

Mk 10:1-12; Friday, March 1, 2019

In today's Gospel, Jesus affirms the indissolubility of marriage. How can Christians so often ignore Jesus' clear teaching: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery?"

When I was a teenager, I did not know a boy or girl who had a divorce in their family. Some time ago, I asked a large gathering of teens how many of them had divorced family members. Everyone in the room raised their hands. This is the tragedy we are living in today. In the book of Malachi God says, "I hate divorce" (Mal 2:16). Why? Because God desires "godly offspring" (Mal 2:15). Divorced parents sew the wind, but their children reap the whirlwind! Clearly, there is much more we must do to prepare our children for a successful marriage. It begins with the frequent and fervent prayers of us parents.

It is almost impossible to read today's passage, and its parallels in Matthew, Luke, and Paul, without calling to mind St. John Paul the Great and his profound reflections on human love in the divine plan, known as the theology of the body. As this holy pope explains, in this passage, Jesus recalls "the beginning" to show that it is only by rediscovering God's original plan that we can find the answer to our longing for relationships of lasting, authentic love. God gave us a symbolic key to that plan by creating us in his image as "male and female" – that is, with bodily differences that are designed for union and procreation, but not for recreation. The one-flesh union of a man and a woman in marriage is a sign pointing to God's own inner mystery and our call to intimacy with him. In the New Testament, this mystery is fully revealed: God himself is a communion of divine Persons, an eternal exchange of infinite love. It is amazing that he has destined us to share in that exchange (cf. CCC, 2231).

Mk 10:17-27; Monday, March 4, 2019

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

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

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

Tuesday, March 5, 2019 -Mardi Gras – Skip

Mk 6:1-6; 16-18; Wednesday, March 6, 2019 – Ash Wednesday

On the first day of Lent, the Gospel connects two passages for our reflection. The first is the unbelief Jesus encounters at Nazareth. As a result, “he was not able to perform any mighty deeds there, apart from curing a few sick people.” The lesson here is that our lack of faith freezes God’s willingness to act in our lives other than to call us to repent. But without God acting, the spiritual transformation we desperately need is not possible, because love never forces. What we desperately need in this situation is humility and repentance, not the display of “mighty deeds,” which would only titillate our imagination. For example, nearly 50,000 people witnessed the miracle of the sun at Fatima. Everyone there was powerfully moved, but in how many witnesses were there genuine conversions? So, while the people of Nazareth were “astonished” at Jesus’ wisdom, “he was *amazed* at their lack of faith.” Can we doubt this is also true of our generation? Jesus is amazed at our lack of faith.

In order to highlight the danger, today’s Gospel does not end with the narrative of the lack of faith Jesus encountered in his home town. Instead, we are taken to the example of Herod, a man addicted to sensuality and haunted with the morbid fear that came from his guilty conscience. He, too, was a man devoid of genuine faith. Power, sex and wealth were his trinitarian idol. But what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, which is a great deal more than Herod’s tiny kingdom, and suffer the loss of his soul? This is a question we should also ask ourselves. Herod liked to listen to John the Baptist, but he refused to heed John’s warning and amend his life. In the end, he murdered John because of a false oath prompted by a lewd dance. There but for the grace of God goes any of us, which is the pointed lesson in today’s reading. Without God’s grace, we are capable of committing any sin.

Lk 9:22-25; Thursday, March 7, 2019

After Peter acknowledged Jesus as “the Messiah of God” (9:20), Jesus began to teach the apostles about the startling nature of his divine mission: “The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.” Jesus uses the title “Son of Man” [*ben-‘adam*] 25 times in Luke’s Gospel. Although it can merely be an idiomatic expression identifying a human person, it is here a reference to Daniel’s vision of “one like a son of man” coming on the “clouds of heaven” where he is given “an everlasting dominion” (Dan 7:13-14).

