

Mk 4:12-17, 23-35; Monday, January 7, 2019

Does Jesus deliberately exclude some people from the kingdom by cloaking his words in mystery in order to avoid being understood? Say no! The key lies in understanding the word “mystery.” In the Old Testament, *mystery* refers to God’s plans that are secret, yet revealed to the prophets for the sake of God’s people. They are a mystery not because God wants them unknown, but because they become known only by revelation. In the New Testament the *mystery* is the whole plan of salvation that was eternally hidden in the heart of God, but has now been fully revealed in Christ. This marvelous revelation is not grasped by human intellectual methods. Like the secrets on any person’s heart, they are known only by those disposed to having them disclosed to them in intimacy. This is why elsewhere Jesus said they are “hidden from the wise and the learned” but “revealed to little children” (Mt 11:25). So, although God is the initiator, receptiveness on our part are vital.

Blessed John Henry Newman reproaches those who hold the common fallacy that we can gain insight into God’s mystery by accident or by a natural process without real effort on their part. He observed that they congratulate themselves “if they now and then have serious thoughts, if they now and then open the Bible.” They bask in the false satisfaction that they had done some very great thing, never remembering that to seek and gain religious truth is a long and systematic work. In contrast, those who seek the truth with all their strength follow the divine rule: “Seek, and you will find” (Mt 7:7), or as God revealed in Proverbs: “If you cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God” (Prov 2:3-5).

Mk 6:34-44; Tuesday, January 8, 2019

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle attested in all four Gospels. St. Mark recounts of this dramatic event serves as a revelation of Jesus’ identity and messianic mission. Almost every line echoes the Old Testament. It is cleverly positioned to contrast with Herod’s opulent immoral banquet that climaxed with the murder of John the Baptist. But Jesus feeds ordinary people with simple food that leads to life.

The narrative opens with the disciples urging Jesus to “dismiss” the people so they can “go to the surrounding farms and villages and buy” food to eat. At first glance this seems to be a reasonable request, but in reality, it reveals a sub-theme, namely, the apostle’s failure to understand – an idea that will come up four times in the narrative. Still dense with human wisdom, the disciples failed to grasp the significance that they are in a “deserted place”. For in the Old Testament the *desert* or *wilderness* is precisely the place where God himself provides superabundantly for his people, just as they fed them with the manna that Psalm 78 (24-25) describes as “bread from heaven” and Wisdom calls the “food of angels” (16:20-21). By satisfying the people’s physical hunger, God taught that he will satisfy their spiritual longing - a lesson spelled out in Deuteronomy: “not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3).

It’s easy to reflect on the apostle’s lacks of understanding. But what about us? This miracle clearly anticipates the greater miracle of the Blessed Eucharist where, under the appearance of bread and wine, Jesus is truly present: body, blood, soul and divinity. But do we truly believe in his presence, not in some vague intellectual sense, but with our whole heart and soul? So, in the end, when we compare ourselves to the disciples in today’s Gospel, we should ask what kind of disciples are we? Perhaps we should identify ourselves with a different pronunciation: da-siples!

Mk 6:45-52; Wednesday, January 9, 2019

Today's Gospel opens with Jesus traveling to Bethsaida, the hometown of Peter, Andrew, and Philip. After his arrival, Jesus went up to a nearby mountain to pray. We who pray so little may wonder, "Why did Jesus devote so much time to prayer?" Prayer is sharing our heart with the one we love. Therefore, for Jesus prayer was the bubbling over of His love for the Father. These loving encounters keep Jesus' human will perfectly aligned with the Father's will. In our case, we pray little because our love for God is small. Conversely, when we pray more, we love better.

