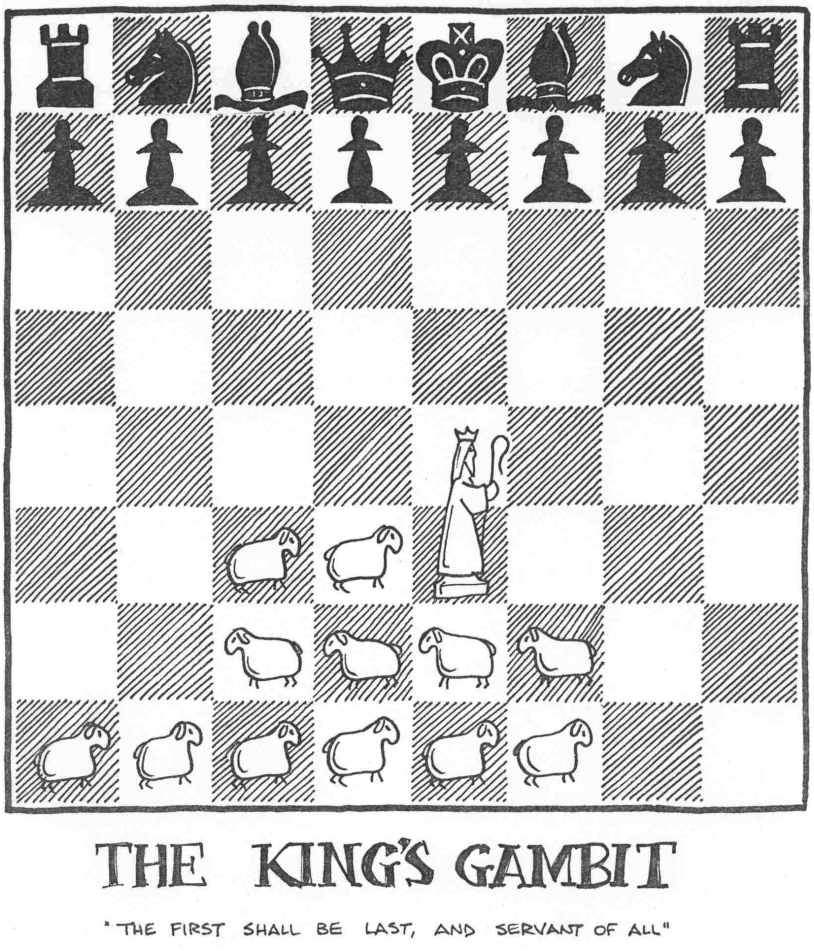
# SUNDAY HOMILIES

## Liturgical Year Cycle C 2013

*by*

*Rev. Robert R. Beck*

*Homilies given in the year 2012*
*Mt. St. Francis Convent, Dubuque, IA*



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Rev Robert Beck is a priest
of the Archdiocese of Dubuque,
and Professor Emeritus of Loras College



Printed by the Loras College Press
under the direction of Jan Troy
November, 2015

With this volume, we arrive at the eighth collection of homilies given at the chapel at Francis House at the Franciscan Motherhouse in Dubuque, Iowa. The period covered in this volume is the "C Cycle" of the liturgical year, following the Gospel of Luke. Since there are times when a substitute celebrant covers for me when I am away, not every Sunday is represented here, though many are. The format is the same, with the text arranged in what looks like verse lines. As I've noted before, this began as a way of following the text without losing my place. But some appreciate it, and so I'm retaining this small "tradition."

In 2013, the year covered here, many things of interest occurred. But perhaps none more interesting than the resignation of a pope and the election of the first pope from the New World. The phenomenon that is Pope Francis burst on the world with a brilliant light that has not dimmed even today, over two years later. By no means could this be ignored in the homilies of that year.

Again, I cannot insist enough upon the value of a congregation that calls forth from the preacher insights that would never have come to birth otherwise. It is important for me as well as, one hopes, for them. In addition, I want to thank Jean Beringer OSF, and Mona Wingert OSF, for proofing the text, Carol Oberfoell of the Kucera Center at Loras College and Jan Troy of the Loras Print Center for producing it.

Fr. Robert Beck

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First Sunday of Advent

December 2, 2012

| | |
|---|---|
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| Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14 | To you I lift my soul |
| 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2 | Act to please God |
| Luke 21:25-28, 34-36 | Signs in the skies |

Once again it is Advent.
It is the time of year when the bare ground and the leafless trees
reveal the contours of the hills and valleys of this city.
We see how close we are to neighboring streets.
Nature is brisk, severe, and beautiful.
As is this season which so many of us love.

Although today it is unseasonably warm.

We also begin a new cycle of scripture readings,
with Luke as our gospel.
Today we hear the gospel talk of signs in nature.
But they are more dire, more of a warning.
Signs in the sun and moon and stars.

Roaring of the sea and the waves. Dire promises.
The emphasis is on vigilance, being on the watch.
The Lord is coming.

The reading from Jeremiah tells us that Jerusalem,
the faith community, awaits a king,
a just shoot from the family of David,
who will bring peace and justice to the city.
Then it will be known as "The Lord (is) our justice."

We await the coming, the advent of the Lord,
who will bring justice to the land.

What is the justice that we long for?
What are the signs in the heavens and on the earth?

A quick review of the past week's news
will provide some examples of signs such as the Gospel selects.

On *Wednesday* we had a Greenland ice-melt update.
It is reported that the rate is increasing.
In the 1990s the ice-melt was 10% of sea level rise: now it is 30%.

But there is good news.
Recent reports also indicate that the event
will not be sudden and catastrophic as once thought,
but more gradual.
Still, eventually it may mean a 40 foot rise in sea level.
Significant, since 50% of our population lives within 50 miles of a coast.

On *Thursday* we had a one-month update on hurricane Sandy.
128 people were killed.
Billions have been set aside for rebuilding:
42 in New York; 37 in New Jersey.

But again there is good news.
In NY, 9 billion of this is set aside for future prevention.
In New Jersey, 7.4 billion.

As well as roaring of waters and waves,
we have some news about signs in the heavens.

On *Friday* it was disclosed that during the Cold War
American planning included detonating a nuclear bomb on the moon,
as a response to Russia's launching of Sputnik.
The news media,
reflecting our unimpressive level of science education,
declared this would disintegrate the moon. Not so.
It would, however, shield the earth with a radioactive cloud of dust.

But here too is good news.
They decided against it.

Why stop here?

Elsewhere in the same passage from the gospel
it speaks of wars and rumors of wars.
Justice demands that we mention an ongoing civil war in Syria
that no one seems to be able to bring to and end.

And in the Congo, another civil war that we do not even hear about,
a war that is completely ignored.
And then in the land of Israel itself, in the actual Jerusalem,
an ongoing conflict that defies any effort at resolution.

Meanwhile, in Washington DC a fiscal cliff comes closer,
without any clear sign that we will avoid it.
Not only do we differ on how to avoid it,
we even differ on whether we should avoid it.

Signs in the skies and waters.
Wars that defy resolution. Signs of the times.

And they all have one thing in common.
They all show the fingerprints of human causation.
Our technical ability has outrun our political will.
While we have the wherewithal to create these conditions,
we seem to lack the ability to apply that ability toward solutions.

So here in Advent we watch and wait for the coming of the Lord.
We need the divine grace of outside help
to bring about a reign of justice and peace.

But it is not so much to the intervention of the Creator
in the processes of nature that we look toward.
It is not a miracle to hold back the storm and still the skies we need.
After all, we can do all that ourselves.
We have done as much.

It is what we cannot seem to do that requires divine help,
the workings of grace.

It is in our own spirits,
our own political will, our own sense of resolve,

that God must bring the touch of possibility.
It is into our human spirits
that the coming Spirit must enter.

We must find a way to do what we know we can do.
But it is here that we need, and can count on, God's assistance.
It is in the inner workings of the human spirit
that grace can bring about changes that matter.
It is the bent ways of the human spirit
that the divine Spirit can untwist.

And so today we hear the words of promise.
It is as yet a simple announcement.
A day will come when Jerusalem will have the name of justice.
But no timetable is given.
In the duration we are invited to watch and pray.
We are to keep vigil. The Lord is coming.

And vigilance consists, according to Paul's letter,
in conducting ourselves to please God.
For in conducting ourselves so, we do more.

In opening ourselves to the coming,
in the change of heart and mind that this implies,
we open ourselves to possibility.
And this includes the possibility of change
and producing change.

Advent is the season that so many of us love.
It is a sober time of promise.
It is a time to pull back, rest our ambitions,
remember our need to trust in God for what we do.

And in the silences of Advent,
the newness we long for begins to emerge.

**Second Sunday of Advent**

December 9, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Baruch 5:1-9 | Up Jerusalem! Stand upon the heights! |
| Psalm 126:1-6. | When The Lord brought back the captives |
| Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11 | I pray always with joy for you |
| Luke 3:1-6 | The voice of once crying in the desert. |

The poetry of Advent continues today.
The book of Baruch pictures Jerusalem
looking out over the land from its hill,
to see the children of Israel coming home
from the far corners of the lands.

Up Jerusalem! Stand upon the heights.
Look to the east, and see them coming.
From the east. And also from the west.

There is some poignancy to this picture
when we realize that the book of Baruch,
named after Jeremiah's second-hand man,
is one of the few books of the Old Testament
that was written from the Diaspora,
the dispersion of the Jewish people across the known world.

The Diaspora was a result of the destruction
of Solomon's temple and David's city of Jerusalem.
Many were taken to Babylon.
Others, like Jeremiah, went to Egypt.
But from this time on, many—sometimes most—
of the Jewish people lived outside the land of Israel.

The Diaspora continues today.
Today is the second day of Hanukkah,
and on feasts like this Jews look toward Jerusalem,
remembering their history.
They think about the city most of them will never see.

So it was for the writer of the book of Baruch.
For him and those like him the exile had never ended.
They were still far off from the holy city.
They had settled permanently in the Diaspora,
and had learned to make a living and a life of worship there.

So it is with some poignancy
that he pictures the children of Israel moving toward Jerusalem.
The landscape is alive with movement,
as the roads seen from the towers of the city
are seen to be alive with travelers coming home.
It is an emotional image, looking to a possible future.

For me, what comes to mind
when I think of the populations coming toward Jerusalem
is the famous poem by William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming."
Yeats was no longer a Christian,
but developed his own system of visions,
and that is reflected in his poem.

He is writing just after the First World War,
the brutal termination of the uprising of 1916 in Ireland,
and the Russian revolution.

The opening movement of his poem
reflects one who longs for the days now gone:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

These lines are a popular source of quotes and titles.
A book about the war in the Middle East is called "Things Fall Apart."

A congressional report on the same topic
is named “The Center Cannot Hold.”
Blogs on the same topic tell us
that “the blood-dimmed tide is loosed.”

The poem moves on from the apocalyptic to the oracular,
as the voice like a prophet is heard.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

Yeats is using the language of the Bible to speak of something else.
He believes that the time of Christianity is past,
and that a new revelation is coming to replace it.

It is no surprise to discover that these lines also
have provided authors with titles.
The image of the sphinx-like creature in the desert
suggests current troubles in the Middle East.
But Yeats meant it more globally.

His poem ends with the vision fading:

The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

For him, the twenty centuries since the birth of Christ
have been marked by turmoil and violence.

Again, he writes in the aftermath of a World War,
the Communist revolution, and the failed Irish uprising.
He has little hope for the Christian tradition.
He is looking for something else,
he knows not what.

But there are other visions besides that of Yeats.
Besides the disillusioned view of the world,
there is the vision of hope.
And the poetry of Advent expresses this.

The opening of Luke's account of Jesus ministry,
beginning with John the Baptist, as we heard today,
lists world figures and local dignitaries.

Luke places the events of the Gospel
squarely in the center of public life and events.
He too sees something moving toward Bethlehem,
as we will see before long.
He too notices how the eyes of the world are on Jerusalem.

Like Yeats, he is aware of a turning point in the history of the world.
But he anticipates with hope.

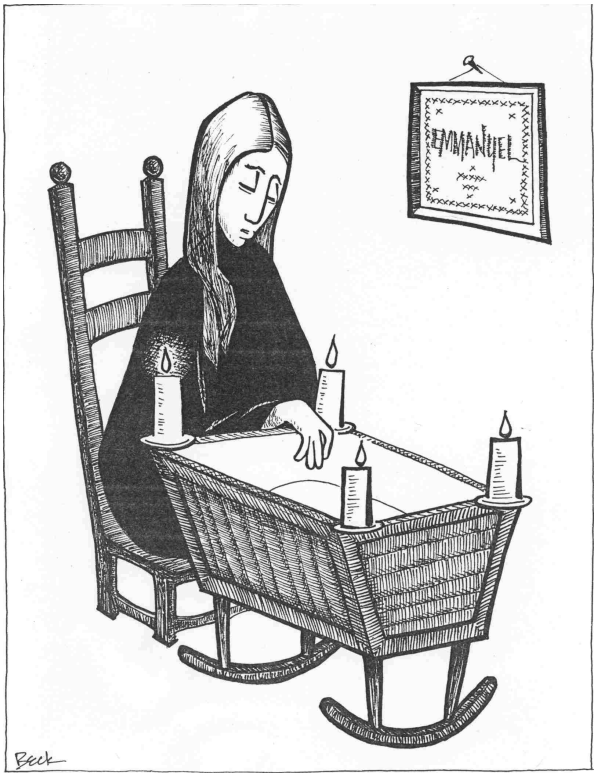
He is no more ignorant of difficult passages
through the events of the time.
He is quite aware of the damage of historical events,
but his message is one of hope.

Quoting another poet, the prophet we call 2nd-Isaiah, he affirms:

*A voice [is] crying out in the desert:*
"*Prepare the way of the Lord,*
*make straight his paths.*
*Every valley shall be filled*
*and every mountain and hill shall be made low.*
*The winding roads shall be made straight,*
*and the rough ways made smooth,*
*and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*"

His moment is the beginning of the calendar.
His horizon is “all flesh.”
His featured personality is the Baptist.
His season is Advent, the time of vigilance, waiting, and hope.

Today we wait and hope with the Baptist.
We stand upon Jerusalem, looking to the east.
Awaiting the coming.



**Third Sunday of Advent**

December 16, 2012

| | |
|---|---|
| Zephaniah 3:14-18 | Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! |
| Responsorial: Isaiah 1-6 | Shout with exultation, O city of Zion! |
| Philippians 4:4-7 | Rejoice in the Lord always. |
| Luke 3:10-18 | What shall we do? |

It is hard to speak of anything else,
especially with a congregation of religious women
who have committed themselves to nonviolence.

But the events at Sandy Hook Elementary school in Connecticut
have riveted the attention of a nation.
20 first graders murdered, and six teachers,
each by deliberate, repeated shots,
with weapons the shooter borrowed from his mother's collection
before he shot her as well.

Weapons that she, no doubt, purchased
because she bought the faulty propaganda
that having your own weapon makes you safer.

In fact, already a member of the gun lobby has suggested
that Sandy Hook would never have happened
if all the teachers had guns.

After something like this we all try to make sense of it,
if there is any sense to be made.
Typically theological questions arise. How could this happen?

But this is different from a natural disaster,
those we quaintly call acts of God.
This is different because we have devised it ourselves.

So, trying to make sense of things, we turn to the scriptures,
to see if any light can be shed.

Today the texts of Gaudete Sunday ring out with joy.
*Shout with joy, O Jerusalem!,*
say Zephaniah, and Isaiah.
And Paul writes to the Philippians:
*Rejoice in the Lord always.*
*Again I say it: Rejoice!*

But we may be in the frame of mind of Ps 137:
*How can we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?*

For surely this seems like a foreign land,
even while it is so American.

But we are in the Advent season, moving in on Christmas.
We are in a time of anticipation,
which of course makes the difficulties we feel
all the stronger.

This is the time we anticipate the birth of the Child Jesus.
Last week we heard Baruch say
*Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights;*
*look to the east and see your children*
*gathered from the east and the west*

Next week we will look in on Mary and Elizabeth
as they share their stories of immanent birth.

But when we remember
the slaughter of the Holy Innocents in Bethlehem,
we are reminded that this too is a theme of the season.

We have sprinkled the season with so much glitter
that we forget its darker side.
We forget that in fact its intensity of hope
rises because of the darker side.

And then there is the story of the Baptist today.
The crowds come to him with the question
that everyone is asking yesterday and today:

What should we do?
What is it that we should do?

And John, surprisingly,
does not preach major revolution or apocalyptic fervor.
His message is simple. Do what it is available for you do.
If you have two cloaks, share one.
The same with excess food.
If you are a tax collector, do not overcharge just because you can.
If you are a soldier, do not abuse your position of power.

In other words, as far as John is concerned,
there is always something you can do,
no matter how seemingly small.
They may be small but they make a difference.
And we do not fully know the difference that they make.

I can imagine someone asking me:
Why I am talking about nonviolence
to a gathering of religious women?

Not many carry concealed weapons.
Violence is not a notable part of their lives.
Furthermore they have devoted themselves to nonviolence.

I imagine what my answer would be.
I would say that we must locate the problem.
It seems to me that it is in our culture of violence.
When we hear the story of the children of Bethlehem
we are reminded of the violence in the culture of that day.
After all, blood sports provided entertainment in the Roman Coliseum.

But our culture is scarcely better.
Our devotion to guns is one glaring example.
It keeps us from doing anything to prevent once again
this latest display of horror.

I imagine that I would say that our politicians are cowed and threatened
by the loud voices of the NRA and the gun lobby.
They have done nothing while in the last few years
sales of private weapons have skyrocketed.

I imagine that I would point out that the culture
is what needs to be changed,
and that this is most likely the opportune time.
Voices have to be heard that call for change
and for legislation that would stem the flow of innocent blood.

I would point out that religious women are in a special position
to add their voices to what we would hope would become a chorus.
They are already involved in tending to the needs of domestic violence
with shelter houses such as Maria House.

Their commitment to nonviolence is not simply window dressing.
They are not to be underestimated.

I would remind my questioner what the sisters bring to the task.
They are committed.
They are remarkably organized.
They have the ability to involve different groups of people.
And retired sisters are especially effective
in presenting their views to our elected officials.
While we are not violent,
we have changed and can change the culture.

Along with the crowds of his day, we ask John the Baptist,
What should we do?

And we hear his answer:
There is something you can do.
It does not need to be earthshaking and life altering.
We do not know the difference our efforts make.

But there will be little difference without them.

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

December 23, 2012

| | |
|---|---|
| Micah 5:1-4 | From you, Bethlehem, shall come a ruler. |
| Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19. | O shepherd of Israel, hearken. |
| Hebrews 10:5-10 | Behold, I come to do your will. |
| Luke 1:39-45 | Blessed is the fruit of your womb. |

We come now to the end of Advent.
The last Sunday happening hard on Christmas.
All season long the readings from the Old Testament
have been charting a narrative about Jerusalem.
The inhabitants were returning to the city.
God was in their midst.

Today we have a surprise.
Instead of being in Jerusalem we find ourselves in Bethlehem,
a little town in the outskirts of the city.
With Micah, we are looking for the Messiah.

And in the Gospel readings we leave the public square,
where John the Baptist has been holding forth,
and we find ourselves in the intimate domestic scene
of Mary's visit to Elizabeth, her kinswoman.

The two women have much to talk about.
They each are expecting a son,
and that surely must have taken up much of their talk together.

But that is not what we hear reported by Luke.
He tells of Elizabeth's wonder at Mary's miracle.
Her child gives deference to the child of Mary.

And as we know, Mary responds
with what we have come to know as the Magnificat,
a testament to the turning of the times.
The coming era will be one of justice and renewal.

As the two women are chatting,
we can draw back and observe the scene.
So much is contained here that gives hope.
    As they trade family stories, we see them celebrating the new births.
    Births are always a testament to the future and its promise.

We see an image of mutual solidarity.
    Like Naomi and Ruth, committed to the care of one another,
    these two, Mary and Elizabeth, tend to each other's needs.
The older can use some help from an abler body;
the younger will welcome the wisdom of the more experienced one.
    In their solidarity we find another cause for hope.

Above all, we witness the generosity of unremitting hospitality,
welcoming another as a member of one's own household.
    Although it is difficult to determine
    which here is the more hospitable.

It is of such domestic virtues and family stories
that a humane and livable future is constructed,
brought into being.
    Luke draws the portrait, and reports the songs.

But the future of these two children includes darkness.
    When Luke described this scene for us,
    he already knew how it would end.

He signals that in the next chapter,
when he tells of Simeon's foreboding:
a sword of sorrow will pierce the mother's heart.
    Luke knows what will unfold in the future,
    both to Elizabeth's son and to Mary's.
    He tells this story knowing that the peace it describes will not last.

Are we to imagine the two women innocent of that knowledge?
    Is Luke painting a picture of quiet hope that is ignorant of the future.
    Or is he suggesting that they have a sense of it.

After all, both seem to have premonitions of what is to come.
Elizabeth knows the destiny of Mary's son.
Mary knows the changes coming
in the history of God's dealing with the world.
Do they know the personal cost? Perhaps.
We do not know for sure.

So what is Luke thinking when he tells this story?
My feeling is that he knows the consequences,
but considers the cost worth it.

The promise that is proclaimed in this quiet scene carries the day.
It places against the violence of the future,
the quiet assurance of daily virtues and mutual care.

It is love for one another that will prevail.
It is the ordinary comfort we offer,
the willing sacrifices we make,
that allow something new and valuable to come to being.

This message is not unimportant today.
The message of the two women is needed.
In the solidarity shown in the story of the Visitation,
I am reminded of the struggle against this wisdom,
the wisdom of the wise women,
that still is news today.

There are many examples,
but I am going to select the most extreme. The Taliban.
While they are extreme, the fact that they are possible at all
is a testimony to the ways cultures can go.

Their war against women is a true war, and not metaphorical.
I only need to remind you of Bibi Aisha,
disfigured for leaving her husband's home.
Or the14-year old girl, Malalai Yousafzai,
advocate for education, shot on a bus, now recovering in London.

Or the five female health workers killed this week
for performing polio immunization work.
The Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan fear
that this effort is an American conspiracy
to “make men less manly
and make women more excited and less bashful.”

While it would seem that this world is far away,
the fears and emotions that cause such devastation is not so remote.
I need only mention the anxieties that attend
the diminishment of the white male majority
to remind us of similar emotions today,
though they are not so drastically acted upon.
Though with this, the fear of gun violence takes on graver dimensions.

Yet in the face of all this,
we have the devotion shown in today’s gospel.
The activity shown here is not spectacular.
It is daily, not dramatic.
It is a matter of attending to the needs of the moment
in the time we are given.
And in this we will find the promise of the new day
that Elizabeth glimpsed and Mary sang.

**Christmas: Mass During the Day**

| | |
|---|---|
| Isaiah 52:7-10 | How beautiful on the mountains |
| Psalm 98:1-6 | Sing a new song to the Lord |
| Hebrews 1:1-6 | In these last days… |
| John 1:1-18 | The Word was made Flesh |

There is an old Christmas song that begins,

> Christmas is a-coming
> The goose is getting fat
> Please to put a penny
> In the old man's hat.

It speaks of traditions, Christmas dinners and almsgiving.
It evokes English winter scenes.

Joni Mitchell, the inimitable songwriter,
has put a different spin on it in her song "River."
Instead of "Christmas is a-coming,"
she gives us the more idiomatic, "It's coming on Christmas."
The song speaks of our contemporary Christmas:

> It's coming on Christmas
> They're cutting down trees
> They're putting up reindeer
> And singing songs of joy and peace
> Oh I wish I had a river I could skate away on
>
> But it don't snow here
> It stays pretty green
> I'm going to make a lot of money
> Then I'm going to quit this crazy scene
> Oh I wish I had a river I could skate away on

A Canadian in LA, she speaks to the disenchantment
many feel at this time of the year.
In the song, it is a case of failed relationship.
But there are many reasons, for many people,
that this is a difficult time.

The cultural Christmas season is about over.
This afternoon after the football games, it is done.
    Meanwhile for us it is just beginning.
        The twelve shopping days of Christmas ended yesterday.
        Our twelve days have just started.

Joni Mitchell's song echoes the hollowness of the season
when it is merely a commercial holiday.
    True, the family gatherings are important.
    But an inner dimension is missing.

For me a symbol of the holiday, versus the holy day,
is the inflatable yard ornament.
    Bright, gaudy, but hollow inside.

Some of these, by the way, frankly escape me.
There is one on Asbury that I imagine you have seen.
    It is a large monkey in a Santa suit.
    Is it a satire on what we have made of the season?
    Is it a popular cartoon character? I just don't get it.

Bright, gaudy, but hollow inside.
    The center is missing.
    The trappings without the core meaning.

In the Sunday liturgy of Christmas
we leave behind the trappings, the popular images.
    Of course there is no Santa or reindeer.
    But there is also no Christmas story.
        No donkey and oxen.
        No shepherds or sheep.
Only the sober, even exalted, hymn
that opens the Gospel of John.

Only "the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us."
    Here we find the central meaning.
    Here, only the core meaning.

The word Incarnation speaks of flesh,
as in the Word became flesh.
This is the meaning of the feast.

It means that for Christians everything has changed.
Like a familiar neighborhood scene
completely altered overnight by a frosty snowfall.
Familiar, but transformed.

It is what St Paul intends in Galatians,
when he writes:

> But when the fullness of time had come,
> God sent his Son, born of a woman,
> born under the law,
> to ransom those under the law,
> so that we might receive adoption.
> …
> God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts,
> crying out, "Abba, Father!" (Gal 4:4-5)

So after all the Christmas stories symbols and songs,
we come to this profound hymn,
the prologue to John's Gospel.

The Word became flesh,
and we have become the adopted children,
daughters and sons of God, dwelling among us.

After removing the packaging,
the colorful wrapping, secular and sacred,
we come to the true gift.
And here we find the central meaning of the season.

It is the gift we are looking for,
if we could only recognize it.

**Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph**

December 30, 2012

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28 | Hannah's son |
| Psalm 84:2-3, 5-6, 9-10. | Blessed are they |
| 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24 | We are God's children |
| Luke 2:41-52 | The boy Jesus in the temple |

The Feast of the Holy Family
is an important occasion for this community.
Each year we look to it to conclude one year and begin another.
And this year we turn again to Luke's Gospel,
and find there the story of the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple.

There is much to engage us with this story.
We might notice that it is the only story of its kind in the Gospels,
which gives us either the infant Jesus
or the adult Messiah.

Or we might make something of the fact
that it gives us the first words of Jesus in this Gospel,
or in any other, for that matter.
"I must be about my Father's business."

And then there is the picture of the early adolescent boy,
more precocious than preternatural,
not yet a teen-ager, but already in that transitional age
of negotiating childhood with the coming adulthood.

It involves all those awkward occasions that parents know so well.
On the one hand, exploring what it means to be a responsible adult.
On the other hand, reverting to childhood securities.

On the one hand, disappearing from the pilgrimage caravan
without explanation.
On the other hand, exhibiting the wisdom of an elder rabbi
in discussing matters of Torah with the Temple priests.

Parents know the exasperation, along with the relief,

that these occasions yield.
On the one hand they are astonished, even full of pride,
upon seeing him in the temple conversing with considerable assurance.
On the other hand, they are searching with great anxiety,
worried what this might mean.

One can never know what might have happened.

Transitional times are full of trepidation.
So much can go wrong.
And so much can go right.
And it hangs in the balance.

What is true of Jesus in his youth
is true of the entire Christian story.
It is true of his family of followers.

The letter of John tells us that we may be called the children of God.
We are God's children now,
and what we shall be has not yet been revealed.

In the letter to the Galatians,
Paul says we are heirs with the Son, and we have come of age.
With the Spirit of the Son, we cry out "Abba, Father."
And as children come of age, we too experience the anxieties
as well as the exhilaration of the transition.

We have come of age,
but it is difficult to be an adult in the church we know.
We are in a time of transition,
and those in the church who are accustomed to acting like parents
are finding it hard, like parents, to let go of their accustomed role.

Like what has come to be known as helicopter parents in today's world
—parents so concerned about the welfare of their children
that they hover over them, even into their adulthood—
like these parents there is an anxiety about their, or our,
ability to manage the issues and risks of adult responsibility.

We are, for instance, children of the Council,
the Second Vatican Council.

But the meaning of that Council
is subject to impassioned debate these days.
    Is it to be counted as the beginning of renewal,
    or the end and culmination of it?

Issues that trouble the church
as regards the ongoing meaning of the council
    are those of continuity versus change.
        Will the children pass on the parents heritage,
        or forge their own?

Issues of law and conscience:
    Is obedience the primary virtue,
    or can the Christian be trusted to follow his or her conscience?
        Is she, or he, adult enough?

Issues of clergy and religious versus lay Catholics.
Is the laity mature enough to understand their own best interest?

For myself, one of the most impressive aspects
of the show of support for religious women of a few months ago,
with full-page ads and a very long ceremony in the Cathedral,
    is that it was conceived and executed entirely by lay women and men.
    No priests. No religious women.
In the church of my youth such a happening would be unthinkable.

When we celebrate the Holy Family,
we are celebrating the family of God's children,
    scattered through space and time,
    present today as in the past.

The children have come of age,
but the transition is awkward for all involved.
    And yet we know this: the movement is toward maturity.

The transition is to adulthood with all its risks,
leaving behind the comfortable securities of childhood dependence.

And with all the hesitancy that the transition evokes,
it is known to be worth it.
An adult future is not only possible, it is assured.

As we struggle, with one age passing
and another coming into existence,
we have the consolation of knowing that we are crossing over.

Our concern is to ask God for the gift of maturity to lead,
and provide leadership, that will continue the tradition
that has carried the church through the ages
down to today.

**Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord**

January 6, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Isaiah 60:1-6 | Gathering to Jerusalem |
| Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13. | The king's justice |
| Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 | The mystery revealed |
| Matthew 2:1-12 | The coming of the Magi |

Epiphany this year falls upon the traditional date,
the Twelfth Day of Christmas.
And once again we have the traditional gifts of the Epiphany.

Where do the gifts come from?
I am not asking where the Magi come from.
We know it is from the East, whatever that is intended to suggest.
Nor am I asking about the gifts here in the chapel.
I am asking about the tradition that these represent.
What do they mean?

I am pretty sure that the gold doesn't represent
the golden dome of South Bend,
nor the frankincense represent the adulation of Frank Leahy,
coach immortal.
Nor the myrrh refer to the miracle of Notre Dame
once again vying for a national championship,
though many of the faithful might think that.

Again, I know about the tradition that the three gifts
represent royalty, divinity, and humanity.
I am wondering about their history in the biblical tradition.
What does that tradition say about these gifts?

Part of that tradition is given in the readings for today.
Especially the first reading of Isaiah 60 and the response, Psalm 72.
Here we see the gifts brought to the new king.
Isaiah 60 is looking to the great and final age of the Messianic king.
This certainly has relevance for today's feast.
The nations of the world are giving homage.

Psalm 72 provides a further clue.
It presents an image of the great king
in the semblance of great king Solomon.
It takes Solomon as its model.
The image is one of kindly and just leadership.
The ideal king will govern the people with justice.
Which means protecting the afflicted, rescuing the poor,
having pity for the lowly.
Given this, the riches of the world will pour into the king's city.
*Justice shall flower in his days and profound peace.*

While the psalm informs us
that wonderful gifts will be brought to Solomon,
it doesn't mention gold and frankincense and myrrh.
For that we have to turn to the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

In I Kings10 we read that she came from the south,
bringing gold and frankincense and precious spices and stone.
*"Never again did spices come in such quantity*
*as that which the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon,"*
the book of I Kings tells us.

Historians know about the ancient Spice Road
that worked its way up the western side of the Arabian Peninsula,
with camel caravans bringing cinnamon, cassia, pepper,
and other exotic spices to the Mediterranean area.
From the air the caravan routes look like immense weaving ropes.
They are about a mile wide.
And the Spice Road had to change its route continually,
to avoid bandits and enterprising tax agents.

The Queen of Sheba came up the Spice Road
with gifts to offer Solomon the Wise,
for she had heard about his reputation for wisdom.
And so we can add Wisdom to the list, alongside Justice,
as the meaning of the gifts.

But nothing has been said about Myrrh.
In fact, if you want to find mention of myrrh in the Hebrew Bible,

you had better turn to the Song of Songs,
the book sometimes known as the Song of Solomon.
For once again we come back to the great King Solomon.

Myrrh is mentioned in this small book
as often as it is in the rest of the Old Testament together.
And it consistently has a clear symbolic meaning.
It represents the speaker's beloved.

What are we to make of this?
While popular report has it that the myrrh represents mortality,
because this powerful perfume was used at burials,
that is not exactly the message of the biblical tradition
as shown in the Song of Songs.

What name should we assign this particular gift,
to go along with Justice and Wisdom?
Perhaps Love. Perhaps Passion. Or even Beauty.
I think I would call it earthly beauty.
It suggests a sense of the mortal beauty that is part of our human lot.
I am reminded of the lines from W. H. Auden:

Lay your sleeping head my love,
Human on my faithless arms …
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.

I am reminded that the Song of Songs
has had a tenuous hold on the biblical canon,
justified generally as being an allegory
of Yahweh and Israel, for the faith community of Israel,
or Christ and the Church, for Christians.
All of this reflecting, of course,
our ambivalence about human sexuality.
However, it seems that is exactly what the poem is celebrating.
The innate good of human love, human being.

So what do we make of this?
I think we might give it the title of Humanity,

meaning the human good in itself,
without justifying reference to the divine.
The Human as good in itself.

And so Solomon represents this as well.
Not only justice for the poor, wisdom of true guidance,
but the spirit of full humanity as well.

It seems that the gifts of the Magi all derive from the stories of Solomon.
He is the originator. So where does that take us?
What does Solomon give us today?

I find myself turning to another passage inspired by Solomon.
Namely a passage familiar to us from Advent,
Jesse's tree, Isaiah 11.
As Jesse's grandson, Solomon surely was a shoot
that sprouted from the tree of Jesse.

The poem goes on to describe the ideal king in the model of Solomon.
First it lists virtues of sound leadership.
We have Christianized them as the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
Isaiah sees them as traits of the wise and just king.
But then the poem moves further, to paint a remarkable picture,
one that we know as the Peaceable Kingdom,
due to the famous paintings by that name
by the American primitive, Edward Hicks.

*Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb,*
*and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat;*
*The calf and the young lion shall browse together,*
*with a little child to guide them.*

This vision of peace,
depicted as a pause in the struggle of the wild,
stands in our imagination like a dream.
We can add Peace to our list of meanings for the gifts.

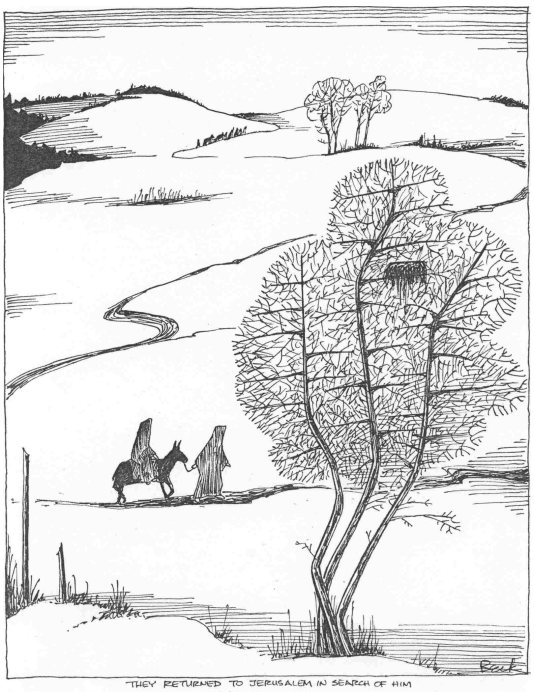
But the dream is never realized.
At times something very close to it emerges,

but then discord enters in again to replace it.
And so the dream is a source of restlessness and dissatisfaction.

But that restlessness is part of the gift as well,
for we always know that there is more,
that what we have before us is not the fullness.
We hope into the future.
And not only do we hope, but we act as well,
working to build the future that we can envision.

And this too is part of the gift of the Magi.
The story is just beginning, and they offer their gifts.
Gifts of justice for the poor,
the wisdom of sound leadership,
the dream of universal peace,
and the restlessness that moves the hopeful toward them.

These are the gifts set before the child, as his story begins.
And, as we know, his story is our own story.



## Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

January 13, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 | First Servant Song |
| Psalm Ps 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10. | A storm crosses over |
| Acts 10:34-38 | Peter's Kerygma speech |
| Luke 3:15-16, 21-22 | The Holy Spirit descended upon him |

The Feast of the Baptism of Jesus
is always an opportunity for us to review our own Baptism.
What do we make of it?

Some have what we might call the weak view.
Baptism is the ticket to a certain group.
It is a way of joining the club.
Others have the view
that it is what saves us from eternal punishment.
There is a lot of anxiety connected with that approach.

More recently, the Second Vatican Council reminded us
that it is a matter of becoming a part of the community of believers.

For some of us, setting aside a religious name
and returning to a baptismal name
was a recognition of the priority of the baptismal claim on us.
But for others it remains something that happened
when were we too young to know what was happening
and taken for granted after that.

In the days before I repented of my wayward ways,
I used to embarrass people by asking the date of their baptism.
Not many knew.
Some, to my surprise, did.

*St Paul* had a strong notion of baptism.
For him it was the difference between life and death.
In a theory that did not make it into Christian tradition,
at least not of the Catholic variety,
Paul relates in I Corinthians 15

that Christians have two life principles
—that which derives from Adam
and that which derives from Christ.

The life that comes from our first parents
is fated to pass into oblivion;
the life of the Spirit that derives from Christ
will issue into the life of resurrection.
For Paul, only Christians rise to new life.
The difference is baptism.

Consequently, we see Paul busy founding new communities
in which the new life can live and flourish.
And not only that, he is desperate to keep those communities vital,
revisiting them often.
And even, when necessary, writing them letters to remind them.

In the *Gospels*, baptism is the beginning of a journey.
A life journey.
We see this in the way they treat the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth.
It initiates his coming story of ministry and salvation.

Luke, following the example of Mark's gospel,
cites the pronouncement of the Voice from heaven.
The message is not previously unknown,
since it cites passages from Scripture.
However, it is unusual in the passages that it cites.
The scripture texts include both Psalm 2
and Isaiah 42, today's first reading.

Psalm 2 expresses the common expectation of the Messiah.
He will be a king of the first order,
one who has power and knows how to use it.
God Yahweh tells him, You are my Son.

The psalm elaborates on God's benefices to the Messianic son:
Ask it of me,
and I will give you the nations as your inheritance,
and, as your possession, the ends of the earth.

With an iron rod you will shepherd them,
like a potter's vessel you will shatter them."

The program is imperial in its scope and methods.
It will involve subduing the resistant nations with harsh reprisals.

But the voice from heaven goes on
to cite another passage from Scripture,
and that is the first reading from today.
It is the first of the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah.

The suffering Servant is a figure of endurance and longsuffering.
The Servant will prevail, not through overcoming with power,
but with the persistence of humble service and persistent love.

The voice announces that Jesus will be the Messiah
by way of being the Servant.
It is an unexpected and unusual demand.
It is no wonder that shortly afterward
Jesus retires to the desert for 40 days to think it over.

Just as the baptism begins the public life of Jesus,
so it begins the narrative of the Ordinary Church Year
in the Sunday liturgy.
The coming year will tell a story,
and we are expected to recognize that story
and its implications for us.

For just as the gospel and the liturgy begin with a baptism,
so does our own personal story as a Christian.
It is a narrative that plays out in our lives.
In a way, the life of a Christian is another Gospel story,
a personal and individual gospel,
another telling of the larger gospel story.

The narrative of our lives follows the pattern
of the unfolding Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John account,
but in a personal and local way.

We make our decisions, or fail to make them,
in the light of the baptism with which we began.

And for this reason we return to the beginning, time and again,
to review what it was that we promised,
what it was with which we aligned ourselves.
We reread the text from Second Isaiah concerning the Servant:

Upon him I have put my spirit;
he shall bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry out, nor shout,
nor make his voice heard in the street.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.
He will faithfully bring forth justice.

And we remember that this is our own call,
our own baptism as well.
And to this effect we renew our baptismal vows
in the name of the Servant and Messiah, Jesus.

**Second Sunday in Ordinary Time**

January 20, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Isaiah 62:1-5 | You shall be called "Espoused" |
| Psalm 96:1-3, 7-10 | Proclaim his deeds to the nations |
| 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 | Many gifts and one Spirit |
| John 2:1-11 | There was a wedding in Cana |

Now as the bitter cold of winter has returned,
we have a theme from springtime to warm us up: weddings.
Instead of June to January, we are going the other way around
—January to June.

Wedding customs are notoriously variable.
Not just from country to country,
they may differ even from county to county.

One big difference in weddings today as compared to Jesus' time,
is that today the bride's family foots the bill.
Then it was the groom.

And weddings can be costly.
I don't go to many weddings. But on occasion it happens.
One of my more recent involved a groom
with whom I was somewhat acquainted
and a bride I met the for the first time.
I was the priest that was available.

The bride was an only child, and her father doted on her.

I must say I was continually surprised by the size of the event.
The wedding party was quite large.
There were most of the usual practices on the occasion.
But it was the reception that got my attention.

The wedding party filled a large room at the Grand River Center.
The reception itself was suitably grand.
I kept thinking, philistine that I am,
that a fortune was going up in smoke.

I thought of how a fireworks display sends up a glorious display,
and then fades away in a wisp of smoke.
Then there was the entry of the bridal party.
At the time, a video that was going viral on the web
was that of a wedding in the Twin Cities.
The procession up the aisle was a spectacle of dance and acrobatics
—first, ushers, then pairs of wedding attendants,
then the groom and then the bride.

I'm guessing that is why the wedding party
entered the Grand River Center they way they did.
I began to suspect that this was the latest mode for weddings.
Maybe they were all like this now.

I said the meal prayer, and left before too long.

I mention this not to be critical.
All in attendance in fact seemed to be enjoying themselves,
and a good time was being had.
I am mentioning it to draw on our experience of weddings,
so as to think about why weddings appear repeatedly in the bible,
and especially why we have one today,
at the beginning of the church year.

What is it about weddings
that make them the very paradigm of celebration?
What makes us want to spend a fortune on them,
apart from a competitive spirit?

Thinking about this wedding, and others I have known,
I would suggest a few things make them stand out
from the usual good times:
a sense of release from ordinary rules,
an impulse to excess,
and a feeling that we are temporarily outside
the boundaries of the commonplace world.

When we are released from the constraints that usually bind us,
we find ourselves doing things we would never do otherwise.

We may enjoy ourselves, forgetting our self-consciousness.
We may meet new people, without putting our guard up.
They say that weddings generate other weddings.
We may also court trouble, of course.
For instance, driving after drinking can be a problem.

The impulse to live to excess
is an aspect of the suspension of ordinary daily rules.
Grand display, expensive outfits, costly rented vehicles. And so forth.
And yet, excess expresses the overflow of feeling.
It makes this time more than any other.

And all of this puts us outside the normal world for a time.
This probably the most important effect.

I am reminded of early mythic calendars.
They rounded off the year to 360 days,
which could be divided in any number of days.
In fact, it has given us the 360 degrees of a circle.
However, as you know, the solar year in reality has five more days.
So the extra days were assigned to carnival time,
which was outside the calendar.
So it is with wedding celebrations.

When we come back to the story of the Cana wedding,
we imagine things as being pretty sober.
Nothing wild is reported.
However, we can see aspects of our experience.

For one, the event stressed the resources of the groom's family.
If they ran out of wine, it would be a bad commentary
on the groom's ability to be a provider.
And, who knows, maybe it was the arrival of Jesus with his disciples
that pushed resources beyond what was planned for.
Mary, who intervenes, seems to be related to the groom,
for she knows what is going on behind the scenes.
She may have been helping out in the kitchen.

We have the other things happening as well.

The testimony to excess is their running out of wine.
The impulse to release is seen in the wine itself, freely enjoyed.

And the experiencing of traveling outside the normal world for a while
is found in the miracle of the multiplication.
I can imagine the guests, not knowing what had happened,
but knowing that they had a remarkably good time,
and that some unnamed difference had marked that day,
remembering it and telling its story for a long time after.

The wedding celebration is a symbol,
and sometimes it is useful to explore a symbol,
to see what it contains.
There is more than this, of course,
but this much helps us to understand
what the wedding occasion brings to the scripture,
and to the liturgy, for that matter.

As a symbol of the end time, as in Isaiah 25,
the wedding celebration configures a future beyond what we can know.
It points to it, suggesting that we are destined
for more than we can express in this age.

As a symbol for starting the Gospel, as the first sign,
it begins a story with a promise of where it is headed.
It sets our expectations toward the future of the unfolding account.

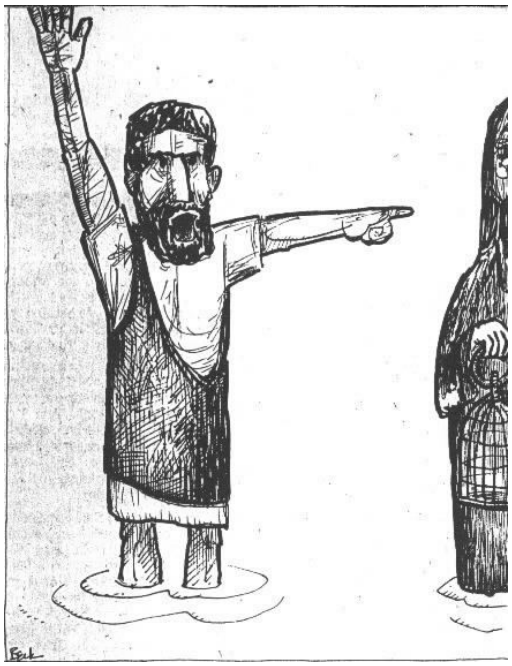
As a symbol for beginning the church year,
it places us inside the New Testament world,
and it places us inside the liturgical action of Sunday worship.
Here too we are outside the commonplace world as we know it.

It reminds us that on Sunday we step outside
the world in which we spend our days
(as we do in a smaller way each daily liturgy).
And in this timeless zone we look back on our week
and forward to what is coming.
We look at our lives as in a mirror.

We bring our works to the altar,
and take out from here our commitment to the days following.

One way in which we differ from a service club
that makes civic virtue its commitment
is that we bring ourselves here
to collect and commit our work as offering.
We offer it and claim it in an exchange of gifts,
in an exchange of life and liturgy.

Outside the cold and wind of January
reminds us of the world in which we live.
Inside, in the warmth of climate control and community friendship,
we think about June and weddings,
and step outside the normal world,
or maybe step inside, give God praise and thanksgiving,
and remind ourselves what we are about.



**Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

January 27, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10 | A Covenant Renewal |
| Psalm19:8-10, 15 | Your words are spirit and light |
| 1 Corinthians 12:12-30 | One body, many parts |
| Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21 | In the Nazareth Synagogue |

One of the ways in which we begin the new year of Ordinary Time
is with a pair of inauguration ceremonies.
One is from the book of Nehemiah,
celebrating the new beginning presided over by the scribe Ezra,
and another with Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth,
at the start of his Galilean ministry.
Each is a proclamation and a promise for the future.

Both of these seem appropriate for the season.
Because we tend to take these readings at their surface meaning,
enjoying their language as it is fitting for our purposes,
we often do not notice their deeper meaning.
When we look at them in their historical contexts,
often surprising depths surface.

For instance, when we compare the account of Ezra
with the text from Isaiah that Jesus quotes in the synagogue,
we find opposite ideas.
Historically, both texts were written
in the aftermath of Israel's return from exile.
It has been pointed out that the struggles of the New Testament period
can all be traced back to the tensions of this period after the return.

The passage from Isaiah 61, quoted by Jesus,
is connected to the Jubilee hopes.
It announces a time blessed by the Spirit,
when the poor will hear good news
and release of those in the captivities of debt, death, and disease.
It is a promise of liberty that appropriately inaugurates
the time of Jesus' mission in Galilee.

The passage represented one strand of theology
for the returning Israelites.
It borrowed from the Second-Isaiah themes of Light to the Gentiles,
openness to the nations.
It was idealistic and forward-looking.

But there was another strand of theology
among the returning Judeans.
This is seen in the story of Ezra's covenant renewal,
part of which we hear about today.
It served the purposes of a foundering community
that was having difficulty finding its way.
Ezra's reform provided structure.
In a time when they were no longer a nation,
and it was not clear what it meant to be a Jew,
Ezra supplied answers.

His reform introduced new categories,
and reinforced some that developed during the exile,
when they developed some cultural markers
to identify themselves as distinct from the peoples
with which they were forced to share existence.

Among these identity markers
were those we most often associate with Judaism:
Sabbath worship, circumcision, and kosher food laws.
In addition, Ezra insisted
that any who were married to foreigners divorce
and marry within the community.
All of this was designed to preserve their identity
and provide security to the community.

We might call these two views, these two strands of theology,
Mission and Definition.

Mission looks out beyond borders
to a ministry of witness and service.
Definition looks to the borders themselves,
and makes distinctions and builds up the structures

that firm up the community.

When Luke shows Jesus choosing the message
of mission, of liberation and Jubilee,
it is for a reason that is close to his heart.
Luke is writing his gospel, along with Acts of the Apostles,
for a very particular readership.

In the ancient world,
in the cities where the synagogues of Judaism were to be found,
there was a class of people who were once pagans,
but were no longer.

They were attracted to Jewish theology
and its belief in the one God.
But they were put off by the very identity markers
that the Jews used to set themselves apart—
circumcision, the multitude of laws, and so forth.

So they helped out at the synagogues, gave support,
helped to fund programs, and so forth.
But they never officially converted.
They were known as God-fearers,
because they feared, or worshiped, the one God.
But they were not called Jews.

When Luke dedicates his work to a certain Theophilus,
whose names means God-lover, we can assume
that he represents this special readership of Luke's gospel.

So when Luke shows Jesus announcing
that "today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,"
when he dedicates his coming ministry to Mission
rather than Definition,
it resonates with Luke's intended audience.
He is saying that Jesus is showing them a way
to worship the one God without the features that had disturbed them.
It also is part of the Jewish tradition,
and they are welcome to be baptized and to follow Jesus.

On the other hand, the citizens of Nazareth
are invested in those identity markers,
and they do not take kindly to developments.
They will shortly make their opinions known,
as they try to cast him from the brow of the hill
upon which their village is built.

The tension between Mission and Definition
continues throughout the history of the church
and is felt strongly today,
when we are experiencing a need for Catholic identity.
We find that it is once again popular in some circles
to insist on Catholic identity markers
—those features that set us apart,
with which we grew up and know so well.

In speaking of the reception of Vatican II,
current interpreters of such as Faggioli Massimo,
have replaced the language of conservative and liberal
with another set of terms.

They speak of a neo-Augustinianism and a neo-Thomism.

This is not an attempt to replace divisive political terminology
with obscure theological vocabulary.
It tries to place this struggle within the history of church struggles.

The neo-Augustinians are more suspicious of the world,
and view the church as an institution
apart from the world's compromises.
They prefer a juridical definition of the church,
and their favorite Council document is *Lumen Gentium*,
the Dogmatic Constitution o the Church.
It is, to quote one of their theologians,
"to see the innermost essence of the Church
in the pure community of love."
The City of God is not the same as the City of Man.

The neo-Thomists, on the other hand, adopted
a more welcoming attitude toward the world outside the church.
They prefer the Council document, *Gaudium et Spes*,
The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.
They have a more positive attitude toward history in theology.
They see the Council as opening a new age in the Church.

It is not false, I think, to describe these two views
as Description and Mission.

For our purposes, it is encouraging to see Jesus in today's Gospel
dedicating his life story to the work of Mission.
His declaration is one of Jubilee, a time blessed by the Spirit,
when the poor will hear good news
and those in the captivities of debt, death, and disease be released.
This is the One we follow,
whose proclamation we attempt in our often hesitant way to fulfill.

It is appropriate that today
we send forth Common Venture volunteers
to work and witness in Zambia.
This too is part of the proclamation of Jubilee.

In their mission we see our own belief
supported and lived out.

**Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

February 10, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8 | Isaiah's Call to Prophecy |
| Psalm 138:1-5, 7-8 | When I called, you answered |
| 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 | Witnesses to the Resurrection |
| Luke 5:1-11 | Peter's Call on the Lake |

We begin the church year with stories about being called.
Last week it was Jeremiah.
This week it is Isaiah and Peter.
But today we have calls with disclaimers.
Both Peter and Isaiah declare their unworthiness
in the presence of the awe-inducing Holy.

With Isaiah the call takes the form of cleansing his lips.
And with a burning coal, at that.
This certainly has to be symbolic, if he is to be able to speak at all.
Once his lips are cleansed
he is in shape to speak the words of the Lord.

In Peter's call, as Luke tells it, they are out on the lake.
At Jesus' suggestion they try something different.
The amazing response plunges Peter into a profound sense of awe.
Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.

In both cases their overwhelming sense of being unfit for the call
causes them to voice an objection.

There is a spirit in the world that is all too ready to agree with them.
Or with anyone else who seems to put themselves forward
as spokesperson or disciple.

No one is perfect,
and those who do not like what a person is doing
are only too happy to point out that person's faults.

Character assassination is a hazard in the arena of public service.

I am thinking of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.
Both of them were literally assassinated,
but their memory is continuously under assault
by attacks on their character,
from those pointing out failures in their personals lives.

No one is perfect, and it is only too easy
to find something that can be presented
as contradicting a prophet's message.
It is easy to brand someone as a hypocrite as a result.
And then it is not necessary to deal with the prophet's message.

I am thinking of my friend Joanne Hall,
who once pointed out that writing a letter to the editor
requires considerable humility.
She was speaking of the willingness to put up with
the personal attacks that such letters attract.

And that was before the letters were put online,
so that anonymous responders could post
their crude and even vicious *ad hominem* attacks.

Character assassination seems to be
the most popular form of criticism in these circles.
It is easy. It is cheap.
And it doesn't require knowing much about the issue,
or dealing with it.

I am thinking about my younger sister Phyllis,
who will be celebrating a major birthday in a few days.
She will be crossing the borderline into 70.
She has devoted her life, more or less,
to confronting distortions of power
and bringing truth to those situations that seem to have a need for it.
She had, and has, a number of enemies.

At one point in her career she was hired
as dean of the nursing school at Marquette University.

The program seems to have been in some disarray,
and she was tasked with the burden of putting it in order.
Among other things, it required terminating
some members of the department, which she did.
And of course there were lawsuits.

But what I remember most
is that the university lawyers were so impressed
by her résumé and bio
that they thought it could stand on its own.

Which meant they didn't bother to protect her.

Which in turn meant that the opposing lawyers quickly realized
that for their part all they needed to do
if they were to undermine the university's position
was to mount an attack against Phyllis' character.

I do not remember how the case came out.
I believe the university lost the case.
What I do remember is that she had to endure
a drawn-out court case which largely consisted
of attacking her character and credibility.

It is not clear that such attacks were the concerns
of Isaiah and Peter when they entered their own disclaimers.
Though we do know that Jeremiah, from whom we heard last week,
had full knowledge of the noxious pattern.

What we see today is probably something else.
We see Isaiah and Peter not only fully aware
of what the critics might say,
but even more painfully aware they would agree with them.
They would be among the first
to list their own shortcomings by chapter and verse.
It is their own self-criticism
that is getting in the way of their response to the call.

Which is not to take away from the danger of those
who would stop at nothing to stop them.

I would venture to say that what primarily justifies Isaiah
is not the ember that cleanses his lips,
    but rather his ready response to the call.
    In his memorable response, "Here I am, send me,"
        we have the action that really clears away the sin,
        absolves the guilt, and removes the fault.

It is in Peter's recognition of how fully unfit he was
for the task he was called to,
    and yet his willing acceptance of the call despite all that,
    that clears away the obstacles for performing it.

As with us. We are not Isaiah or Peter.
But nonetheless we are called.
    We know best the limits we bring to the task.
    And yet in answering the call we find the answers
    to our vivid awareness of our unworthiness.
        It is in carrying out the call that we are made worthy of it.
Only then, and not on our own.
Just as in answering it, we find the ability to perform it.

We are what St Paul, knowing his own shortcomings,
called "earthen vessels,"
or perhaps more simply, "clay pots."
    Fragile but necessary vessels
    for the work of prophecy and discipleship.

It is not the vessel that makes the difference,
    but what it contains.

**First Sunday of Lent**

February 17, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Deuteronomy 26:4-10 | My father was a wandering Aramean. |
| Psalm 91:1-2, 10-15 | Lest you dash your foot against a stone |
| Romans 10:8-13 | The same Lord is Lord of all |
| Luke 4:1-13 | Into the desert for forty days |

In the coming Passover Seder meal a child will ask
What makes this day different from every other day?
But this year Catholics ask
What makes this Lent different from any other Lent?
And the answer, of course, is
that we will spend much of it without a pope.
That we will have a new pope by Easter.

It is in times between administrations that questions arise
about the direction taken by an organization.
And it is this time between popes that we draw back
and consider what we want in a church.
With that in mind we turn to the Scriptures of Lent with fresh eyes.
What do they tell us about our moment in time?
What do they have to say to us
as we enter the time between popes?

As always, Lent begins with Jesus in the desert.
The three temptations follow the baptism of Jesus,
and represent three false ways to perform the role of Messiah.
Jesus, as the coming Messiah king
that Israel was expecting to restore its rule and place in the world,
finds Satan proposing some models of kingly behavior.

The temptation to turn the stones into loaves of bread
is an obvious use of power for someone who hasn't eaten for 40 days.
Jesus' answer, quoting the book of Deuteronomy,
tells us what the temptation is about.
One does not live by bread alone.

The passage in Deuteronomy is about the manna in the desert.
The people are hungry, and God provides a meal.
The lesson is that it is not only bread, it is God's gift.
It is not only by bread, but by God's gift that we live.
Life is a gift, and we are to live in the memory of that.

But this is a temptation toward false Messiahship,
and in this sense the temptation
is to put too much faith in one's own power,
and not enough in God from whom all power derives.
In the extreme case,
it is to confuse one's own authority with that of God.
One is reminded of the story about Caesar's coin.

The temptation to worship Satan
in order to gain control of the nations of the world
is an accurate picture of the imperial world of Rome.
Everyone was expected out of loyalty to the emperor
to worship him who was in effect possessor of the nations of the world.
But this was a Satanic demand for believers.

For a promising Messiah,
allegiance to the empire was a quick way to attain dominion,
and Israel expected that with the coming Messiah
she would be the new version of empire.
Jesus reminds the devil that God is the only one we serve.
Which is to say, God is the true authority
from which all authority flows.

When the devil takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple,
he makes an offer based on the psalms, according to him.
God defends those who believe. Trust in God.
So let's try this out. Cast yourself form the pinnacle,
and have God save you. That will win a lot of followers.

But Jesus, once again responding with words from Deuteronomy,
reminds Satan that there is a difference in trusting God in times of trial
and creating a situation that forces God's hand.

The psalm is a prayer of consolation.
The devil turns it into a guarantee of protection that invites testing.