Perhaps even more shocking to the apostles was Jesus’ revelation that his sufferings have vital implications for all his followers. After this first prediction of his Passion and Resurrection, Jesus declared “to *all*, if *anyone* wishes to come after me [that is, be my disciple], he must *deny himself* and *take up his cross daily* and *follow me*.” Notice, the key points. This command is to “all”. There is no exception. Secondly, we are called to deny ourselves, that is, voluntarily make sacrifices for the kingdom of God. Third, we are charged to take up our cross, that is, willingly accept whatever difficulties and suffering we will encounter over the course of our life. Fourth, we must bear these trials daily, not occasionally or grudgingly. Finally, we are called to follow Jesus, that is, to be like him, but not to lead him.

It is said that if the angels could assume a human nature, they would willingly do so for two reasons. The first is to receive the Blessed Eucharist. The second is to suffer like Jesus. No one likes to suffer. Nevertheless, suffering is the instrument that affords us the daily opportunity to grow in self-sacrificing love. At the end of our life, any suffering we endured will seem like a mere pittance in comparison to the everlasting happiness we enjoy in God’s intimacy.

Mt 9:14-15; Friday, March 8, 2019

Two verses in today's reading fit into the first seventeen verses of chapter nine in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is depicted as the Divine Physician. In the passage, Jesus is reproached by Pharisees because he eats "with tax collectors and sinners", and his disciples "do not fast." To the first charge, Jesus replied: "Go and learn the meaning of the words" quoting the prophet Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Then Jesus added, "I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

In response to why his disciples do not fast, Jesus identified himself as the heavenly Bridegroom, his disciples as the sons of the wedding-chamber, here translated as "the wedding guests," and the time when the Bridegroom will be taken away from them as the first hint of his passion and death. By identifying himself as the Bridegroom, Jesus connects himself with those Old Testament passages that depict God as the heavenly husband. For example, "For your maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth her is called," declared the prophet Isaiah (Is 54:5). Hosea affirmed: "And in that day says the Lord [that is, when the Messiah comes], you will call me, 'My husband,' and no longer will you call me, 'My Ba'al [meaning 'my master']" (Hos 2:16).

With these words, Jesus is describing his whole public ministry as wooing his bride leading up to the wedding ceremony that climaxes on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. In the ancient Jewish weddings, the bridegroom was taken away from the sons of the wedding-chamber when he entered with his bride into the wedding chamber in order to consummate their marriage. Jesus will be beaten to his wedding-chamber and nailed to his wedding bed by our sins. Then he is taken away only to rise triumphantly from the dead as the victor over both sin and death.

Mt 25:31-46; Monday, March 11, 2019

The scene of the great judgment is the prophetic climax of Jesus' discourse on the last things. Jesus earlier warned his disciples to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man. In today's Gospel, we are given a picture of what will happen when he arrives as the just judge. Jesus will repay everyone according to his conduct – "for what he has done" (Mt 16:27). This is a critical point. God does not arbitrarily determine who goes to heaven or who goes to hell regardless of the choices they make in this life. At the same time, no one is saved by faith alone as St. James attests: "You see that a man is justified by works [i.e. what he does] and *not by faith alone*. ... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead [a corpse], so faith apart from works is dead" (Jas 2:24,26). In every judgment scene in the Bible, humans are judged by God based on their behavior.

As the scene opens, Jesus majestically takes his place on his glorious throne surrounded by his mighty hosts of angels. His first action is to assume his role of shepherd as he divides the sheep of his flock from the goats – the good from the bad, the just from those who will be publicly condemned. The sheep, who represent the saints, are placed at Jesus' right hand. This is an idiomatic way of representing the place of honor. The left in this teaching, on the other hand, depicts the place of dishonor.

Jesus the King delivers the verdict. Those on his right hand are so blessed they inherit his kingdom. They showed themselves to be the true children of the Father by living Jesus' commandment: "to love one another, even as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34). When they respond in amazement at his generosity, Jesus will reply: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did it for me" (Mt 25:40). May we all hear those comforting words applied to us.

