

Mt 13:54-58; Tuesday, May 1, 2018

Jesus “came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (Jn 1:11). This heartbreaking statement in the first chapter of John’s Gospel captures the sad events narrated by St. Matthew in today’s Gospel. It suggests multiple applications, first to the Nazarenes, then to the chosen people, and finally to the myriad of Christians who shut the door of their hearts to Jesus by sin. The specific issue addressed in today’s Gospel was Jesus’ rejection by the Nazarenes, because Jesus was too human. They could not reconcile the boy who grew up into a man in their midst with the prophet who spoke wisdom and performed mighty deeds. Jesus simply did not fit into their conception of how God should act. Like others they were astonished at Jesus’ teaching, but their amazement was not an expression of admiration but one of suspicion and offense. “Familiarity breeds contempt,” wrote Shakespeare. Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth gives the most egregious example of this truism. The Church Father Origen called this the “scandal of the Incarnation. ... The fragility of our intelligence cannot succeed in understanding or even intuiting what faith knows, namely, how the unsurpassable power of the divine majesty, the very Word of the Father, the very Wisdom of God through who all things visible and invisible were created, should have come to be contained in that man who appeared in Judaea; how the wisdom of God should have entered the womb of a virgin, to be born a small creature that screams and cries like any other baby.”

The Nazarenes’ prejudice blinds them to the truth that is before their eyes. That which was holiest and closest to God did not coincide with what was familiar and closest to them. They wanted a Messiah from heaven, who would bring a great display of power and dazzle their dull lives. It could not be the son of the carpenter who grew up down the street. Well, what excuse do we use for not listening to Jesus’ wisdom and following him faithfully?

Jn 15:1-8; Wednesday, May 2, 2018

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah (5:1-7), God sings of His love for Israel, which he calls his “vineyard, my beloved.” The prophets also compared Israel to a vine. Jesus draws on these Old Testament images to describe the transforming intimacy that God wishes to create in each of us.

God wants us to be spiritually fruitful; therefore the Father prunes us so we can “bear more fruit.” Pruning is the cutting procedure (ouch) that eliminates selfishness and attachment to sin. This arduous process is described in various ways. Jesus called it carrying our cross and following him (Mt 10:38). St. Paul refers to *God’s discipline* (Heb 12:5-11). St. James wrote about *trials* and *testing* that produces *steadfastness* (Jas 2:2-4). Finally, St. Peter highlighted the *suffering* that tests our faith like gold in a *purifying fire* (1 Pet 1:6-7).

Enduring the difficulties of life in a fruitful, transforming way is only possible when we “remain” in Christ. This oneness is most intimately achieved in the worthy reception of Holy Communion. Thus, Jesus declared during the Eucharistic discourse, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood *remains* in me and I in him” (Jn 6:56). Those who do not remain in Christ, because of serious sin severed that relationship, will be thrown “into a fire and they will be burned.” This is the horrifying depiction of the eternal suffering of the damned. On the flip side, we have Jesus’ guarantee: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you.” The key to understanding this promise is the condition, “and my words remain in him.” This means our fidelity and love moves us to ask what God wants, because he knows what is best for us. When the obedience of faith reigns in us, it is a witness that we are Jesus’ true disciples because we radiate his love - then we will “bear much fruit.”

Jn 14:6-14; Thursday, May 3, 2018

When Thomas confessed that he does not know where Jesus is going, so how can he know the way? Jesus declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Jesus responded with the sixth “I am” declaration, using the name of God that was revealed to Moses. Jesus is **the way** because it is only through him that humanity has access to the heavenly Father. He is also **the truth** for he is the incarnate Word, “who has come down from heaven” (3:13) Jesus reveals the Father, accomplishes his saving work, and draws everyone to share in the divine communion. By following Jesus as **the way**, we can come to know **the truth**, that is, his revelation of the Father and his loving mercy. Finally, Jesus is also **the life** because he has come down from heaven, and only he can lift humanity up to share in that divine life, which as the Son he has enjoyed from all eternity.

Thus, Jesus added, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus is the “narrow gate” (Mt 7:13-14), the “one mediator between God and the human race” (1 Tim 2:5). Therefore, Peter boldly declared to the Sanhedrin, “There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Philip does not understand the meaning of Jesus’ declaration, so he asks: “Show us the Father.” Like Philip, we, too, are often dense in understanding. He wished for a grand display that would make faith easy. Do we sometimes wish for a miracle that would sweep us off our feet and make faith easy? Jesus gives us the same reply he gave Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father ... Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?” Well, do we truly believe?