The scene shifts to the Apostles who were laboring in a boat against a headwind, but without Jesus. Suddenly, between 3 and 6 A.M. – the 4th watch - Jesus came in their direction walking on the water. It appeared that Jesus might walk pass by the struggling Apostles, who were terrified because they thought they were seeing a ghost. This incident recalls a passage from Job that describes God as the one "who alone stretched out the heavens, and trampled the waves of the sea ... Lo, he passes by me, and I see him not, he moves on, but I do not perceive him (Job 9:8, 11). Jesus calmed the Apostle's fear with the veiled reference to his divinity, "It is I" (*egō eimi*), which can also be translated, "I am" – the divine name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3:14). As Jesus gets into the boat with them "the wind died down," validating his absolute mastery over the elements. The last verse raises this question. What was it that the Apostles did not understand about the loaves? They did not yet understand that Jesus was the divine Shepherd-Messiah performing actions that belong to God alone.

So, like the Pharisees described earlier "their hearts were hardened," meaning their ignorance was culpable. Many times, we don't understand when Jesus challenges our complacency, preconceived ideas, and habitual behavior. How open are we, or do we also have hard hearts?

Lk 4:14-22; Thursday, January 10, 2019

Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee filled with the Holy Spirit and power. Tragically, Luke narrates Jesus' rejection in his hometown in far more detail than does Matthew and Mark because he sees it as a foreshadowing of Jesus' subsequent rejection by the majority of his own people. On a Sabbath Jesus unrolled a scroll from Isaiah and read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because he anointed me (*chrīo* in Greek from which we get *Christos* – Christ; *masah* in Hebrew from which we get *Messiah*) to bring good tidings to the poor ... to proclaim liberty to captives." Then Jesus dramatically announced, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Their reaction is revealing.

On one hand, the people marveled at the electrifying power of his words. On the other hand, they questioned how he would dare to make such an audacious claim. They were *unwilling* to surrender to the gift of faith. Therefore, they demanded that Jesus prove his claim by doing miracles right now at their command. He worked miracles in Capernaum, so they wanted to experience a display of his power in Nazareth ... if, indeed, he had any.

Jesus was not surprised by their skepticism and rejection. He was fully aware that he would often experience the rejection of the prophets who foretold of his coming. However, in rejecting him they were also rejecting the Father who will reject them. So, it was that God bypassed the widows and sent Elijah to a foreigner, the widow Zarephath of Sidon. Similarly, God ignored the lepers of Israel but gave Elisha the power to heal the leprous Naaman the Syrian. This lesson rings true today. Eternal happiness will bypass many so-called Christians because they reject Christ, foolishly believing that God will be pleased with their pick-and-choose morality – a false religion that is the worship of self, power, wealth, and sex! Where do we stand? What do our actions say about our faith?

Lk 5:12-16; Friday, January 11, 2019

Leprosy was a kind of living death. Therefore, it served as an apt metaphor for the consequences of sin, the existence of the damned. In ancient times the term “leprosy” referred to any number of infectious skin diseases, but like sin, all of them were disastrous for the sufferer. Lepers were driven from common society, doomed to a wretched life of isolation and destitution, far removed from human warmth and family, and cut off from the worship of the Temple and the synagogue. It was a disease that only God could cure, for no human in the ancient world could heal this scourge.

Luke, the physician, described the leper in today’s Gospel with medical precision as being “full of leprosy.” It is significant that Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper. This act of tender compassion was as startling as the miracle itself. No one willingly touched a leper, because it risked the danger of contamination and made a person ceremonially unclean. Jesus, of course, does not hesitate to touch the misery of human wretchedness – even the corruption of sin, which is far worse. He is the divine physician who came to heal the stench and corruption of sin. Jesus said: “I do will it. Be made clean!” Nature immediately obeys its creator. The leper was healed instantly. As a result of this miracle, “great crowds” came to listen to Jesus and to seek cures.

However, Jesus always remains detached from the fickle adulation of the multitude. He is well aware that one day they will be shouting, “Crucify him.” Jesus’ human strength and comfort came from his relationship with the Father. Therefore, he would frequently withdraw from the nosiness of the crowds into the wilderness where he would be undisturbed in prayer with the Father. If the Son of God needed to spend time in solitude with God in prayer, how much more do we need to do the same?