Mt 6:7-15; Tuesday, March 12, 2019

By bringing our attention to the Lord's Prayer, today's Gospel reminds us of the importance of prayer. After all, the battle of our spiritual life and the battle of prayer is the same battle, "for they concern the same love and the same renunciation" (2744). In the first place, prayer serves as the thermometer that measures the vitality of our spiritual life. The frequency of our conversations with God is the best measure of our growth in holiness, or the lack thereof. The reason is simple, prayer is our love language with God. How can we truly love God if we hardly talk with him? Thus, the Catechism calls prayer "the life of the new heart," but it adds: "We tend to forget him who is our life and our all" (2697). "We pray as we live, because we live as we pray" (2725).

The second reason prayer is important rests in the cry that is embedded in every prayer: "HELP!" Prayer by its very nature recognizes our helplessness on the one hand and our total dependency on God on the other. This is a critical reality because God never lets us down. Thus, Jesus told Sister Faustina, "The prayer of a humble and loving soul disarms the anger of My Father and draws down an ocean of blessings" (320).

In affirming the vital necessity of prayer, the Catechism affirms: "if we do not allow the Spirit to lead us, we fall back not the slavery of sin (Gal 5:6-25)". It challenges us, "How can the Holy Spirit be our life if our heart is far from him?" Then the *Catechism* makes its own the following statements: 1) St. John Chrysostom -- "Nothing is equal to prayer; for what is impossible it makes possible, what is difficult, easy ... For it is impossible, utterly impossible, for the man who prays eagerly and invokes God ceaselessly ever to sin." 2) St. Alphonsus Liguori -- Those who pray are certainly saved; those who do not pray are certainly damned" (2744).

Lk 11:29-32; Wednesday, March 13, 2019

In today's Gospel, Jesus condemns his "evil generation," a critical expression that he will use six times in chapter eleven of Luke's Gospel in order to punctuate his displeasure with their behavior. They refused to hear his message and repent. So severe is his reprimand that Jesus compared them unfavorably with the pagan Ninevites who repented at Jonah's preaching and the queen of Sheba who traveled a great distance to learn from Solomon's wisdom. Jesus is far greater than Jonah and Solomon, but he is ignored.

But that was a long time ago. How does Jesus judge our generation? Are we listening? Have we repented? Ultimately, the evil generation of Jesus day shouted for his crucifixion. We, in contrast, have crucified Jesus more than sixty-five million times by legally murdering innocent babies. For Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did it for me" (Mt 25:40). But if that horror is not enough, politicians are promoting laws that will allow the slaughter of babies at every stage of pregnancy.

In C.S. Lewis' brilliant satire, the *Screwtape Letters*, the demon Screwtape advises his nephew Wormwood to destroy human understanding of history, then the dummies (us) will repeat the same mistakes of the past. Jesus' evil generation became Roman slaves in 70AD with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. What about us? Psalm 127 gives us this admonition: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain" (v.1). Our rejection of God is bringing us to the precipice of destruction. This applies to our families, where most children are now born out of wedlock as well as to our country. Let us remember: "To fall in love with God is the greatest of all romances; to seek him is the greatest adventure; to find him, the greatest human achievement" (Fr. Raphael Simon, O.C.S.O). This is how it works; if we truly love God, we will seek and find him only to discover that all the time he was knocking at the door of our heart asking to come in.

Mt 7:7-12; Thursday, March 14, 2019

In today's Gospel Jesus teaches us about perseverance in prayer. He instructs us not to give up when our prayer apparently goes unanswered, or when dryness is pulling us in the opposite direction. We often think of prayer in terms of *asking*, which certainly has an important place in prayer. But at its core, prayer is our love language with God. Therefore, the frequency and intensity of our prayers is a good measure of our love for God. Those who love little, pray little if at all. Those who love much, pray frequently even continually. There should be a balance between our desire to pray and God's desire to give. Desire must match desire, but often all the desire is on God's part. He longs to envelop us in his love. Our yearning to receive must match his yearning to give. Therefore, we must become perpetual beggars at the door of God's heart. Often, however, we discover that we are distracted by other loves that hold places of honor in our heart.