But this is a test of Messianic performance.
And in that case it proposes a policy of spectacular display
as a way of gaining a compliant following.
We all like spectacle, and the devil knows it.
Show without substance.

So the tests of misrule for the Messiah are threefold:
hubris, empire, and display.

Hubris is the pride that takes full credit for oneself and neglects the gift.
Empire is the political ambition that compromises to gain power.
Display is the love of grandstanding that substitutes for authority.

These turn out to be temptations thought to be attractive by Satan,
but not by Jesus.

Of course Luke is not telling us about the desert temptations
simply for historical reasons, listing the trials of Jesus.
He has something further in mind.
The temptations against the messianic role
are also temptations of the church.
In fact, they are primarily temptations of the church,
rather than of Jesus.

Is **hubris** a temptation of the church?
It is when it declares itself beyond judgment or criticism.
Beyond fault or failure.
There are historical eras in which this kind of overreaching
has been a emblem of the church. We know them all too well.

But this season of Lent offers signs of promise and hope.
In his resignation of the position of pope,
Benedict has demythologized the role.
Now, rather than a mystical position
arrayed in the robes of semi-divinity,

the papacy is seen to be a position in the church,
one which can be resigned.

**Empire** is a model that has long troubled the church,
as it borrowed some of its trappings, and occasionally its methods.

Maggiore Faggioli, the young church historian of the Council
who will soon be giving a talk at St Elizabeth Seton in Cedar Rapids,
has an article on this in the recent Commonweal.
He writes that there has been —
a strong dynamic of attraction-repulsion between Catholicism and imperial power.

But … The age of colonial empires gave way to financial empires.
A world dominated by Western powers is yielding
to one increasingly oriented toward the South and East.

The era of Catholicism as a state church in Europe
has given way to the contemporary world of religious pluralism and freedom
—and decreased Catholic practice.

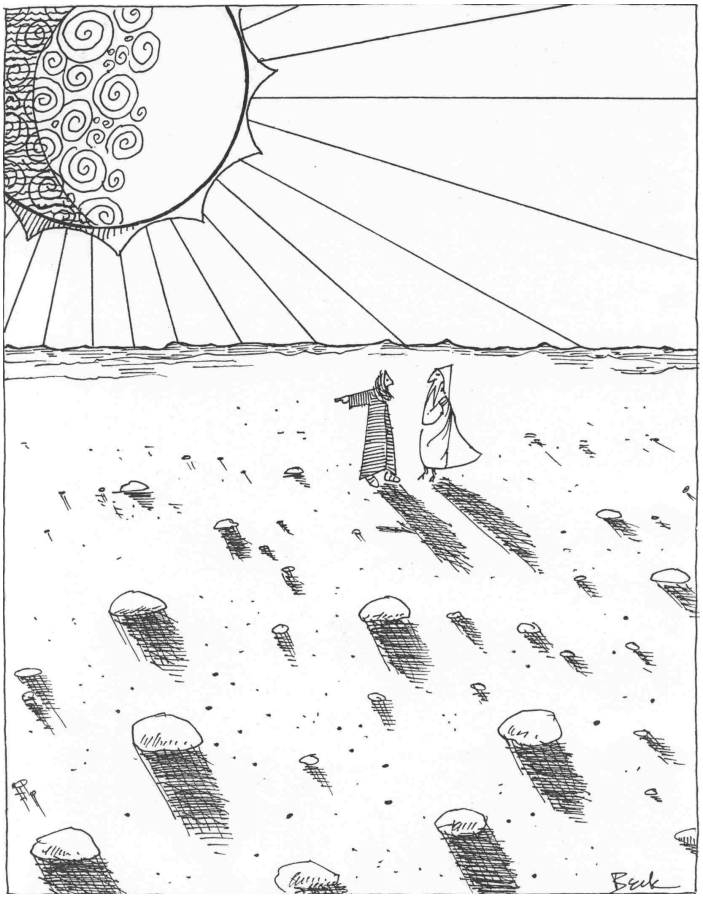
This is the long-term historical context of the papacy
from which Benedict XVI will resign:
one that became more monarchical in the nineteenth century
(as a reaction against the democratization of modern political systems)
and is now more centralized than ever before—despite Vatican II.

And yet we are a world church. This is what we are.
We will be searching for a way to express that in the modern world.
This is the task that lies ahead, that has gone unnoticed by no one.
The resolution of this puzzle will preoccupy much of the futue.

The third temptation is that of loving **display**.
I need only mention the revival of the cappa magna
to suggest that this temptation is already being shown for what it is
in today's church.
Here, as in the other two cases as well,
St Francis stands ready to provide our inspiration.
As well as his call: Build my church.

This Lent is a time of renewal for each of us.
But it also is one for the church in general.

And the convergence of the Lenten season
with the selection of a new leader
    cannot but occasion reflection on what meaning
    the church should have for us today.
        Reflection that will inevitably concern every Cardinal
        just as it will ordinary Catholics,
        as we ponder what it means to belong to this church of ours.



**Second Sunday of Lent**

February 24, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18 | God appears to Abraham |
| Psalm 27:1, 7-8, 8-9, 13-14 | Hide not your face from me |
| Philippians 3:17—4:1 | He will transform our lowly bodies |
| Luke 9:28-36 | The Transfiguration |

What makes this Lent different from any other Lent?
And what makes this Sunday different from any other Sunday in Lent?
It is the last Sunday that Benedict will celebrate as pope.

As last week, it is appropriate to take this time
to consider what we are as church,
and what the Scripture has to tell us.

It is said that St Augustine divided time into three parts:
that which is no more, that which does not yet exist,
and the fleeting present moment that never lasts.
Today we take a look at the past, present, and future.

The story of Abraham and the covenant ritual
is enough to remind us that the past is very different from our present.
We have difficulty understanding, let alone appreciating,
the covenant ritual of the divided animals.
Cultures can be very alien.

Abraham was promised many descendants,
like the stars of the sky and the sands of the shore.
If we agree with St Paul, and understand these
to refer to Abraham's descendants by faith, that is the church,
we are reminded that the church that we are reflecting upon today,
with its 1.16 billion members worldwide,
is perhaps the oldest and largest institution
in the history of the world.

When we turn to the story of the Transfiguration,
we see there an account of past present and future.
Situated in the middle of the Gospel story,

toward the end of the Galilean ministry of Jesus
and shortly before he turns his face toward Jerusalem,
it looks back to the beginning of the Gospel
and forward to its conclusion.

It looks to the beginning, as the voice from heaven
which was first heard at the baptism of Jesus
now returns to remind the disciples of the mission of the gospel.
It looks forward to the conclusion
in its shining image of Christ in his glory.
And it finds itself in the present moment
that is the hinge between these two, past and future.

When we look at Luke's account of the Transfiguration,
what do we see that can instruct us
in this pivotal moment in our church's history?
There are some features that are distinctive in this Gospel.

When we look back at the baptism, with its message from Voice,
we see that it combines two scripture traditions.
One is the promised Messiah.
In Psalm Two, cited by the Voice, the promise of the messiah
is described in terms of the full imperial longings of Israel.

> [The Lord] said to me, "You are my son;
> today I have begotten you.
> Ask it of me, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance,
> and, as your possession, the ends of the earth.
> With an iron rod you will shepherd them,
> Like a potter's vessel you will shatter them."

As Luke reports the Voice at the Transfiguration,
Jesus is called the Chosen One, the title given to the Servant.

For another biblical theme was joined to this by the Voice:
the mission of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh.
Against this imperial threat and bombast
it sets the humility and nonviolence of the Servant:

Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my Chosen One with whom I am pleased.
Upon him I have put my spirit;
he shall bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry out, nor shout,
nor make his voice heard in the street.
A bruised reed* he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.

From shattering with an iron rod,
we turn to refusing to break a bruised reed.
This is how Jesus is to work out his Messiahship.

There is a particular reflection today
as we look forward to the election of the pontiff,
another Chosen One,
and find ourselves looking back to the Gospels,
which in turn look back to the Servant.
The Model of the Servant of Servants.

When we look to the Scripture,
we see that the Chosen One differs from imperial overlords
in his refusal of the methods of power and coercion common to empires.
As we choose a vicar of the Servant,
this too is part of the picture.

Luke adds another item to his version of the story.
Luke informs us that Jesus is discussing with Moses and Elijah
the coming departure, or exodus, he is to take in Jerusalem.
By calling it an exodus, Luke brings to mind
the liberation of Israel from slavery.
In Jesus' exodus
we do not see the demands of a God who wants suffering,
but rather Jesus' fidelity to a mission of liberation
that involves great risk.

We too are looking toward a departure, an exodus.
And it will be not only this week,
but (we hope) to be completed before Easter

with the naming of a new pope.
As we look forward into the future, we are conscious
of how the process in which our church is now engaged
coincides, probably intentionally,
with the season of Lent and Holy Week.
The entire church is participating in the exodus of Jesus.
And in a special way with this transition that demands our reflection.

There is one more touch that Luke includes in his Transfiguration account.
He tells us the disciples fall asleep.
We are no doubt invited to think
of the episode in the Garden of Gethsemane,
when they slept through another crucial moment.

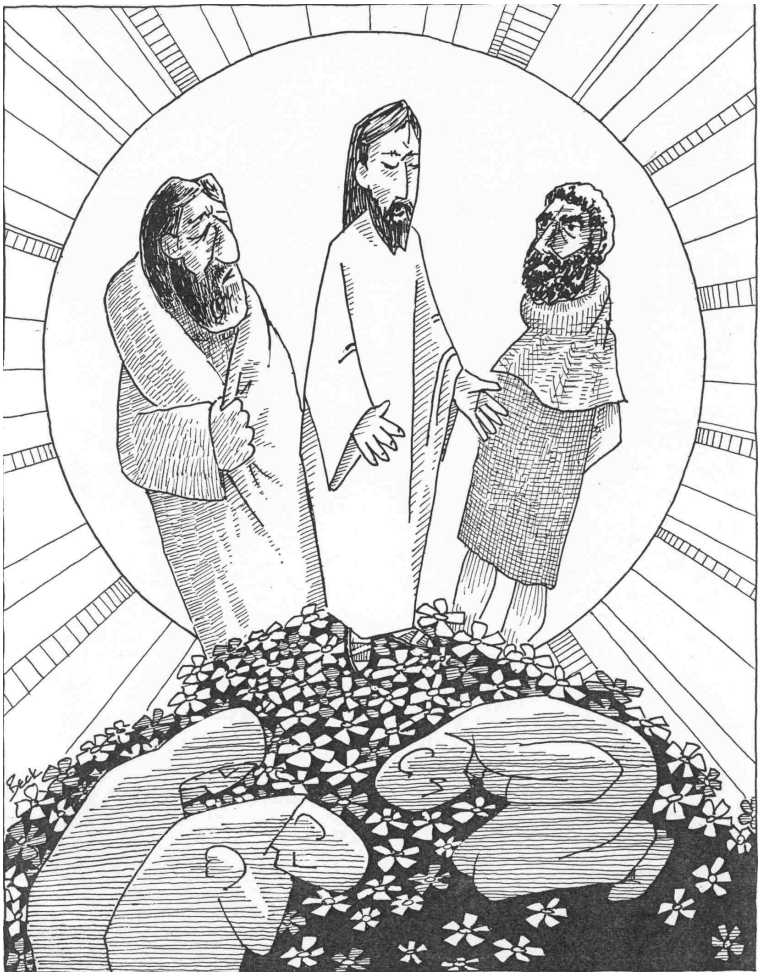
This human touch can be added to others that shape the story.
They are bewildered at what is happening.
Peter does not know what he is saying.
Although earlier in the chapter he has led the disciples
in recognizing Jesus as the Messiah,
he fails to accept Jesus' version of the role.
Peter is thinking about the lethal rod of iron.
But Jesus is thinking of the Servant
unwilling to break a bruised reed.

Peter is the chosen successor,
but only as one who is distinct and in many ways distant
from the example given by Jesus.
He is not to be confused with the Messiah.

These then are three of the lessons of the Transfiguration.
Service,
liberation,
and discipleship.

The Voice reminds us of the Servant role.
Jesus discusses his liberating work in the coming exodus.
Peter knows not what he says,
demonstrating the difference between the Messiah
and the Messiah's disciple.

Service. Liberation. Discipleship.
These are the lessons of the Conclave on the mountain.
These are some of the lessons for this Lent
that is different from any other Lent.



**Third Sunday Of Lent**

March 3, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15 | The burning bush |
| Psalm 103: 1-4, 6-8, 11 | The Lord is kind and merciful |
| 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12 | All baptized into Moses |
| Luke 13:1-9 | A tyrant, a tower, a fig tree |

What makes this Lent different from any other Lent?
Today the universal church gathers
to hear these biblical texts read and proclaimed.
Among the many congregations is that meeting in the Sistine Chapel,
discerning who they might elect as the next pope.

I imagine the person selected to preach there on this day
asking the gardener to set up two trees in the sanctuary.
One represents the burning bush of Moses,
and a trick of lighting makes it seem to glow with an internal flame.
The other represents the fig tree of the gospel,
and also can seem to be burning, but there is an off/on switch,
because whereas the burning bush is a tree living and burning,
the fig is either living or burning. Not both.

One is the burning bush of liberation,
marking the call to Moses to "set my people free."
The other is the fig tree of repentance,
given a reprieve for another year.
The preacher in the Sistine Chapel presents the two lessons for the Conclave.
Liberation of God's people.
Repentance for sins past.

The gospel prefaces the fig tree
with two episodes from the current events of the day.
Jesus' listeners wonder why these events happened.
Was it because of the sins of the victims? Jesus denies that.

If we are looking toward sinfulness in these events,
we might look to those who bring about the disasters.
Pilate, in "mingling the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices,"

displayed his characteristic ruthlessness.
Sharon Ringe reminds us:
"The first example tells of an act of officially sanctioned terrorism
and exemplary violence used by political authorities
to enforce control over a captive population."

Concerning the falling tower of Siloam,
we might wonder who was cutting corners in the construction,
perhaps making an illicit denarius in the process.
Ringe again: "Life experience, however, leads one
to look with a certain skepticism at such 'accidents' too.
Are they perhaps the product of construction shortcuts in methods or material,
disregarding the consequences for workers or member of the public?"

But Jesus makes another point.
He turns to his questioners and asks,
"What about you? Will you repent?

I rather doubt that repentance will be asked of the fathers at the conclave.
We have seen calls for this,
with special mention of the management of the crisis of child abuse.

But if it is asked of them, I think it will not occur, for a number of reasons.
For one, the patriarch does not repent, nor apologize.
It is not part of the role.

But more specifically, I think that the problem
is not so much personal as it is structural.
Let me give three instances.

**First**, the bishops of the world have not been served well
by a bad theology of scandal.

Mary Keenan, in her sensitive study of the crisis in the Irish church,
one that is sympathetic to the plight of the perpetrators
as well as that of the victims,
notes that a theology that views the public revelation
of sins in the church as an act of scandal,

in which the revelation is thought to be as sinful as the original act,
has a part to play in how the scandal worsened, once it was revealed.

Clearly, this theology serves the institution.
Secrecy is given theological support, against transparency,
now seen as a serious sin.

But Dr. Keenan indicates a **second** aspect
in which bad theology has supported a structural problem.

In viewing the clergy as "ontologically" different
from the rest of baptized Christians,
a distance is created that supports an isolated clerical culture
that tends to protect itself.
How much has this perception of distance
helped to bring about a circumstance in which
the children are not immediately considered first of all?

Let us add a **third** aspect to the structural problems the church faces.
A clue is seen here in the language favored
for describing Benedict's departure from Rome.
Some call it abdication; some call it resignation.
This points to the double role of the Pope.
Monarchs abdicate; bishops resign.

Benedict was both bishop of Rome
and the absolute monarchical ruler of the Vatican.
Both bishop and king.
And the two roles do not make the same demands of a person.
In fact, they can easily be in conflict.

Is it not political states, like our own, that guard their secrecy,
so that someone like Pvt. Bradley Manning
is charged with abetting the enemy, for acting on the thought
that transparency should apply in matters of state,
and releasing secret documents to Wikileaks.
States insist on secrecy.
And in doing so, the Vatican is acting like any other state.

But the Bishop of Rome is something else.
It is as the Bishop of Rome that the Pope is the Vicar of Christ.
It is Christ who said I am the Truth, the Way, and the Life.
I am the Light of the World

The two roles conflict, but they are embedded in the structure.
And on these three counts alone
—theology of scandal,
clerical exceptionalism,
and the blurring of church and state—
there is a structural rigidity that doesn't hold much promise.

So I do not believe that repentance will be on the agenda
today in the Conclave.

However, for this very reason,
the fact that the problem is embedded in the structure,
I believe that change will come, and it will be lasting.
Because for change to come it will require changes in the structure.
And then the changes will be built in.

This assumes, of course, that change will come.
I do believe that there are some in the conclave
who are seriously dismayed by recent events in the church.
An analogy occurs to me.

Today the Republican Party is doing some serious soul-searching.
Nearly all agree that changes must be made.
But there are two schools of thought.
Some say deep changes are necessary.
Others say the positions are fine,
but it is the presentation of them that needs attention.
The first say it is the product,
the second say it is the packaging, not the product.

So I suspect the discussion in the conclave is going.
Constructive change, or cosmetic?
But cosmetic change will be widely recognized for what it is,
and one has to believe that there are many who recognize that.

And yet...

So today we have the two trees,
the burning bush of liberation and the fig tree of repentance.
I do not know what the preacher in the Sistine Chapel will choose, if either.

But either will do.
The call to liberate the People of God from bondage.
Or the call to repentance.
The only thing we know for sure is that in today's liturgy
the call is being clearly sounded.

And after the call we are invited,
at the very least, to pray.

First, a conclave is not the Iowa caucuses. Either John Paul II or Benedict XVI appointed each of the 117 cardinals who will cast a ballot, including 11 Americans, so there will be little ideological clash.
—John Allen, NCR, Mar. 1, 2013

**Fourth Sunday of Lent**

March 10, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Joshua 5:9, 10-12 | First Passover in the Land |
| Psalm 34:2-7 | When the poor called out, God heard |
| 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 | In Christ a new creation |
| Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 | Parable of the Prodigal Son |

What makes this Lent different from any other Lent?
For one thing, this Sunday we are looking for a Pope.
And in the process, we consider what it is to be church.

And as we consider, we hear the parable of the Prodigal Son.
There are three portraits in the parable, two sons and a father.
They might be called Passion, Duty, and Love.

**Passion** wants to live to the fullest.
It believes that there is a seductive real world out there
that needs to be explored
and can only be engaged by leaving the familiar world behind.
The passionate person does not moderate,
does not gauge the amount of risk.

Passion wants it all, and wants it now.
Passion is a kind of reverence
—for the possibility that life has to offer.
It wagers everything on the moment, on the chance.
It is a gambler, and when it wins it wins big.
And when it loses, it loses everything.

Passion belongs to the younger son,
who is passionate about going out to meet life.
When he wins, it is because he has taken the risk.
When he loses, his passionate nature allows him
to swing back toward repentance,
and the humility that harbors no lies.

**Duty** is careful.
It is very aware of what is expected of it.

It measures things out precisely, and doesn't overdo.
Duty is a reverence for what is expected, what is due.
It measures not only what must be done,
but also what must be received in return.
It is concerned about justice, not only for what is due itself,
but also what is due others.

Duty favors quantifiable measurements.
It wants to know what is and what isn't, and why.

Duty belongs to the older son,
because the older child is always most often the dutiful one.
He has had to take on the responsibilities of the family name,
and knows he is the face of the family to the larger world.
Family pride keeps him from taking risks,
and he is proud of his record in that respect.
He is not familiar with repentance,
because he never recalls having need of it.

**Love**, in the portrait of the father, knows no artificial boundaries.
As compassion it responds only to need, not merit.
In this it is like Passion.
As ethical empathy it marks those
neglected by the systems of the world and insists on their due.
In this it is like Duty.
Love is larger than both Passion and Duty,
for it embraces both, and then some.

Love belongs to the Father,
because parents know the bottomless ache of lost children.
As we have shared in the stories
of the two cousins in Evansdale this past year.

Parents know the limitless demand
that love makes as regard their children.
They sacrifice, and do not even recognize it as sacrifice.
It is simply what must be done, out of love.
If love is real, and not love we find in books and in the movies.

Avery Dulles, one Cardinal who wasn't a bishop,
once published a book called *Models of the Church*.
That might be a model for today.
How are Passion, Duty, and Love models of the church today?

**Passion** ...

When we look at images of the church we have quite a few.
There is a wide spectrum of Catholics
who have hopes for their church.

If we take the Prodigal Son as our cue,
we might look at the recently unchurched.

These are the growing number of ex-Catholics
who look back at the church they left with lingering hope.
Those I am thinking of are disaffected, not simply apathetic.

If we want, we can say that Passion
has taken them in a different direction.
In this sense:
they typically have embraced
the possibilities offered by the modern world.
They embrace ideals like freedom and equality,
and think on them in terms of justice.
They have left home in order to explore them,
and wonder why their church cannot share their experience.

For some, the exploration continues,
and they have made their home there.
For others, the new settlement, as with the Prodigal,
no longer seems as glamorous as at first.
They have not, however, decided that they should return,
for they do not yet believe that they will be welcomed back
without turning against much they have come to understand
and believe in.

For these, we who stay seem to be befuddled.

We are unaware or simply without courage of our convictions.
I often think of the Irish professor
who asked me how I could remain active in the church
without experiencing intellectual dishonesty.
You, no doubt have your own stories,
explaining to these why you stay.

**Duty** ...

But there are not the only the unchurched
who have an agenda for the church.
There are those we might carefully call the dutiful.

Like the older son, these have a clear idea
of what the family is and what it is not.
For example, not too long ago I read the report
of an earnest priest who made the firm claim
that there are only 5 million true Catholics in America.

Given the fact that 75 million Americans identify themselves as Catholic,
it would seem then that 70 million of us would be asked to leave,
if this person was given his say.
That seems, on the face of it, an excessive price to pay for purity.

Here too we feel accused, from another direction.
We are unfaithful.
We do not understand that obedience should not be questioned.
We do not seem to represent authentic Catholicism, as a result.
In fact, we would seem to be undermining the true church,
like enemies within the household,
to quote a title of a book I just reviewed.

Most of us do not fit into either of these camps.
If we did, we would not be here, in this place.
And yet, neither is it as if we are free of of these models, these images.
Rather, it is as if we share in both of them.
The accusers on both sides of us have something real to say to us.

We sometimes vaguely feel like we have left home,

but without having made the actual move.
It is as if we made the break in some sense,
but cannot take it all the way.
We like to think that it is because we have not given up hope.

Others call us naive, but we believe otherwise.
We believe that this is the home that offers what nothing else can,
despite its current travails, injustices, and embarrassments.
In this we sometimes feel like the older son who has not left home,
who can resent that it hasn't produced the rewards
that fidelity would seem to have promised.
We too can feel resentment.

So we are strangers to neither of these syndromes.

**Love** ...

Of course, there is a third portrait in the story, a third model
—the father who welcomes the younger son
and reasons with the older.
The parent who loves unconditionally,
who cannot bear the anguish of a lost child,
is the image of God in this parable, as we clearly know.

It is the God who loves the human family like a human parent does,
though even more profoundly in ways that we cannot fathom.

A third model of the church is the image of the forgiving, welcoming God.
It is this that the prodigal does not expect, and yet discovers.
It is this that the dutiful son cannot accept,
and yet is himself welcomed.
Both forgiveness and reasoning are the two sides of this experience.

This is the model that we wish upon the electors gathered in conclave.
A church that does not express its welcome
only at the price of excluding some.
This, perhaps, is also the model that we should adopt

in our peculiar position between the others.

We reach out, in either direction,
with hope and faithfulness, and love.
The hope-against-hope of the younger,
the dutiful fidelity of the elder,
and the unrestrained love of the father.

**Fifth Sunday of Lent**

March 17, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Isaiah 43:16-21 | See, I am doing something new! |
| Psalm 126:1-6 | When the Lord brought back the captives of Zion |
| Philippians 3:8-14 | I consider everything as loss |
| John 8:1-11 | Let the one without sin cast the first stone |

What makes this Lent different from any other Lent?
We have now added the phrase "Habemus Papam"
to our popular American vocabulary, to go along with "Sede Vacante."
From the "Vacant Chair" to "We have a new pope,"
and just in time for Holy Week and Easter.

So now, in the fifth and last
of our Lenten reflections on the new day in the church,
we come to the story of the Accused Woman,
as I will always think of her from now on.

But let me begin with a diversion,
a picture from our classical heritage: The Iliad.
This epic, one of the foundations of western culture, tells a simple story.
The Greeks want to get their hero, Achilles,
out of his tent, where he is sulking,
so that they can finish this war, now in its tenth year,
and go home.

Achilles is sulking because he has lost his war prize.
Achilles had insulted the honor of Agamemnon, chief among equals,
blaming Agamemnon's own war prize as the cause of their recent difficulties,
and insisting Agamemnon give it up.
Agamemnon, in a fit of injured pride, agreed,
but only if he could take that of Achilles as a substitute.
Which he did, demonstrating that he could.

So Achilles sulked in his tent,
and the war effort was getting nowhere without his help.

One more thing. These prizes of war were young women,
captured and kept as trophies.

My point is that the women in the story are pawns in the game, not players.
The contest is among the men.

That episode is from our Greek heritage.
In today's Gospel we consider our Judeo-Christian heritage.
And here we see a similar pattern.

The story of the Accused Woman presents a group of men
trying to "trap" another man, Jesus.
The woman is a pawn, not a player in the game.
That is why we do not see the other adulterer, the male partner in crime.
It is not about the adultery, it is about the trap.

Both our Greek and our Judean cultural ancestry
participate in this patriarchal pattern.
And the vision we had this past week of the Cardinals,
old men gathered behind closed doors
with no woman involved in the proceedings at any level,
was a reflection of that cultural legacy.

And though we have a remarkable new presence on the Chair of Peter,
the place of women in the culture and the church
has not yet been a noticeable theme in his story.

But that is not to say there are no signs of hope.
I can think of three.

The first is seen in the contrast
between the demands of the law and the invitation of Jesus.
The laws on stoning in the covenant code of Deuteronomy
all ring with the refrain, "for you must purge the evil from your midst."
Here we have the perennial idea of purification through violence.

Mark's Gospel has provided the language for interpreting stories like this.
It has to do with the meaning of holiness.
Jesus confronts a prevailing understanding of holiness as purity

(clean and unclean)
with an alternative understanding of holiness as compassion.
Jesus persistently violates purity laws in order to save, heal and help.

In contrast to violent cleansing,
Jesus answers with classic strategies of nonviolence.
Here he addresses the physical threat with a response of vulnerability.
He defuses a volatile situation through delay, inviting reflection.
He interrupts a dynamic that tends automatically
to move toward violent resolution by introducing unexpected behaviors.
He refuses to attack the opponents, either physically or verbally.

Commentators have regularly mentioned Pope Francis's holiness.
I think we can see here a holiness understood as compassion.
This follows a persistent theme of purifying the church,
seen in the past years, with its refrain of a "smaller, purer church."

The shift from purity to compassion promises much.

The second sign of hope comes from noticing the setting of the story.
The people are asking how Jesus can be the Messiah,
since he comes from Galilee.
As Nathanael asked earlier, What good can come from Galilee?
So Jesus comes to this story today as an outsider,
apart from the circle of judges gathered around the woman.
He is being judged and tested by them
through their case against the Accused Woman.

One compelling description of the struggle in the church today
is as a struggle between the center and the edge.
A movement toward centralizing power in the papacy (and the curia)
is pitted against the decentralizing recognition
of the conciliar authority of the bishops.
Massimo Faggioli, the young church historian
who recently spoke in Cedar Rapids,
makes the point that since the Second Vatican Council
power in the church has been centralized more than ever before,
despite the council's efforts.

It is in the light of this that I learn Pope Francis says
he came: "from the ends of the earth."
He views himself as the Bishop of Rome,
more than the ruler of the Vatican State.
He sets aside the splendor.
He has questions for the Curia.
He has renewed their offices temporarily, until they can be reviewed.
This is another sign of hope.

For me, the third sign in the story today concerns the stoning.
This part is extremely unsettling.
We do not want to think about a group of men
stoning a young woman to death.
In all of the Gospels, this gospel of John is the only one
that shows us someone about to be stoned to death.
(True, Acts tells of the stoning of Stephen.
But none of the Gospels recount such a story.)

It is worth noticing, I think, that this woman is not the only person
threatened with stoning in John's gospel.
Before this eighth chapter is out,
Jesus himself is made the target of hostile stones.

He escapes, but the threat of death by stoning returns
a couple of chapters later.
At that time he decides to leave Jerusalem for a more secluded place.
Just in time for Lazarus's sisters to invite him back to help their brother.
Followed by the Passion and Death, as a rather direct result.

In other words, Jesus enters the woman's story.
Not only does he bring her into the story at the end,
in his conversation with her,
when she stops being a mere pawn and becomes an actual player.
Not only does he recognize her right to a role in the decision
about her life, and death.
But also in his own story he shares the risk and plight that she faced.

Here I am thinking about the pope's decision to take the name Francis.
There has been much commentary on this.

Emphasis has pointed to his simple life and love of the poor
—on St. Francis's commission to "build my church,"
to St Francis's dealings with Islam, and so forth.
But there is another aspect to Francis that I am thinking about:
the Stigmata, Francis's embrace of the cross
displayed in his sharing of the wounds.

Is this part of the new pope's vision? One might think so,
given his mention of the cross in his first sermon.
It is a clear contrast to strategies of power.
I have a feeling we will find out more about this
as Holy Week comes closer.

Jesus shared the jeopardy of the woman;
Pope Francis embraces the cross of Francis.
These are essentially the same.