Mk 1:14-20; Monday, January 14, 2019

It’s insightful the way the Bible gives us hints of what is to come. The Greek word for “arrested” (*paradidomi*), which literally means “handed over,” is the same word that is translated as “betrayed” when applied to Jesus in the passion narrative. Already the shadow of the cross looms over Jesus’ mission, since John’s martyrdom prefigures Jesus’ crucifixion and death when he is “handed over” to his enemies (Mk 13:9-12).

Jesus proclaims “the gospel of God,” which is the good news of salvation that is both from God and about God. It is *the time of fulfillment* – for in the Person of Jesus, God is breaking into human history to fulfill his promises and to bring the whole plan of our salvation into completion. This is the decisive moment of history, for Jesus is the hinge upon which all human history turns. Jesus also proclaims a favorite theme, namely, the *kingdom of God is at hand*. Using the words of the prophet Isaiah it indicates: “The Lord of hosts will reign” (Is 24:23). This signifies that God’s kingdom is embodied in Jesus’ own person who will expel the foreign occupants of sin, Satan, disease, and death. Nevertheless, the kingdom is partly veiled. Like seeds sown in the ground God’s kingdom will continue to grow, even in troubled times like today, until it reaches its consummation with Jesus’ Second Coming.

Therefore, taking up a common theme of the prophets, Jesus calls for a twofold human response: 1) to *repent* and 2) to *believe* in him and his message of life. John the Baptist added his voice to the Old Testament prophets by calling the people to repent, that is, to turn back to God with all their hearts. Jesus brought a new accent with the invitation to *believe*, that is, to trustingly surrender to what God is prepared to do in them. This is the same invitation Jesus is offering to us right now. How will we respond?

Mk 1:21-28; Tuesday, January 15, 2019

After the call of the first disciples, Mark records Jesus' first miraculous deed, an exorcism. Throughout his Gospel, St. Mark shows Jesus' progressive dismantling of the powers of darkness that began with his defeat of Satan in the desert. This exorcism occurs on a Sabbath in the synagogue of Capernaum. The scribes taught by merely offering opinions or handing on customs of certain biblical interpretations. Jesus, in contrast, spoke powerfully as one who has authority *in himself* to reveal the definitive meaning of the Scriptures. As a result, his listeners sat in wonder and awe.

Truth exposes evil. So, "an unclean spirit" cried out in fear and rage: "What have you to do with us?" The demon is alarmed because he knew that his uncontested possession was in danger of being lost. To throw Jesus off guard and to lead him into the sin of pride, this devil falsely claims hidden knowledge of Jesus' identity by calling Jesus, "the Holy One of God." Jesus will reveal his true identity in his own time, but not through demons. Therefore, Jesus silences him with the command, "Quiet!" – literally "Be muzzled!" like a dumb beast. Because the demon is confronted by a "mightier one" his tyranny ends in his cowardly defeat.

The people are amazed anew by Jesus' power and his new teaching. It is not "new" in the sense that it has never been heard before, but new because the truth of the Gospel has the unique power to accomplish what it communicates. This is why the Church urges us to prayerfully read the Bible and makes its own the words of St. Jerome: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ" (CCC # 133; DV 25). The Church also teaches us that "Scripture is the souls of theology." As a result, we are studying a corpse when we study our faith without its biblical soul. A good place to start is reading the daily reflections in the *Magnificat*, or using the commentary in the *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* or the *Navarre Bible*.

Mk 1:29-39; Wednesday, January 16, 2019

The Gospels show that physical illnesses are related to demonic oppression because illness and death are a part of the condition of fallen humanity that resulted from Satan's defeat of the first parents, and they are also a sign of the devil's domination over humans. Jesus has come to conquer Satan and defeat all that comes from him – including sin and death. In today's Gospel Jesus will demonstrate his authority over demons by a dramatic physical healing.

