

Mk 11:11-26; Friday, June 1, 2018

Jesus' dramatic gestures of cursing the fruitless fig tree and disrupting the temple commerce serve as prophetic warnings of the destruction of the temple. It also prepares the disciples for understanding the significance of the new and greater temple of the new covenant, the temple 'not made with hands' (14:58) that is Jesus' own body (Jn 2:21; Heb 9:11). At the same time Jesus' cleansing of the temple also has significance for the Church, the Body of Christ.

Therefore, we should ask: am I consumed with the zeal for God's house that motivated Jesus (Jn 2:17)? If we consider the "temple" of our own parish and our own household, do we find it polluted with secular values and behaviors that do not belong there – for example: self-serving leadership, factions, gossip, sexual immorality, selfishness, impatience, commercialization and a lack of charity toward those outside our group? Are we bringing the Church into the world, or the world into the Church? The Book of Revelation pointedly depicts Jesus coming to judge individual churches. Perhaps more to the point is St. Paul's lesson that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19-20). How holy is our temple?

Do we have mountain moving faith? Here we need to examine our prayer life. If Jesus meant what he said, then why do our prayers sometimes seem to go unanswered? First, prayer always changes the praying heart when we enter into a trusting relationship with God. Secondly, we often fail to align our desires with the true good that God desires for us. We need to pray according to God's will (1 Jn 5:14), and not with a divided heart (James 4:3-5). Jesus is our model for prayer, because his heart was always in total surrender to the Father's will. As his desires and priorities become our own, the more we will discover the wonderful ways God always answers our prayers. "Not my will, but yours be done."

Mk 12:1-12; Monday, June 4, 2018

This parable describes a typical agricultural scene in Jesus' native Galilee. It would remind his audience of Isaiah's "song of the vineyard," an allegory about God's dealings with unfaithful Israel (Isa 5:1-2, 7). But Jesus' version gives it a new turn as the owner leased his vineyard to tenants, signifying the religious leaders of Israel. At the time of the harvest, the owner sends a servant to obtain his share of the produce, literally, "the fruits." In sacred Scripture fruits often signify the result of good or evil conduct. God expects good fruit from his people – justice, piety, and good deeds (Hos 10:12; Jn 15:2; Gal 5:22).

God's servants, the prophets, were mistreated. For example, Micaiah was imprisoned on bread and water (1 Kgs 22:27), Jeremiah was scourged and put in stocks (Jer 20:2), Zechariah was stoned in the temple courts (2 Chron 24:20-24), and Isaiah was sawn in two (Heb 11:37). Then "last of all" the landlord sends his "beloved son," a term that identifies the "only son" who is destined to die (Gen 22:2; Jer 6:26; Amos 8:10; Zech 12:10). The expression "last of all" signifies the fullness of time when Jesus comes to definitively accomplish the Father's plan. The statement, "come, let us kill him" is an exact echo of Joseph's scheming brothers who plot to kill him (Gen 37-20). God does not punish the vineyard, representing his people, but Israel's corrupt leadership. He will turn his vineyard over to new managers who will properly care for it— that, is, the apostles and their successors who are the leaders of the new Israel. To accomplish this, Jesus will become the rejected one. He is the stone that becomes the corner stone of the new structure, namely, the temple "not made with hands." The Jerusalem temple was merely a mock-up of this new temple of the risen Lord and all those joined to him.

Mk 12:13-17; Tuesday, June 5, 2018

Roman taxes were particularly galling to the Jews because they were a constant reminder of their subjection to Rome's tyranny. This was such a bitter issue that Judas the Galilean in AD 6 led a revolt against Rome that was violently crushed. Pharisees and Herodians, opponents on the opposite end of the political spectrum, conspired together to trap Jesus with a question about paying taxes to Caesar. Jesus was so unconcerned with money he had none, for in the divine economy the only coin that has any value is love. When they produced the silver *denarius*, Jesus asked: "Whose image and inscription is this?" These schemers were forced to answer: "Caesar's." Immediately, their plot unraveled for by using Caesar's coins, they implicitly recognized his authority as emperor. Jesus simply drew the obvious conclusion when he replied: "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." Mark informs us that these blind, hard-hearted men were "amazed at him." There is an added but subtle irony here. For the denarius had this inscription on one side: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus." On the reverse side was the title "High Priest" – *Pontifex Maximus*. These blasphemous statements asserted that the divine Tiberius was the mediator between humans and the gods and should himself be worshipped as a god. By carrying this idolatrous coin into the temple, they desecrated God's house.