All the signs seem to indicate a significant shift
toward the gospel and its values.
Since it is these that provide us with hope in the first place,
I believe we can trust in more changes to come.
After Holy Week we celebrate Easter and its renewals.

**Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord**

March 24, 2013

At The Procession With Palms -

| | |
|---|---|
| Luke 19:28-40 | The Triumphal Entry |

At the Mass -

| | |
|---|---|
| Isaiah 50:4-7 | My face I did not shield |
| Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24 | My God, why have you abandoned me ?. |
| Philippians 2:6-11 | He emptied himself, even unto death |
| Luke 22:14—23:56 | Luke's Passion |

Luke has a name for this story that we just heard.
He calls it the story of the suffering Messiah.
No one else in the bible uses this term.
It never says this in the Old Testament,
since the suffering Servant and the promised Messiah
are two distinct, separate themes there.

We will encounter it in the days to come,
because in this Gospel and in Luke's other book, Acts of the Apostles,
the Easter witness will mention the requirement
that the Messiah suffer in order to enter his glory.

Many take this to mean that God wanted the Messiah to suffer.
But I suspect that God does not desire suffering for anyone.
My understanding of Luke's notion of the suffering Messiah
is that the Messiah would arise from those social classes
that knew suffering all too well.
Not that God desires that the Messiah suffer,
but that the Messiah will arise from the ranks of those
who have historically endured suffering.

The ancient world was divided between the few elite
and the multitude that scraped by on a subsistence diet.
The Messiah, it seems, would come from that sector of society.

We see it in the early chapters of this Gospel,
where the village families carry on their business
with the clanking machinery of the empire in the background.

Mary sings her Magnificat, looking to a reversal of fortunes and positions.

> He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones
> but lifted up the lowly.
> The hungry he has filled with good things;
> the rich he has sent away empty.

And Joseph takes his young family on a long journey
at the demands of the imperial census
at a critical time in Mary's pregnancy.

We see it in the story we just heard.
In the account of Jesus' entry into the city,
Luke hears echoes of the angels singing to the shepherds in the fields
"Blessed is the king who comes
in the name of the Lord.
Peace in heaven
and glory in the highest."

The Daughters of Jerusalem make their appearance.
The Good Thief, very likely a social bandit,
in a phenomenon growing at the time, a victim
of the growing appropriation of lands by the large landowners,
who having lost his land
joined others in similar illegal pursuits.
He recognizes the truth about the one crucified with him.

We see it in Herod and Pilate, who in their amused contempt
dismiss the so-called Messiah from Galilee, before they crucify him,
a punishment reserved for those of little account.

The Messiah will arise from the ranks of the suffering,
and they will recognize him. And he will recognize them.
And with that he will bring with him the gift of hope.
For now they know that God,
who seems so indifferent so much of the time,
knows their plight and desperation
through the experience of his Son who shared their conditions.

Today I think that we know this story, with the arrival of Pope Francis.
The surprising gestures he makes,
such as celebrating Holy Thursday among prisoners, shows as much.
Whether or not he can change conditions,
we know that he recognizes and understands them.
In making contact with the plight and desperation of the many,
he gives the gift of hope.

There is much yet to be done,
but already a seismic wave of hope has rushed forth,
shaking rigid certainties and threatening to bring them down.
Someone has bothered to pay attention.
Already, simply by recognizing the many, the changes have begun.
Who knew?

**Second Sunday of Easter (or Sunday of Divine Mercy)**

April 7, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Acts 5:12-16 | Life in the early community |
| Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24 | The new cornerstone |
| Revelation 1:9-11, 12-13, 17-19 | A vision on the island of Patmos |
| John 20:19-31 | Thomas overcomes his doubts |

Thomas is not prepared to believe anything without some kind of evidence.
He is not easily fooled.
Or maybe he has been fooled before,
and is not about to let it happen again.

Ironically, Thomas is the apostle of the totally new.
He makes us aware of this theme in the scripture
by his manner of finding it hard to accept.
He brings it forward, highlights it.
His doubting word is the test, and his approval is the seal.

The theme of the totally new,
of a God who creates newness where this is nothing but resignation,
is a constant if the Scriptures, in fact.
It is the refrain of the Easter Vigil,
as one unexpected thing after another is shown to have happened.

But we are Thomas,
and we do not think this happens outside the stories.
And we are sure that the bible is full of stories.
Not things that really happen. At least not to us.

We are all Thomas. We are skeptical.
Not particularly hopeful about the new day.
We find it difficult to believe that a complete turnaround is possible.
We remain skeptical, in fact.

And we were so unprepared for this Lent.
For instance, the events of the past two months have caught us by surprise.

When I look back at the Sundays before Ash Wednesday,
I see Gospel readings that could have been announcing the coming events,
if I were to believe them.

Three Sundays before Lent we saw Jesus
reading from the scroll in the synagogue of Nazareth,
announcing a Jubilee year.
But what did I talk about?
Not the possibility of a new era in the church.

When two Sundays before Lent we heard Jesus
say that he would be like Elijah and Elisha and go to the Gentile world,
I never foresaw that we would have a pope from the new world.
And before Easter, at that.

On the Sunday before Lent,
when we heard about the call of Peter from the Lake,
who knew that on the next day Pope Benedict would make an announcement
that we would shortly be calling on a new successor to Peter?

P. Benedict announced his plan to resign on Feb 11,
the Monday before Ash Wednesday,
saying that it would take place on Feb 28,
Thursday of the second week of Lent.
Which meant that we would probably have a new pope by Holy Week.
By Easter, that is. And so we have.

But we were still hesitant.
As we waited, we were very aware
that there was a limited supply of hope involved here.
All the voting cardinals were appointed
by either John Paul II or Benedict XVI,
both of whom seemed intent on limiting the impact of Vatican II.
All men, all elderly,
all appointed to ensure continuity of past patterns.
So the possibilities seemed limited.
We were not expecting much.

But the surprise has been rather complete.
All of the past few weeks—
    the resignation of Benedict,
    the selection of a non-European,
        the choice of the name Francis,
        the lived option for the poor,
        the persistent changes in tradition.

We have seen the ability to make major changes by small moves,
using the leverage of the very weight of tradition to redirect it.

We know the stories.

Holy Thursday: Washing the feet of prisoners,
    including two women and two Muslims,
    restoring the meaning of the symbolic action from ordination to service.

The Easter Vigil: Shortening the service
to the optional three Old Testament readings,
    suggesting a pastoral principle at work.

Easter Day: talking about the resurrection witness of women.

In all of this, reclaiming for the people the liturgy,
the ritual practice that works as the spring that drives renewal,
    according to Massimo Faggioli.

But wait, we said. All of this is merely symbolic.
Wait to see what happens when he makes crucial decisions,
such as appointing new members of the Curia.
    And then we hear that yesterday his very first appointment
    is a new head of Religious Life.
        And a Franciscan, no less.
        It seems a new and brighter day for American Women Religious.

The point is that the unexpected is to be expected
when it comes to the Spirit, and resurrection is at the heart of this.

The resurrection is primary among the annals of the unexpected.

The story of Thomas speaks to this, of course.
We are siblings of Thomas.
We are realists who do not expect that much will happen.
But we are wrong, just as he was.
And his response can be ours.

The consensus of the Easter readings
is that the resurrection was unexpected
and a complete reversal of community outlook.
Far from being the realization of community wish-fulfillment,
with hope generating belief in the resurrection,
it seems it was the other way around.

Hopelessness was interrupted by the witness of certain disciples,
and resurrection brought about hope.
And with that limitless, immoderate joy.

Energy was released that is seen
in all the readings from Acts that we have this season.
From a depressed hiding out in the upper room,
they move out into the world, announcing, witnessing, healing.
And then they gather in their homes,
praying, breaking bread, rejoicing.

Luke names this new energy.
He calls it the Holy Spirit.

We have witnessed a new energy in the church today.
It is world-wide, and we cannot deny it is the Holy Spirit.
The spirit of renewal has returned.

The story of Thomas speaks to this, of course.
We are siblings of Thomas.
We are realists who do not expect that much will happen.
But we are wrong, just as he was.
And his response can be ours.

**Third Sunday of Easter**

April 14, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Acts 5:27-32, 40-41 | Peter and John before the Council |
| Psalm 30:2, 4-6, 11-13 | O Lord, you drew me clear |
| Revelation 5:11-14 | Vision of the heavenly throne |
| John 21:1-19 | Risen Christ appears at the Lake |

Today we hear three Easter stories about Peter.
I am tempted to ask,
"What makes this Easter different from any other Easter?"

The stories are framed in the restoration of Peter.
Three times, "Do you love me?"
It is clear that this three-fold question and response
is in order to clear the slate after the three-fold denial
in the high priest's courtyard, the night before the crucifixion.
With Peter comes the call,
and the call is a portrait of the Petrine ministry.
So what are the Easter stories about Peter?

In the first story, we see Peter, joined by John,
confronting the Council of Jerusalem
in the early days after the Resurrection.
They had been in this spot before, and were told to cease and desist.
But here they are again.
As Peter explains, they are to obey God, not men.

Their message is simple:
Jesus of Nazareth has been crucified and raised from the dead,
as had been foreseen by the Scriptures.
We have come to witness to this before you.

Even for those responsible for the death of Jesus
the Easter message is not withheld.

Peter takes the message to the world,
even where it is contradicted.

This is the work of the prophet, confronting the powers that be.
This is part of the work of the church.
David Cochran, professor of politics at Loras,
notes that the Catholic social mission
endorses neither liberal nor conservative
as they are configured today.

It presents a third option,
sometimes agreeing with one side,
at other times agreeing with the other side.
And sometimes, criticizing and moving beyond both sides.

Pope Francis, our pope of this Easter, has consistently (it is said)
criticized the church for being self-referential.
By this he means a primary concern
with the church's own business and image,
rather than turning outward to a world that needs its message.
This seems to be the point of the first Easter story about Peter.

The second story takes us to the lake shore in Galilee.
It is morning of a new day, after a difficult and hard night.
While there are seven disciples in the scene,
Peter is given the main part.
It is Peter who decides to go fishing.
It is Peter to whom the Beloved Disciple reports, "It is the Lord."
Peter is the one who jumps in the water and hurries to shore.
It is Peter who drags the net ashore with its 153 kinds of fish.
The story is about Peter and Jesus,
the one with the breakfast fire, on the shore.

And while Peter decides to go fishing,
it is Jesus who tells him where to fish.
While the story focuses on Peter, Peter focuses on Jesus.
Likewise, the church takes its cues from Jesus.
We consult the gospels to see what he did,
and from that we gain an understanding of discipleship.

Pope Francis, the pope of this Easter,
has called for a highlighting of gospel values.
In particular he has called for attention to the poor.
It has been noted that he had never endorsed Liberation Theology. However,
he did encourage and personally follow its mission.
This Easter, the life of the Spirit let loose on the world
is new life for those at the margins in particular.

The third Easter story about Peter has already been mentioned.
Three times Jesus asked Peter, Do you love me?
And three times Peter answered, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.
As we saw in the previous story, this was clearly true.

But there was more to each of these exchanges.
After Peter's responses, three times Jesus said, Feed my sheep.
Which is to say, Peter's love is to be shown in pastoral action,
pastoral concerns.

We might contrast the juridical and the pastoral.
The juridical is busy about correct doctrine.
Its values center on the truth of faith
in its best clarity and authenticity.
Its watchword is orthodoxy.
Its mission is to maintain and hand on the true faith.

The pastoral takes a different direction.
Its concern is the deposit of faith
as a solace and healing remedy for the troubles of the human family.
Its attention is focused on human need, on human suffering.
It focuses on how the church is a vehicle of grace and a ministry
to those in need.
Its watchword is orthopraxis.

Pope Francis, the pope of this Easter,
has spoken loudly of the need of a pastoral practice,
though not necessarily in words.

His every decision, every gesture seems predicated
on this priority, this guideline.
And in this he is giving the example to the church
in this post-Easter period.
Our concern is to be pastoral.
Not that the truth be compromised,
but that it reaches those for whom it is a solace.

In the Easter season we see the promise of Easter unfold.
Its themes are forgiveness and renewal,
new life and life of the Spirit,
courage and bold witness.

The disciples leave behind the fearful nights hidden in the upper room,
and march purposefully out into the indifferent and yet waiting world,
bringing the new faith community into its mission.

Once again we take up the mission,
now on our turf, our dollar, our moment.

**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

April 21, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Acts 13:14, 43-52 | The Gentile mission begins |
| Psalm 100:1-2, 3, 5 | We are the sheep of his flock |
| Revelation 7:9, 14-17 | White-robed nations in glory |
| John 10:27-30 | The Good Shepherd |

Every Sunday morning on the way to church
I listen to Sunday Baroque, with Suzanne Bona as host,
and sponsored by Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut.
    And now I know that there is another university in Fairfield,
    because I read over the weekend
that the Jesuit-run University of Fairfield
is presenting an honorary degree this spring to S. Pat Farrell, OSF.

This is one bright bit of news in an eventful and difficult week.
In public life we have seen terrorism touch the Boston Marathon
and a horrific explosion in a fertilizer plant in Texas.
    In political life we saw the gun control bill
    unable to pass the Senate in its most watered-down form.
        And in church life we have both good news
        and more questionable news.

It is difficult to assess P. Francis's "reaffirmation"
of the oversight and stated "reform" of the LCWR.
    I cannot say what happened in the discussion
    between the leadership, Bishop Sartain, and Archbishop Mueller.
        I have heard that there is cause for concern.
But I think that the proclamation of good news
that is part of the Sunday liturgy also should offer emblems of hope.
    In that spirit, I want to make the following remarks.

This Sunday is what is known as Good Shepherd Sunday.
It devotes itself to the pastoral role and function of the church.
    In that regard, the hope I am speaking of
    is based on changes with long-range effects,
    and not so much on decisions producing immediate results.

Maybe I should begin with the first reading,
instead of the Gospel.
The reading from Acts of the Apostles announces a new beginning,
opening a door to the Gentiles.
It represents the original mission of the church
out into the larger world.
My thought is beginning here is not only this announcement,
but also the focus of P. Francis's Easter season homilies.

I do not know who else has noticed,
but all of the homilies that have been reported upon,
and there are many,
have taken as their text the day's passage from Acts.
It features the mission to the world.

But there is another reason that caused me to pay attention to this.
For some time now, we have been hearing about a smaller, purer church.
It has consistently been my feeling
that this is just the opposite of the picture we receive from Acts.
In effect, it is as if Acts of the Apostles were a movie,
and we were playing it backwards.
So it is very significant, I think,
that Francis has chosen Acts for his Easter homilies.

A second point was crystallized for me this week
after my issue of the *NY Review of Books* arrived in the mail.
William Pfaff, former editor of *Commonweal*,
has a review of Garry Wills most recent book, *Why Priests?*

Toward the end of the review he wonders aloud
what Wills might say to the new situation that has presented itself
with the election of Pope Francis.
In his description of this new moment,
one point especially jumped out at me.

After the usual rundown of the different practices
that the new pope has introduced, he says,
"It is clear from what he already has done

that Francis intends a significant declericalization of the Church,
a refocus on the poor as God's beloved,
a merciful and compassionate church and clergy."

The point about clericalization is my point and, I think, true.
And I would suggest that much of the difficulty
that we have been experiencing
traces to that,
from the sexual predatory crisis,
both in its occasions and its mishandling,
to exalted and stifling distances between clergy and people.

But a third point is probably more pertinent today.
In one of those homilies,
given on the anniversary of the 86th Birthday of Benedict XVI,
Francis spoke about the Second Vatican Council,
which he said represented a historical occasion
for a great ecclesiastical revolution,
one that has not yet happened.

He said its work was unfinished.
In the spirit of the Council, the church opened itself to the world.
But a number of steps yet remain to be taken.
In fact, some wish to go backward,
something that can be called being stubborn,
or wishing to tame the Holy Spirit.

He said, using the masculine pronoun to the disappointment of some,
"To say it clearly, the Holy Spirit annoys us.
Because he moves us, he makes us journey,
he pushes the Church to go forward. …
But to go forward, that is bothersome."

He has said "A church that does not go out of itself,
sooner or later, sickens from the stale air of closed rooms,"

He has said that in the process of "going out"
the church always risks running into "accidents,"
adding, "I prefer a thousand times over

a church of accidents than a sick church."

From where I stand, it seems to me that no one, no group or individual,
has done what the pope calls for more completely
than have the American Religious Women.

There are layers to this.
Responding to the call of the Council,
in what can only be named a spirit of obedience,
American religious women embraced the risk to move into the world.

In what can only be called an experience of conversion,
this movement was reinforced by a deep sense
of fulfilling the work God had called them to.
Obedience and conversion opened into a flowering of new possibilities,
not only for them, but for all church women,
and in a larger more removed sense, for all women.

For this group of women illustrated
what a concerted, communal, and deeply committed
movement could accomplish.
It also showed the church itself what resources it had been lacking.

And what this has done cannot now be erased,
as if never having happened.

Given this, it seems to me
that whatever immediate decisions are taken,
whatever negotiations are required in the middle distance of time,
this authentic response to the call of the Council,
will stand as the testimony to the faith and authenticity
of the American religious women.

This, it seems to me,
after all the voices are heard and all the issues sorted out,
is what will remain.
And this is no negligible matter.

There may be "accidents" that need attention.

There may be causes that will need pleading.
    But the honest, authentic response to the Council,
    is part of history, and continues to be.

It is a record you can rely upon.

The flurry of awards being given to Sr. Pat Farrell
is recognition of an individual
showing remarkable grace and skill under pressure.
    But it is more.

These are also signals from the People of God,
around the world as it turns out,
    to all the American Religious Women
    that your witness is vital
        and has been life-giving.

And that this witness will endure.

## Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 28, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| **Acts 14:21-27** | A door of faith to the Gentiles |
| **Psalm 145:8-13** | The Lord is kind and merciful |
| **Rev 21:1-5a** | I saw the holy city Jerusalem |
| **John 13:31-35** | Love one another |

Two thematic statements set the stage for today's reflection.
One is from Revelation: the vision of the New Jerusalem
descending from Heaven like a bride adorned for her husband.

The other is from the Acts of the Apostles:
They reported how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

The New Jerusalem is the redeemed community, seen in its ideal splendor.
A woman represents a community
in which no woman has as yet an official place of standing.

This is not to say that in our lifetime we have not seen
a blossoming of the presence of women in the church.
If we simply pause a moment and reflect on it,
we can see the vast distances we have come from the 1950s,
to take one moment as a benchmark.

A few impressionistic brushstrokes can make the point.
Consider, for instance, the emergence of women theologians.
When it was decided a few years ago
to name certain women as Doctors of the Church,
no professional theologian was available.

Now we look at the US, and notice that among the most prominent
of Catholic New Testament scholars and Systematic Theologians
are Sandra Schneiders and Elizabeth Johnson.
The Catholic Theological Society of America
has been carried by female theologians for some years now.
This articulation of a voice is a sign
as well as the reality of the coming church.

It represents a voice that will not easily go away.

Another example that comes to mind
is the Masters of Theology program at Loras,
now coming to a close after 20 years of educating parish ministers.
Over 100 graduates, and most of them married lay women
who hold essential positions in their parishes,
as DREs, and as parish administrators.
This experience has become a norm.
But aren't the women theologians under siege?
Isn't the Loras program coming to a close?
Doesn't this suggest dire thoughts?

That brings us to the other thematic statement for the day:
God has opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.
When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch,
"they called the church together
and reported what God had done with them
and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles."

Perhaps it is not too presumptuous to draw an analogy.
When P. John XXIII proposed the Second Vatican Council,
he expressed the desire to open the windows
to let fresh air into the church.
Perhaps the opened window of the Council helped to do for women
what the opened door of Paul and Barnabas did for the Gentiles.
Perhaps we have come to a new moment, a tipping point,
in the history of the People of God.

For Paul and Barnabas it is a time of rejoicing
and praising God for the success they experienced on their mission.
But when we look a bit closer, we find it was not without its difficulties.
After all, the two of them would shortly be invited
to go to Jerusalem and explain themselves in the council there.
The point would not be gained without debate.

Paul made many enemies,
but prominent among them were the fellow Christians
who strongly identified with their Jewish traditions

and did what they could to derail his ministry.

And shortly before that, Peter,
having discovered in his experience of baptizing
the household of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion,
that God shows no partiality,
was finally convinced.

But he too had to return to Jerusalem to explain his actions.

The difficulties are everywhere and often overwhelming.
Stephen, after all, was stoned.

And it was only in the persecution that followed upon that event
that finally moved the Christians to move beyond Jerusalem
out into the larger world.
It took a persecution to move them into mission.

I do not need to count the times Paul was arrested,
enabling him to write letters.
Or Peter was imprisoned, only to be miraculously freed by angels,
giving dramatic support to the idea that he really was the one
who had the keys of the kingdom.

But one of Luke's main purposes in writing Acts
was to argue that the movement out into the Gentile world
was not an accident, but part of God's purpose,
driven by the Holy Spirit.
Nor was it a mistake, as many thought,
but part of God's plan for the People of God,
now to be understood as not only the Chosen, but all peoples.

The realization of the present day
is that clearly this means women as well as men.
Furthermore, this is not simply a matter of simple justice
in recognizing the fundamental humanity of all persons,
but also a matter of allowing the church
full array of gifts that its people bring to it, whether men or women.

God indeed shows no partiality.

In the gospel reading for today,
Jesus begins his farewell discourse at the Last Supper,
as John tells it.

It will continue for four more chapters of the Gospel.
It will conclude with Jesus' prayer for his disciples
—that they may be one as the Father and he are one.

This is, of course, the text that P. John XXIII selected
as the prayer for the Council.
It directs the movement of that Council,
in concert with the prayer of Jesus.
Today and tomorrow we discover what the words mean,
as fuller implications are disclosed to us.
We learn over and over what it means
that God shows no partiality.

But today Jesus keeps it simple.
"As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.
This is how all will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another."

**Sixth Sunday of Easter**

May 5, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Acts 15:1-2, 22-29 | The Council of Jerusalem |
| Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8 | Let all the nations praise you! |
| Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23 | Twelve Gates and no Temple |
| John 14:23-29 | The Paraclete, the Advocate |

Jerusalem today is a torn city.
It is divided between a Palestinian side and an Israeli side.

It is a site of competing religions. Claimed by three.
Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.
And all their permutations:
Many kinds of Judaism.
Kinds of Islam. Expressions of Christianity.
Living there, one gets accustomed to having a three-fold Sabbath:
Friday for Islam; Saturday for the Jews; and Sunday for Christians.

It is also a war site. A battle field.
The irony: the name popularly is said to mean City of Peace.
In Arabic it is El Qutz, that is, the Holy City.

There are two Christian cities in the land.
Nazareth in the north, is within the state of Israel.
Bethlehem in the south, in the West Bank, occupied by the Israeli army,
and now, by many Jewish settlements.

The largest concentrations of Christians in the area
are in the north of Israel and the south of Lebanon.
When these two countries are at war, as they frequently are,
it is between the Muslims and the Israelis.
Christians, found in the crossfire,
traditionally have cared for the wounded and displaced.

For Christians, the city and the land do not have the same meaning
as for the other religions.
The land is crucial for the Jews, as well as the Palestinians.
For the Jews it is the Promised Land.

For the Palestinians it is the place they have been living
for over seven centuries, now finding themselves displaced.
For the Jews. Jerusalem is the City of David.
For Muslims it is their third-most holy site.

Where the Muslims reverence the Mosque of the Rock,
the Jews claim as the original site of Solomon's Temple.

But for Christians it has a different meaning.
The readings for today reflect this.
Jerusalem is a pilgrimage destination,
a place to visit for commemorating the past.
But it is not necessarily a site of current presence.

Today, in the reading from Acts, we hear about the Council of Jerusalem.
It is, in effect, the last stand of Jerusalem in Christian history.
In this farewell appearance, the Christian church in Jerusalem
gives its blessing to the mission to the world of the Gentiles.
At this point, Christian attention turns toward the world mission.
Jerusalem is left behind.
Not too long after that the city will be destroyed by the Romans.

It will later be rebuilt.
But the Jerusalem that Jesus visited is 15 feet below the present city.

The book of Revelation pictures the New Jerusalem,
configured as a city with twelve gates, each of a particular rare gemstone,
and twelve courses of precious stone as its foundation.
It is massive—a cubic shape some 15 hundred miles wide, long, and high.
And it is descending to the earth.

There is no temple in the New Jerusalem.
For temples serve to provide a place in which
God can be experienced as present on earth.
But here God is permanently present.

The vision of the redeemed community in Revelation
is thought by many to be a picture of the future.
But it seems that for John it was a vision of the church of his day,

its glory hidden from view, but visible with the eyes of faith.

I am reminded of the novel by Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*.
Though in reverse, as it were.
In the novel the hero continues to look good,
even while the self-portrait hidden in his quarters
displays the degradations of his actual immoral existence.
It is as if the portrait is the authentic record of his spiritual state.

In Revelation the vision of the New Jerusalem
works the other way around.
The visible church in history is showing the dire effects
of persecution and difficult times,
but the heavenly community reflects its true nature in glory.

But the New Jerusalem is also a vision
of the Christian church in its fullness.

In the Gospel we see Jesus taking his farewell of the disciples.
The setting is the upper room at the Last Supper.
This is traditionally located in the southern part of the city of Jerusalem.
Although he is about to leave them,
he promises his continued presence through a Paraclete,
an Advocate who will be with them.
Living in his presence they will have no need of a temple.
His body is the temple;
and they are his body.

Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer
were working on a theme when Mary died.
The theme was prompted by the awareness
of the limitations of the scriptural record.
It doesn't condemn slavery, though we do.
Too often it recommends religious violence as a solution to differences.
Its endorsement of the full humanity of women is usually less
than what one would have hoped.
As Sandra Schneiders has framed the question,

how do you embrace a tradition you have been written out of?

Mary and Reimund pointed out that the vision of the scripture
is often, even usually, greater than its accomplishment.
It points to something that is not yet historically available.
But in pointing, it creates the possibility of change.
It stirs up restlessness with the present lame accommodation.
It creates dissatisfaction, that calls for being addressed.
In other words, it creates hope.

In this sense, the New Jerusalem
is more than a vision of the present community,
projected across the sky like a vision.
It is also an articulation of the possible future,
that encourages us to move toward it.

Mary and Reimund at one point called it God's Dream.
It is not misleading to see it as God's Dream for the human family,
the children of God.

The Bible differs from pagan mythologies
in that the pagans tell stories of the gods,
stories that take place wherever it is that the gods live.
But the stories of the Bible take place here on earthly terrain,
and not in some mythical realm.
Instead of stories of the gods,
the Bible tells a story of the people that God has created and encouraged.
It begins with the first couple in the first chapter of Genesis,
and ends in the final chapters of Revelation
with the New Jerusalem.

It is a journey and a pilgrimage.
It is our history and our future.
It is our call, our hope, and our story.

## The Ascension Of The Lord

May 12, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11 | The Ascension |
| Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9 | God mounts his throne |
| Ephesians 1:17-23 | At his right hand in the heavens |
| Luke 24:46-53 | The Ascension |

The weather may be a bit chilly and gray, but May has finally arrived.
We know this not because of the weather.
But because mothers are dressed up
in their Mother's Day finery of pastels and flowers.
We know because people are gathered outside colleges
for graduation ceremonies.

It has been a long time since Mother's Day
has occurred on the feast of the Ascension.
Perhaps this is the first time,
since the Ascension has always been on Thursday,
and Mother's Day on Sunday.
However, it is not uncommon for graduations to enter the mix.

Maybe these festivities have something to say to each other.
Maybe they have something to tell us about that vexed question:
What is the meaning of the Ascension?

There are many theories to the meaning of this feast.
That is a clear sign that we are not entirely sure what it means.
Some would point to the fact that Luke says
this is the end of the resurrection appearances of Jesus,
and would promote that as the primary meaning of the feast,
at least as it appears on the calendar.
The time of the historical Jesus is over
and now we turn to the church and the coming of the Spirit.

Others would take their clues from John's Gospel,
and see the occasion as marking the Son's return to the Father
—sort of closing the circle.
The work of Jesus is now complete and we are celebrating that completion.
But we are also announcing the beginning of a new age,
the one in which we are now living.
And this is the important thing.

Some would build upon the message from Ephesians,
one of the possible readings for today.
Jesus as Messiah has completed his work,
and now ascends to the Father
to offer that work as the commission given him,
and now to receive honor for its completion.

Others might look at the letter to the Hebrews,
another option for reading today,
and see the priestly work of the Christ now completed.
His work is finished, his death embraced
and now the reparation is done, sin forgiven,
and a new era is upon us.

In all of this, the mood of the day is celebration
and the conferring of honor.
Triumph is at last achieved, after too long a delay.
Christ has entered his own, and now we can celebrate.

Often the conclusion that we draw from this
is that the work is finished. The deed is done.
We now rest in the aftermath of the victory.
All that is left is to offer praise and congratulation.
Worship is a matter of glory and praise.

And that is consistent with the other celebrations
that we are marking on this day.
Mothers are to be honored and congratulated.
The new graduates are to be extolled and praised
for completing their term of study.
And now the real world begins,
which is the meaning of the word "commencement."

Let these be our clue.
What do we celebrate on Mother's Day?
While our message is mixed, we hope, at least,
that we are offering congratulations and well-deserved honor
for carrying out a role with aplomb,
with commitment and devotion.

We hope that we are not saying that this is
to make up for being stuck with a thankless and difficult role in life.

We come, that is, with a spirit of recognition for things done,
not reparation for things not done.
We come with gifts of praise and honor,
not gifts to make up for our previous lack of attention.

