accept (or respond to) his answers); and who, in spite of everything, is still able to say, "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" even when Jesus himself is praying, "*My God, why have you abandoned me?*"

Insight

In my ordinary life, how many questions do I ask Jesus? How many decisions do I consult him 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 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*).

Luke 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*). Do we believe in his *truth* enough to follow his *way* through many small deaths into the fullness of *life*? That is discipleship.

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."

Luke 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. "*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: “*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 God speak and act in us and through us.

Thirdly, even when God is speaking in and through us, some people will reject God’s teaching and turn on us. The prophet says that he (and prophetically, Jesus) endured beatings, blows, insults and spitting.

But God vindicates the prophet eventually: “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 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 as it is to us when someone we 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 it. 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:

The *Responsorial* (Psalm 116 and 1Corinthians 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.

1Corinthians 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 they 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.” In doing we absorb.

Luke 13: 1-5 shows Jesus teaching by a ritualistic gesture the lesson we learn from Calvary: “As I have done for you, you also should do.” With him we are to “offer our bodies as a living sacrifice,” our “flesh for the life of the world.” On a daily basis this takes place in *ministering* to others, making ourselves the servants of all, using our bodies to make life a little easier for others, to communicate to them our love and God’s indistinguishably blended in our graced actions. This is our *sharing in the blood of Christ* made visible.

Initiative: Be a disciple. Celebrate liturgies fully, actively and consciously, seeking to absorb the mysteries being celebrated

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*. And 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.*”

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.

Luke 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,” and the number of the current year to say, “All time belongs to him, and all ages.” 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*; 2. the *covenant* with Abraham; 3. the *exodus* from Egypt with Moses; 4. God’s *fidelity* to spousal love for his people; 5. the abundant *blessing* and fruitfulness of God’s word; 6. the wisdom and *secure guidance* of God’s word; and 7. God’s promise to *recreate our hearts* by the *gift of his Spirit*.

Romans 6: 3-11 presents Baptism as the mystery of our dying and rising in Christ to live “in newness of life.”

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.”

In **Matthew 28: 1-10** (Year A) 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.

In **Mark 16: 1-8** (Year B) 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).

In **Luke 24: 1-12** (Year C) 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).

The Liturgy of Baptism begins by celebrating the visible presence of the risen Jesus in the Saints. In addressing them we also acknowledge that they are alive in heaven, as we shall be. 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 waters of Baptism do all of these things for us.

Then we *renew our Baptismal promises*, recommitting to live out our Baptism with faith.

Initiative: Renew your Baptismal promises during the Easter Vigil as a *conscious commitment* to learn to live as the risen Jesus by persevering discipleship.

What has this booklet done for you?

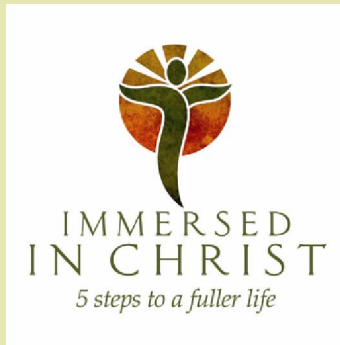
These reflections were designed to help you deepen your appreciation of *conversion to Jesus Christ*, and specifically conversion to *discipleship*.

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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These reflections are based on themes from the book
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chapters one to eight

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