After the synagogue service, Jesus entered the house of Simon and Andrew. Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever, which at that time was frequently caused by malaria and could be life-demonstthreatening. The severity of her illness is implied by the fact that she was unable to carry out the demands of hospitality for her honored guest. The apostles acted correctly giving us a vital example of how we should behave in difficulties. They told Jesus about her illness without any foreknowledge of what he was going to do.

Miracles were never antiseptic with Jesus, but highly personal; for they are always directed to the heart as love in action. Jesus is always willing to extend his consoling touch. So, he grasps the sick woman by the hand and "helped her up." Literally, the Greek text says he "raised her up" using the same verb that describes Jesus' resurrection (Mk 16:6). Here we get a hint of the greater miracle that will occur on the last day when all the dead will be raised up. Peter's mother-in-law now gives the example of a model of discipleship: "She waited on them." Once again, St. Mark gives us an important lesson in his choice of words. The Greek verb, *diakoneo*, here translated as "waited on" will become the standard term of Christian ministry (Acts 6:2). It is from this verb that we derive the word "deacon." As always, the great example is Jesus himself who came "not to be served but to serve" (Mk 10:45).

Mk 1:40-45; Thursday, January 17, 2019

Leprosy was a hideous and terrifying disease that aptly represents sin. Fr. George Kane tells the story of Wong Li, the leper of Tsingtien, China. Wong Li lived a miserable existence begging by the Temple of Lanterns, terribly disfigured – a living mass of decay. The locals called him, “The Most Horrible Leper in all China.” Gradually the missionary won Wong Li’s friendship and then told him the amazing story about Jesus and paradise. It was a tale of real people who rose from wretchedness to become princes and princesses in the land beyond the farthest star. Wong Li listened with rapt attention. He always called Jesus “the Man on the Cross.” On the day of his baptism and first communion, Jesus wrapped poor, disease-ridden Wong Li in his sacramental arms, for he now possessed a soul of transcendent loveliness.

Then the day came when the priest was told his leper was dying. As he knelt by Wong Li’s side, the leper held tightly in his half-rotten hand the crucifix he was given at his baptism. It was his passport to eternal happiness. The end came swiftly. He whispered the name of Jesus, pressed the crucifix to his bleeding lips, and died. This is what happened next in Father Kane’s words: “I knew that as suddenly as a blinding flash of lightning, the soul of the leper of Tsingtien had winged its way to the very portals of paradise.” Then he imagined what happened when Wong Li walked into paradise awed by the beauty that ‘no eye has seen or mind conceived. He wrote, “I could almost hear the voice out of the Beatific Vision say, ‘what is your name? And I fancied I heard poor, humble Wong Li answer in his childlike simplicity, ‘I am The Most Horrible Leper in all China.’” Then as a nail-pierced hand took the hand of Wong Li, “I seemed to hear a voice saying, ‘I too was accounted as a leper and as one struck by God, for I am the Man on the cross.’” So, ends the story of Wong Li and all of us who are cured from the leprosy of sin. For our true destiny is with Wong Li in the palace of the King of Kings, where everyone lives happily ever after.

Mk 2:1-12; Friday, January 18; 2019

Up to this point in Mark’s narrative, Jesus has been proclaiming the kingdom of God while demonstrating its reality by healing the sick and casting out demons. His mission seemed like an unbroken string of successes until, at this point, there is a tragic turn in the story. Beginning with the healing of a paralyzed man, Jesus encounters opposition in the form of disapproval, suspicion, and contention on the part of the religious authorities. The incident in today’s Gospel marks the first in a series of five conflict stories in which Jesus faces increasing resistance, culminating in a plot to kill him. At the same time, each episode is a further illustration of hardened sinfulness, as well as examples of Jesus’ “new teaching with authority” (Mk 1:27). They also provide a deeper insight into the revelation of Jesus’ identity.