Jn 15:12-17; Friday, May 4, 2018

The importance of John chapter 15 is attested by the fact that this is the second of three weekday readings that the Church has us reflect on this important passage. Today’s Gospel opens this vital passages with the words: “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you,” and closes it with the charge: “This I command you: love one another.”

Our love for one another is manifested in how we behave toward each other, even when our feelings may be pulling us in the opposite direction. Therefore in his hymn of love in his letter to the Corinthians St. Paul describes our love for each other this way: “love is *patient* and *kind*; love is not *jealous* or *boastful*; it is not *arrogant* or *rude*. Love does not *insist on its own way*; it is not *irritable* or *resentful*; it does not *rejoice at wrong*, but rejoices in the right. Love *bears* all things, *believes* all things, *hopes* all things, *endures* all things” (1 Cor 13:4-7). How are we doing when we examine our behavior by these criteria? For example, how patient, kind, not jealous nor boastful are we? What do we endure for others?

The Bible also teaches us that our love for God is demonstrated in *obedience*. That is challenging enough in itself until we come back to Jesus words in today’s Gospel and recognize that the most difficult commandment is “loving one another *as I have loved you*.” In case we are slow in getting his message, Jesus added: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Jesus said this during the Last Supper shortly before he went to his Passion and death for our sake. He called us “friends,” but it was our sins that nailed him to the cross and his love that kept he there. Loving this way is not difficult; it’s impossible. Only grace makes the impossible, possible. That needed transformation that gives us the boost we need occurs in the worthy reception of the Eucharist when we abide in Jesus.

Jn 15:26-16:4a; Monday, May 7, 2018

Jesus promised to send two witnesses. The first was the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth. Secondly, he will send the Apostles, and the army of disciples they will recruit. St. Peter and the Apostles boldly proclaimed the testimony of these two witnesses to the Sanhedrin: “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And *we* are witnesses to these things, and so is the *Holy Spirit* whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:29-32).

When Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost, the mystery of the Holy Trinity was fully revealed, and the world entered the “last days” - the age of the Church. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the Apostles immediately began their mission of witnessing and evangelizing. It is important that we realize that the promise of the Holy Spirit was not only given to the Apostles nor to the Church in some generic way. It’s the Holy Spirit’s individual presence in the sacrament of baptism that casts out sin and elevates us to share in the divine nature (1 Pet 1:4). These graces are matured with another outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of confirmation - the sacrament of witnessing. The intimate relationship of the Holy Spirit with each Christian prompted St. Paul to write: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you” (1 Cor 3:16)? We become the Blessed Trinity’s living tabernacle! The Holy Spirit presence in us always stimulates evangelizing as was evident on Pentecost.

Our incorporation into Christ by the presence of the Holy Spirit gives us the daunting mission to convert our secular world. The Holy Spirit does this in three ways: 1) He guides us to *love* unselfishly as Christ loved, which witnesses Christ in our actions. 2) He gives us the will to *study* our faith and the *courage* to proclaim it. 3) Finally, He gives us the strength to *remain faithful* and *loving* amid the persecutions that will inevitably follow. Come Holy Spirit!

Jn 16:5-11; Tuesday, May 8, 2018

Today’s Gospel brings us to the upper room on Holy Thursday. The apostles are filled with grief because they think that Jesus’ departure is an eternal separation. However, he will return to them, but not in the same way he was with them before. Jesus’ absence, which was caused by his crucifixion, will be the source of his great glory and it will be extremely advantageous not only for the apostles but also for the entire human race. However, the mystery of it all was not yet perceptible to them. They could only focus on Jesus’ warnings about his impending death and their foreboding about what it means for their future.