Similarly with our graduates. We come to honor them.
They have completed a long and often arduous task,
and have succeeded.
We gather to recognize that, congratulate them for that.
A new day begins, but it does so
on the basis of these four years now completed.
They are now in the past,
but they continue to shape the coming future.

Let these be our clue for today's feast of the Ascension.

This marks the end of the Gospel story of Jesus of Nazareth,
and it begins a new story of the risen Christ,
the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.
But not so as to leave the Gospel behind, as no longer relevant,
no longer crucial to the present.

Some would see here the signal that the divine work is complete,
and the task of Christians is to bask
in the glory of that accomplishment.
Christian life is to be a life of praise and adoration,
in prayerful thanksgiving, and that is enough. That is all.

While we may have entered a new era in salvation history,
with the Ascension of Christ to the Father,
it does not mean that we have left Jesus of Nazareth behind,
and are now exclusively in the glorified moment of praise and honor.
The Gospel work is still relevant.

The gospel's attention to the poor,
to the marginal who have been excluded
for the sake of the community's self-image,
to the populations whom our cultures ignore
as not of sufficient interest to claim our attention,

... the Gospel's attention to the full people of God,
whether or not they have anything to offer us
or advance their cause,

... this message of the Gospel is still relevant.
It is still something that requires our own attention.

The Ascension concludes an era,
but it does not conclude the work of God and of Jesus.
We still turn to the Gospels to consider what it means to be a disciple.
We look at the concerns of Jesus as he traveled the villages of Galilee,
and draw our conclusions as to what he wants us to do.
We listen to him talking to his disciples about faith,
and false ambition, and the work of the Servant,
and we make our inferences about what he intends for his followers.

The Ascension is not the elevation of the Christ
to universal emperor above all empires,
but rather the subduing and subjection of imperial ambition
to the lesson of the cross.
Christ who is Lord of the Universe is the Nazarene
who was crucified by the empire, died on the cross,
and yet triumphed despite this work of humiliation.

The Ascension is not so much the endorsement of sacrificial priesthood,
but rather the reason it is no longer necessary.

All priesthood is now not repeating
the ineffective efforts of the temple liturgy,
but a recognition of the action that made them no longer necessary.
Sacrifice is re-imagined as the self-offering
that liberates and redeems others.

And so the Ascension is not the end of the Gospel story
but rather the establishment of that story at the heart of discipleship.
We celebrate the story that is now coming to an end,
and we understand that story to set the program for ourselves.
We honor Jesus' life by this special feast,
and by shaping our lives in the image of that life.

**Pentecost Sunday - Mass During The Day**

May 19, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11 | The First Pentecost |
| Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34 | Send down your Spirit |
| 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13 | Many gifts, one Spirit |
| John 20:19-23 | He breathed on them: Receive the Spirit |

The picture we have in our mind is the upper room,
where the disciples are gathered
and what the Bible calls tongues of flame over each of their heads.
Some of the ancient Christian artists presented these as beams,
not unlike today's laser beams,
emanating from one place overhead and coming to each of them.

The picture in my mind, however,
possibly because of May and finally the turn of the weather,
is of a Mayday festival in a field or a park
with a pavilion and flags, or pennants, or banners,
flying over the pavilion.

In my mind we are celebrating Pentecost under three flags,
marked respectively, Community, Humanity, and Peace,
or perhaps, Shalom.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian Community
because he was worried about what was happening there.

Taking to heart his teaching
that they had achieved freedom through the work of Christ,
they were living out that freedom in dangerous ways.
They took it to mean
that they could pursue the most individual of interests
without concern for the community
that was being breaking into factions as a result.

Since he had already taught that they were free from the law,
and he did not find it helpful to turn back on that,
he had to find another way to save the community.

He did that by making the community welfare
the limit and condition of freedom.
A line of action might be perfectly legitimate,
but if it harmed the community, it should be avoided.
And they should be able to make those decisions on their own.

In this setting, Paul spoke of the many gifts of the Spirit
that formed the heritage of the one community.
They fit together like the many parts that make up the body.
And we are all baptized into the one body,
which is the body of Christ.
And we are all given to drink of the one Spirit.

We speak of Pentecost as the birth of the church.
We tend to mean that in a chronological way.
We are talking about calendars.
But it is true for Paul is a deeper way,
insofar as it is the source of the dwelling of the Spirit in the community
and shown in the way that love is manifest there.

Of course it is not that simple, as we now from our own experience.
Paul tells the Corinthians that they are changed after baptism.
But apparently for them, as for us, that change is not complete.
Why else would he need to write the letters,
if the change were automatic?

But for Paul, as for us, the divisions persist.
And continual attention is required to moderate their harm.

Another of the flags under which Pentecost proclaims its celebration
is what we might call that of Humanity.
When Luke wrote the account of the first Pentecost
that we heard in the first reading,
it would seem that one of the many things that he had in mind
was the Tower of Babel,
and how its history was now cancelled, overturned.

What was it that divided the Tower community?
And even more interestingly,
what is it that unites the Pentecost community?

In the ancient world, tribal perspectives prevailed.
Those who were considered truly human were those from my own tribe.
All the rest were problematic.
The divided world of Babel represented this fracturing of humanity,
endorsed by the many languages and dialects.

But in the Pentecost community this is reversed.
The many languages no longer divide them.

As Luke tells the story, not only did they each hear the speech
in his or her own language,
but they knew that the others were hearing that as well.
What disappears are the barriers of language.
What remains is the communication.

In our own day
we have not entirely lifted clear of the barriers of tribalism,
even as we recognize the humanity as a single family.
In our distinctions between what we call races, between genders,
in our struggles concerning immigration, health care, erasing poverty,
we still separate people into those who are like us
and those who are not, and implicitly not fully human.

Part of the mission of the Pentecost Spirit
is to move out into the world, as in Acts,
to bring all branches of the family under one roof,
in one household.

The divisions among human societies contribute considerably
to the impulse toward war and other social struggle.
And so it is that we find the third banner
under which we celebrate this feast
is that which says Peace, or Shalom.

When Jesus enters the locked room to greet the gathered apostles,
his first words are "Peace be with you."
And he repeats those words again.
The greeting of Shalom follows upon their departure from him.

The last time they were with Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane.
They disappeared, escaping the crisis in many different directions.
And then Peter had denied him.

Now they are gathered in one place,
most likely because of this same Peter.
And all that history of betrayal and flight are left behind them.
Peace be with you.

The sign of Shalom cancels the separation, the divisions,
and brings them together under this one roof, in this upper room.

In all of these cases, the Spirit brings healing and oneness,
after division has ruled.

In the Community of the faithful,
division has entered through self-interest and exaggerated freedom.
In the family of Humanity division has entered
through tribalism and narrow group self-interest.
In the group of Jesus' disciples division has come into their lives
through fear and insufficient faith.

In all three cases division has separated the family,
but now they are one in the Spirit.

This is the promise of this feast.
This is our experience of the Spirit.

## The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

May 26, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Proverbs 8:22-31 | The Wisdom of God |
| Psalm 8:4-9 | Praise of God's Creation |
| Romans 5:1-5 | Peace with God, justified by Christ, love in the Spirit |
| John 16:12-15 | The Spirit of Truth |

The Feast of the Most Holy Trinity
comes at the end of the special seasons of the liturgical cycle
like a doxology,
like a Glory Be to the Father Son and Holy Spirit
bringing the prayers to a close.

And every year we wonder what we are celebrating
in what seems a very abstract feast.
After all, there is not only the ontological Trinity
of the relations of the Persons in themselves,
but also the Economic Trinity of their relations to our world.
It can get very mysterious.

So this year, I would like to begin with some abstract ideas
from Paul Tillich's Trinitarian Systematic Theology,
and then bring it closer to home, if possible.

Tillich has arranged his Systematic Theology in a Trinitarian fashion,
in a famous system of correlation,
in which human issues receive a divine response.

Another way to put this is that we relate to God in many ways.
And whereas the pagan religions provide a multitude of gods,
for a multitude of situations,
we believe in the One God.
The pagans had gods for the house, for the market,
for the national interest, and so forth.
Each corresponded to a human need
and they were invoked for those purposes.

But the great insight of the Jewish tradition
is that there is only one God.
And that is the God we worship and invoke in any situation.

But isn't it marvelous that the same God
who made the universe of many galaxies,
thousands of light years or more across,
is the God we whisper to in our night prayers,
and petition in our liturgies.

The lesson of the Trinity is that we relate to God in different ways,
and we can speak of some of these
as corresponding to persons of the Trinity.

Take the God of the galaxies.
We have seen the images.
Our galaxy, the Milky Way, contains 200 billion stars,
each a version of our own sun.
A huge percentage have planets, like the earth
and the others circling our sun.
In addition, we know today that there are
around 170 billion galaxies in the known universe.
The numbers are astounding.
This is the world that we believe God created.

Paul Tillich speaks of the mystery of Being.
Philosophers ask why is there something, and not nothing.
Not many people ask this question, but it is a valid and important one.
Our answer is the creator God.

God not only began the created world, but keeps it in existence,
much as my concentration during an airline flight
keeps the airplane in the sky.
Or not really. I do not really keep the plane in the air.
But God really keeps being—creation—in existence,
as an ongoing activity.

God is cause of being,
and this aspect of our relationship to God
is that of God the Father.

Our own relationship to creation is that of stewardship,
and it seems to me that this part of discipleship is fidelity to that task.
We are concerned today about sustainable living.
In this community it is called Care for the Earth.
It means that we, made in the image of God,
have a role in the work of creation.

Paul Tillich relates the Second Person of the Trinity to Existence.
Here he is speaking in the manner of existentialist philosophers.

In other words, the human world doesn't simply exist,
it exists in rather constant crisis.

The crisis of human existence in faith eyes
is that of separation from God in what we call sin,
and the divine response to that in sending his Son
for the restoration and reparation
that leads back to right relationship.

This is the story of Jesus of Nazareth as related in the Gospels,
and in my reading it is a story
of overcoming hostilities and resolving conflict
in the manner shown us by Jesus.

As I read the Gospel, and in the language of this community,
it means a commitment to nonviolent conflict resolution.
It might mean accepting the cross as a model
for accepting harm rather than inflicting it.
It may mean adopting a policy of forgiveness rather than retribution,
and learning to live it out.
But in applying it,
I think we can include a commitment to Nonviolence
along with Caring for the Earth,
as an application of Trinitarian theology to our lives.

The third value that to which this community has devoted itself
is Walking with the Poor.
    While that also is certainly a theme of the Gospels,
    I am inclined to relate it to the Third Person of the Trinity,
    The Holy Spirit.

Part of the reason is that the biblical author
who is especially conscious of the poor, Luke,
    is also the one who sees the Christian community
    under the special guidance of the Holy Spirit,
    both in his Gospel and in Acts.

And then there is Paul Tillich.
In addition to the problems of Being and Existence,
he points to the problem of Life, which is ambiguity.
    We cannot live life simply by rules,
    since the reality constantly outstrips
    the ability of the rules to anticipate everything.

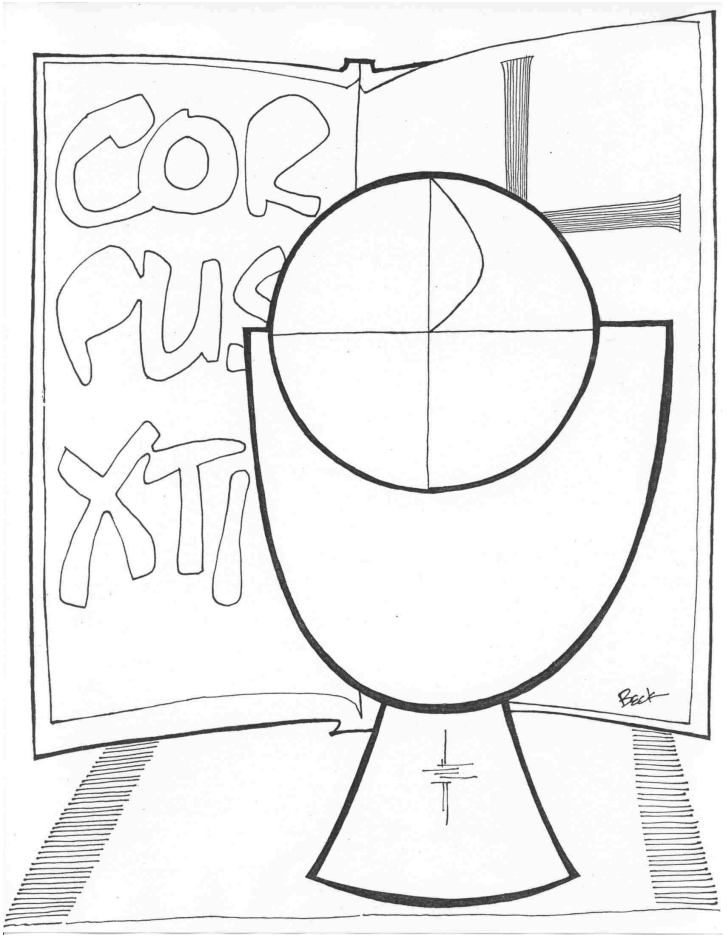
The Spirit enters here.
The Spirit dwells in the community as its guide and security.
    And it is for this reason that Walking with the Poor
    is part of the Life of the Spirit.
It is not a set of rules that prescribes this.
    It is a continual exploration,
    seeking out what that means and learning as we go.

And here, with the multitude of the poor that populate our world,
we arrive at the far end of the spectrum
that began with the innumerable galaxies.
    From the mighty to the humble.
    From the barely knowable to the scarcely comprehensible.

The life of the Trinity, as it relates to us in our world,
is one of constant pilgrimage.

It is a journey of exploration,
into creation,
into resolution of social tensions,
into sharing the needs of the neediest.

In the terms of this community,
we might say it is Care for the Earth,
Nonviolence,
and Walking with the Poor.



## The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

June 2, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Genesis 14:18-20 | Melchizedek, king and priest |
| Psalm 110:1, 2, 3, 4 | In the line of Melchizedek |
| 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 | Do this in remembrance of me |
| Luke 9:11-17 | Five loaves and two fish |

We all remember when this feast used to occur on Thursday,
as a nod to Holy Thursday,
which already was loaded with so much meaning
that we needed to devote another day
to the celebration of the Eucharist itself.

Each of the yearly cycles takes up a different dimension of the feast.
In the first cycle the imagery focuses on the bread, the body.
In the second cycle it is the blood.
But this year we are in the third cycle.
So what is the ground of our reflection this year?

We might take our cue from the reading from I Corinthians.
Here in the 11th chapter we find one
of four accounts of the Eucharistic words.

Paul's version of these words has its own distinct character.
He includes the words, "Do this in remembrance of me." Twice.
So perhaps Remembrance is the theme for our reflection.

But what are we to remember?

Perhaps a further clue can be taken from Paul's letter.
He is writing to a community that has its share of problems.
Primary among them is a tendency for the community
to divide into factions.
And that is what prompts his attention to the Eucharist.

At one time the blessing of the bread
came at the beginning of the meal
and the blessing of the cup came at the end.

We still note that in the liturgy when the priest picks up the chalice
and says, "When supper was ended…"
The Agape Meal came between the two moments.

In the Corinthian community it seems that everyone
brought their own provisions for a banquet.

However, not everyone was equally blessed with resources.
It seems that the poorer members, unable to afford a meal,
were required to wait and watch
while the more comfortably funded ate.
Paul found this intolerable,
and delivered a blistering note to that effect,
implying that the Lord was not present at their meal.

Part of that note is today's passage.
Apparently, the remembrance of the Lord that Paul had in mind
did not conform to the Corinthian version of the Lord's meal.

In the Gospel we have an indication
of what that remembrance might include.
The gospel reading from Luke is not from the Lord's Supper.
It could have been, since Luke
also has the Eucharistic words of institution in his Supper account.
But instead we turn to the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

This is not arbitrary,
since all the accounts of this miracle include words
that are strongly reminiscent of the Eucharist:
*"Then taking the five loaves and the two fish,*
*looking up to heaven,*
*he said the blessing over them, broke them,*
*and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd."*

So the story of the multiplication of loaves
is supposed to make us think of the Eucharist.

What about it should arrest our attention?
The feeding of the hungry?

That is certainly part of it.
Is it the miracle itself we should honor?
That is part of the feast as well.

Many of you know the story of Stone Soup.
I first heard the story from an active Catholic laywoman,
who related it to this gospel story.

The setting is a village somewhere in Europe,
during one of the many wars.
Soldiers arrived in the village.
They were without food or other resources.
They knew that the villagers were suspicious and unlikely to cooperate.
So they had a plan.

They were able to borrow a cauldron, which they filled with water,
and began to heat over a fire.
When it was getting warm they took a number of large stones
and put them it in the cauldron, eliciting the curiosity of the villagers.
Upon inquiries, they explained that they were making stone soup.

It didn't sound very tasty or nutritious. True.
A few potatoes and carrots might help. These were donated.
Upon further questioning, more ingredients were donated,
including some mutton and seasoning and so forth.
It was going well, but one final step was required,
which was to remove the stones.
The soup was delicious and the soldiers shared it with the villagers,
and all had a grand time.

The implication, of course, is that in the gospel story,
when the crowd gathered in the desert to hear Jesus speak,
there were, in addition to a few loaves and a couple of fish,
some other provisions that were not being revealed publicly.
But once the loaves primed the pump, so to speak, the sharing began.
And all were satisfied.

Of course there is nothing in the biblical account
to suggest this is what happened.

It is only a story told by certain pious Christians.
    However, it does fit remarkably well
    with the passage from I Corinthians,
    and one wonders if the lectionary isn't in some way hinting at this.
After all, where Corinth failed to share their blessings,
and some went hungry,
    in the sharing of the loaves everyone ate
    and there was more than enough, with some left over.

When we come to the story from this direction,
we see that it indeed involves relieving the needs of the needy
and the hungers of the poor.

But it also shows us something further
—that poverty is a result of unequal distribution.
    We have set up barriers between members of the human family,
    but when those barriers disappear,
    the problem disappears along with them.

It is said that we have enough resources
to feed the vast numbers of hungry in the world.
The problem is one of distribution.
    That is, it is a problem of imagination
    that would be able to envision its carrying forward.
        It is a problem of political will to accomplish this elusive goal.
        And very much a problem of self-interest, perhaps greed
        or, more likely, fear.
    A fear that would tell me that unless I hold onto my own
    I may join those who are starving.

In other words, the problem of poverty
is what is sometimes called a manufactured crisis.
    It is a crisis we have created,
    caused not by what is available, but by how we allocate it.
        And one would think that what we have caused,
        we should be able to resolve.
    There is still room for a miracle here.

So what does this have to do with Corpus Christi?

Here is one way to think about it.
The Risen Christ comes among us as bread and wine.
    We might imagine another situation, another story,
    in which the divine presence is located
        in the beauty and noble quality of precious gemstones,
        perhaps shaped into a wonderful work of the artisan's craft,
        like the emperor's nightingale in Yeats' poem.

    Or perhaps Christ could come among us
    as an awe-inspiring vision of intense, shimmering light
    and elusive beauty.

But no, it is as bread—very plain bread—that Christ comes.

In honoring the Eucharist,
we surround it with precious metals and intensely bright lights.
    But at the center of all of this is simple bread.
    And that is important to remember.

Otherwise it is as if we have become so overwhelmed
that the Lord has consented to enter under our roof,
    that we fail to listen to what he is trying to tell us.

**Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

June 9, 2013

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|---|---|
| 1 Kings 17:17-24 | Elijah and the Widow's Son |
| Psalm 30:2, 4-6, 11-13 | Changing mourning to dancing |
| Galatians 1:11-19 | Paul's Call to Apostleship |
| Luke 7:11-17 | The Widow of Nain, and Son |

A long time ago, in the Sundays right before Lent began,
we heard from the opening chapters
of Luke's account of Jesus' public life.
We heard how he went into the synagogue in Nazareth
and read from the scroll of Isaiah.
It announced a Jubilee year of favor,
programmatic for the ministry of Jesus, now beginning.

You will remember that shortly after that,
the townsfolk were upset with him,
and he said that he would follow in the footsteps of Elijah,
who went to the widow woman of Zaraphath.
Well, today we see him doing that.

Part of Luke's message is that Jesus' mission
will extend itself to the Gentiles,
which is what happens in Luke's next volume,
Acts of the Apostles.
Another part of Luke's message
is that Jesus has a mission to the poor.
The widow shows us that.

Whenever we read about widows in the bible,
we might have the cry of the poor in mind.
In the Covenant Code that is part of the Mount Sinai story
about Moses receiving the tablets of the law,
there is a section that we can call the Cry of the Poor.

In the 22nd chapter of Exodus, beginning with v. 20,
there is a passage that begins with a call to avoid abusing
the stranger in the land and the widow and orphan.
The passage continues: if they cry out to me, I will hear them.

This is the cry of the poor, without a doubt.

The passage moves on to threaten the potential molesters
that God will act, and then your wives will be widows
and your children will be orphans, for "I am a God of wrath."
This fits neatly into our prejudices
about the Old Testament God of Wrath.

But then the passage moves on and repeats the sequence:
Do not molest the poor neighbor.
If he gives his coat as a pledge, return it before nightfall
so that he has something to cover himself during the night.
If he cries out to me, I will hear him.
And then this: For I am a God of Compassion.

We are not accustomed to thinking of the God of the Old Testament
as a God of compassion, but here it is.
How can the God of Wrath also be the God of Compassion.

A moment's thought gives us the answer:
The compassion is directed to those being abused,
while the wrath is directed toward those who would abuse them.
In other words, God is a God of justice.

But what do these potential victims have in common?
What do the stranger, the widow and orphan,
and the poor neighbor share,
that they appear in this list together?

Clearly it is that vulnerability that would allow them
to be targets for those seeking victims.
Each lacks something that would allow them to be targeted.
The foreigner is outside of his or her protective setting
in their home territory.
The widow and orphan in a patriarchal society
are without the conventional protector
and at the mercy of the unscrupulous.
The poor neighbors lack the material means
to provide a buffer between themselves and the world.

The Covenant Law declares
that those who are vulnerable for various reasons
are to be given special consideration.
The covenant community is to be judged on the basis
of how they take care of the vulnerable in their midst.

Elijah's friend in Zeraphath is a widow,
her son is an orphan, they are poor,
and they are foreigners.
They fit all the categories.

It is not clear that the woman and her son in Luke's Gospel
are poor, or foreigners.
As it is with the prophets, who sound this theme time and again,
it is enough that that they are a widow and an orphan.
And are in difficulty.

It is not hard to see why this is the case.
In each of the instances today, the woman has already lost a husband.
And now she loses a son.
She is hurting.

But more than hurting, she feels helpless
before the difficulties facing her.
It has probably been a struggle carrying on.
Perhaps after the death of her husband she was consoled
in having a son who could do some of the things her husband used to do.
He could be the man of the house, carry part of that burden.
But now that was ending.

We see frequently in televised news stories,
if we do not choose to block them out, mourners in the Middle East,
survivors of the violent struggles that rack that area,
struggles that often feature young men opposing one another.

And often the mourners are widows

and the mothers of slain sons.
We have front row seats on their intense pain.
And their sense of helplessness.

And beyond the helplessness of the widow and orphan
is the hopelessness.
Hopelessness of having nowhere to turn.
Hopelessness that breeds desperation.

It is here that the community with a commitment to the vulnerable
moves beyond charity to faith witness.
For in its caretaking it not only spares the desperate,
but it also reveals a God who insists on this.

Pope Francis has been making news daily
simply by maintaining a focus on the needs of the poor.
It would appear to be revolutionary,
if we gauge it by the reaction of the media.
And it may be revolutionary,
but it is also written into the program from the beginning.

Its representatives are the stranger in the land,
or, if you will, the immigrants among us,
the poor neighbors who make a claim upon us,
and the widow and the orphan, who will not survive
unless a caring community notices them, and responds.

This is one of the reasons that faith life is communal.
We are not in this alone.
None of us is self-sufficient;
we are each, in some way, widows or orphans.
And we are each in some way, in a position
to care for the widow and orphan.

It is in this mutuality, rather than the individualism of our culture,
that we live our faith.

**Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**

June 16, 2013

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| 2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13 | David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan |
| Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 7, 11 | Forgive the wrong I have done |
| Galatians 2:16, 19-21 | If justification is through law, why Christ? |
| Luke 7:36—8:3 | David, Simon, and a repentant woman |

She washed Jesus' feet with tears and dried them with her hair.
The image is so vivid, and the event so memorable,
that we forget there is a third party present at the event.

This third person is the host, the person who invited Jesus to dinner.
In the story, this is the person that Jesus is talking with.
The woman has no speaking lines,
and only toward the end does she enter the conversation
in the fact that Jesus addresses her directly.

Otherwise, it is Simon the Pharisee
that gets most of the attention.

It is to Simon that Jesus addresses his little parable above
about who has the greater love,
the one forgiven little or the one forgiven much.
The parable invites us to compare the two of them,
Simon and the Woman.

One indication of Simon's degree of love
is his failure to provide hospitality for his guest.
The custom of the day was to provide an opportunity
for guests to clean up a bit.
Not for Jesus.

And shall we mention Simon's condescension toward the Woman?
And, as we know, his lack is supplied by her generosity.

Simon, for all we know, is a good man by conventional standards.
He certainly seems conscious of the conventions that would dictate
keeping a distance from those known as public sinners.
He is amazed at Jesus' lack of this knowledge.

It seems to him a confirmation that Jesus
shares neither his class level of breeding
nor his sensitivity to religious virtue.

It confirms his decision not to extend to Jesus
the normal courtesies proper to the more refined classes.
Not to this wandering preacher.

There are certain vices only available to the conventionally virtuous.

Only they can discriminate on the basis of public holiness.
Only they can find satisfaction in refusing to mix with the riff-raff.
Only they can find justification for not honoring those
who do not attain their standard of proper behavior.

Of course, it is not difficult to find other examples,
once we put our minds to it.

As Simon illustrates, there are pitfalls
for those who would monitor public virtue,
in the hope of maintaining a level of acceptable behavior.

Here are three that come to mind.

First, will we not have to limit creativity somehow?
What about those people who pride themselves
in thinking outside the box.
Doesn't coloring outside the lines come next?
What about people who say that the rules are there to break,
in the cause of breaking into the newness of the future?
Aren't they always a problem?

But if we go down this road, what do we do
with the human being made in the image of the Creator?
And how do we create a future
without the gifts needed for that enterprise?
Should we just make do with the past?

Another thing that comes to mind is related:
the importance given to the virtue of obedience.
But what (or whom) is it that we are to obey?
The Gospel tells us to go forth to all nations.

This very thing was signaled earlier this week
by Pope Francis in his daily homilies,
and repeated that same day in this place by Archbishop Jackels:
It is better to venture out into the unknown and risk mistakes,
than to stay safely at home and shrink into myself.

But in obeying this call to go out beyond the borders
of secure and regulated behavior,
we seem to be flirting with disobedience in the name of obedience.

How can that be?

Perhaps there is a limit to the value of obedience,
at least as it is filtered through human agents.
Obedience to the call of God,
despite an apparent failure to honor the accustomed rules,
might be seen in the Woman of today's Gospel.
A woman who honors God even while being condemned
by Simon, the arbiter of conventional behavior.

Speaking of P. Francis suggests the third thing that comes to mind:
attention to the poor, those beyond the gates
of any gated community, real of metaphorical.
In our gospel story, this "element" (as they say)
has entered the house, and the story, in the form of the Woman.

I have not called this woman by the name of Mary Magdalene,
as you have noticed.
This is because at the end of the story
we meet another woman, one who actually has that name.

Mary Magdalene, who is said to have supported the ministry of Jesus,
along with other wealthy women,
comes from a different stratum of society.

She would seem to be more of a socialite,
one who mixes with members of the royal household,
such as Joanna, wife of Herod's steward.

But she has not held onto that status by keeping apart.
She has risked her reputation
by following this same Jesus that Simon finds so questionable.

Of course, there is an aspect of gratitude, since, as the gospel tells us,
she was relieved of seven demons.
In any case, she has risked her reputation
by joining the group that follows Jesus
and provides support for his movement.

And I guess I would say that the risk was real,
since in the end she has given her name, in popular usage,
to the unnamed woman in the story.

She has in fact lost her status, in becoming identified with this woman.
It doesn't say that the woman was a prostitute,
but it implies that, since she was a public sinner.

Mary Magdalene has lost her reputation,
having handed it over to this woman
—what comes from following Jesus too closely.

But she has also gained much.
For now her name is also associated
with great love, great repentance, and great forgiveness.

And she has provided hope to Christians throughout the ages,
who having once despaired were given hope.
She has become the image of God's great forgiveness
and love for us.

**Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

June 30, 2013

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| 1 Kings 19:16, 19-21 | Elijah names a successor |
| Psalm 16:1-2, 5, 7-11 | My portion and my cup |
| Galatians 5:1, 13-18 | Called for freedom |
| Luke 9:51-62 | Turn toward Jerusalem |

Paul tells us this morning that we are called for freedom.
It is not something that we often hear.
We are more accustomed
to have the emphasis placed on rules and obedience, not freedom.
But there it is.

Earlier in this letter to the Galatians he connects it to maturity.
He tells the Galatians that previously we were under the law
in the manner in which a child growing up is under authority.

More specifically, using the image of the child
who was destined to be the head of the clan,
he compared the law to the Greek slave
who was entrusted with raising that child for the future responsibilities.
But the situation was temporary,
and when the child came of age, freedom followed.

But freedom is a tricky term.
When I look back on my adolescence,
I know that freedom was an important theme for me then.
It consisted of cutting ties that held me down—mainly parental ties.
It expressed itself in driving around a lot with friends in the evening,
simply because I could.