The principle Jesus enunciates here forms part of the Christian teaching on the relationship of Church and state. Other places in the New Testament affirm our duty to respect civil authority while giving our overriding allegiance to God. Therefore, the *Catechism* teaches us that we must never follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the moral order, the fundamental rights of persons, or the teaching of the Church (# 2242). Let us pray that we all give to God what belongs to God.

Mk 12:18-27; Wednesday, June 6, 2018

At Sunday Mass we acknowledge our faith "in the resurrection of the body." St. Paul tells us that our bodies will be radiant with divine glory (Rom 8:18-23; 1 Cor 13:42-44). No longer will we experience any sickness, pain, or disability. St. John affirms that we shall be like God, "for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2). St. Peter adds that we shall share in the very life of God, the eternal exchange of love within the Blessed Trinity (cf. 2 Pet 1:4).

Today's Gospel on the resurrection serves as a counterpoint and balance to Jesus' earlier teaching on the permanence of marriage (10:2-12). Marriage is a sacred bond established by God, therefore no one is authorized to break it. However, marriage as we know it is a reality that belongs to this present age. It will pass away in the eternal wedding banquet of the Lamb, but the unique love of our spouse will both remain and be perfected in eternity.

The Catholic tradition of consecrated celibacy for the kingdom, first enunciated by Jesus (Mt 19:12), is especially treasured as a sign reminding us of our ultimate wedded union with the divine bridegroom. Like earthly marriage, consecration to Christ in a vow of lifelong celibacy is the expression of the total and exclusive gift of self. Therefore, the consecrated woman is "married" to Christ, and a consecrated man is "married" to the Church in imitation of Jesus. In both vocations embraced in Christ one discovers a source of joy and abundant fruitfulness. Marriage looks to this earth whereas celibacy looks to the next life. Therefore, consecrated celibacy is a sign of the amazing love to which we are all called in eternity.

Mk 12:28-34; Thursday, June 7, 2018

Scribes had endless debates regarding the relative importance of 613 commandments, the total of which was determined by their calculation. Of these 365 were positive commandments – one for each day of the year, and 248 were negative – one for each bone in the human body. In their never-ending debates no one could demonstrate which one was the most important. Therefore, the scribe believed that Jesus could be successfully refuted regardless of his choice.

Jesus responded by quoting the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-5), which observant Jews recited as their daily morning prayers. Amazingly, in numbering their 613 commandments these scholars had omitted the commandment to love God. This exposed that their attempt to trap Jesus was founded on a mindset of religious observance that was legalistic and external. *They* were the focus of its observance: *their* recognition, *their* profit, *their* viewpoints, *their* feelings, and *their* positions. There was no place for God in their hearts. No wonder Jesus said of them: “For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith... You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel (Mt 23:23-24)! By citing the *Shema* Jesus exposed that their debates, about which of their 613 commandments was the most important, were trivial and misdirected. After giving them this irrefutable response, Jesus cited the second commandment in importance. Quoting Leviticus 19:18 Jesus said, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” which they also excluded from their list of 613. The scribe acknowledged the wisdom of Jesus’ answer, and admitted that loving God and neighbor is greater than the Temple sacrifices. In announcing that the scribe was “not far from the kingdom of God,” Jesus challenged him to go further – all the way. After this “no one dared to ask him any [more testing] questions.” They had no interest in truth, so they wouldn’t chance further embarrassments. What a lesson for us!