The paralyzed man in today’s narrative is an apt image of someone who cannot help himself. He needs the help of others to carry out some of the basic tasks of life. He forms an apt depiction of all humans who lie paralyzed and helpless in relation to God. None of us can approach God with our self-sufficiency, relying on our strength and good intentions. We have all have been incapacitated in one way or another by sin. As a result, we all need the faith of others - parents, teachers, friends, and even strangers – to carry us to Jesus on the litter of their prayers, good example and encouragement. Their aid is urgently needed in times of spiritual darkness, confusion, or fatigue. Today’s Gospel teaches us that the faith of this man’s friends was the catalyst for Jesus to work both a spiritual and a physical healing that changed his whole life. In a similar way, we are called to bring to Jesus those who cannot come by themselves. Our Blessed Mother informed the children are Fatima that many souls go to hell because no one plays for them! Praying for others, offered in tenacious faith that lets no obstacles block the way, is a powerful way to carry others to Jesus.

Mk 2:18-22; Monday, January 21, 2019

In the Old Testament God is depicted as Israel's husband; thus, Isaiah wrote, "For your Maker is your husband" (Is 54:5). In today's Gospel Jesus reveals himself as the heavenly husband. What's more, Jesus views his whole public ministry as wooing his bride ending in his wedding ceremony, which climaxes when "the bridegroom is taken away from them."

Jewish weddings were festive occasions that lasted seven days. The groomsmen, called the sons of the bridechamber, assisted the bridegroom and prepared the wedding chamber. At the end of the wedding, they would carry the bridegroom, who was dressed as a priest wearing a crown, to the place of the wedding bed when the bridegroom was taken from them to be united with his bride. Then they and the other guests would respectfully depart.

The highpoint of Jesus' wedding with us was quite different. We were both his groomsmen and his collective bride, but in our smug self-confidence we neglected prayer and eventually denied our Lord. Our attachment to this world led us to betray him with a kiss. In immediate preparation, we tore his body apart with the lash of our sins of the flesh. Then our pride embedded a crown of thorns on his head as we ridiculed his royalty. Instead of joyfully carrying him to the bride chamber, our sins of indifference, disobedience, and our lack of love beat and dragged him there, as the weight of his wedding bed dug into his torn shoulder. Once there our acts of immodesty tore off his seamless priestly robe opening up the wounds on his scourged body. Finally, our accumulated sins nailed him to his wedding bed. "Greater love has no man that his, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). As we reflect on these events, may the humble prayer of the tax collector become our urgent plea, "God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk 18:13)! Let us never again strike Jesus by our sins.

Mk 2:23-28; Tuesday, January 22, 2019

Today we are praying for the legal protection for the life of all unborn children. This prompts me to comment on the elephant in the room, a metaphor for an obvious problem that people don't want to face. Many Christians abhor the legal slaughter of millions of innocent babies, but they refuse to face the unpleasant reality that their redefinition of marriage by the widespread acceptance of contraception is the root cause of this evil.

The basis for the traditional Christian condemnation of contraception is clear. Contraception is evil because it's a violation of the design God built into the sexual differences between a man and a woman, which was created for *procreation* and oneness in marriage, not for *recreation*. The early Christian Fathers were unanimous in their opposition to contraception, which was condemned at the First Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.). Similarly, *Luther*, *Calvin* and *John Wesley* also condemned contraception as gravely evil. The first break with this unwavering moral teaching came in 1930 by the Anglican Church. What followed was a marked increase in birth control practices among Americans of all faiths. Even worse, pastors and theologians began teaching an evil approach to marriage that separated marital love from procreation. Marital love was redefined to mean fulfilling *my* needs, not sacrificing myself for another person or my family. With the arrival of the contraceptive pill, it became easy to medicate a woman's healthy fertility to sever the one flesh union from its natural consequences, a child.