But this was what we might call "freedom from."
Its main idea was to avoid any commitments
that might end this time of endless possibility.
It rejoiced in possibility, and feared anything that would end it.

But that is simply the first face of freedom. There is more to it.
After all, freedom finds its fullest expression in free choices,

in freely committing oneself.
It is in action that freedom finds itself,
that it takes on a real existence,
and not just a dream of endless possibility.

There is an irony in the way that adult freedom shows itself.
We find ourselves choosing the very paths
that previously seemed to us restrictive and lacking freedom.
But the requirements, for instance, of mission,
or the difficult demands of parenting,
draw forth from us choices that we freely make,
even though we know the costs.
And the costs are limits on our freedom of movement,
of following the moment.

St Paul takes it further.
He tells the Galatians how best they can use this freedom.
For the Spirit, he says, not for the Flesh.

Now I have to say something here.
When Paul is talking about flesh and spirit
he is not talking about body and soul.
That is what we probably think he is talking about.
But he didn't think along those terms.

He didn't divide us up into components.
Instead, he talked about how the human person
could live in different directions, in different life projects.
Incidentally, this is why Paul's thought
is so convincingly represented by existentialist philosophy,
which also talks about the ways of being human.

Books have been written about what Paul means by flesh and spirit.
One way to indicate it is to say that for him
flesh has to do with human ways of being,
reliance on human resources, and so forth.
But Spirit has to do with the ways of God,
and our possibilities of living in accord with those ways.

Later in the letter, just after the part we heard today,
Paul makes a list of typical actions of the flesh
and another list of deeds of the Spirit.

While it certainly doesn't exhaust the meaning of these terms,
one way to put it is to say
that living according to the flesh is to live for oneself,
while living according to the Spirit is to live life in a larger horizon,
one that finds it place in the family of God.

I apologize for this sidetrack in to flesh and spirit,
but these can easily be misunderstood.
In any case, our freedom, when we get past loving possibility
and get down to making commitments,
can go in different directions.
We can choose to live for ourselves,
or we can commit our lives to something larger than that.

Which brings us to the others readings for today.
(No, I have not forgotten them!)

The theme with Elisha, as with Jesus and his disciples,
is the call to discipleship.
This takes many forms, but it is essentially a call
to that larger life beyond one's self.
And there are many sides to that call, some of which are seen today.

The response is freely given.
Elisha's response to Elijah's invitation could not be more decisive.
Free response is dramatized here by slaughtering twelve yoke of oxen.
There is no turning back here.

And in the gospel stories we see different aspects of the call.
Probably the most important statement in the reading is the first:
Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem.
From now on, for ten long chapters,
Jesus will be traveling toward Jerusalem,
and the Passion story that awaits him there.

The rest of this liturgical year, almost to Advent,
we will be hearing stories of Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.
And first of all we hear these discipleship stories.

The disciples James and John in their own way
reflect that tradition of Elijah,
who famously called down fire from heaven
in his struggle with the priests of Baal during the famine in Israel.

But James and John are denied this satisfaction.
We recognize that the call to discipleship
rules out vicious acts of vengeance.

Jesus begins his move to Jerusalem with calls to the journey with him.
The discipleship called forth here is journey discipleship.
And at the same time, it echoes themes from Elijah's call to Elisha
—a prophetic call.

And they are consequences of freedom.
Jesus warns one that he has no place of rest.
This is certainly a strong image of freedom,
almost the adolescent freedom as constant movement.
But here it is not aimless, but very focused.

A second wants leave to bury his father,
while a third wishes to say farewell to his family.
Jesus suggests that there is a calling that pulls one away from family ties.
This too seems an image of adolescent freedom.
Breaking loose from past limits.
But here it is not for the sake of breaking loose,
but rather for committing to something further.

For this is discipleship for the journey.
And the journey leads to Jerusalem.
And the journey is always with us.

Probably all who are serious about their faith life
have experienced a conversion,
even if it is from growing up Catholic to embracing being Catholic.

Consecrated religious and ordained ministers
are conscious of making a choice.
But I suspect it is true of most, if not all.

But it is, at the center, a call
and free response to move away from ourselves
to something, and someone, beyond us.
And in that way, discover as if for the first time
who we really are.

**Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

July 7, 2013

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| Isaiah 66:10-14 | Jerusalem, nursing mother |
| Psalm 66:1-7, 16, 20 | Let the earth cry out with joy |
| Galatians 6:14-18 | Cross and circumcision |
| Luke 10:1-12, 17-20 | Sending the Seventy-two |

Today we hear a story of two Jerusalems,
and two journeys to arrive there.
Of course it is the same city.
But time and circumstances change the meaning of things.

In the final chapter of the book of Isaiah
we hear about Jerusalem as a nursing mother,
welcoming back the exiles with unconditional love.
As a mother comforts her child, so shall Israel be comforted.

The city is rebuilt after the dark days,
and the prophet imagines a future
in which the nations of the earth shall gather there.
The passage evokes the popular interpretation of the name,
Jerusalem. City of peace.
And here peace is shalom, fullness of prosperity.

One day, Israel's devotion to the one God will be shared by the nations,
and all peoples will turn from their pagan ways
and follow the covenant with Yahweh.

But another kind of journey is taking place in the Gospel of Luke.
The destination is similar,
for Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem,
and we are now on the way.

Today he selects 70 (or 72) followers,
and sends them out ahead of him, to prepare for his coming.
The image is that of a movement that has grown.
The advance teams prepare for engagements
in the next towns down the line.

Jesus anticipates that his delegates
will encounter both welcomes and rejections.
He advises them for both eventualities.
The road is long, and there will be many debates along the way.
And along the way, Jesus will be the rabbi
who exchanges views with the Pharisees.
But at the end he will arrive at Jerusalem,
where another group waits for him.
Then it will be the high priests and elders who, with less patience,
will arrange to have him violently removed.

This is a different view of Jerusalem, one that Jesus anticipates,
when in a few chapters he will say:
"I must continue on my way
today, tomorrow, and the following day,
for it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets
and stone those sent to you
how many times I yearned to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
but you were unwilling!"

Jesus and his disciples are still early in the journey to Jerusalem.
We know what will happen to him when he arrives there.
But we also know that this is not the end of the story,
for the crucifixion is followed by his resurrection,
and the gospel of Luke moves on to the Acts of the Apostles.

We are still early in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem,
but already there are hints of what will follow.
Just as Isaiah has suggested that the nations of the world
will turn to the one God, and come flooding into the city,
so in this story of the 72 (0r 70) disciples sent out,
we have hints of the coming mission to the nations.

That is the number of nations of the world,
according to the book of Genesis.

And later the command to "eat whatever they put before you"
will be put into practice in the mission to the world,
as Peter learns in Acts,
when he is invited to baptize the family of the centurion, Cornelius.
He receives a vision of all kinds of food, clean and unclean,
and is invited to rise and eat.

But there is one major difference in this new story.
Luke shows Jerusalem left behind.
For at the time that he was writing,
the city that Isaiah, chapter 66, envisioned being rebuilt
was itself again destroyed.

It would again be rebuilt, and you can visit it today.
But for Luke, it was past history,
and not only a destination, but a point of departure.

The nations would not be coming to Jerusalem,
so from Jerusalem they would go out to the nations.

They would carry with them a vision,
a dream of what some called the Kingdom of God,
and others called the New Jerusalem.

It was a vision of a society
that was built in the image of God's original plan.

It would be a society characterized by peace, a "city of peace."
It would be a just society, where they would be called children of God.
It would be a haven for the poor and vulnerable.
It was a vision that sustained them in the journey.

The followers of Jesus would carry this vision
out into the world around them.
And although it would be sometimes bent and sometimes tarnished,
it continued to live, and lives yet today.

Religion seems to be one of the great sources
of violent hostility in our world.
    Today we see religious disruptions in the Middle East
    —in Syria and Egypt, in Gaza and the West Bank.

Religious beliefs are deep and basic.
They speak to the ground of our existence
and the fundamental meaning of life.
    That is why religious tolerance,
    among the fervently religious, is a gift.
        How can we believe deeply
        without distrusting others just as deeply?

In many ways the two Jerusalems are still with us:
the nursing mother of Isaiah
and the stoning place of prophets as in Luke.
    And yet we are called to believe deeply without hate.
    We are called to respect those who seem to us misguided,
    just no doubt as we seem to them.

This is the week of three popes.
    By that I mean, first of all,
    that two popes, John XXIII and John Paul II,
    were approved for canonization as saints.
John Paul has a second miracle approved,
while John XXIII was approved without a second miracle.
    Unless, of course, you consider the endless miracle
    that is the 2nd Vatican Council.

This is calculated to please two distinct groups in the church,
sometimes called liberal and conservative.
    And at the same time, it may simply invite
    both groups to be equally displeased.
        Why should my favorite need to share the rostrum
        with my not-so-favorite pope?

Which brings us to the third pope, the one named Francis,
who proposed this dual promotion.

And in so doing, invited us to look beyond our own preferences
to a larger community, one we might call an inclusive community
of divergent opinions,
different spiritualities,
varying faith styles.

Maybe this, rather than being of one mind,
is what identifies a city of peace.

**Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

July 14, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Deuteronomy 30:10-14 | God's commands are not distant |
| Psalm 69:14, 17, 30-31, 33-37 | Turn to The Lord and you will live |
| Colossians 1:15-20 | Firstborn of all creation, firstborn from the dead |
| Luke 10:25-37 | The Great Commandment; the Good Samaritan |

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus encountered a scholar of the law
who had a question: What must I do to inherit eternal life?
For this question Jesus answers with another question:
What is written in the law? How do you read it?

At this point, the scholar of the law answers
with what we have come to know as the Greatest Commandment:
Love God with all you heart, soul, and being,
and Love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus affirms this as the correct answer,
and assures him that if he does this he will live.

But the scholar of the law is not yet satisfied,
and he asks another question: And who is my neighbor?
This time Jesus does not answer one question with another,
but instead with a parable.
And parables had the reputation of being more like riddles.

But before we rush on to Jesus' parable,
let's spend some more time with the question of the day:
Who is my neighbor? What are the possible answers?

**One** possible answer is simply that neighbors
are those in the neighborhood, as we typically use the term.
Loving our neighbor means affirming those who are like us,
and not those who are different from us.
In some cases, it may mean putting a wall around the neighborhood,
with a gate—the gated community.

This can be extended to mean the desire

to avoid anyone in our nation who is different from us.
It would put a wall at the border,
to make us a gated national community.

(It is somewhat ironic that one of the crafters
of the more restrictive immigrant policy before Congress,
and a major campaigner for the fence across the southern US,
is the Senator from North Dakota, which happens to have
its own significantly long stretch of international border.
But of course, that is not under discussion.
Canadians are like us, aren't they?

No doubt they would consider this point silly,
having nothing to do with the reality of the situation.)

But the main point is that those
who do not look like those in our neighborhood
are not to be trusted and are probably dangerous.
As the loud grandma on the river wall
told her little granddaughter last night: Stay close.
Someone might grab you.

Thus, we can object to Proposition 8 housing in Dubuque
on no greater grounds than that some of those involved
are not from old Dubuque.
We can object to changes in the city on the grounds
that some people who do not look like us are coming here.

**A second** possible answer to the scholar's question
is that our neighbors are those who are not our enemies.
This thought takes its cue from the line in Matthew's gospel
that instructs us as disciples of Jesus
that we should love our enemies as well as our neighbors.
They must be different then.

Also, the original passage from Leviticus 19:18,
where the scholar of the law
finds the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself,

begins by insisting that you should not take vengeance
or bear a grudge against your neighbor.
After all, that would be tantamount to treating them as enemies.

Today we have a clear instance of this idea
in the war against terrorism.
Let us put aside the way this distorts the notion of war
by declaring it against an abstract noun: terrorism.
The war against grammar may be proceeding at full force,
but it does not need national support.

Furthermore, this noun remains properly undefined,
so that someone who shoots a gun in the city of Dubuque
can be charged with terrorism.
This is a long way from 9/11, but still, it draws a straight line.

But our most notable version of the war against terrorism
translates into a suspicion of Islam.
We justify our aversion to Muslims on the basis of 9/11,
and we say that they are naturally violent,
but our primary concern that they are not like our neighbors.
They must be enemies.

But the first two answers to the scholar's question
do not exhaust the possibilities.
In the gospel account Jesus provides a **third** answer.
We call it the parable of the Good Samaritan.

We already know, as did Jesus' original hearers,
that this is not going to be a conventional answer to the question.
We know that Samaritans were not appreciated by Judeans
because of a long and complicated history.
They were not neighbors, even though they lived next to Judea.
So any story that features a Samaritan,
and especially one that we would come to call Good,
is already suspect.

And in the story Jesus answers the scholar's question.

It is not an answer that names a category of persons.
It is not an answer that draws the line
around who is neighbor and who is not.

We sometimes think that Jesus is saying that the man in the ditch,
waylaid by robbers, is an example of a potential neighbor.
But Jesus is not even saying that.
The neighbor in the story is not the man in the ditch.
The neighbor in the story is the Samaritan himself.

For Jesus does not ask the scholar who was the neighbor.
He asks instead Who was neighbor **to** the man in the ditch.
Not which one is the neighbor, but how do you become a neighbor?

Not where do you find your neighbor,
because you can become a neighbor to anyone.
Simply by imitating the Good Samaritan.

Where do you find the neighbor?
In yourself.

## Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 4, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23 | Vanity of vanities |
| Psalm 90:3-6, 12-14, 17 | Harden not your hearts |
| Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11 | Your life is hidden with Christ |
| Luke 12:13-21 | Parable of the Rich Fool |

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a small literary gem.
In it Qoheleth, or "The Preacher," adopts the role of Solomon the Great
to survey the opportunities for happiness or satisfaction
available to him.
And of course Solomon had legendary resources,
so he is an excellent choice of a voice.

One after another he samples the rewards
of wealth, pleasure, and even wisdom itself,
and nothing satisfies.
Repeatedly he finds nothing but emptiness
at the heart of his experiences.
His famous mantra says this: Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

Finally, he concludes that the best plan
is to embrace the present moment.
Here too he has a famous line: Eat, drink and be merry.

This is the backdrop to today's gospel parable about the Rich Farmer.
The concerns of wisdom literature are here.
"There was a rich man…" says the parable,
sounding the wisdom theme of riches and poverty.
"You fool," says God, reminding us of wisdom and folly
as approaches to life.
A third wisdom theme, the just and the wicked,
is not out in the open, but it is surely present here.

But the parable seems to hide its lesson.
Where the investigations of Ecclesiastes
find emptiness at the heart of things,
the parable about the Rich Farmer has a blind spot at the center.

For, what is he doing wrong?

He finds himself the beneficiary of a splendid harvest,
and so he decides to build a better granary.
Isn't this simple prudence? Isn't this what we would do?
In fact, isn't this what we *should* do?
What is wrong with this?

We know that he is doing something wrong,
because God calls him a fool.
The lesson at the end, added by Luke, informs us
that this is how it will be
for those who store up treasure for themselves,
but are not rich in what matters to God.

So what did he do wrong?
We look for a mistake somewhere along the line.

Is he greedy? It doesn't seem so.
He is simply at the good end of a fine harvest season.
Does he fail to give God the credit? It doesn't say that he does.

What does the parable itself say, that might be point of its lesson?
Once we ask the question in this way, we notice a line.
It has been there all along, but we have skipped over it.
We see it, but not straight on.
Much as with certain kinds of night vision
we see things only by not looking at them directly,
but rather see them out of the edge of our eye.

The line is this: You fool.
This night your life will be demanded of you.

This is what the farmer neglected to include in his calculations.
This is the missing piece that God charges him with failing to notice.

Suddenly the parable is no longer about wealth, and what to do with it,
but rather about one's life, and what to do with it.

Now we remember that Wisdom literature
is about how to live the successful life.
And we have the question before us:
What constitutes the successful life?

The American tradition for success is simply material excess.
All the books that tell you how to be a success in your life
are talking about money. That is our yardstick.
And like a yardstick it has quantifiable measurements,
for easy calculation.
But not all Americans seem to agree with this.
Almost weekly we hear stories about persons on the fast track
who drop out and open a whole foods store.
This week it was a woman, a successful CEO in business,
who decided to drop all that and try her hand at running a farm.
Perhaps you saw it in the TH.

So even for us, with our clear cultural instructions
about how to measure success,
it seems there remains some question.

What do we do with our lives?

A major American poet, W. S. Merwin,
has put the question in an interesting context.
In one of his poems he discusses an anniversary
that goes by each year, that he does not celebrate,
because he does not know which day it is.
He is talking about the day of his death.
It will be one of the two dates on his tomb.
But he doesn't know when it is.

The great 20th century German philosopher, Martin Heidegger
is famous for insisting that only the life
that is lived with an awareness of its ending in death
can be called authentic.

This, it seems, is something that the parable is also telling us.
True wisdom, it seems, is that

which understands the gift we live and the limits it includes.

The question becomes how best to devote my life.
In the name of what (or who), do I burn away
my energy, time, and spirit in the course of my life?
How do I spend myself in a way that I find satisfactory.
What is worth the gift of a lifetime?

In my experience, this community
probably understands that better than almost any I know.
It is something that I find myself learning here.

It is a matter of living in the moment.
But also living in the long perspective of faith vision.
Not in a spirit of dread, but of joy.
It is the joy, I think, of finding a satisfactory way to spend your life.

There are probably many ways to do this.
Perhaps those who amass a fortune feel similarly. I wouldn't know.
Perhaps we cannot claim to know the exact answer.
But at least we have identified the right question.
The question that the parable raises.

## Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 18, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10 | Plot against Jeremiah |
| Psalm 40:2-4, 18 | Lord, come to my aid! |
| Hebrews 12:1-4 | A great cloud of witnesses |
| Luke 12:49-53 | Not peace, but division |

At the top of the bestseller lists in the past week or two
is an unexpected visitor. A book about Jesus.
The author, Reza Aslan, is a Muslim scholar
who was Christian for a time, but has returned to his birth religion.
As a result of an unfortunate interview on Fox News,
which immediately made it to YouTube,
the book rocketed to number one.

Jesus has many faces in our world.
I have a PowerPoint presentation which consists

of over a hundred images of Jesus.
But since this is the image of the day,
it is worth talking about a bit.

The book is on the list that I am waiting to read,
so my remarks are second-hand, based on reviews.
But I think they might be justified
inasmuch as the book seems to relate to the gospel reading for today.

Aslan's book is called *Zealot*.
Somewhere in the book he admits that the Zealot party
did not exist until 30 years after Jesus of Nazareth.
He is simply claiming that Jesus was a Zealot for his cause.
It is only coincidental that it evokes the people we call Zealots.

He paints a portrait of Jesus who lived in tumultuous times.
This is true. Revolutions began in Galilee and moved to Jerusalem.
Or out to the desert.

Jesus lived in a world that was dramatically unlike
those holy card pictures
with the pastel blue sky and pastel green grass.
His ministry was launched in the midst of political and religious tumult.
We have come to understand that it must be read in that framework.

This much Aslan gets right.
And he is right to bring it forward to a public
that doesn't tend to read scholarly books on biblical history.

As he picks up on this, Aslan's Jesus is a political revolutionary
who worked for the overthrow of the regime.
At one point he says that Jesus, being "no fool,"
but rather a radical revolutionary, "understood
what every other claimant to the mantle of messiah understood:
God's sovereignty could not be established except through force."
In his view, it is the later church
that interpreted Jesus as nonviolent,
in order to pacify the Roman empire and avoid persecution.

This seems so far from what we believe about Jesus.
And so it raises questions for us.

I would suggest that he gets it exactly backward.
Violence is not radical. Rather, it is business as usual.
To respond to violent repression with violent resistance is not radical,
it is imitating the oppressor.
This is what Mohandas Gandhi,
and later, Martin Luther King, Jr., have taught us.

They also show us that nonviolence,
as a form of deliberate resistance,
is much more radical.

Aslan seems to think of nonviolence as simply hiding from conflict.
Since he seems to lack an idea of nonviolence as resistance,
he can say that Jesus, like others of the time,
understood that God's sovereignty
could not be established except through force.

This, by the way, is exactly the point that Rome
was trying to make, in destroying the temple.
Violent force is the mark of authentic divinity.
The God of the Jerusalem Temple clearly did not make the grade,
in their view.

At this point we come to today's Gospel reading from Luke
which includes the famous lines:
"Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division."

Not peace, but division?
As a matter of fact this also doesn't sound
like the nonviolent Jesus that we are used to.
What is happening here?

The story of Jeremiah, who begins today's liturgy of the word,
is the key to the gospel reading.
The most unlucky of prophets,

and yet for that reason one of the most influential,
Jeremiah had the unenviable task
of confronting Israel with the coming end of their kingdom.
They did not appreciate the message.

The prevailing belief in Israelite society
was that the kingdom would never fall
because The Lord God himself dwelt in the temple.

So when the Babylonian forces gathered at the gate,
and Jeremiah began preaching immanent defeat,
he was seen as committing crimes against God's people.
It was blasphemy piled on top of treason.

Today's episode shows them
trying to dispose of the nuisance he represented for them
by dumping him into a dry cistern.
These ceramic pits dotted the land,
and filled during the rare rains, making the arid region habitable.
They provided a convenient dumping ground.

An Ethiopian official came to Jeremiah's aid, no doubt saving his life.

Here Jeremiah serves as an example
of one who brings division, not peace.
While peace is the message he would prefer,
the time for this is not yet.
Division is a result of his message, not the intention it was given.

For those who believe that God’s sovereignty
cannot be established except through force,
it is obvious that nonviolent action is either ineffective
or it is somehow violent.

In this way of looking at it, Gandhi’s campaigns were violent
because they produced a violent reaction.
Martin Luther King’s protests were violent
because they caused people to respond
with hoses, dogs, and truncheons.

And, as if to seal the deal, they both died violent deaths.
And, of course, we can add to this
the death of Jesus of Nazareth.

But again, this is backwards.
Rather than being violent,
nonviolence has the ability to expose our own need for violence.
It reveals divisions, and fierce oppositions.
It is radical in the sense that it reaches down
into the roots of our ways of behaving.
It is radical in that it confounds people
who might be otherwise friends of our cause.
It seems frivolous. But it is anything but that.

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.
both died violent deaths. And they knew that they would.
But they did not for this reason
capitulate to the pressures to alter their approach.

And, again, we can add to this roster
the death of Jesus,
who came to light a fire on the earth.

**Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time**

August 25, 2013

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|---|---|
| Isaiah 66:18-21 | They shall bring from the nations |
| Psalm 117:1-2 | The covenant virtues |
| Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13 | Whom the Lord loves, he disciplines |
| Luke 13:22-30 | Enter by the narrow gate |

The book of Isaiah ends with an image
of the ingathering of peoples
from all corners of the earth.

The deportation and exile in Babylon,
following the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's temple in 587 BC,
was a major turning point in Israelite history.

From this time onward we see many of the chosen people
scattered among the nations of the ancient world.
Synagogues, in which worship centered around a liturgy of the word,
became important places of worship
in the absence of the temple and its sacrifices.

Upon the return from Babylon,
two contrary impulses drove the people of Judea.
One, derived from the Isaian tradition,
articulated especially in Isaiah 56-66, as in today's reading,
imaginatively opened its eyes to the wider world.
It is a vision of what we might fairly describe as a universal mission.

The contrary vision was driven by the need to survive
in what seemed a hostile environment.
They were inclined to circle the wagons
and seek ways to declare their identity.
They no longer were able to claim national identity,
since now they were a colony of Persia.

Yet, they were a people.
They were a faith, believing in the one God.
But a defensiveness set in,

the opposite of the more open outlook.

They made much of certain identity markers:
kosher food laws, the rite of circumcision, Sabbath worship,
and laws against mixed marriage.

It is no surprise that after Jesus made his short speech in the synagogue,
his townsfolk were upset, and tried to throw him from the hilltop.

Often we place a lot of weight
on the markers that define us as a community,
and we do not look lightly on those who would neglect them.

As we make our way through the Gospel of Luke,
you will recall that this story of Jesus began
with Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth,
reading from a scroll from this same Isaian writer.
It invoked the imaginative mission to the wide world.
It spoke of liberation and Jubilee.

It took a position directly opposed
to that of those concerned about community identity.

But now we are much later in the story,
and Jesus is working his way toward Jerusalem,
in what has proven to be a very long and circuitous route.

But along the way we have repeated reminders that Jesus
is teaching a more open view of what it means to be Jewish,
what it means to be faithful to the one God.

Along the way he has been keeping up a dialogue
with three different groups: disciples, Pharisees, and the larger crowd.
For the first he advises, warns, and teaches.
With the second, the Pharisees, he keeps a running debate going on
about what makes a person righteous in God's eyes.
They say it's the law; he favors repentance.

But he also engages the growing crowd that is following along.

They know that something important is happening here.
And once in awhile someone will ask him a question
or ask for a decision, which, incidentally, he refuses to give.
Today we hear someone ask if only a few people will be saved.

We are probably on the right track if we see here
someone who is concerned about the chosen community
who gives high regard to the identity markers that fence it off.

At first, it sounds like Jesus is right there with him.
"Enter through the narrow gate," he says.
That surely is music to the questioner's ears.

However, Jesus keeps talking, and as he does,
suspicions surely must be growing that he doesn't agree after all.
It turns out he is not talking about membership
in the ritually gated community after all.
No, he is talking about repentance.
It is an entirely different gate that he has in mind.

Finally it is confirmed:
people will come from the east and the west
and from the north and the south
and will recline at table in the kingdom of God.
That he has something else in mind is surely true.

All the way through this account
you may have been thinking that this is not too different from today.

Our own faith community is also divided
between those who wish a more outward posture
and those who are concerned
with our own version of identity markers:
certain traditional practices,
liturgical distance between celebrant and people,
Latin as a distinct language unlike other religions.

First of all, it might be pointed out
that although there are people on both sides of this divide,

and they tend to stay there,
at the same time circumstances may change
and make one emphasis more timely than another.

However, today it seems clear that today
we are moving from the closed circle
to the world mission.
And circumstances seem to require it.

For many of us that seems welcome news,
and Pope Francis seems personally responsible,
changing the tone without touching the doctrine.
And yet, so much seems to be different.

And in today's world it would seem
that we can use Luke's view of Jesus and his ministry,
with its open vision and world mission.

**Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time**

September 1, 2013

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|---|---|
| Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29 | Words on humility, docility, alms |
| Psalm 68:4-7, 10-11 | A home for the poor |
| Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24 | Mediator of a New Covenant |
| Luke 14:1, 7-14 | Places at table |

As Jesus works his way to Jerusalem,
in a journey that has taken most of the summer so far,
he has accepted the hospitality of various persons along the way.
Earlier he stopped at the house of Mary and Martha.
Toward the end, at Jericho, he will stay at the house
of a tax collector named Zacchaeus, noted for being short
and climbing a tree to see the passing notable.

And often he will be invited to dinner at the house of a Pharisee.
Today that happens, and we hear much about table manners.

There are actually three parts to this story of a dinner,
and we hear two of them.
First, there is the advice to the guests,
who may want to advance their place at the table without justification.

Here the recommendation is that one take the lower seats.
One may be invited higher, which is an occasion of honor.
Or, at the very least, one can avoid the dishonor of being moved lower.
Here the lesson is about being humbled or exalted.
And perhaps this is what is signaled
by the words of Sirach in the first reading, concerning humility.

In looking for an example, I am reminded
of the new look that has been given the papacy by Pope Francis.
He is often spoken of as the pope of humility.
For instance, it was noted that he carried his own carry-on
onto the plane for the trip to Brazil.
He avoids ostentatious display.

This weekend's news was that he took a "selfie,"
which is current language for taking a picture
of yourself with someone on a smart phone camera.

Actually, someone else was taking a picture
and he was invited in, and accepted.
    But one headline read: "Pope Francis takes a selfie,
    solidifies Catholic Church's newly cool image."

Not everyone likes this.
    One critic sniffed, on line, "How can I follow a pope
    who doesn't act like a pope?"

But the gospel story moves on,
for in addition to advice to the guests,
there is advice to the host as to who should be invited to dinner.

    Don't invite merely your friends and relatives.
    Rather, invite those normally not included
    —the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame.

In other words, where the first part of the story
talked about the high and lower end of the table,
the next part of the story extends that.
    We go right beyond the lower end of the table to the door,
    and right out the door to those in the street and alleys.

To stick with the Pope for examples,
one thinks of the celebration of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday,
    when he washed the feet of persons
    who were (in some cases) neither male nor even Christian.

This also received some adverse criticism, which still continues.
This is no doubt because the foot washing
has become associated for some people
with the sacrament of ordination to the priesthood.
    Some of you know bishops that have made it clear
    that no matter what the pope does,
    we will continue with men only at the washing of the feet.

But there is a third part of the gospel story
that is not included in today's reading, probably because
a version of it is included in the year of Matthew's gospel.
That is the parable of the Great Feast.
It is too bad that we exclude it this year,
because Luke's version is distinctive.

In Luke's version of the parable, Jesus has the host of the dinner
send out **two** delegations to find replacements
for those who refused the original invitation to the dinner.

The first delegation was told,
'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town
and bring in here the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame.'
You will recognize this as the same language
we heard earlier in the advice to the host.

But in the parable of the Feast, a second delegation is sent out,
and this time not to the streets and alleys,
but to the highways and hedgerows of the countryside.
In other words, now we are going right outside the town itself
to find guests for the dinner.

Informed commentators tend to see in this second delegation
an invitation extended beyond Judaism to the Gentiles themselves.
As in the book of Acts, Luke's second volume.
The parable of the Feast takes the lesson beyond the table itself,
beyond the doors of the house,
and even beyond the gates of the city itself.
It takes it to those who are entirely outsiders
and view themselves in that way.