Jesus reassured the apostles, “it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you.” Jesus must complete his role as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is the divine plan. Once completed, Jesus will send the Holy Spirit who will not only come with his gifts to sanctify them, but “he will convict the world in regard to sin and righteousness and condemnation.” The Holy Spirit, the divine Person of Truth, will give the ultimate witness that Jesus was innocent of any sin and is the Righteous One who, alone, redeemed mankind. At the same time, the Holy Spirit acts as the prosecutor who will confront Satan and his human cohorts with the evil of rejecting Jesus. Then the folly of their actions will be fully exposed. The Holy Spirit, then, has a dual role. As the sanctifier he is the great advocate, helper and defender for all faithful disciples. Eventually each person will see and understand how God’s mercy saved them from the clutches of the Evil One and from their own weaknesses and tendencies to sin. However, the Holy Spirit will also act as the prosecutor of the unjust, who indicts them with the undeniable truth of their foolish choices and their repeated rejection of the graces that came to them from the side of the crucified Jesus.

Jn 16:12-15; Wednesday, May 9, 2018

The abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, makes alive in us Jesus' classic paradox that overturns all earthly social values and preconceptions: "He who is greatest among you shall be your servant (Mt 23:11). Within its sublime explosiveness, this declaration gives us a glimpse of God's own nature: "Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but empties himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:5-7). This paradox radically sabotages any definition of power or authority that would divorce it from love and compassion.

Power and love is one and the same thing in God, therefore they must overflow in the behavior of Jesus' disciples. The Holy Spirit teaches us to model God's mercy, which is exhibited in loving service to others, especially the needy. Otherwise we cannot claim to be Christians. We must become like Jesus where the highest becomes the lowest out of love. He is our king who reigns by serving. Therefore, the offering of us to God in Christ, as well as our sacrificial service to others, becomes the preeminent acts of worship in the priesthood of the laity.

Then heaping paradox upon paradox, the Holy Spirit helps us understand and embrace Jesus' second statement: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Mt 23:12). For a Christian the way down is the only way up! There is, of course, no virtue in groveling nor any virtue in humiliations for its own sake, rather the Divine Person of Love teaches us that love is the heart of the Christian life, and love always seeks the lowest places for itself because it puts others first and gravitates to where it is most needed - to the dejected and the down-and-out. Let our prayer be, "Come Holy Spirit! Remake me."

Mk 16:15-20; Thursday, May 10, 2018

Today we celebrate the glorified Jesus' ascension into heaven where he is enthroned in splendor at the right hand of the Father. The manifestation of this event to the disciples occurred forty days after the Resurrection. It is the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy: "And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (Dan 7:14).

In addition to his enthronement as the divine king of all creation, Jesus also ascended to the Father as the eternal high priest. The Ascension, then, should be seen as the completion of Jesus' great sacrifice that encompassed his Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension. The Ascension is the vital completion of Jesus' sacrifice for us, for it is at the *heavenly altar* that Jesus, the Lamb of God, eternally offers the totality of himself to the Father on our behalf. Because he is the enthroned priest-king seated at the right hand of the Father, Jesus "is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25). St. Paul continues: "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent, which is set up *not by man but by the Lord*" (Heb 8:1-2).

This is the mystery that is made present to us every time we attend Mass. This is the reason that our prayers are so powerful when they are made through the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus. How can the Father refuse the requests of such a son? He can't. This is the power source of the divine Mercy Chaplet as we pray: "For the sake of his sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world." There is no request that is too big for God's mercy.

Jn 16:20-23; Friday, May 11, 2018

Today's Gospel reminds me that Jesus said in five different ways. "He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Mt 10:38). Jesus gives us this command in the same passage that he also said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master; it is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household [family]" (Mt 10:24-25). There is only one way to heaven and it passes through the cross.

Now the cross can mean many things. I read that a 14 year-old boy was beaten, doused with gasoline and set on fire simply because he was a Christian. Recently, fanatical jihadists crucified a 5 year-old little girl because it was reported to them that she made the sign of the cross. We are now experiencing another age of martyrs. However, few of us will ever have the privilege to die a martyr's death. Our cross is combating our selfishness, pride, and unbridled sensuality. We have to battle against gossip, unforgiveness, materialism and the distorted values of this world that utterly distorts the beautiful gift of human sexuality. We are surrounded by numerous allurements that pull us away from Christ and the cross he asks us to carry. Consider the money that we give to the church and the poor. To what degree does it reflect that Jesus is first in our life? Then, there is the cross of our past sins and the remembrance of all the times we let Christ down and hurt others by our selfishness.