In addition, we must submit ourselves to the long process of waiting, as we frequently repeat our request day and night. We need to learn from God's silence to trust, to ask for better things, and to patiently wait for him to infuse his own Spirit into our hearts. As the Holy Spirit begins to act, we begin to embrace in love the Father's only begotten Son who from deep within us asks the Father for everything we truly need. When we allow the prayer of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to become identical with the prayers breathed in our own heart, then our every request is fulfilled in the manner Jesus describes here: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

The Father is so boundless in his goodness that he is incapable of giving us anything less than his own Son. When we have Jesus, we have everything worth having.

Mt 5:20-26; Friday, March 15, 2019

The Pharisees observed the law with external exactitude, but with hard hearts because they focused on themselves. This resulted in a perverted piety that offended God because it displaced him. That is the essential evil of pride. This understanding leads to the discovery of the correct way to spell the word *sin*. The first and last letters are a tiny *s* and a petite *n* with a very large *I* in the middle. The *I* or *ego* is the problem. During his sermon on the Mountain, Jesus gave instruction on challenging issues that are as relevant today as they were when they were first spoken: anger, chastity, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, loving one's enemies, and becoming perfect.

In today's passage, Jesus continued to spotlight the working of the human heart by making the connection between *murder* and its root, *anger*. He taught that there is no room in an angry heart for God because God is love (1 Jn 4:8). It is important to recognize that the *feelings* of anger are not the issue. Feelings are something over which the individual may have little control. Rather, Jesus focused on the *expressions* of anger, insults or worse, which are acts of hatred. There is an inherent incompatibility with attempts to worship God with a heart that is opposed to God because it is filled with anger. The gift that is pleasing to God is a surrendering heart. Anger rebels against God. Humans categorize other people as enemies, but Jesus teaches that they are *brothers* and we must care for them as such. The seriousness of this lesson is seen in his words: "Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny" (5:26).

Teaching Christ's way of conflict resolution is extremely important training in the formation of children. Anger, name-calling, backbiting, judgmentalism, verbal and physical fighting, bullying, getting even, passive aggression, coldness, and ridicule are pagan methods of solving conflict. They cripple one's relationship with God because they are embedded in pride, selfishness and disobedience. Tragically, these negative habits of solving disagreements and hurt feelings also rip apart marriages and societies.

Lk 6:36-38; Monday, March 18, 2019

In that part of Luke's Gospel is called "the Sermon on the Plain," Jesus gives us an important lesson on how we are to love those who hurt us. We must love them and forgive them – in short, "be merciful." Jesus' teaching on mercy figure so prominently in Luke's Gospel that St. John Paul the Great called "the Gospel of Mercy" (*Dives in Misericordia* 3). Jesus commands his disciples "to get merciful, just as God the Father is merciful." Thus, we read in the book of Exodus after the sin of the golden calf: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy and faithfulness" (34:6). These ideas were repeated by David in Psalm 86: "But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in mercy and faithfulness" (15). With this command to be merciful, Jesus is definitively interpreting another commandment of the Torah: "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev 19:2). In this way, God's holiness is understood in terms of his divine attribute of mercy. Subsequently, in the marvelous parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus will expound on his teaching to love one's enemies and to be merciful.

In sharp contrast, the Pharisees viewed holiness as a separation from anything that could render a person ritually unclean. This separatism, which originally was intended as a safeguard to protect Jews from the seduction of Greek philosophy and pagan behavior, became over time an obstacle to loving God and one's neighbor. It overemphasized externals and ignored the human heart where both love and sin can abide. Thus, the Pharisees, who were good at externals considered themselves the saints for Israel. This underscores the controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees over table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners, where Jesus, by extending mercy, leads sinners back to God.

Finally, Jesus commands us not to judge another's soul and to forgive and not condemn. The great benefit here is that God will forgive and not condemn us.