Once pleasure became the primary end of marriage and babies the evil to be avoided, it was only a short time before *abortion* became widespread. Sixty-six million plus babies murdered later, we Christians bear a large responsibility for this crime that cries out to God for vengeance. Self-centered sex is often called "love making," but the cruel reality is it has nothing to do with either *genuine* love or *making*. Let's resolve today to

take to heart Jesus' words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17).

Mk 3:1-6; Wednesday, January 23, 2019

As Jesus enters a synagogue he is met with open hostility. The Pharisee has no compassion on a man with a withered hand. His was an economic crippling malady in a society where most men made a living by manual labor. Watching suspiciously, the sole focus of the Pharisees is to bring a legal charge against Jesus, if he would cure on the sabbath. Ironically, these men with withered hearts should have recognized the absurdity of their position, for they readily admitted to themselves that Jesus was able to make a cure – something only God can do. Yet, their pride and hatred blinded them from seeing that they were opposing God.

Far from being intimidated, Jesus stumped their twisted thinking with a simple question, "Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?" They were now trapped by their own exception made during the time of the Maccabean revolt. The Pharisees decided, "Let us fight against anyone who attacks us on the Sabbath, so that we may not all die as our kinsman died in the hiding places" (1 Macc 2:41). The conclusion was inescapable. If they recognized the right to wage war on the Sabbath to defend life, how much more ought they to recognize the legitimacy of a good deed like restoring health to this man on a sabbath? Their stony silence signaled their refusal to admit the obvious.

Mark often narrates how Jesus looks around at his audience with a searching gaze that penetrates to the heart (3:34; 10:21, 23; 11:11). In this instance, we are given a glimpse of Jesus' interior reaction. He is angry and deeply grieved at their hardness of heart. "Hardness of heart" is a biblical expression that identifies the stubborn refusal to be open to God, a condition that will at times even characterize Jesus' disciples (6:52; 8:17). Jesus' anger depicts God's indignation at human evil. Our response to Jesus evokes the true state of our heart. What does Jesus' penetrating gaze see in us? Are we willing to see ourselves the way Jesus sees us? Tough questions!

Mk 3:7-12; Thursday, January 24, 2019

Today's Gospel begins an important transition in Mark's Gospel. Earlier, the evangelist showed us the conflict developing between Jesus and the religious authorities of Israel, to the point that the Pharisees began to plot his death (3:6). In response, Jesus withdrew to the sea and the countryside. From this point on he will be more elusive, avoiding the synagogues and traveling back and forth across the lake of Galilee, often at night. Nevertheless, Jesus will not be deterred, for he will bravely continue his ministry of teaching, healing, and exorcisms. At the same time, there is a new element in place. Jesus now begins to take steps to establish a new Israel, which is the new family of God. Earlier in the Gospel, Mark gives us a deepening revelation of Jesus' identity, but he now begins to shed light on the identity of the community Jesus is gathering about him.

Earlier, the reaction to Jesus' healing was the smoldering fury of his opponents. In today's Gospel, Mark recalls Jesus' skyrocketing popularity among the ordinary people. This recalls what St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "For consider you call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to the flesh, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no flesh might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:26-29). The frailty of Jesus' human nature stands in contrast to his mighty deeds. On the one hand, he cures by a mere touch, but his own body is being crushed by the crowds mobbing him. Mark intentionally gives the impression that the whole world was coming to Jesus because the throng came from all over Israel and from

the territory of the Gentiles. Is there also an intended contrast between the enthusiasm of the crowd that came to Jesus and our mediocrity?

Mk 16:15-18; Friday, January 25, 2019

On the feast celebrating St. Paul's well known and dramatic conversion, the Church brings out attention to the great commission Jesus gives to all his followers shortly before he ascends to the Father. There is, I think, a heroic element in each of us that longs to accomplish something great and meaningful in our life. Most of us, however, are not called to great accomplishments in the sense that even the world would recognize. True, Jesus told Ananias that Paul was "a chosen instrument of mine" (Acts 9:15), but before we ask - "What about me?" - we need to recall that Jesus also said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16).