The important thing to remember is this. If we suffer with Christ, we will also rise with him into everlasting glory and happiness. So let's review! By taking up our cross during this fleeting moment of time we call this life, we will be given an eternity of happiness. Hmm. That's the best deal ever made!

Jn 15:9-17; Monday, May 14, 2018 – St. Matthias

Today we are given a summary of the new covenant. The Father loves the Son; the Son loves us; and when we *remain* in Christ we radiate his love to one another. But how do we know if we *remain* in Christ? It is certainly not found in the experience of our feelings, nor is it discovered in great fellowship, wonderful sermons and beautiful music. Our *behavior* reveals if we *remain* in Christ. The test is simple, do we must keep the commandments and repent from our sins.

It is very tempting to define Christianity in terms that are compatible with the spirit of our age, which measures things by feelings or the latest fads. Many Christians have swallowed these deceptions to their spiritual ruin. Emotional based religion is not true religion at all, because it is nothing more than the worship of oneself. Sadly, we have a lot of that today. The fundamental test is simply this; we know that we *remain* in God's love if we "keep the commandments" as Jesus obeyed the Father. We pray that this will become a reality in our lives every time we say the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Fidelity is hard, that's why the reward is heaven. The irony is that ending habits of sin can seem as a great impingement on our freedom. The devil sells the lie that the key to freedom and happiness is to be rebellious and egotistical like him. The reality of buying into this deceit only brings unhappiness and emptiness in this life and an eternity of misery in the next life. Fidelity to the commandments, in contrast, releases the fruits of the Spirit that permeate our life. They are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22). Are those qualities characteristic of our lives? Judas heard this lesson, but he was preoccupied with Judas. Not good! Well, are we paying attention?

Jn 17:1-11a; Tuesday, May 15, 2018

Many people meet the imminent reality of their death with denial, fear, and frustration as they desperately attempt to cling to this life. This was not the case with Jesus. He approached his death with this beautiful priestly prayer to the Father. At the same time his prayer serves as a powerful instruction for all his followers. There is a sense, then, that the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel forms Jesus' last will and testament. St. Athanasius declared, "It is plain that as the Word he knows the hour and end of all things. If he had not known the hour, he would not have said, 'Father, the hour is come'."

A careful study reveals striking parallels between Jesus' Priestly Prayer and The Our Father. The Lord's Prayer, which is shorter and more succinct, provides a wonderful background for this beautiful and poetic priestly prayer of Jesus, our high priest. Both prayers address God as Father. Both glorify God with the divine name. Both prayers seek to do the will of God. Finally, both prayers beg for deliverance from the devil, the evil one. The key, of course, is that both prayers reflect Jesus oneness with the Father and his passionate desire to operate completely in the center of the father's will. Would that we were all more like that!

This beautiful prayer has a special meaning for our ordained priests, for it is read at the Chrism mass on Holy Thursday when priests renew their vows of ordination. From an ecumenical perspective, it begs the Father to bring about Christian unity—something we desperately need today, because disunity weakens the Gospel message. However, above all interpretations, Jesus Priestly Prayer stands as our Lord's last public accounting to the Father for his mission. The apostles, who were with Jesus from the beginning, will witness his fidelity to the very end. May we, also, become witnesses by the fidelity of our lives?

Jn 17:11b-19; Wednesday, May 16, 2018

This touching passage is part of Jesus' fervent prayer to the Father on behalf his apostles and all of us. Jesus begins by using the example of his oneness with the Father in the Blessed Trinity to capture the tight family unity that he has established with the members of his Church, his Mystical Body. However, he recognized that, when he returns to the Father, his faithful followers would be vulnerable. Therefore, Jesus asks the Father to give us his all-powerful protection.

Jesus faithfully guarded his apostles, and, although they will falter, he only lost Judas to whom he gives the awful identification of the "son of perdition." Judas lust for money led him to steal and come under Satan's influence. When he rejected Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist, Jesus referred to him as "a devil" (Jn 6:70). When Judas went to the chief priests to betray Jesus, St. Luke tells us "Satan entered into Judas" (Lk 22:3). Eventually, Judas recognized the enormity of his crime, but he confessed it to his co-conspirators not to the Lord of mercy. Finally he hung himself in despair because he thought his sin was larger than God's infinite mercy.