Mt 1:16, 18-21, 24a; Tuesday, March 19, 2019 – Feast of St. Joseph

Today's Gospel is chosen for the feast of St. Joseph. We are told two important things about this extraordinary saint. First, he was the "husband of Mary" and secondly, he was a "just man," which is very high biblical praise. We can't adequately grasp the holiness of the man God chose to be the spouse of Mary and the foster father of Jesus. His life is so pleasing to God, that he was named the patron saint for the whole Church. It is truly amazing to experience how eager God is to answer the prayers of St. Joseph on our behalf. Try it!

Devotion to St. Joseph spread very early in the Church. After the Roman persecution of Christians ended in 313 A.D., St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, erected a great basilica in Bethlehem honoring God for the gift and example of St. Joseph. The extraordinary goodness and purity of St. Joseph is evident in the fact that God chose him to guard the chastity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and to serve as the foster father and male role model for the Son of God made man. St. Joseph is a model for husbands, as he perfectly fulfilled the ideal laid before us by St. Paul: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her." In the eyes of the world, St. Joseph was a non-entity, a common laborer who had little education and no important worldly achievements. Oh, how God sees things differently! Which of us would not wish our lives were even remotely as successful as was the life of St Joseph?

It is my privilege to meet with a wonderful group of men, the Men of St. Joseph, for prayers and Bible sharing each Tuesday morning from 6:30 to 7:30 at the Tchefuncte Country Club in Covington, LA. All men are welcome. We end each meeting with this prayer:

"St. Joseph, help me to be like you. Help me to be obedient to the teachings of the Church and faithful to God's commands. Help me to patiently endure my cross each day. Let me be a model of holiness and a pillar of virtue. I solemnly promise to embrace God's will and I accept the challenge to work tirelessly for my family's salvation. Be my guide and companion on this journey. St. Joseph, Terror of demons, pray for us."

Mt 20:17-28; Wednesday, March 20, 2019

Today's Gospel recalls Jesus' third prediction of his impending Passion. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus pulls his apostles aside to share with these intimates the somber news of the destiny that awaits him in the holy city. Jesus will be condemned by the religious elites of Israel and then handed over to the Romans where the brutalities will be increased in earnest. He will be mocked, scourged, and crucified. However, this tragedy will end in triumph. His death will not be the end of the story. He will rise on the third day.

The apostle's response shows that their love for Jesus is still very imperfect because they are still very much self-focused on what's in it for them. The mother of James and John approaches Jesus to seek thrones for her boys in places of honor at his right and left hand. Sitting next to a powerful monarch was a tremendous privilege in the ancient Near East. Only the highest-ranking figures in the royal government could hope to enjoy such an exalted position. Ironically, Mark will tell us that Jesus will establish his kingdom by way of the cross, where two men will hang crucified "one on his right and the other on his left" (27:38). Little do James and John yet realize that reigning with Jesus always entails suffering, sometimes martyrdom – but it always requires a death to self and worldly ambition.

These brothers will eventually partake of the cup of suffering. James was the first of the apostles to die a martyr's death when he was beheaded in Jerusalem around 44AD by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2). John was the only apostle to die a natural death. But he experienced suffering at the foot of Jesus cross, a life of hardship and exile to the island of Patmos (Rev 1:9). Without a doubt, he had a martyr's heart. However, the apostle's lack of concern for Jesus in today's Gospel is exhibited by these two who sought thrones and by the ten who were indignant toward them. How often do we neglect Jesus because we are focused on ourselves?

Lk 16:19-31; Thursday, March 21, 2019

In today's Gospel Jesus tells a parable about two men. The one is exceedingly rich and is described as a royal figure, for he was "dressed in purple garments and fine linen." Moreover, he dined or celebrated, not just on special occasions, but each day. A poor man is also introduced. In addition to being destitute, he was hungry and longed to eat his fill, just like the prodigal son (15:16). Perhaps he was also lame or crippled, for he was lying at the rich man's gate. This pitiable man was also covered with sores and probably considered accursed (Deut 28:35). Adding insult to injury, dogs licked his sores. His name was Lazarus, from the Hebrew Eleazar ("my God is help"), the name of the man who was Abraham's faithful servant. The rich man offered no help to Lazarus.