Most of us have supporting roles for we are not called to be major players on the stage of life. St. Dominic Savio was only fourteen when he died. Saints Louis and Marie Martin were a simple married couple. She died at the age of forty-five and he at the age of seventy-one. Neither had any great worldly accomplishments. The same can be said for their daughter, St. Therese of Lisieux, who died at the age of twenty-four.

Nevertheless, each of us is called to holiness. But as we get older, we can sometimes look back with great sadness and recall the times we took the wide and easy way that leads to destruction (Mt 7:13). Then, like , we betrayed our Lord or we denied him like Peter. It's a painful realization. But God's loving call still summons our heart. The past is no longer ours. We need to surrender it to God with an aching heart, but our focus must be on the present moment: "Now is the acceptable time," wrote St. Paul, "behold now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2).

God can quickly achieve holiness in us. He is the great healer of souls just as he rapidly changed the self-righteous, avenging murdered Saul of Tarsus into Paul the jealous Apostle and martyr. Are we willing to surrender to his loving call? That's the challenge!

Mk 3:22-30; Monday, January 28, 2019

Today's Gospel brings a seismic shift in the opposition to Jesus from the religious establishment of Israel. The big guns arrive to discredit Jesus. They are the scribes from Jerusalem, experts in the Mosaic law, whose authority is weightier than that of the Galilean Pharisees. They will emerge as Jesus fiercest opponents. They arrive on the scene to check the miracle worker from Nazareth by discrediting him with the people. When that fails, they will resort to crucifixion.

Their chilling verdict is categorical: "He is possessed by Beelzebul" and "By the prince of demons he drives out demons." Beelzebul was a name of Satan derived from the false god of the Canaanites. Jesus calmly responds by confronting them face to face for they were undoubtedly spreading these charges behind his back. Jesus demolishes the charge that he drives out demons by the power of demons by showing its logical absurdity. Satan is hardly making war against his own kingdom. Jesus can drive out Satan because he is the stronger man who can guard his possessions and defeat the devil. Here he evokes Isaiah: "Yes, captives can be taken from a warrior, and booty be rescued from a tyrant; those who oppose you I will oppose, and your sons I will save" (Is 49:25). As John the Baptist declared, Jesus is the "mightier one" (Mk 1:7) who alone has power to bind Satan and release those suffering under his tyrannical rule.

To refute the charge that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul, Jesus made the solemn declaration: "blaspheme against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin." Blaspheme against the

Holy Spirit so hardens one's heart in a willful blindness that closes a person from repentance and the reception of God's forgiveness. God will forgive any sin, but only if we repent.

Mk 3:31-35; Tuesdays, January 29, 2019

Who are the brothers of Jesus mentioned here and in other places in the New Testament? Are they, as some claim, Jesus' biological siblings? Those who make this false assertion, stake this position on the Greek word *adelphos*, which does identify a biological sibling. However, that literalistic interpretation leads to some absurd conclusions. For example, in First Corinthians 15:6, St. Paul informs us that "five hundred *brothers*" saw the risen Jesus at one time. No serious biblical scholar claims the apostle was referencing 500 biological brothers. Clearly, St. Paul was identifying Christian disciples who became brothers in Christ.

Both the Hebrew and Aramaic languages lacked a word for "cousins." The Old Testament used the term "brother" for a variety of relatives including cousins and uncles, as well as close friends and allies. The New Testament simply follows the same practice. The ancient Church understood this practice and unanimously held that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. Furthermore, when specific brothers of the Lord are named like James and Joses, other passages in the New Testament identify them as the sons of someone other than the blessed Virgin Mary. The sacred text is always very careful to specify that only Jesus is the child of Mary, no one else. This traditional understanding of the "brothers of the Lord" fits perfectly into the point of today's Gospel. In a culture in which family and tribal ties were all-important, Jesus was establishing a new family, the family of God, whose members are intimately united to Jesus in a bond of love far stronger than blood relationships. We enter this family just as Jesus did, by doing God's will.