In contrast Jesus asked the Father to "sanctify" the remaining apostles. Using language similar to the ordination of the Aaronic priests, Jesus requests that they be consecrated for "the priestly service of the gospel" (Rom 15:16). In the words of the *Catechism*: "The Eucharist that Christ institutes at that moment will be the memorial of his sacrifice. Jesus includes the apostles in his own offering and bids them perpetuate it. By doing so, the Lord ordains his apostles as priests of the New Covenant: 'For their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth'" (CCC 611). Let us pray for our priests and bishops that they grow in holiness so they can lead us into greater holiness.

Jn 17:20-26; Thursday, May 17, 2018

In this part of his Farewell Address, Jesus ardently prays for all of us, who through the centuries have accepted the gospel. His prayer for unity in his Church is particularly touching: “That they may be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us.” Sadly, Christianity has fractured into more than 40,000 denominations. This is the unfortunate result of rejecting the authority of the Church Jesus established. “I did it my way,” is a catchy tune, but it is not a life principle that will stand up to God’s judgment.

About thirty years ago a famous priest conducted a well-attended retreat for bishops, priests and deacons. He addressed the need in these confusing times to be alert and to keep ones eyes open. Then pointing to his right eye, he said, “Keep this eye fixed on the Pope and his authoritative teaching. Then pointing to his left eye, he said, “Keep this eye fixed on the teachings of theologians and other religious thinkers. He then gave this excellent advice. When you observe a conflict between the teaching of theologians and the Pope, simply close the left eye and just look with the right eye! In the turbulent seas of spiritual storms of confusion and error, there is only safety in the bark of Peter.

The Holy Spirit’s gift of papal infallibility has guarded the Church for 2,000 years. The teachings found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are fully consistent with the teaching that the Catholic Church has faithfully proclaimed since Pentecost. This remarkable fidelity to Christ is the answer to Jesus’ prayer to the Father, “that the world may believe that you have sent me.” St. Paul describes this miracle of grace: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6).

Jn 21:15-19; Friday, May 18, 2018

In today’s Gospel Jesus confirms Peter as the chief shepherd of his universal Church. In his office as the visible head of the Church, Peter and his successors have the task of shepherding Jesus’ entire flock, thereby exercising a unique share in Christ’s supreme authority.

Three times Peter was asked to reaffirm his love for Jesus as a way of renouncing the three times he denied Jesus. To capture the feel of the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the two Greek words that are used for the word Love: *agapao*, which means “perfect love”, and *phileo*, which means “brotherly love” or “friendly affection”.

Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love [*agapao*] me more than these?” In the safety of the upper room Peter made the boast he would be faithful to Jesus even if all the others fell away. That self-confident pride is gone. Peter replied, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you,” using the word *phileo* indicating the minimal love of friendship. Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Then Jesus asked a second time, “Do you love me?” again using the word *agapao*. Peter replied, “Lord, you know that I love you,” using the word for minimal love, *phileo*. Jesus said, “Tend my sheep.” When Jesus asked a third time, “Do you love me?” Peter was grieved because Jesus used the word *phileo* for love – meaning, ‘Peter, can you truly say you even have minimal love for me?’. Peter replied, “Lord, you know everything” implying his belief in Jesus’ divinity; “you know that I love [*phileo*] you – Lord, at least I have basic love for you. Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” Jesus ended this dialogue with his humbled apostle with the summons, “Follow me.”

On the day of our judgment we won’t need to say a word in our defense, because our actions will answer the question, “Do you love me?” Will they demonstrate that we loved God with our whole heart, or with minimal love, or not at all? What do our actions proclaim now?

Mk 9:14-22; Monday, May 21, 2018

When Jesus asked about their discussion, a father, not the disciples answered. He hoped for a cure of his mute son, so he pleaded, “I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.” Undoubtedly this was a surprise to the disciples, because earlier Jesus gave them the authority to cast out demons and heal the sick (Mk 6:7-13). Therefore, Jesus’ reply is directed to the disciples: “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?”

Jesus’ impassioned words dramatically shifted the focus from the father’s plea to the disciples’ inner life. Jesus commanded in the plural: “Bring him to me.” In other words: “it is your job to bring the needy to *me*. They, like you, need *my* mercy. It is *my* job to heal.” Tragically, the disciples made no attempt to bring the boy to Jesus, even after their attempt at healing failed. Let’s make a comparison that resonates with parents. What would you think, for example, of a pediatrician who sent away your child who had a life threatening heart or neurological disorder without any recommendation to a specialist? The disciples relied on themselves. That was the problem. They said the words, but they came from their self-confidence, not from humbly depending on their Lord. They failed in faith’s most fundamental requirement – everything must be deposited at the Lord’s feet.