Both men died. The rich man was buried, but Lazarus, who could not afford a burial, was carried away by angels to the side of Abraham where he enjoyed the promised beatitude. The rich man went to Sheol, the abode of the dead, where he suffered torment in fire – a point repeated several times. When he sees Abraham, the rich man calls him father and asks him to send Lazarus to give him a drop of water. He is refused. During his life, he could have crossed the chasm that separated him from Lazarus, but not now for he must suffer the consequences of his life's choices. Then the rich man asks Lazarus to be sent to warn his five brothers. He is refused, for they had Moses and the prophets: "Open your hand freely to your poor" commanded Moses (Deut 15:11), and "share your bread with the hungry" ordered Isaiah (Is 58:7). Finally, he pleases to send someone from the dead to his brothers, then they will repent. Abraham again responds negatively, for "if they will not listen to Moses and the prophets neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead." So it was that the religious leaders of Israel, who had the testimony of Jesus Resurrection from their own guard, refused to believe. He has risen! Does this reality enflame our faith and permeate our actions?

Mt 21:33-43, 45-46; Friday, March 22, 2019

The somber parable of the wicked tenants in today's Gospel draws on the vineyard allegory of Isaiah 5:1-7. It served as a grim forewarning of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. Jesus drew on this well-known vineyard image to continue his message of judgment on the chief priests for turning the temple into "a den of thieves." Following Isaiah's pattern, the landowner in Jesus' parable represents God while the vineyard is Israel – or today, the vineyard can be aptly applied to the Church. Jesus inserts a new set of characters, the tenants, who are responsible for the vineyard while the owner is away. They represent the spiritual leaders who have the responsibility to take care of God's people. Today the tenants would have a special reference to bishops and priests, but also to parents and teachers who have the obligation of correctly forming children by their example and word.

When the owner sent his servants to collect his share of the produce, the tenants beat, killed and stoned them. These servants represented the prophets God sent to call his people to repentance. Finally, the owner sent his son, representing Jesus, but they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him – a foreshadowing of how the chief priests will hand Jesus over to the Romans, who will take him outside of the city walls to crucify him. Today Jesus is again crucified in the murders and acts of violence to numerous innocents together with the false and misleading teaching, which comes from some leaders in his Church – steering God's children into the spiritual death of sin. Jesus makes it clear that his judgment on these tenants will be severe – the kingdom of God will be taken away from them. Unfortunately, the consequences are also terrible for those they led away from God. Today's Gospel is a wake-up call to personal conversion and to pray that our bishops and priests will be holy.

Lk 1:26-38; Monday, March 25, 2019 – The Annunciation of the Lord

Today's Gospel recalls the stupendous moment when Mary consented to become the mother of God and Jesus was conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary was living in the hamlet of Nazareth – from the Hebrew word *nester*, meaning "branch" or "shoot." This reflected the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy: "There shall come forth a *shoot* from the stump of Jesse [David's father], and a *branch* shall grow out of his roots" (Is 11:1). As an indication of flawed human judgment, Nazareth was given a dismissive attitude in the New Testament by Nathaniel who quipped, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth" (Jn 1:46)?

It's significant that the angel Gabriel addressed Mary as "hail [*chaire* – literally *rejoice*] favored one" [*kecharitomene* in Greek. St. Jerome translated this Greek word best with the Latin expression, *gratia plena* – "full of grace", because the perfect tense St. Luke used designates an action in the past with effects that continue in the present. In other words, Mary was transformed by grace to be a fit vessel to house the God-man. She was free from all sin. Mary's son will be called Jesus, which means "God saves." Mary is the first fruit of the redemption her son will bring because she was protected from sin in view of his merits.