Jn 19:31-37; Friday, June 8, 2018 – the Sacred Heart of Jesus

It was to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, a humble nun that Our Lord chose to reveal to the world His Sacred Heart, thus opening a new era of Grace and Mercy in the history of the Church and the world. These private revelations took place during the years 1673-1675, and are drawn from the diary of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, the witness of her fellow sisters, and that of her spiritual director, St. Claude de La Colombiere:

“Behold the Heart which has so loved men that it has spared nothing, even to exhausting and consuming Itself, in order to testify Its love; and in return, I receive from the greater part [of humanity] only ingratitude, by their irreverence and sacrilege, and by the coldness and contempt they have for Me in this Sacrament of Love [the Eucharist]. But what I feel most keenly is that it is hearts which are consecrated to Me, that treat Me thus. Therefore, I ask of you that the Friday after the Octave of Corpus Christi be set apart for a special Feast to honor My Heart, by communicating on that day, and making reparation to It by a solemn act, in order to make amends for the indignities which It has received during the time It has been exposed on the altars. I promise you that My Heart shall expand Itself to shed in abundance the influence of Its Divine Love upon those who shall thus honor It, and cause It to be honored.” Jesus also revealed to St. Margaret the first Fridays devotion: “I promise you, in the excess of the mercy of My Heart, that Its all-powerful love will grant to all those who shall receive Communion on the first Friday of nine consecutive months the grace of final repentance; they shall not die under My displeasure nor without receiving the Sacraments, My Divine Heart becoming their assured refuge in that hour.” The nine first Fridays must be undertaken while observing true devotion to Our Lord, also being in a state free from mortal sin, and with the intention of making reparation for the offenses against God.

Mt 5:1-12; Monday, June 11, 2018

The pagans only thought of their gods as “blessed” or “fortunate,” because they were thought to be immortal and hence free from the sadness of human existence, which always ends in the darkness of death – the worst of evils for most of the people of pagan antiquity. Then, there were those who were considered somewhat blessed because they were the privileged few who enjoyed riches, a good education and all the things denied to the great majority of mankind. Against this background, Jesus declared those “blessed” who least resemble the pagan gods, because they embrace their sufferings and their mortality and make these the straight road to God and true happiness. This is the path of the cross for it is the way of love. This is an amazing turnaround: the least privileged in the eyes of the world are precisely those who have the greatest possibility of using their emptiness and weakness in a way meant to induce God to communicate his own life and strength. Jesus is always full of surprises.

The important lesson for us is that those who practice the Beatitudes are imitators of God. The Beatitudes are not negative commandments that forbid sin, as the first Decalogue largely was, in keeping with its nature as the *minimum* necessary to obey God. The Beatitudes are the perfection of the commandments that invites poor mortals to be like God here and now in this world. Then, they can live on the other side of sin, grow the divine holiness within, and become children of God in truth, begotten of the divine Word of Truth who, sitting on this mountain, is now dispensing life through his words. The Greek Fathers, particularly St. Irenaeus and Athanasius, affirm that the Word became man in order that men might become like God, might be deified. Then we live in God and God lives in us. This is the awesome destiny that brings true happiness trumps: “Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die!”

Mt 5:13-16; Tuesday, June 12, 2018

In saying that his disciples are the “salt of the earth,” Jesus is describing a critical character of the Christian vocation. Either we heighten the quality of human life and make it more palatable, more delightfully nourishing, or we have no reason for being. Salt is not for itself. It cannot be its own end. Nor are we. Salt serves a humble yet somehow an indispensable purpose. Nothing can substitute for it. The lesson here should be obvious. Insipid Christians, those who have lost their proper flavor, have abandoned their function as the condiment of society. They have forgotten the salt that was placed on their tongue at their baptism. No doubt they let this happen by blending into the common environment, out of exhaustion, or perhaps out of their fear to introduce a jarring note – a sharp, pungent flavor – into the environment about them. So, how salty in this sense are we?

Light by its very nature illuminates. The “good works” of Christians are the beams of light that manifests the goodness of the Father to all. St. Paul instructs us: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for *good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). This is an awesome dignity and a great responsibility. The Father cannot be seen, for he dwells in heaven. Therefore, the visible presence and behavior of his adopted sons and daughters on earth are the signs of his loving presence. We must be the visible and living images of our heavenly Father. This is precisely why Christians can be such a source of scandal. When our lamps are dimly lit or worse not lit at all, we are responsible for the darkness in our world. Well, how dark is our world? How bright is light shining from the lamp of our good works? Ouch!