It is important to reflect that we are parents, grandparents, leaders in whatever capacity are disciples only because God had mercy on the lowly, not because we were so wonderful and gifted. We men often recognize in our wives a depth of self-sacrifice and holiness that we lack? Think of St. Joseph, the head of a family that included the Mother of God and the eternal Son of the Father. We man can become effective spiritual leaders only when we become men of prayer.

Mk 9:30-37; Tuesday, May 22, 2018

Bishop Sheen wrote: “Nothing is more beautiful in Our Lord’s character than the way He prepared His Apostles for that unpalatable lesson of apparent defeat as the condition of victory. . . . That the Cross was the condition by which His Kingdom would be ushered in was farthest from their minds.” Jesus was no passive victim to forces beyond His control. God’s logic always exceeds human understanding, and is out of step with the world. Equally astounding is the Father’s love “who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32). Eternity is far too short a period to grasp the magnitude of God’s love. It is the never-ending marvel! The idea of Jesus’ violent death and resurrection did not fit the apostle’s preconceived categories. If what Jesus is predicting is literally true, the Apostles must have wondered in dismay: “How can any good come from it?” Perhaps they were afraid to ask questions because they were frightened that it might be literally true.

On their journey the disciples were discussing which one of them was the greatest. Jesus gives them a crucial lesson on discipleship that is exceedingly important for the future leaders of his Church and those who will succeed them: “If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant (*diakonos*) of all.” This is another of the radical ideas by which Jesus turns our upside down thinking right side up.

To rifle home his point Jesus takes a child in His arms. Then he again jolted their thinking when he said: “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” How we treat the nobodies is a measure of how we treat God, because Jesus identifies with those who are insignificant and helpless in this world. When we receive in kindness those who are marginalized we also receive the Father. Pope Francis is frequently repeating this lesson to the Church.

Mk 9:38-40; Wednesday, May 23, 2018

John expressed his concern to Jesus because the Apostles saw a man casting out demons in Jesus' name, but he did not "follow us" rather than "follow you." This statement implies that John had a misunderstanding about authority. He failed to recognize that Jesus was the only source of power. It certainly did not come from the Apostles. Here, John echoed Joshua's complaint to Moses because Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp, but they had not been with Moses when God's spirit came upon them. Moses replied: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!" Jesus did not reject the idea that the Apostles shared his authority, rather he instructed them to take an expansive approach toward others who are acting in his name. So he said: "Do not prevent him." Jesus explained that anyone who "performs a mighty deed" in his name is not a person who will speak ill of him. Therefore to do a work of healing or deliverance in Jesus' name honors him, and that person is not Jesus' adversary. Then Jesus stated a general principle, "For whoever is not against us is for us."

The leaders in Christ's Church must be open to those who are not within the formal bounds of the Church or who do not have a specific commission from the Church's leaders. Jesus is not, however, promoting neutrality in relationship to himself. Thus, St. Matthew quotes Jesus saying: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." The Second Vatican Council recognized the disunity among Christians, but encouraged Catholics to collaborate with other Christians whenever possible without ignoring the real doctrinal differences that exist between us. Christians should not be fighting against one another. However, we should be able to explain our faith biblically in a way that is both kind and clear.

Mk 9:41-50; Thursday, May 24, 2018

The "little ones" are a reference to children, but more broadly it refers to anyone who is weak or vulnerable, even adults. Scandal leads another person into sin. Jesus emphasized the seriousness of this evil when he said, "It would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." The "great millstone" was called literally a "donkey millstone," because it was so heavy it required a donkey to turn it. Drowning is a terrible way to die, but, in comparison, eternal damnation is far worse.