Returning to Pope Francis for an example,
I think of his most famous remark concerning gay Christians:
"If they accept the Lord and have good will,
who am I to judge them?"

This has gone viral on the internet, as they say.
There are links that say, “Pope Francis judge.”
    There is a large collection of blogs on the famous five words,
    namely, “Who am I to judge?”

It is interesting to me that this pope has produced little
in the way of official documents.
    There is the last installment in Pope Benedict’s series on Jesus,
    which Francis helped to complete.
    And which has received little coverage.
        But other than that very little in the way of official statements.

And yet, what he has said, always in an off-hand or unofficial manner,
continues to make headlines and stir comments,
    and it would seem, hearts and minds.

So I have a question.
    Why does this cause such a commotion in what we might call,
    for lack of a better term, the “world”?
        Why do they care?

I know why I care about what the pope does,
for it is my church and I have a stake in it.
    And perhaps you are of a similar mindset.

But I thought the world was secularized, uninterested in religion,
    having abandoned what it sees as myth and magic,
    and moving on to other things of greater concern.

So. Why do they care?

I can imagine some thinking that the pope
has removed the veils of mystery and in that way
    revealed the Catholic Church for the ordinary organization
    that they think it is.
In other words, for them he has shown that the church
is nothing special, which agrees with what they think.

I can see others thinking that now that the pope
has opened up to non-Christians and gays,
that the church no longer presents a roadblock to their agenda
and can be dismissed.

These suppositions presume that the "world" is pleased
because the pope has taken the church out of the way,
and now that it no longer appears to be judging others,
or keeping guard over a hidden mystery,
it can now be dismissed from considerations, thanks to the pope.

But I wonder.

It also seems to me possible that people have a hunger
for the transcendent, for belief in a world beyond the mundane.
That they long for something to which they can dedicate their lives
in ways beyond what seems to be currently available.
That life has a depth and meaning that they suspect to exist,
but of which until now have been unable to get a glimpse.

It seems to me that this kind of evangelization
—for that is what the pope and the gospel are doing—
makes it possible for people to imagine themselves in such a setting
and find a place in such a world.

It may be that for once they can imagine themselves and the church in the same "selfie," the same picture.

That is just a supposition, a guess.
I still wonder: Why do they care?

**Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

September 8, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Wisdom 9:13-18 | Who can know God's counsel? |
| Psalm 90:3-6, 12-17 | A thousand years are as a day |
| Philemon 9-10, 12-17 | Paul returns a runaway slave |
| Luke 14:25-33 | Costs of discipleship |

Today's Scripture readings fit neatly
under the heading of "the Cost of Discipleship."
    This is a familiar phrase, and it has its associations.

Some of them may be inspiring,
as when in altruistic youth one seeks a challenge.
    Some of them may be less happy,
    as when one is given meaningless tasks
    under the guise of faith discipline.
        So we might be interested in exploring
        what the Scriptures have in store for us today.

The Gospel reading is one of those mysterious passages
that trouble as much as reassure us.

Jesus is still on his way to Jerusalem.
    He has been instructing the disciples,
    debating with the Pharisees,
    and interacting with the crowd.

Now, addressing the crowd, he offers them
the option of moving to the discipleship group.
    But he doesn't make it easy.
    "Unless you hate your father and mother…"
        This will certainly get the attention of those who remember
        the commandment, "Honor your father and mother."

"Unless you take up your cross and come after me,
you cannot be my disciple."
    He is not making it easy.

Then he adds a couple of examples.
You who construct a tower better know beforehand
if you have available the necessary resources.
Otherwise you are open to mockery.
And the king who plans a war had better know beforehand
if he is outnumbered.
If not, he better make plans for peace.

He concludes with a warning:
Any who do not renounce their possessions cannot be a disciple.

My past year of study in Luke's gospel has changed it for me.
It has long been thought that Luke wrote his work for Gentiles,
rather than those of Jewish heritage.

But I discovered recent thinking that the Gentiles in question
would be those already predisposed toward Judaism,
who favored its dignified theology
but were put off by the identity markers
of food laws, of circumcision. And more.

Luke pictures some of these,
such as the centurion in his fifth chapter,
who helps to support the local synagogue.
Many of these were wealthy and influential,
and were of great assistance to the synagogue.

It would seem that Luke, like Paul before him,
is targeting these people in his mission and writings.
When they converted, they brought with them their entire families.
They are commonly called God-fearers, or God-worshipers,
as in certain ancient inscriptions on the front of synagogues.

To make the point briefly, Luke pictures a Jesus
who has special reference for this group of people.

When this perspective
is allowed to frame the lessons of the gospel passages,
we see dimensions that were hidden before.

For instance, Luke consistently invites them to forego the values
that they inherited from the Roman imperial culture
that was their birthright.
We see this in the Magnificat, with its reversals of power and riches.
It is elsewhere as well.

Today, Jesus invites them to renounce their possessions.
He talks about hating father and mother,
which in their case means putting on hold their cultural heritage
with its values of wealth and power.

We do not need to go far for a magnificent example, however.
In the second reading we have most of Paul's letter to a certain Philemon.
The church in the city of Colossae meets at his house.
Paul is in prison, not too far away, in Ephesus.
One of Philemon's slaves has run away, and gone to Paul.
Now Paul is sending him back.

Now in Roman culture the reprisals for slaves that ran away
were severe, ranging from selective mutilation,
such as an eye or a knuckle or two, to death itself.

It was thought necessary,
in order to keep the institution of slavery in place,
since slaves tended to resist its confinements.
And the culture depended on slaves to keep running.
In fact, it is said that the constant expansion of the empire
was driven by the need for a constant supply of new slaves.

So Paul was sending the slave, Onesimus, into danger, it would seem.
Today's reading is his cover letter.

Paul points out that Onesimus is now a Christian.
He is your brother, he tells Philemon, the Christian slave owner.
So what will Philemon do?
Will he exact his right, and punish the slave?
Paul points out that he hopes to visit.
It would not look good to have Onesimus
at the liturgy at Philemon's house, missing an eye.

In effect, Paul invites Philemon to make a choice
—slavery or Christianity. Which will he choose?

As a matter of fact, Onesimus appears in the letter to the Colossians,
so it seems that Paul's ploy succeeded.
And in any case, we probably would not have this letter if it had failed.

Philemon is today's Exhibit A of the cost of discipleship.
He is called to cast aside certain values
that were part of his imperial culture.
He shows how discipleship puts pressure
on inherited, unexamined values.
It puts them in tension with another set of values
that are those of the kingdom of God.

All this talk about Roman imperialism seems so much ancient history,
until we remember that we are living in a *de facto* empire,
modeled in some respects after the Roman system.
But all empires have similar issues.

For instance, we in the American Empire are currently
in the position of the king in the gospel
who is calculating whether he has the resources
to mount a campaign against an opponent.
And the calculation is moral as well as financial.

It is one of the burdens of imperial power.
It is experienced as a duty as well as a benefit.
It allows a considerable degree of self-delusion and false generosity
to color our views.
But the cost of discipleship makes it possible for us
to confront those tendencies.

We too have the cultural values of wealth and power
as indicating our own worth, our own success.
But discipleship sets up a contrasting set of values,
allowing us to reflect upon what we truly believe.

Part of those contrary values is a social model
grounded on mutual respect and consideration,
    rather than domination through overweening power,
    whether that comes through violence or wealth.
We call this social model "community."
    We think of it as respecting each member,
    strong or weak, pleasant or difficult.

In this regard, the cost of discipleship opens the way to another vision.
While it closes off one set of options, it opens up another.

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This is the mutuality that we express today in naming Prayer Partners.
It is indiscriminate and inclusive.
    No favorites; we are all God's children.
    We are all disciples, following the path,
        sometimes easily, other times searching out
        what seems to have turned on us.

In praying for one another, we discover one another.
In partnering we claim our common discipleship.
    And in so doing, we also find our own way
    and redeem our own shortcomings.

We find ourselves in common,
facing our God.

**Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

September 15, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14 | The Golden (molten) Calf |
| Psalm 51:3-4,12-13,17,19 | In your great compassion... |
| 1 Timothy 1:12-17 | Paul's change of heart and direction |
| Luke 15:1-32 | Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Prodigal (Lost) Son |

While this has been a rather long Gospel reading,
the shorter version would have left out
everyone's favorite Gospel parable, that of the Prodigal Son.

We should remember, of course, that it is a parable.
It is not a set of categories into which everyone we know can fit.
There are some who do not repent,
just as there are some who are never feel resentment.
It is just a story of two sons and a father.
A story that sheds light on parts of our lives.

There is another reason that we would want
to include the story of the Prodigal Son,
and that is that it allows a comparison with the first reading for today
—the story of God, Moses, and the Golden Calf.
(Although here it is called the Molten Calf. Too bad.)

In the story of the return of the Prodigal
we learn of the Fatted Calf
(though here it is called the Fattened Calf.)

The Golden Calf and the Fatted Calf show us two ways of celebrating.
And we can take our cues from these
to understand why we celebrate,
and what it tells about us.

The story of Moses and the Golden Calf has been imagined by Hollywood
to involve a kind of orgiastic or delirious partying
among the apostate Israelites.
This is pure imagination.

The story tells of a people
that were losing faith in Moses and God Yahweh,
having not heard from either for some time.
    The worshiping style was not different
    from what they had been doing before.
        However, they sent their attention in a new direction.
        The calf was a false god.

In the story of the Prodigal, we hear the father twice
—once for each son—explaining why they had to celebrate:
    "Take the fatted calf and slaughter it.
    Let us celebrate with a feast,
        for this son of mine was dead, and has come back to life;
        he was lost, and has been found."

If the Israelites of Moses' day
are celebrating in an act of departure,
    the father for his part celebrates a return.
    For, like the lost sheep, this is a return to the fold.

So on the one hand,
there is a certain kind of celebration that rejoices in departure.
    It sometimes appears as a kind of rebellion.
    Perhaps it is a celebration of freedom.
        Perhaps of self-preoccupation.

The celebration of self
is a considerable part of our society as it has developed.
    It often involves a delusive sense of freedom,
    not unlike adolescent release from parental control.
        There are many ways to talk about this.
        You are free to select your own examples.

For my part, I would only point to something
that has caught my attention lately.
    And that is what seems to me to be a considerable number
    of current examples in the news of young men killed
    trying to escape from police intent on issuing traffic tickets.

Often it involves motorcycles,
which in itself suggests to me the image of the rebel individual
refusing the chains of sober society.
    In any case, let it stand as a symbol
    of how we often understand freedom.
        The Golden Calf in this regard celebrates a false freedom.

But the Prodigal returns, and the father launches a celebration.
In fact, he insists that he *must* celebrate and rejoice.
    It is not a choice.
    It is a requirement.

Why must he celebrate?
Why is celebration required?

We can say it is simple human response,
that he is so joyful that he cannot hold it in. there is that.

But there is more.
Celebration is a requirement because
certain things, certain events, demand celebration.
    To neglect to do so is a sort of sacrilege,
    a kind of insult to the rhythm and dynamics of our common life.

Certain events demand celebration, if we are to be true to ourselves.
    If the father was not to celebrate his son's return,
    he would be guilty of a major violation
    of the woven fabric of our lives.

And more than this, it is, or can be, and act of witness.
    In the father's case, the celebration is a witness
    to the benevolent movement in the world
    that has returned his son to him.
        It is a witness to a provident God, if you will.

For celebration takes things beyond
his own personal relief and thanksgiving
    to the social life that surrounds him.

It involves others, some of whom possibly
did not even know the son that well.
And certainly some, like the other son,
who is not impressed by his brother,
and has to be taught about the need for celebration.

Celebration reaches out beyond the self to involve others.
It is social.

The liturgical celebration, for instance,
which is signaled by the readings today,
is not an individual's prayer, or even a collection of individual prayers
somehow happening at the same time.

It is a communal prayer, by which we pray as a community,
not a collection of individuals.
The self that prays in the liturgy is not my self, or yours,
but something else.
It is the communal self, the community itself, that is praying,
and we join it.

After today's liturgy we will be commissioning liturgical ministers.
They are helping us out, and we are grateful for that.
So part of the commissioning is to show our gratitude and support.

But it is more, as well.
For in commissioning them, we place our prayer in their hands.
We as a community give different ministers particular parts of our prayer,
so that we can operate as a worshiping community.
And not a bunch of worshipers in a community.

Authentic celebration takes us beyond ourselves into our shared life,
and how we share that life in God as well.

**Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

September 22, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Amos 8:4-7 | A word to the merchants |
| Ps 113:1-2, 4-8 | The Lord who lifts up the poor |
| 1 Timothy 2:1-8 | That authorities leave us in peace |
| Luke 16:1-13 | An unscrupulous steward |

Recently, as I have been working my way through Luke's Gospel,
both on Sunday and in the daily readings,
and in my own project as well, for a fresh look,
I have come to rely more and more on the commentary by Sharon Ringe.
Much of what I am saying today begins with her ideas.

The problem, of course, is what to do with this crafty manager,
and Jesus' apparent approval of his tricky ways.

But we have to begin with latifundium.
I first learned this Latin word during the 1980s,
when Latin America was at the forefront of our justice actions.
And this was a feature of the inequities that prevailed there.

Latifundium refers to large land holdings,
and comes from the Latin for expansive farm.
As a system it emerged under the Roman Empire,
and was a way of rewarding military and civic heroes.
The landowner lived elsewhere, in the city.

They were run by managers, and worked by tenants,
who were often little more than slaves.
It had taken hold in Palestine as well.
And so it is in today's parable.

Ringe says the tipoff is the actual meaning of dishonest wealth,
which should more properly be translated as "wealth of injustice."
It is a reminder that great economic disparities
prevailed in that world, between the few rich elite
and the vast crowd of the poor.

The notion was that the disparity should be softened through almsgiving.
Not all were this pious, however.

The manager hadn't done anything illegal or dishonest,
or he would have been required to repay that amount.
He was simply not doing his job,
and the property was being squandered.
So he was fired.
But before the tenants discovered
that he was no longer acting for the landowner,
he adjusted their debts.
He was a child of this age, motivated by self-interest,
like the absentee landowner himself.

The owner was now stuck with the new situation.
He couldn't take the goods back from the tenants
who had acted in good faith,
since that would created resentment
that would result in considerable damage to his property.

So he grudgingly, wryly, praised the manager.

In all of this we find considerable irony,
or if you will, a joke.
What the landowner failed to do by way of alms,
his crafty manager does by devious and indirect means,
namely, the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor.

So Jesus suggests that the disciples learn from this.
What the manager does by accident,
they will commit themselves to in direct action.

What is the lesson here?
Ringe sees it as instructing the disciples
that they should not be afraid to dirty their hands with Mammon.

She writes, "Instead of urging upon them a lifestyle
or even an ideal of poverty,
or advice to keep themselves pure from contamination by wealth,

it challenges them to manage wealth in the direction of justice."

This could very well be the case
for the rich Gentiles for whom Luke is writing,
and to whom he is giving advice through Jesus' teaching.

However, I think it is fair to suspect
that the lesson might be more radical than that.
Once one starts talking about redistribution of wealth,
the demands of justice become more and more stark.

Redistribution of wealth goes in both ways in real life, of course.
Usually it funnels toward those already in possession of it.
The trick is to bring it back to greater equality.

The passage from the book of Amos provides testimony
to the way in which wealth gets concentrated in the hands of a few.

Today he focuses on the merchants
who are using every means at their disposal
to enlarge their own portion of the nation's wealth.

This is a consistent theme with Amos,
and he charges the judges, the priests,
and the national leaders with the same fault.
What we have come to call the common good is his abiding concern.
For it is being blatantly abused.

The merchants skimp on the amount while ratcheting up the price.
They find ways to take advantage of the poor family's lack of choices
to allow them to make even more money.

But probably the most startling of the charges is their use of religion.
They attend the feasts—the Sabbath and the New Moon
—but apparently only for show.
They are eager to get back to what matters to them.
And that is tipping the redistribution of wealth in their own favor.

The link between religion and distribution of wealth has a long history.

It has produced the discipline of distributive justice.
    It has generated moves like the preferential option for the poor
    and liberation theology.

But these religiously motivated movements are pushing against a tide.
Which is why they tend toward structural solutions for society itself.
    This, of course, receives the response
    that we are to keep religion and state separate.
Which may be good for the state, though the full report is not in yet,
but it is certainly not so good for religion.

Unless we are to think that religion is a purely private affair
that has no relevance in public life.
    That all God is concerned about
    is personal morals and regular churchgoing.

However, we have Amos to remind us,
in the uncertain terms that he is accustomed to using,
that this is not the case.
    God is also interested in public affairs and justice in society.

The fierce opposition to idolatry in the Hebrew Scriptures
is not a matter of a jealous God who wants it all for himself.

Rather, it is a case of retaining a God
who has a passion for social justice,
against the pagan competitors that could care less.

    At issue in maintaining the one true God
    is retaining that God's passionate concern for all the people,
    the least advantaged most of all.

## Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 6, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4 | The just by faith shall live |
| Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9 | If today you hear his voice... |
| 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14 | Bear the hardship of the gospel |
| Luke 17:5-10 | Faith the size of a mustard seed |

Yesterday a friend who is recovering successfully from cancer
told about the ordeal and how now that she is recovering
she is thinking about all those people
who go through what she is going through.
And she wonders how it is possible to believe in a loving God.

As you know, she is not the first one to think this.
And it is something that comes to mind usually
in times of harrowing difficulty.
It is when the anguish and suffering that fills our world
comes home to us that we begin to wonder.
Is it only those who have never suffered that can easily believe in God?
Is faith only for the naïve?

Today's scripture readings speak of faith in a rather insistent manner.
The apostles request help in their faith.

In the reading from the book of Habakkuk
the prophet says that the just ones by faith shall live.
Today's reading is the only time that this book is read in the liturgy.
One reason may be that the passage provides Paul
with his main scripture quote to describe his own teaching about faith.

In itself, the Habakkuk reading is fairly obscure.
It helps to realize that Habakkuk is situated in time
between the Assyrian oppression of Israel
and the Babylonian crisis that is now on the horizon.

Habukkuk is in a dialogue with God.
The prophet is concerned about what he sees
as rampant injustice and infidelity in the land.
How long, he asks, will you allow this to continue?

The Lord's response, which we skip today,
is that Habakkuk is not to worry,
because the Lord is sending the Babylonians as a corrective.
Habakkuk is appalled at this,
pointing out that the Babylonians are famous for their brutality.
The cure is worse than the disease.

At this point, today's reading picks up again,
with the Lord's response to this.
In effect, the answer is to have faith.
More specifically, the pertinent verse says
that the rash are people puffed up and without integrity,
but the just by their faith shall live.

What are we to make of this?
The footnote in your bible will tell you:
*"the faithful survive the impending doom*
*because they trust in God's justice*
*and wait patiently for God to carry it out."*

There is something to this. Faith involves patience.
It involves trusting in the unfolding of time and events.
In my lifetime the unexpected, even the unforeseeable,
has happened twice in the history
of the supposedly unchanging church.
The first was Vatican II. The second is now, with P. Francis.
It looked like the spirit of the Council was going away. But now it is back.

But I suspect that something more is being suggested by Habakkuk.
And here I refer back to my story of cancer in remission,
and the experience of faith crisis.
One could make the case that faith is only meaningful,
only real, when it is tested.
The rest of the time it is a nice addition to one's résumé.

The Lord is telling Habakkuk that a sorting-out is on the way.
If the prophet is worried about the quality of faith in the land,
the Lord is sending a crisis that will authenticate the true believers.

The rash ones are those who rely upon themselves.
We are to understand that one's personal efforts
are even less promising than those of God.
My personal resources are conspicuously limited.
The alternative is to rely on God.

But where is God? The prophet is told to wait on events.
Trust, and it will turn out all right.

In the Gospel, the apostles seek greater faith.
We cannot know what prompted that question.
In Luke's arrangement of Jesus' sayings, this follows
upon Jesus' teaching that they should forgive wrongs unconditionally.
That may be a suitable context for their request.

Or, it may be something more personally devasting,
since it is the question that comes from a crisis in faith.
The question arises in times of crisis.

Jesus' answer is somewhat off-putting, it seems.
It appears that he doesn't tell them how to increase their faith;
he simply tells them what it would be like if they had more of it.
They could move mountains, or in this case, a mulberry tree.
But it may be that he is telling them that when the time comes
the mustard-seed faith they already have will suffice.

We see this often enough.
Not that faith operates magically, like the Force in Star Wars movies,
rearranging things around at a distance.
But rather, with faith we can accomplish amazing things.
Testimony to this is the historical record of accomplishment
of the Religious Women of America.
How often have matters of great importance gone forward through faith,
when reasonable people insisted that it would never work?
Faith can move mountains. And trees.

But there is more to the Gospel reading,
and this part stops us rather cold, because it talks about slaves.

We want Jesus to deny slavery. He doesn't do that.
We do not believe that slavery is acceptable,
and so we cannot relate to this story.

But we have to respect the fact that we are dealing with
another culture in another time.
The attitudes toward slavery would change,
and the influence of Jesus and the Gospel
would be the ultimate cause for this.
But in the meantime, the institution of slavery was a part of life,
and it was impossible to imagine life without it.
Today we have labor-saving devices that do much of the work for us.
They did not.

Slavery was structured into society,
and to do without it would require a major re-imagining
of what social structures were and how they could be changed.
It is difficult to do this because we always tend to think
that social structures are a part of nature itself.

But the point of the story is that we do not give extra-credit
for doing something that is part of the job description.
The apostles should not be looking for special favors.
This in turn also has links to today,
and the call that the Pope is making.
For instance, church officials should not be looking
for symbols of status or preferential treatment.

But it also returns us to the teaching of Paul on faith,
first floating into view with the passage from Habakkuk.
This might be the place to enter the last word.

For Paul, we cannot achieve right relationship with God on our own efforts.
That is a gift from God, and in fact has been offered us already.
It is our place to accept it and respond to it.

Our response involves thanksgiving, in life and liturgy.
It means handing the gift on in works of charity and justice.

It means understanding our own place in the created order
as redeemed and loved, and yet creatures.

Like the apostles in the gospel,
we are to do what is expected of us, but that will suffice.
The life of faith is one of daily awareness,
but it also rises to new clarity in times of crisis.
It never proves itself absolutely, but it can sustain us.

**Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

October 13, 2013

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|---|---|
| 2 Kings 5:14-17 | Naaman the leper |
| Psalm 98:1-4 | The Lord has revealed to the nations |
| 2 Timothy 2:8-13 | The word of God is not chained |
| Luke 17:11-19 | Ten lepers |

Every year we meet the ten lepers on Thanksgiving Day.
It always seems incongruous then.
After all, then we are thinking about Thanksgiving dinner,
and are not appreciative of being asked to contemplate
the disease of leprosy.

But it does emphasize the point that this gospel is largely about gratitude.

Now today we meet them in another setting,
and in the company of Naaman the Syrian.
It gives us another chance to think about this gospel.

There is more to the story of Naaman than we hear today—much more.
But what we have focuses on certain themes.

One, of course, is leprosy.
Another is the presence of the foreigner,
for Naaman is from Damascus, a frequent enemy of Israel.
And the third
—and it is here that the lectionary edited reveals its interest—
the third concerns thanksgiving.

These three themes bring out the similar features of the gospel.
The ten were lepers, the one who returned was a foreigner,
and he returned to give thanks.

Leprosy was not a deadly disease,
but it was humiliating and isolating.
Its largest burden was social, insofar as the leper was shunned.

The role of the foreigner is also important to the stories,
since the foreigner is out of place, and a foreign leper doubly so.
Place becomes an important need in the stories.

But there is something more
in the presence of the stranger in these stories,
for the stranger brings fresh eyes,
an approach that is not bound by the familiar conventions.

And, of course, gratitude is an important element.
Naaman is unable to thank the prophet,
and so instead he takes some Israelite earth back to Damascus
to set up a garden shrine to Israel.
This may seem odd, but the Bronze Age perspective
saw the gods tied to the land.
So, for the man from Damascus, bringing back a bit of the land
was a way to make Yahweh God feel at home.

At this point, we might draw a lesson
on the importance of giving thanks.
We understand that life is held together
by a network of freely offered gifts,
and that responding to that generosity
is as important as originating it.
These are the bonds of authentic community.

But a closer look might take us further.
It shows us that in each case,
both that of Naaman and that of the Samaritan leper,
the impulse of gratitude is redirected.

First, the individual responsible for the cleansing is thanked.
But this gratitude is quickly shifted toward God,
the ultimate cause for healing.

In the case of Naaman, the prophet refuses his offer of a gift.
He doesn't take the credit, it would seem.
This prompts Naaman to take the Israelite soil back with him,

in order to thank God as frequently as he wishes.

In the case of Jesus,
the story tells us that he returned and thanked Jesus.
But Jesus in response, wondering about the other nine,
pointed out that none except this foreigner
returned to give thanks to God.
So we discover that the true recipient of thanksgiving is God.

Both Jesus and Elisha are agents of healing.
But both refer their action back to God.
Elisha is God's prophet, and is advertised as such
by the young Israelite woman, the servant girl of Naaman's wife,
who informed him of the possibility of healing.

And Jesus is the revelation of the Father,
the sign and signal of God's will for us.
Here too the frame of the story
shifts from thanking the person immediately responsible
to thanking the creator God who wishes us well,
and brings us to health and wholeness.
In both cases, the story is an affirmation of the love of God,
and the ultimate worth of the created world.
In this sense, the end of the story concerns worship as much as gratitude.
Or maybe a better way to say it is that it concerns worship
as an expression of gratitude.

But maybe we can go even further,
and add to the themes of gratitude and worship a third.
For here we might also notice that in each case
the one who receives the healing is a foreigner.
The stranger is the one who gives thanks.
And the stranger, and this is the notable part,
is the one who worships the one God.

Naaman sets up a garden shrine outside the land of Israel.
Even before Israel was dragged out

to the neighboring territories in captivity,
explained by the prophet Second-Isaiah as a call
to be a light to the gentiles…
Even before this, Naaman has taken God Yahweh
beyond the confines of the land.

And Jesus makes a point of the fact
that only the foreigner has returned to give thanks to God.
It seems we are learning something about God in these passages.
Something new is being revealed about the God
whom is already known, we think.
This God is not circumscribed
by the conventional boundaries that have been drawn for him.

Of course, some have pointed out
that the other nine are doing exactly what Jesus asked them to do,
namely, go to the priest and have him confirm
the cleansing that has taken place.
This is what the law required.
But, of course, the Samaritan wasn't Jewish,
and so he wasn't obligated by this.

At this juncture, it might be useful to remember
that Luke's gospel was written not so much for Jews
but rather for friendly Gentiles
—those whom I have repeatedly referred to
as God-fearers, or God-worshippers.
This shifts the perspective that I (for one) have had for this story.
Now it is more about the Samaritan than it is about the other nine.

A constant feature of this gospel,
especially on the long road to Jerusalem that Luke takes with Jesus,
is a running debate on the respective merits
of self-achieved righteousness versus repentance,
in a large, self-understanding sense of that word.
That is, a record of accomplishment
versus a true understanding of one's standing with God.
Which is the road to right relationship with our God?

Jesus, as we know, comes down consistently
on the side of repentance and self-awareness.
The Pharisees favor a scrupulous practice of law-keeping,
building an enviable résumé of merit.
Today, we have nine lepers keeping the law,
while one returns to thank, and praise, God.

Maybe one more step is called for.
In today's world, we might look to what P. Francis is doing.
There is a shift in focus going on.
In this week's *Witness*, our archdiocesan newspaper,
the main headline says: "Pope wants less 'Vatican-centric' church."
This is filled out in the first sentence of the article:
"In his latest wide-ranging interview,
Pope Francis said that he aimed to make the Catholic Church
less 'Vatican-centric' and closer to the 'people of God,'
as well as more socially conscious and open to modern culture."

This probably speaks for itself.
But we can add our own refinements.
What might be said is that this too is a comparable shift in focus.
One to add to the others we've seen in the readings today.
In fact, this entire homily has been tracing how the focus shifts.
It continues today, with the witness of Pope Francis.
And it will continue in our reception of his example.

**Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

October 20, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Exodus 17:8-13 | Moses and the Israelites versus Amalek |
| Psalm 121:1-8 | Our help is from The Lord |
| 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2 | Be persistent |
| Luke 18:1-8 | A persistent widow and a corrupt judge |

The second letter to Timothy tells us
that all Scripture is inspired by God,
and we should be persistent in proclaiming it.
In the Gospel Luke tells us that Jesus told a parable to his disciples
about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary.

We think of prayer as belonging to the different categories
of praise, thanksgiving, and petition.
Today's examples seem to belong to that of petition.
Both Moses and the widow in the gospel parable
show the trait of persistence in their petitions.

Apart from their persistence, the two examples
are unlike what we usually think of concerning prayer.
Moses' prayer seems to be located entirely in his arms.
And the widow's action is largely persistent pestering.
This is, I suppose, one way to think about prayer.

But these examples deserve a closer look.
In both cases there is a backstory that helps
to make sense of what is happening.
There is much that seems mechanical in the prayer of Moses.
It seems all externals, and not so much internal,
where we tend to think that prayer is properly located.

Sometimes people explain the story by invoking a primitive mentality
that doesn't make these distinctions.
But it seems to me that there might be something else going on here.

When Moses held his arms up, the Israelites could see he was praying.
Then they knew that God was being invoked on their behalf.

That is, they depended on God's help,
and when they saw Moses, they were encouraged.

Why do I say that they depended on God's help?
When we place the story of Moses,
and Aaron and Hur, and the Israelites, in their historical context,
we see a people who have just escaped from slavery.

They are a people without organization, without a nation state,
without much in the way of resources.
They are going forward entirely on trust in God.