Mk 5:17-19; Wednesday, June 13, 2018

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the laws or the prophets?” Jesus was very much aware that his radical spiritual doctrines, which proclaim the primacy of the interior determination and commitment of each person would fly in the face of the Jewish religious establishment and would also lead to abuse and misinterpretations by religious dissenters down through the ages. There are always those who are dissatisfied with the hard truth that demands an interior transformation. Therefore, there are those who are looking for a more private and nonconformist religious interpretation. They quickly discount the Church, which St. Paul called “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15).

History affords us with numerous examples of those who invent on the spot a religious “tradition” that is nothing more than a projection of their own frustrations, opportunism, political programs, and spiritual arbitrariness, often masquerading under the names of “mysticism” and “spiritual authenticity.” In 1899 Pope Leo XIII warned American Catholics against a particular creeping cancer of false ideas. It was proposed that “the Church should shape her teaching more in accord with the spirit of the age” in regard “to ways of living” and “even in regard to doctrine.” Each one, according to these bogus ideas should “follow out more freely the leading of his own mind and the trend of his own proper activity.” He also warned about the confusion of “license with liberty” that is so common today, along with “the assumed [moral] right to hold whatever opinions one pleases upon any subject” and then to act out on them. Among Catholics we see the tragedy of pick-and-choose cafeteria Catholicism, which leads to silly justifications like: “Well, God knows I’m a good person.” Within Protestantism the splitting into nearly 40,000 different denominations is equally tragic and scandalous. “I did it my way” is a catchy Sinatra tune, but it won’t stand the test on judgment day.

Mk 5:20-26; Thursday, June 14, 2018

Jesus is the teacher of the *more*. He is not the teacher of the false alternatives. Today’s Gospel about the *more* focuses on anger. The focus is not merely on the feelings of anger of which we may have limited control, but the sentiments of anger that we nurture with the desire to harm the person who is the object of our wrath. This desire to get even can lead to murder. As always, Jesus focuses on the abiding attitude of our heart as well as the concrete results of attitudes that lead to our actions. The prohibition against murder goes back to the commandments given to Moses. Because anger is at the root of murder, Jesus’ radicalism condemns even the partial manifestation that leads to this evil.

The Greek Fathers called Jesus the “Knowers of hearts,” with good reason. Jesus cannot take into his intimacy a person who may be exteriorly clean in his external actions, but who, in the private chamber of his heart, allows vices that the written Law cannot reach. Unfortunately, the result of this kind of internal anger and hatred abounds in our society today. Two examples readily come to mind. The first is the numerous murders that occur in our cities each year – more than the lives lost in recent wars. The second is the bile that spews out of Washington and much of our secular media. God cannot dwell in hearts filled with anger and hatred. Thus, St. Paul prays, “May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ grant you, according to the richness of his glory, ... that Christ may dwell through faith [i.e. faithfulness] in your hearts” (Eph 3:14, 16f). In today’s Gospel we find the fulfillment of God’s promise to “set my law within them and write it on their hearts” (Jer 31:33). Oh, if we would only let him!

Mt 5:27-32; Friday, June 15, 2018

Once again in today's Gospel Jesus takes us from an external deed to the depth of our heart. His insight into our psyche is simple and keen. The human glance is not neutral, because it is often full of intentions. St. Augustine observed that the human spirit is an active and creative agent that is always seeking some connection, some effect, some relation in which to cast itself and realize its desires and needs. We often look at something, not simply in order to perceive it, but in order to understand it, or judge it, or possess it, or enjoy it, or love it, or exploit it. Morality comes into play in the purpose phrase "in order to." Here we discover an important truth about ourselves. The reality of who we truly are already exists interiorly in potency before it becomes acted out in our behavior. So, the life others see, the environment that I create around myself, the effect my life has upon others – all these are the results of the state of things deep in the chamber of my heart. The heart always comes first, because it is at the core of our being. No wonder that Jesus longs to give us a new heart, his own.