Turning from scandalizing others to scandalizing oneself by the occasions of sin, Jesus used exaggeration to warn his followers of this great danger. While not advocating self-mutilation, we would be better off lame or blind than in a state of deadly sin. Gehenna, the "Valley of the Son of Hinnam," referred to a steep ravine southwest of Jerusalem where child sacrifice was once offered to the pagan God Moloch. This vile site became the garbage dump of Jerusalem, full of maggot-ridden carcasses and burning refuse. Thus it became the image of Hell and the punishment of the damned, depicted here in terrifying vivid terms: "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." Jesus drew on Isaiah's warning about the fate of God's enemies: "Their worm shall not die, nor their fire be extinguished; and they shall be abhorrent to all mankind." There are some today who dismiss the reality of eternal damnation in hell. They are fools! In the Old Testament, Israelites were warned not of offer sacrifices that lacked salt, that is, were merely rituals and devoid of genuine zeal for God. Jesus here teaches his disciples that the fire of persecution and suffering act as salt, the flavoring agent that stirs their love of God. Only self-sacrificing love brings inner peace and "peace with one another."

Mk 10:1-12; Friday, May 25, 2018

The Pharisees knew that Jesus rejected divorce when he taught in Galilee (Mt 5:31-32). Now that he is in the territory ruled by Herod Antipas they hoped to trap Jesus by either having him repudiate Moses or else say something that would lead Herod to get rid of Jesus as he did John the Baptist. Avoiding their trap, Jesus had a great deal to say about divorce, which is a terrible scourge in our society –spiritually it's worse than the Black Death.

Jesus pointed out that Moses did indeed *permit* divorce, but only “because of the hardness of your hearts.” Then Jesus cited an irrefutable authority greater than Moses, namely, God himself (Gen 1:27; 2:24): “God made them male and females. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate.” Jesus utterly rejected divorce and remarriage.

In establishing his Church, Jesus frees us from its captivity to sin – if we will draw on the power of the sacraments. The hardness of heart that rules men and destroys families no longer needs to enslave humanity – if we rely on grace. The Catechism teaches us that by restoring the original order of creation disturbed by sin, Jesus gives married couples the strength to live marriage in the new dimension of the Reign of God, but we must be willing to surrender to his help. Jesus affirmed that to divorce and then remarry is to commit adultery. Living in a habitual state of adultery is a very serious matter. Therefore great care should be taken in preparing for marriage God's way in order to avoid the disastrous situations that so often leads to divorce. Additionally, Christians should not allow themselves to be captured by the false values of society's easy approval of divorce. Let God's words to the prophet Malachi be the final words, “I hate divorce” (Mal 2:16), said the Lord, because he desires “Godly offspring” (Mal 2:15).

Mk 10:17-27; Monday, May 28, 2018

There is a timeless quality to this narrative. Its appeal consists in the fact that we can envision ourselves grappling with the awesome opportunity Jesus offers this youth. He's primed for action, seeking direction, but he viewed “eternal life” as a commodity to be acquired by his own effort. Jesus' initial reply came as a surprise because Jesus points him to the one who is good, God alone. Jesus is always full of surprises.

Jesus then takes this young man back to kindergarten by focusing his attention on the commandments. Observing the commandments is the indispensable training ground; the basic first steps in becoming compatible with God. Otherwise mortal sin makes that union impossible by binding us to Satan. Unless repented they will drag us all the way to hell, for it is impossible to be in union with God while we are rejecting his will.

This upright young man answered, “These I have observed from my youth.” Then looking at him with love, Jesus gave the best offer ever made: “Go, sell what you have, and give to [the] poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Jesus' unexpected reply penetrated to the core of his being. It is an answer that always seem shockingly irrational to the wisdom of this world. Jesus said in effect, ‘If you want to fill up the ache in your heart; if you want to achieve your wildest dreams of perfection; then strip yourself of everything and enter into my self-squandering love. Tragically, he went away sad because he loved the gifts more than he loved the giver. We are not told the rest of the story, because it must be completed in every life. What attachments hold us back and prevent us from following Jesus – from being all in? Let it not be said of us: “Of all the words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these; it might have been.

Mk 10:28-31; Tuesday, May 29, 2018

Today's Gospel serves as an epilogue to Jesus' encounter with the rich young man. As he sadly walked away, Jesus said to his apostles, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." The great danger of wealth is that it easily leads to pride and self-reliance. St. Augustine wrote, "It is hard to be saved if we have them; and impossible if we love them; and scarcely can we have them, but we shall love them inordinately." Wealth is an elixir that delivers a counterfeit sense of superiority deluding a person to think and act like he is the center of his universe. Then a person lives in the fantasy world in which he is king. Feeling superior and spiritually self-confident is a delusion that always leads to disaster. Wealth is both a great danger and a serious responsibility. Few can handle it. Finally, if wealth is a sign of God's blessings, why was Jesus so poor?