Bottom line, did Mary have other children? Biologically, no. Supernaturally, yes. For we are all here spiritual children as the Book of Revelation states: "Then the dragon (Satan) was angry with the woman (Mary), and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring (you and me and the whole Church), on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus." (Rev 12:17).

Mk 4:1-20, Wednesday, January 30, 2019

Today's Gospel introduces an extended discourse in Mark's Gospel about Jesus' teaching. It is called the Sermon on the Sea. Jesus begins with an admonition that literally means, "Listen! Look!" He concludes with the words, "whoever has ears to hear ought to hear." In the biblical sense "to hear" means to absorb, to appropriate deeply into one's heart, to allow the message to sink in, and to change one's whole life. Jesus eagerly reveals the mystery of his heart to those disciples who are open to receiving it. However, to those who lock themselves outside, Jesus' message of salvation remains hidden because their obstinacy prevents them from being converted and forgiven.

Jesus is the sower of life and truth. The seed is his proclamation of the kingdom. The ones on the path are those in whom the word meets with no interest or receptivity. Satan swoops down like a greedy bird and snatches it away. Others enthusiastically receive the word, but they are blocked by their underlying hardness of heart that prevents God's word from penetrating deeply. Their allegiance is too shallow to survive temptations or persecution. They easily fall away. Those sown among the thorns also do not let God's seed sink in, because they are too preoccupied with this world and its cares. They easily get caught up in the deceptive lure of riches and the craving for possessions. As a result, their spiritual life is sterile. The rich soil represents those who allow the word of God to produce its marvelous effects in their lives. They take Jesus into their hearts so he can transform their lives. Then they can bear fruit, but some are more submissive than others so the yields are different.

Jesus calls us to examine ourselves. Are we a hard pathway, or a rocky soil, or the thorny soil? If we bear fruit is it thirty, sixty or a hundred-fold? What is our response to God's love, and what are our obstacles to responding more fully?

Mk 4:21-25; Thursday, January 31, 2019

In Mark's Gospel, the parable of the sower and its explanation are followed by four cryptic sayings, which the evangelists Matthew and Luke also record but in different contexts. Jesus probably spoke these sayings in a variety of settings over the course of his public ministry. In today's Gospel, all four are included in two groups of two each separated by the admonition; "Anyone who has ears to hear ought to hear."

Jesus is the lamp that is not hidden "under a bushel basket or under a bed." Quite the opposite, he has come into the world to bring humanity the light of revelation. Yes, the kingdom is a mystery and parables can seem obscure and difficult to understand, but Jesus came to make the kingdom known. For "nothing is secret except to come to light," fully revealed in Jesus. We are called to take the light of the risen Christ to the whole world. How do we do it? One way only, by allowing ourselves to be transformed into Christ.

The final pair of cryptic sayings expands on the consequences of hearing well or poorly. If we try to understand and then follow faithfully, Jesus will give us more understanding and a greater strength to be more faithful. This is the process of spiritual growth that can take us through stages of infancy, adolescence and adulthood. Like athletes who progress from high school to college and then to the pros, we discover that the challenges increase with greater intensity. Spiritual infants grapple with overcoming mortal sin. Spiritual adolescents battle deliberate venial sin. Finally, spiritual adults are challenged with always dosing the best thing in the love of total surrender. There are many athletes who in high school had the talent to make it to the pros, but failed to do so because they were unwilling to pay the price of years of demanding training to get there. We are all called to holiness, but how many of us are willing to battle out of the infant and adolescent stages of spiritual development?