Deuteronomy 24:1 is concerned with the orderly procedure of a divorce and was highly accommodating. Its prescriptions would be very popular today. Jesus, however, is concerned with personal responsibility. His teaching is both restrictive and universal. It applies to everyone. Forget the legality of Deuteronomy for the actual result of a divorce is the husband makes his wife an adulteress, because he legally frees her to marry again, and the husband becomes an adulterer if he marries again. Therefore, the Catholic Church has always condemned divorce and remarriage. An annulment is not Catholic divorce, but the determination by the Church that a marriage was not valid. In that case remarriage is possible.

Mt 5:38-42; Monday, June 18, 2018

"Do not resist the one who is evil." Surprise, surprise! Jesus does it again. Turning our upside-down values right side up, he commands us to defeat evil by surrendering to it the right way, by allowing it to triumph over us. This is a summons to heroism. For it takes real courage and selflessness to refuse to fight violence with violence, evil with evil. Jesus knows that our militaristic idealism against evil and on behalf of the truth can be nothing more than the pious mask for self-promotion and self-righteousness as well as the satisfaction of the base human craving to win. We may deceive ourselves to think we are serving God, but our real hidden motive, perhaps hidden even from ourselves, is to make ourselves appear superior to others. We want justice and wish to crush what we perceive as injustice.

The principle of an eye for an eye did establish some level of justice, because it affirmed that the eye of the poor and helpless is equal to the eye of the rich and powerful. However, if followed many of us would become toothless with one eye. This is hardly the last word. Jesus gives us a better way. The willingness to surprise our adversary with compassion, with love, with forgiveness – with the mercy of the dying Jesus who pleaded with his Father to forgive us, delivers a far more efficient and constructive result. It puts evildoers at the risk of being converted, and it introduces into society the divine principle of self-giving love at all costs. After we have given both our cheeks to slap, he will have run out of cheeks to strike, and perhaps he will be convicted with shame. After we have given him both our tunic and coat, he may feel pity for our nakedness. As we go the second mile together, we may pass from animosity to friendship. Perhaps our gentle love will lead him to see better options than injustice and violence. Isn't this the risk Jesus took when he allowed our sins to scourge him, crown him with thorns, and nail him to the cross? Doesn't his love sit like a burning coal on our hearts?

Mt 5:43-48; Tuesday, June 19, 2018

“Love your enemies!” What? Is Jesus crazy? Yes, he is, but with the insanity of love. This command must have seemed like sheer madness to the ears of Jesus’ contemporaries, just as it does to many today. His imperative is particularly strong for in the original text for Jesus declared, “You *will* love.” Christianity is not for whims as the crucifixion amply demonstrates. Perhaps that is why many of us are afraid to embrace it fully. Loosely quoting Leviticus Jesus begins with affirming our obligation to love our neighbor. This precept even makes sense to the secular way of judging things. After all, it’s logical to love those who are like us and with whom we must get along to live in any kind of harmony. This is the logic of the flesh, of survival. But hating my enemy is natural to me because my enemy is so deliciously repulsive.

Adding impossibility on top of difficulty, Jesus concludes with another astounding command, which states literally “You *will* be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Yet, this is our vocation in God’s mind. So, contained in this surprising command is the Father’s power that can make the impossible possible. The tragedy is that far too few of us are bold enough to take the plunge into love as did John Paul II, St. Therese, St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta and a legion of other saints. To achieve a human holiness like our heavenly Father, we must begin by *willing* it.

Earlier in today’s Gospel Jesus contrasted love and hate. He concludes by adding the command “pray”. Prayer is a love language. When we pray God transforms the praying heart. This is the first answer to prayer. There is an important lesson here. We cannot be the Father’s children without the interior revolution Jesus is here inviting us to. May we all plunge into it!