The disciples were "greatly astonished" and said, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus answered, "For human beings it is impossible [Notice: not difficult or even very difficult, but impossible], but not for God. All things are possible for God."

Peter now speaks for the twelve: "We have given up everything and followed you." Implied in his statement is the question, "What will we get?" The Apostles have apparently let go of their material possessions, but "their squabbling for positions of honor (Mk 9:34; 10:40) and their aversion to the prospect of suffering (Mk 8:32) show that they have not yet abandoned all for Jesus. At this point it is good to ask us, "What do I cling to that holds me back?" Another tough penetrating question to ask is this, "How generous am I with God in my tithing?" The reward for faithfulness is breathtaking: "a hundredfold now . . . and in the age to come eternal life." That's what I call a bargain!

Mk 10:32-45; Wednesday, May 30, 2018

In today's Gospel Jesus gives his apostles an important lesson on the mystery of his messianic vocation, and what is the meaning of their vocation, which is to follow in his footsteps. Jesus begins with the most solemn and detailed prediction of his passion that serves as a summary of what will soon occur in Jerusalem. Jesus went up to Jerusalem many times in his life, but Mark only recalls this one time, because this is when Jesus will fulfill his destiny as the suffering servant. As with the two earlier predictions of his impending death, the response of the apostles is inept. We are merely told they were "amazed" and "afraid." They were *amazed* because of Jesus' heroic courage to enthusiastically embrace a terrible fate that did not fit into their ideas of a conquering Messiah. Jesus will indeed conquer sin, death and the devil, but it will be in suffering, obedience, and humility. They were doubly *afraid*: first for Jesus who they genuinely loved, and secondly for themselves. They were not yet the stuff from which martyrs are made.

Believing that Jesus will soon die, James and John move in to grab glory seats for themselves. Notice, they asked Jesus to grant their request without first telling him what it was. Jesus cut to the chase with the question: "What do you wish me to do for you?" Then Jesus uses the metaphor of the "cup," which represents both *blessing* as in the Eucharist and *wrath* as in Jesus' death. Jesus also uses baptism as a metaphor for his passion. The lesson is that we become Jesus' disciples through the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist and all that they signify. The brothers expressed their willingness to follow Jesus, but it is highly doubtful that they realized what they were asserting. Golgotha will change that. Now it comes to us. How faithfully will we live out our baptism in communion with Christ?

Lk 1:39-56; Thursday, May 31, 2018 – Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The power of the Rosary to transform lives, parishes and cultures resides in twenty meditations that take us through the whole Gospel beginning with the conception of Jesus and ending with the crowning of the Queen Mother that anticipates our eternal destiny with her divine Son. The vocal prayers like the "Hail Mary" and the "Our Father" form a framework to help us focus on these mysteries. Today the Church directs our attention to the second Joyful Mystery – the Visitation: Mary's visit to Elizabeth.

Mary has just been given the astounding news that she was chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. But there are no sentiments or exclamations like, "Wow! Look at me, I am to become the mother of God." No. No. She is so inflamed with the love of God that she merely sees herself as the "slave girl of the Lord" (*doule Kurion*). Her love is so complete that its warmth immediately extends to Elizabeth who will endure the trials of pregnancy and delivery in her old age. In Mary there is no detour in her love for God and his children that focuses on Mary. Elizabeth needs help, so without delay she embarks on the difficult six-day journey over mountainous terrain to the house of Zachariah. What about her own pregnancy? What will people think? These questions never cross her mind because her divine Lover will provide. Ah! To be more like Mary and get our interests and concerns out of the picture so we can begin to love God and others without stopping on self-focus. That's our challenge.

As she treads up and down mountain trails to the house of Zachariah, Mary is *Theotokos*, the God bearer. Here we discover another insight that reveals Mary's ongoing ministry; she brings her divine Son to us. She does this by pleading with us, sometimes with tears in her eyes, to stop sinning, and she implores us to pray the prayers of the whole Gospel, her Rosary. For she knows that it is impossible for us to continually meditative on these forty mysteries without falling deeply in love with her divine Son.