But none of the nations around them wanted
this large mass of migrating people settling in their territory.
So it was with Amalek.
They came out with their professional army against Israel,
who had no such thing.

Perhaps a comparison can be made with today's Palestine.
Here too a people without a country, without a professional army,
finds itself confronted by a powerful state and occupying armed forces.

God favors the vulnerable and marginal.

It is seen in the widow in today's story.
In the Covenant Law Code, the widow and the orphan,
like the stranger in the land, and the poor neighbor,
are axiomatic for the vulnerable and the marginal.
It is useful to remember this when we hear the parable.

Also, we will remember the prophets' excoriation
(Amos comes to mind) against corrupt judges.
The idea is that the judges are those primarily responsible
for monitoring justice in the land,
and if the judges are selling their verdicts,
who will speak for God in this area?
So the unjust judge is also axiomatic
for a certain kind of social failure.

In other words, when they heard this parable,
the disciples would recognize the types involved,
and appreciate the humor that the one
who is the stock example those vulnerable to harm
is bullying the one who is famous for exploiting the weak.

So in both cases, with Israel and with the widow,
our sympathy is with the underdog.
The vulnerable are those who haven't the leverage
to force their way in social situations.
By necessity their only resort is to depend on God.

But so often this seems foolish, for where is God?
How often does prayer seem pointless, without any result.

How often do the wicked win, and the just have no satisfaction,
as the psalms frequently note.
And the psalms are prayers.

It is here that the recommendation of persistence comes in.
This is more than telling us simply to wait
and eventually the times will change,
the worm will turn, and our moment will come.
It is more than that, for it is an assurance
of God's company during our wait for the time to be ripe.

But why do we need to wait?
Why can't a good God answer our prayers immediately?
Isn't that what a good God would do?
Why this torture of making us, or those in need, wait?

But is that always good?
Perhaps a comparison might be made with the indulgent parent.
Not many would agree that the father or mother
who never denies a child's wishes
is necessarily doing a good thing by that child.
It would seem to be feeding a sense of entitlement
that would not situate them well in life.
It would not only impair social relationships,

but also interfere with authentic self-understanding.

I am thinking of a poster I saw recently about dogs and cats.
The dog says, "My master gives me everything. He must be God."
The cat says, "My master gives me everything. I must be God."
There is that danger in self-assessment.

Which is to say, if humility is a virtue,
this is not the way to achieve it.

But there is something more, I think.
We tend to pray for many things.
Some of these reasons for prayer, though perhaps intensely felt,
are in fact trivial and pass quickly.
May we win this ball game. May I pass this test.

But others are much more serious.
We know this. But sometimes it takes time to notice it.
There are prayers that we repeat again and again.
And we learn along the way that these are the things
that really matter, that really concern us.

In this way, perseverance in prayer teaches us
what is really important.

If we keep coming back to it, it concerns us deeply.

Israel was a wandering people in search of a place.
Within that people were some who had special needs.
All of us are in some ways like Israel.
And all of us, in some times, have special needs.

Today we hear that God hears us.

**Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

October 27, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18 | The Cry of the Oppressed |
| Psalm 34:2-3, 17-19, 23 | The Cry of the Poor |
| 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 | I have kept the faith |
| Luke 18:9-14 | A Pharisee and a Tax Collector at prayer |

Last month *America Magazine* published an interview with Pope Francis, and the opening question was about his self-understanding:

*"Who is Jorge Mario Bergolio?"*

*"I do not know what might be the most fitting description....*
*I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition.*
*It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre.*
*I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon."*

This is not the answer that most people would expect from the pope.
It seems a legitimate question to ask, "What does he mean?"

Some would say that he is simply saying he is not above anyone else.
We are all sinners, and he is one as well.
Except that he seems to be saying more than that.
And he is not comparing himself to anyone.

Today's parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector
may offer a path of inquiry into that question.

The parable is part of a larger debate going on
between Jesus and the Pharisees along the road to Jerusalem,
a journey that has taken up most of the Sundays of this year.

The debate concerns the meaning of righteousness.
This is not a word we often use in our tradition,
but it might be understood as being in right relationship with God.
The debate is in terms of self-righteousness versus repentance.

The parable itself simply presents two figures in the temple, praying.
The parable has been described as reversing our expectations.

The saint and the sinner are identified as justified
in the reverse manner of what we might expect.
This has caused us to make the tax collector a saint
and the Pharisee a sinner,
even though we have to invent where their sainthood and sin lie.

The opening of the parable sets the stage for us,
and in fact controls our reading of it,
when it says that the parable is about those
who are confident in their own righteousness and despise others.

Confidence in one's own righteousness
is close to what we often call self-righteousness,
although by that we usually are thinking about hypocrisy.
For us, hypocrisy typically means claiming a degree of virtue
that we do not actually possess.

But here self-righteousness would seem to be
something both deeper and more literal than that.
It describes a sense of achieving righteousness on our own terms,
by our own actions and abilities.

If righteousness can be understood as right relationship with God,
the mistake here is that I can control that process on my own.
That it is all my doing, and when I have achieved it
I can present it to God as a finished work.
No need for God to get involved in the process.

When we look at the Pharisee, we see that he is telling the truth.
He is thanking God that he is not like the rest,
those who have not been gifted as he has been.

We usually do this when we count our own blessings.
And the psalms seem to be doing this much of the time.

Before long, Thanksgiving will be here,
and we will be doing that very thing.
Among the blessings we remember

is that of having been given a time and place for our lives
that allows us to be faithful believers.
It is hard to see how the Pharisee is doing anything other
than making this prayer.

The problem is not that the Pharisee is lying about what he has done,
for he most certainly has done what he says he has.
For, how can he lie in talking to God, whom he knows already knows?
So it is likely that he has done all of these things.

The difficulty comes in when he thinks that his virtuous achievements
have earned him a place of special honor.
This is not to deny his virtue, for it is real.
Rather, it is to question the conclusions he draws from that evidence.

The tax collector is sorry, but he is naming no sins.
We all have heard about how the tax collectors were public sinners.
They were in a position to advance their own fortunes
at the expense of their fellow Judeans.

The reaction against them on this account
might be attributed as much to resentment as moral discernment.
How often do we attribute base motives to those whom we suspect
are making gains for themselves to our own disadvantage?

The tax collector simply identifies himself as a sinner.
No list is given. We do not know why he repents,
though it is apparent that he is doing just that.

There is room here for questioning
what Luke in this gospel understands by repentance.
It does not always have to do with rejecting past errors,
although it can include that.

Sometimes it seems to mean something like conversion,
turning from one way of life to another.
In the Acts of the Apostles,
Luke's account of Paul's encounter on the road to Damascus,
seems to fit this picture.

There are a number of figures in this gospel
that are examples of repentance.
Some have specific faults that they can point to.
Others, like Peter, called when he is fishing on the lake,
simply identify themselves as sinners.
"Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

His sinfulness is stated simply, as a condition, and not as a catalogue.
(This self-declaration, by the way, is something
that the current pope has in common with the first pope.0

There is room for mystery here.
Repentance means something deeper and richer than admitting wrongs.
Just as self-righteousness means something more than hypocrisy,
and lying about one's past achievements.

I am not satisfied with any answers I am able to give
to the questions that I have raised.

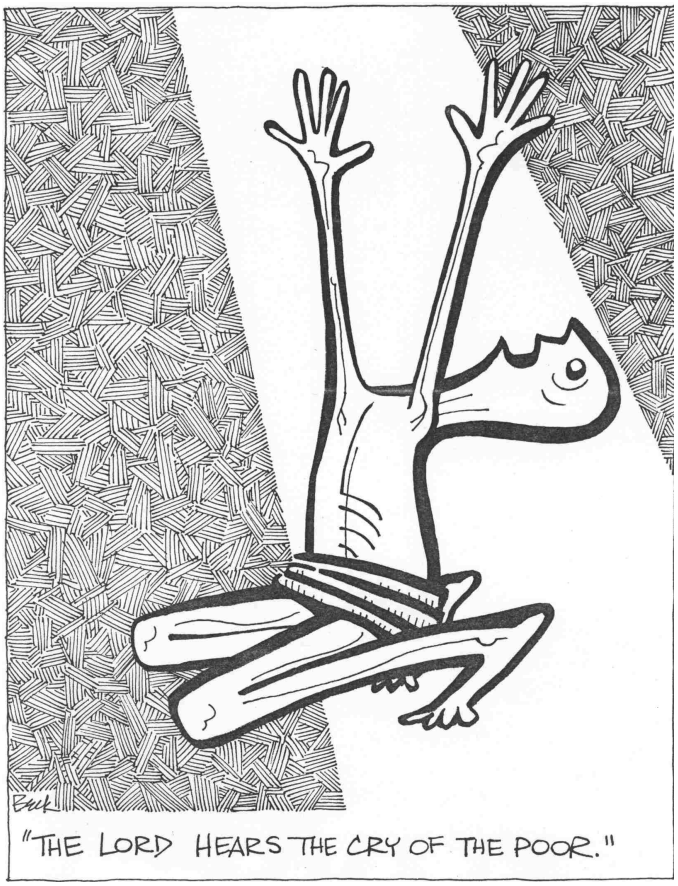
However, I might offer one way in which the two positions compare.

If self-achieved righteousness is seen as accomplishing the work
of establishing and maintaining my relationship with God all on my own,
if it is seen as something that I have earned
by careful attention to moral behavior,
if by my work and extra effort I imagine I put God
in a position in which God has to recognize my rights,
if I think I can put God into my debt in this way,
then I am badly misunderstanding my relationship with God,
and the difference between Creator and creature.

If on the other hand I understand
overcoming any breach between myself and God
as something that God has erased on my behalf, on our behalf,
if I see the interaction between Creator and creature
as a dynamic of gift given and received,
if in all of this I am conscious, even overwhelmed,

by my unworthiness for receiving such a gift,
then perhaps I can understand our true relationship,
and am thus in a position to appreciate
what right relationship, or righteousness, actually means.

In the end, I cannot say precisely or fully
what P. Francis meant to say in his declaration of being a sinner.
And yet I do know that it is an important admission,
and that here, as in so many other ways,
he is leading us toward our own self-discovery.



**Solemnity of All Saints**

November 1, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14 | Numbered and unnumbered |
| Psalm 24:1-6 | A people longs to see your face |
| 1 John 3:1-3 | God's children now |
| Matthew 5:1-12 | The Beatitudes |

This coming April 27 two new saints, who are also popes,
will be added to the calendar,
or at least to the roster of canonized saints
—John XXIII and John Paul II.

But today we also celebrate the unlisted among the saints.
We have an echo of this in today's first reading
from the seventh chapter of Revelation.
John, the speaker, tells of a vision of the heavenly assembly.

First mentioned are the 144,000.
The book of Revelation loves numbers,
though not in the mathematical sense.
These are Jewish numbers—12 times 12, times 1000.

The vast crowd of the unnumbered saints follows,
probably referring to the Gentiles.

The numbered and the unnumbered.
We won't be bending the meaning too far
if we see here the canonized saints,
many with assigned feast days,
along with the unlisted multitudes of saints,
many of whom are unknown, even unremembered.

Robert Ellsberg, the editor-in-chief
of Orbis Books, the Maryknoll publishing house,
is a convert to Catholicism.

In his popular book, *All Saints*, he made use of his adopted tradition
to celebrate an alternative list of heroes of the faith.

Generously, he includes Quakers as well as Catholics,
Gandhi as well as Gregory the Great.

His ploy is to shine a light in areas we ordinarily do not look,
to see if sainthood might not be lurking there.

We might make our own list of heroes of justice or piety,
suffering from the slings and arrows of today's world.
We might consider the broken parts of the world today,
and the vast number of unsung, unreported, unlisted victims
who survive, or fail to survive there.

We might spend a moment or two remembering specific heroes
that do not often receive much acclaim,
but who mean something particular to ourselves.

Today we celebrate them as gathered into the heavenly choir,
where everyone can sing beautifully,
no matter how we remember their ability before.

And in particular, we celebrate the community of God's children,
throughout time and space, present and past, near and far.

One family in all its diversity and glory,
cherished by one God.

**Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time**

November 3, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Wisdom 11:22-12:2 | The universe as a grain of sand |
| Psalm 145:1-2, 8-11, 13-14 | I will praise your name forever |
| 2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2 | Do not be alarmed by warnings of the end |
| Luke 19:1-10 | Zacchaeus the Short |

Apparently Zacchaeus was looking for something more.
He climbed the tree to look.
He was not very interested in having anyone see him,
so he hid among the branches.
But he was still looking.
And then he was spied out.

The invitation was simple.
Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house.
He invited him to display some hospitality.

All along the road to Jerusalem, as we have been seeing this year,
hospitality has been on display.
He has stopped over with Martha and Mary.

He has been invited to dinner with important Pharisees,
where he noticed people jockeying for position in the table places.

He has been accused of eating with sinners and tax collectors,
although he hasn't done that for awhile.
It is as if today he needs to keep that going:
*Come down, Zacchaeus. I must stay at your house.*

That is all it took. Zacchaeus was ready.
He was hesitant, and uncertain,
and didn't want people to notice his uncertainty,
but he was ready.

And so he responded in embarrassing excess.
It gives one a distinct impression that the invitation was long overdue.

Tax collectors, of course, had a bad reputation.
And Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector.
And he was rich.

It would be difficulty for those from whom he collected taxes
not to think that he had cheated them
out of some of their own hard-won property.

Very few people like to pay taxes.
This is true even when the taxes support the common good
and are an expression of social interdependence.

But in the case when someone is taxing citizens
on behalf of an invading empire
whose occupying armed forces face them down daily,
then it is even more of a bitter pill.

And Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector,
was the symbol for all of that.

So Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see this person
causing all the commotion in the town of Jericho
as he was passing through.

It was probably just another passing illusion,
but it was worth checking out.
He knew he needed something in his life, that he was going nowhere,
but it was difficult to say precisely what he was missing.
Maybe this was the chance.
He might as well take a look.

And then, hidden where he was among the leaves,
he suddenly finds himself addressed, called out:
*Zacchaeus, come down.*

Come down, Zacchaeus, and join the human race.
There is no need to hide from the rest of us.
Come down and join us.

Today I must stay at your house.
Today. Key word.

This is the day, Zacchaeus that your life will change.
Today is the day I am inviting myself into your life.
Today is the day that you have been waiting for, looking for.
It is here, Zacchaeus.

It is as if a sudden spotlight was shown on the man in the tree.
All eyes turned toward him.
Zacchaeus, who was so conscious of the gaze of others,
who wanted to observe without being observed,
is now the center of everyone's attention.

But he doesn't notice.
His attention is entirely engaged with the person who called to him,
this Jesus of Nazareth.
Hearing his own name, he realizes that this call
is what he had been looking for,
this was the day he had been waiting for.

He is being called to hospitality.
Today I must stay at your house.

He is called to be the generous host.
And the generosity takes hold.
It is as if he doesn't know where to stop.
As it the dam has broken and floods the countryside.
Hospitality overflows into undoing all and any
of the former barriers he had constructed
against caring about the lives of other people.

There were laws on the Israelite books
on recommended amounts of reparation for situations like this.
Zacchaeus meets them, and more.

If in those days being rich meant putting up
a wall around your person and property

where wealth could pile up and not flow out to those around you,
    if it meant being strong or disciplined enough
    to ignore those visibly in need around you,
        if this was true, now it is gone.

One wonders how much longer
Zacchaeus will be described as a rich man.
    Not much longer, one suspects.

But also, he seems to think that he has found something much better.
He doesn't seem to be regretting his move.

    In any case, he becomes an example for us,
    an example of many things, in fact.

But one of these is the role of discipleship
as providing focus in our lives.

Zacchaeus already had what many wanted, but he found it empty.
He had his riches, but what to do with them?
    Now he knew.

In distributing it he found life.
    He found a place in the society that shunned him,
    and which he had shunned.
        He found out how to be a disciple.

In the distribution he became an emblem
of discipleship as hospitality and generosity.

Later, in his second book, Acts of the Apostles,
Luke will show the early community sharing everything
    and living a common life of mutual support,
    enabling one another to live a more complete and joyful life.

Zacchaeus is an early example of that which is to come.
But for now he is showing Jesus around his place.

Meanwhile, we celebrate in the spirit of Jesus and Zacchaeus.

Hospitality is the order of the day,
and the Sisters of St. Francis welcome you, their benefactors
to their Sunday Worship.
They have made room for you in the center of the chapel.
They are in the chairs around the outside, in the choir loft,
and participating through in-house TV.

Generosity is also part of today's celebration,
as we honor you who have contributed toward keeping this community,
its work and witness, alive and well.
Your gift is also given in all the work they do for others.

And today we all welcome Jesus to our house,
as the Risen Christ joins us in the liturgy of Word and Eucharist.
And with him all of those dear to us,
who are also sharing in the new life of resurrection.

Together we praise and we pray.

**Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time**

November 10, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| 2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14 | A Mother and Seven Sons |
| Psalm 17:1, 5-6, 8, 15 | In the shadow of your wings |
| 2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5 | The Lord is faithful |
| Luke 20:27-38 | A Wife and Seven Husbands |

Today we hear from the Maccabees and the Sadducees,
and they are not to be confused!

But maybe some confusion is allowed,
Since, after all, we do not hear from either of them very often.
And today each gives us a story of seven brothers.
In the book of Maccabees we hear a story
of seven brothers and their mother.
In the Gospel we hear a tale
of seven brothers and one wife.
All very unusual and strange.

The Sadducees are the ones who ask Jesus a question about resurrection.
This seems to be a legitimate question.
The Sadducees are different from the Pharisees,
about which we so often hear.
While the Pharisees were found in the various synagogues around the land,
where the form of worship was centered on the holy book,
the Sadducees were temple priests and those allied with them.
Their form of worship was temple sacrifices,
and among the holy scrolls they accepted only
the first five books of Moses.
So they ask their question in terms of the scriptures they accept.

What gets in the way is their attempt to trap Jesus.
This is the last week of his life,
and they are trying to find construct a reason to have him put away.
So they are not being entirely candid.

Nevertheless, there are real issues involved here,
and in fact that is necessary.

If they are to catch him in something blameworthy
—it has to be important enough to alarm people.
It has to be important enough to make a difference
that would get him into deep trouble.

Immortality is such an issue.
It has to do with the need to be remembered.

What is the thirst for immortality, after all?
Is it not that we do not get lost in time,
that what we do and what we are does not disappear?
How can we describe this?
There is a fear that we will vanish without a trace.
That there will be no sign that we ever walked the earth.

Eventually this will be true, of course.
But we do not want it to be too soon.
Immortality implies that we make an enduring mark,
that we sustain our presence beyond our time on earth.

At least this is the meaning of the term for the Sadducees,
who cite the Levirate law.
The Levirate law, in the books of Moses,
would assure that the family continue,
and that in that way there be a setting for remembering.

Here the Book of Ruth might be remembered.
Naomi, who has lost everything,
property and family, husband and sons,
in fact all but her daughter-in-law, Ruth,
begins the story bereft and lost.
But at the end she regains her property, and her family.
For her daughter-in-law, Ruth, remarries
with the help of Naomi's arrangements,
and the first son legally is that of her first husband,
Naomi's son, Chilion.
In this way, the family name continues.

In fact, that is part of what this day is about for the donors.

We are here to remember family members and close friends.
We do not want them forgotten,
and our presence here announces that.

But resurrection is not simply
remembering a person's name and accomplishments.
It is personal and individual.

And here we turn from the Sadducees to the Maccabees.
The origins of the doctrine of resurrection in the bible
emerged during the revolt of the Maccabees, about 165 BC.
Judas, nicknamed Maccabee, the Hammer, along with his four brothers,
staged a revolt against the foreign emperor
who would turn the temple into a shrine of Zeus.
Surprisingly, they won.
And their victory celebration and re-dedication of the temple
has given us the feast of Hanukkah.

For the Maccabees, the question is one of God's justice.
More so, than that of individual merit.
It is a matter of how God rewards those
who die in his name, for his cause.

After this the doctrine developed into a dream of God's just society.
The resurrected community was imagined as one
in which the justice of God was seeded throughout the society
and as a new creation achieved the reality
that was intended in the original creation.

So this is the question of justice, and the redeemed community.
And St Paul talks much about it.

But here we also have Jesus' answer:

> "The children of this age marry and remarry;
> but those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age
> and to the resurrection of the dead
> neither marry nor are given in marriage.
> They can no longer die,

for they are like angels;
and they are the children of God
because they are the ones who will rise.

Jesus' answer addresses two issues: marriage and death.
Resurrection life involves neither.
Part of the reason is that the two go together.
Marriage relates to birth, which is the other aspect of death.
Without subtraction we do not need addition.
Just as with unlimited multiplication
we need something like subtraction.

So resurrection answers the levirate law's question about immortality:
it comes not through new births but from no more death.
But personal resurrection speaks more directly to us
than social permanence does.

And this too is what brings us together this morning,
as we express our faith in the resurrection of those we love,
as well as our own hope in the life to come.

However, there is another aspect to the gospel story,
and that is the fact of the debate itself.
This is not just idle story telling and exchange of views.
This is the final week of the Gospel.
Jesus is about to die.

And so this inquiry concerning immortality and resurrection
is more than just an abstract question.
It is, as they say, existential. Literally life and death.
They hope that by trapping Jesus he will be eliminated.
What is at stake in this contest of wits
is his actual death and its aftermath.

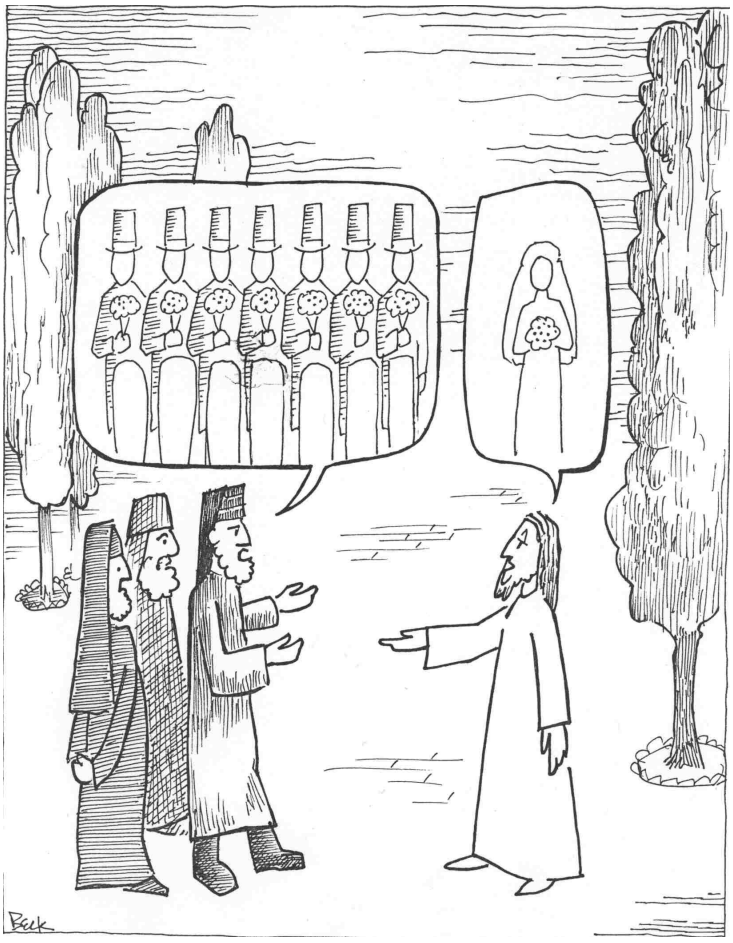
And that aftermath is given in the Easter story.
His own death will be vindicated in the denied tomb of Easter.

And so for a third time we return to the gathering here.
In addition remembering the names of those we love,

and affirming their victory in resurrection,
we also join in the liturgy.

Here in the Eucharist we worship x
in the presence of the resurrected Christ.
Our celebration involves all three affirmations
—immortality, resurrection, liturgy.

And in those affirmations we find both hope and consolation.



**Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

November 17, 2013

| | |
|---|---|
| Malachi 3:19-20 | The sun of justice rises, to wither or heal |
| Psalm 98:5-9 | He comes to rule the earth |
| 2 Thess 3:7-12 | Some are not keeping busy |
| Luke 21:5-19 | When you hear of wars and insurrections. |

Today, as we come to the end of the church year in the liturgy,
and the end of the growing season in nature,
we turn to the end times,
as given in the farewell speech of Jesus spoken to his disciples.

And once again, we discover that Luke's take on this is slightly different.
Coming, as he did, some decades after the destruction of Jerusalem,
he carefully separated out from this speech
the parts that spoke to the end of Jerusalem and the temple
and the parts that spoke of the end of time.

In the meantime, the church is devoted to world mission.
In one verse, not in today's reading, and nowhere in the other gospels, Luke has included these words:

"Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles
until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."

Which is to say, that a time was opening up in history
during which the gospel will go to the nations.
It points to the Acts of the Apostles,
the first chapter in this history of world mission.

As you know, I will not be here next week,
as I will be at the Society of Biblical Literature convention in Baltimore,
as usual on the Sunday before Thanksgiving.
So this in effect will be my farewell to Luke for another three years.
I would like to take the time to say goodbye to this gospel,
which has never been one of my favorites.
But this year that has changed.

At the same time, I want to thank you
for tacitly asking me to bring forth from the weekly scriptures
something more than what has come to be familiar,
something deeper than the surface.

So by way of saying farewell to Luke for a while,
I would like to revisit some themes that emerged this year
to change and renew this gospel for me, and I hope, for you.

First of all, let's say goodbye to the God-fearers.
You have that term all too often this year.
The God-fearers were those Gentiles who were friends of the synagogues, but because of certain practices, such as circumcision or the food laws, they were not inclined to convert to Judaism.
However, they were the people that Luke had in mind
when he wrote his gospel and the subsequent volume,
Acts of the Apostles.

This year, I was especially conscious of the fit
between this and the new day that we are experiencing in the Church,
with the arrival of the new pope.

That is particularly noticeable in another feature of Luke's Gospel.
It appears particularly in the story of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth,
an episode that begins Luke's public ministry of Jesus,
and helps us launch the year of Luke, in the liturgy.

It was last January 27th, the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, that this story appeared, to be continued in the following week.
We also saw Ezra, the scholar of the law,
renewing the commitment of Judah, upon their return from exile.

It was then that I saw most clearly how these two events stood
at opposite corners of the Jewish gathering hall.
After the return from captivity,
there were those who wished to continue the outlook
of the latter chapters of the book of Isaiah.
This talks about being a "light to the Gentiles."

It imagines the Jewish faith experience as a gift to the world,
to be shared.

But another viewpoint, and Ezra was the expression of this, prevailed.
This viewpoint saw the world as a threat,
and the necessary response was to shut off access to that world,
and close ranks.

Under Ezra, all mixed marriages were dissolved
and everyone remarried within the community.
Other practices, commonly called identity-markers, became important.
Among these were circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath worship.

They served to mark the separation
between the faith community and all others.

We heard recently, in the reading from 2 Maccabees,
how strongly this was felt,
as the story tells of seven brothers who were forced to eat pork.
The feeling was too intense to be about menu choices.
It was about threats to their identity.

So when Luke shows Jesus in the synagogue of his hometown,
beginning his public ministry with a reading from Isaiah 61,
followed with "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing,"
we understand how some of his hearers felt.
And we understand better why they tried to dispose of him
by driving him off the hill of Nazareth. But to no avail.

At the same time, we understand how this was a welcome invitation
to the God-fearers among Luke's readers,
who learned that there is an expression of Judaism,
one that Jesus embraced, and fulfilled, that had a place for them.
For Jesus was not coming from outside Judaism to undermine it,
but rather he was drawing on an authentic tradition,
one with which many disagreed, and intensely so.

You can imagine that this presentation of affairs resonated with me
during this year of the new pope.

A very similar shift, and set of options, seemed to be presenting itself.
An openness to the larger world
versus a need to declare and reinforce our unique identity
came to the fore, representing two strands of our tradition,
and now placed in tension with one another.

This year I came to the awareness that Luke's account
of the long journey to Jerusalem, that part of the gospel
that takes up most of the church year in the liturgy,
was the setting for an ongoing debate
between Jesus and the Pharisees.

And I also learned that in Luke's gospel there is a certain group,
here associated with the Pharisees, called in Greek, nomikoi,
translated sometimes as scholars of the law,
and sometimes as lawyers.

One Bible dictionary cites Ezra
as a prominent example of the nomikoi.

The scholars of the law promoted righteousness
by way of careful observance of the law.
Jesus, on the other hand, preached repentance.

The gospel spoke of those "confident of their own righteousness,"
apparently forgetting that it was a consequence of grace, a gift of God.

Luke provided numerous examples of repentance
—Peter on the lake saying "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man."
And the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears.
And Zacchaeus. And the Good Thief.
And the parable of the Pharisee and Tax-Collector praying in the temple.
And the parable of the Prodigal Son and his older brother.
The example of the older brother has come up more than once
in recent discussions about dissatisfaction with the approach
favored by P. Francis, felt by some.

And today we come to the mission to the wider world.
It in an invitation, a welcome to all.

It will, for Luke, be shown in the Acts of the Apostles,
where he continues his story.
But for now we simply look out, and ahead.

Here too we find signs of our own times.
The Christian message has reached the far ends of the earth.
And now that message is returning
by way of a pope who hails from there, the far ends.
The word has gone out, and now, having been translated, returns.
And it is a message of welcoming and inclusion.
It is one that is timely, and one that fits well, I think,
with the gospel of Luke.

So in addition to the welcome that I receive from this community
for exploring the meaning of the Scriptures,
the spirit of the times has contributed as well this year.

And I must say, that no better guide to the events of this past year
could be imagined than that provided by Luke the Evangelist.