Mt 6:1-6, 16-18; Wednesday, June 20, 2018

Jesus gives us two lessons in today’s Gospel. The first deals with *almsgiving*, with his focus, as always, on the heart of the believer. He wants us to give alms in a way that does not attempt to bring attention and praise on us. We should seek no glory or reward outside of the God’s approval. After all, his approval is the only reward of any lasting value. Notice, too, that Jesus simply assumes that his followers will be generous in almsgiving. Included, of course, is the important issue of tithing and the overall matter of how we use our wealth. Whatever, we have is God’s gift. Therefore, our generosity should reflect God’s generosity to us. When it comes to tithing, some get caught up in the 10% and miss the real issue, namely, does my tithe and almsgiving truly reflect that I use the treasure given to me to put God first in my life? As St. John of the Cross wrote in his *Spiritual Canticle*: “I gave him myself, excluding nothing.”

Jesus’ second lesson addresses the subject of fasting. One danger of external religious practices is decoupling them from the interior dispositions of faith and love that make them meaningful. Then self-glorification can seep in and spoil the discipline of fasting. Therefore, Jesus here intends to restore the practice of fasting to the fervor that should prompt it in the first place. The purpose of fasting is to discipline our appetites so we can more freely give our whole heart to God. Modern Christians have lost much of the discipline of fasting. In the early Church Christians typically fasted on bread and water twice weekly on Tuesday and Friday. They wanted to free themselves from the tyranny of their appetites so they could surrender more completely to their Lord.

In both of today’s instructions there is an important corollary. We cannot even decipher the true meaning of our own actions, for only God is the true Knower of hearts.

Mt 6:7-15; Thursday, June 21, 2018

Today's Gospel affords the impossible task of commenting on the Lord's Prayer in a few hundred words. The early Christians prayed this lovely prayer three times daily. It is also deeply imbedded in the Church's worship, in the Eucharistic celebration and in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. During the Mass it becomes the prayer of the entire Church. It reminds us that we are in the last times, that is, the time of salvation that began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost as we await the Lord's return in glory.

St. Paul used the touching name *Abba* for the Father in the context of the adopted sonship Christians achieve through Jesus (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). This adoption as the Father's children in Christ by the sacrament of Baptism incorporates us into the Body of Christ and makes us other Christs. St. John also captured the intimacy of this unique relationship when he wrote: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, *and so we are*" (1 Jn 3:1). As a result, our relationship with the Father should overflow with confidence and complete surrender. The very name *Father* transcends all created categories, for he is Father in a way that is beyond anything created, for he eternally fathers the Son. Whenever we use the love language of this prayer, we enter into communion with the Father and with the Son in the Holy Spirit. The Father's love requires two fundamental dispositions on our part. First, we should ardently desire to become like him. Secondly, we must always approach him with a humble and trusting heart just like a little child. Finally, because God is "our" Father, our relationship with others must cut through all races, sexes, cultures, classes, parties, or any other distinctions. Therefore, no matter how despicable or downtrodden, regardless of their offenses and brokenness, they are my brothers or sisters because they are also God's children. Collectively we are his adopted family.

Mt 6:19-23; Friday, June 22, 2018

In today's reading, Jesus continues to form us in a spiritual vision according to the mind of the Father. Therefore, Jesus commands us to store up treasure in heaven, not on earth. In describing the destructive action of moth and rust, Jesus used a Greek verb that literally means "to disfigure" or "render unrecognizable." In the impregnable bastion of heaven, which is the heart of the Father, no one can break in to steal our treasure. Jesus urges us to use meticulous care in acquiring a lasting treasure, which is a life of love united with God. For it is only love that lifts up the world and transfers it into the "inner storeroom" - the Heart of God. Therefore, Jesus reminds us, "Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be." The names of these precious treasures are: *forgiveness, love, kindness, patience, adoration, and praise*. The heart is the organ of loving, not the organ of feelings. An important lesson is this, the heart that moves among the worms must in the end be devoured by worms. Who and what we love matters.

Jesus continues his instruction by taking us from the heart to the eye. The whole axis around which our world revolves is the heart, which is the seat of human intentions, desires, and actions. The eye is the "lamp of the body" because it directs the heart to either a goal on earth or in heaven. So, the heart is like an arrow that is powerful and effective, but, at the same time, it is blind for it only goes in the direction where it is aimed. So, it is our understanding and reason that directs the aim of the heart correctly, *if* it is illuminated by God.

Love is important, but of itself love is not enough; we must love in truth. Jesus brings us the truth in word and example for he is the incarnate Light. Therefore, we must pray, "Lord, teach me how to open my eyes to your light!" and "Heal my eyes of the innumerable diseases that afflict them so I can see you clearly." Without God's grace we remain in darkness. Therefore, we pray that he will give us Jesus' heart and his light!

Mt 7:1-15; Monday, June 25, 2018

Let's face the harsh reality. There is only one judgment that truly matters. It's God's judgment that every person will face. So, Jesus' message in today's Gospel is right to the point as always. Stop judging others, that is, judging the state of their goodness and motivation, so we will not be judged harshly by God on our judgment day. We should pray, "Please, Lord, let me not be judged by my false standards of justice but by your infinite mercy."

Here's the problem. When we judge others, we assume the position of the omniscient center of the world whose insight penetrates human hearts. When it is spelled out like that, we do seem very silly doesn't we? The reality is we judge others according to our limited blueprint for success and failure. Then we determine if others deserve having space in this world to the degree they fit in with our grand designs. What have we done? We have assumed the role of a make-believe god – fun, perhaps, but very dangerous. If we truly had the mind of God, we would forgive all because we would possess empathy for the misery and plight that underlines most human actions – even our own. "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner," should be uppermost in our thoughts.

The habit of judging others places us in the impossible position of receiving God's, or anyone else's forgiveness. Why is that? Well, it is not because they would be unwilling to give the forgiveness we need. But as we have repeatedly defined us as judges, we cannot at the same time embrace our true identity as a sinner needing pardon. Then, God will judge us harshly, not because he is angry, but because we have put ourselves outside the sphere of his forgiveness. Even God cannot forgive an unrepentant heart. That's a very dangerous place to be.

Mt 7:6, 12-14; Tuesday, June 26, 2018

The Church Father Origen has a wonderful passage where he defines with great penetration the treasure man holds in sacred stewardship: "I believe we have received our very soul and body as gifts on loan from God. And do you want to see an even greater gift that God has lent us? God has entrusted to your soul his very 'image and likeness'. This loan, too, which beyond doubt you have received, you must return undamaged. ... Was it not this trust that the apostle meant when he said to his beloved disciple Timothy: 'O Timothy, guard the treasure entrusted to you! (1 Tim 6:20)? And I will finally add this: we have also received Christ the Lord on loan as gift, and the Holy Spirit is [also] our lent gift." In summary, the pearls we must guard is the holiness of God's love as it continually pours itself into our hearts and souls in Christ.

In the thirtieth chapter of Deuteronomy (15-20) we discover the foundation of Jesus' lesson on the narrow gate. In God's name Moses sums up all the observances of the Law with a single phrase: "See, today I am putting before you life and happiness, death and misery. *Life and happiness* comes from walking in the narrow way of the Lord's commandments. *Death and misery* come from trudging down the wide path of serving strange gods while abandoning God's promises. Each way leads to its appropriate goal. "Choose life, then," Moses challenges, "so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, listening to his voice, clinging to him; for there is where your life is."

How could this way be called anything but "narrow," because we couldn't even see the way, much less take it, were we not guided and assisted by Jesus himself who is the bridge between heaven and earth.

Mt 7:15-20; Wednesday, June 27, 2018

Jesus, the true guardian of our souls, faithfully leads his Church to the safety of eternal happiness. Ah, yes! but there is a catch for it is the narrow way that leads us through our Calvary – suffering, the cross. False prophets try to subvert the fidelity of Jesus' followers by introducing easier doctrines. "Listen to us," they say. "We are like you, and we know a better way. Like the wicked queen enticing Snow White with her lush looking apple, it just looks and sounds so inviting. If, like dumb sheep, we wander off into the widest spaces and then go astray where Satan's spiritual wolves are waiting for a diabolical banquet.

In 1899 Pope Leo XIII wrote a letter warning the American church (*Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae*) about the specific dangers coming from false prophets. There were those who argued that "the Church should shape her teaching more in accord with the spirit of the age." They urged "each one to follow out more freely the leading of his own mind and the trend of his own proper activity" – in other words, do things your way. These false shepherds confused license with liberty and proclaimed that each individual should assume the right to hold whatever opinions one pleases. They defined being a faithful Christian in terms of the natural virtues, but discounted supernatural virtues like faith, hope, love, humility, and obedience. Prayer was viewed as a misguided relic of the past. The enlightened Christian's efforts, they say, should be directed to social justice. Need I ask how well we listened to Pope Leo's warning?

During these troubling times, Jesus did not leave us defenseless struggling to ferret out of the Bible what we are to believe and how we are to act. We need only look at the tragic fracturing of the Protestant churches into about 40,000 denominations to see how that is working. In the words of St. Paul: "the Church of the living God" is "the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim 3:15). We are always secure from false prophets in the bark of Peter.

Mt 7:21-29; Thursday, June 28, 2018

In God, *to be is to be good*, and *to be good* is to be *Father*, that is, to eternally bear the blessed fruit that *is* his divine Son. God's will is not different from his nature as father. Thus, when he calls us to do his will he brings about the fruit of his divine Son in us. Therefore, the repetition of "Lord, Lord" leads to perdition if it is not accompanied with action. Jesus declares that only those who *do* God's will are saved. Invoking the Savior is a futile exercise when we are practicing a religion of our own creation, as is tragically common today. Unfortunately, there are some who deny the necessity of doing God's will claiming that *faith alone* is necessary for salvation. They assert that the only thing necessary for salvation is to accept Jesus as ones Lord and Savior. The Bible teaches something quite differently. James declares: "Do you want to be shown, you foolish fellow, that faith apart from works is barren? ... You see that a man is justified by *works* (that is, what he does) and *not be faith alone*. ... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead" (Jas 2: 20, 24, 26).

Others ignore the Commandments they decide not to follow, foolishly living under the delusion that God will accept their rationalization when they stand before his judgment. We all need to take seriously the answer Jesus gave to the question, "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" Jesus replied: "If you would enter life, keep the commandments" (Mt 19:16, 17). Jesus called them, "commandments," not suggestions. We are blessed as Catholics to have an infallible Church that proclaims the truth in these confusing and uncertain times.

Mt 16:13-19; Friday, June 29, 2018 – Saints Peter and Paul

One of the amazing discoveries of God's revelation is that he often chooses to communicate his truth and life to the world through the mediation of flawed humans. Exhibit A is presented in today's Gospel, when Jesus promised to make Peter the Prime Minister of his Church. Thus, the ancient Greek Christians routinely identified Peter alone of as "head," "chief," or "prince" of the apostles. Indeed, these terms express the common view of the whole ancient Church of both East and West. For example, John Chrysostom, a native of Antioch who became the archbishop of Constantinople wrote:

"It is a prerogative of the dignity of our city [that is, Antioch] that, from the beginning, it received as master the *prince of the apostles*. In fact, it was a just thing that this city—which was glorified by the name of 'Christians' before the rest of the earth—should receive as shepherd the *prince of the apostles*. When we received him as *master*, however, we did not keep him forever but rather we yielded him to the royal city of Rome. Therefore, we do not hold the body of Peter, but we hold the faith of Peter as we would Peter himself. As a matter of fact, as long as we hold the faith of Peter, we have Peter himself."

In the ancient Byzantine liturgy on today's feast, Peter is addressed as "Peter the first-chosen, the chief shepherd", and as "the rock of the faith and the holder of the keys of grace." The image of the "keys" comes from this passage in Matthew's Gospel and draws from rabbinical imagery that refers to authoritative teaching that unlocks revelation and imposes or lifts a sentence of excommunication, acts that either exclude from or include within the community of Christ's Church. By connecting "Church" with the "kingdom of Heaven" Jesus shows us the tight bond between them, for the Church is the image of the eternal Kingdom.