Mary's miraculous conception will come about by the Holy Spirit who will "overshadow" her, using a verb that described the glory cloud *overshadowing* the portable temple called the tabernacle and the arc of the covenant. Mary's womb will become the new meeting place of God's sacred presence. Her humble and complete surrender to God's will, her *fiat*, will be mirrored by her divine son, who also said "yes" to the Father: "Behold, I come to do your will" (Heb 10:7). Mary had become a living tabernacle. When we denounce sin and give our "yes" to God we, too, are transformed and become living tabernacles. May we always say to God, "Let it be done to me according to your word."

Mt 18:21-35; Tuesday, March 26, 2019

The parable of the Unforgiving Servant delivers a timeless message because it reflects God's boundless mercy, which turns right side up the upside-down thinking of all those who hold on to unforgiveness. Imagine the shock when Peter heard Jesus' concluding words of the narrative when the Lord declared that the master would hand the unforgiving servant "over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart."

Jesus was laying down a principle for all Christians, namely, that not only the *offender* but also the *offended* bear a responsibility to heal wounded relationships, because the innocent Jesus willingly suffered for the sins of the guilty – that is, all of us. Jesus set the example when he prayed on the cross, "Father forgive them" (Lk 23:34). The focus of the parable is on the *offended* – those hurt, teaching that we must forgive others regardless of the gravity of their offense.

The flip side of the coin deals with the responsibility of the *offender* – the one who harms. Because it is implied in the parable, it can be easily missed. Often the harm we do to others is humanly impossible to repair. How could Saul, for example, adequately make up for the murder of St. Stephen? What could Alessandro Serenelli say to Maria Goretti's mother to heal the loss of her murdered daughter? Only Jesus can repair a damage so great. Nevertheless, the offender has a dual obligation. The first is to repent and radically change his behavior. The second is to pray for the inner healing of the one he has offended. Their great offenses were the occasion that ultimately transformed both Saul and Alessandro. The one became St. Paul an apostle and a martyr. After his conversion, Alessandro lived the remainder of his life chastely in humble labor and prayer. What about us? Do we forgive those who hurt us, and do we repent and ask God to heal those we have wounded?

Mt 5:17-19; Wednesday, March 27, 2019

In St. Matthew's Gospel, we discover Jesus' most extensive treatment of our Savior's relationship with the Old Testament Torah – the Law. When our Lord speaks of "the law and the prophets" he is referencing the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures. In saying that he has come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them, Jesus makes the claim that he will bring to a perfect fulfillment all that the Old Testament anticipated. This truth led St. Augustine to write that "the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New." How, exactly then, did Jesus perfect the law and the prophets? In the first instance, he did so by his sublime teaching. His way of unfolding the deep meanings of the Old Testament is both matchless and breathtaking. But most fundamentally, Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets through his entire life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

In the words of the *Catechism*: "Christians therefore read the Old Testament in the light of Christ crucified and risen. Such typological reading discloses the inexhaustible content of the Old Testament; but it must not make us forget that the Old Testament retains its own intrinsic value as Revelation reaffirmed by our Lord himself. Besides, the New Testament has to be read in the light of the Old" (CCC 129).

Thus, when we read about Abraham's obedience to sacrifice his son, we recognize that Abraham looks to God the Father and Isaac represents Jesus who was sacrificed in the same place. Also, when we read about the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana, we recognize that it depicts Jesus as the heavenly husband foreseen in the Old Testament. No wonder, the Church makes its own the words of St. Jerome: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." For when we study the word of God, we encounter the Word who is God! This is how our faith comes alive, for the Bible provides the soul of theology.

Lk 11:14-23; Thursday, March 28, 2019

In today's Gospel St. Luke recalls Jesus' healing of a mute person. The word the evangelist used can refer to a deaf person or to one who is both deaf and mute – is unable to speak. This miracle is the first of five in the central section of Luke's Gospel as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and crucifixion. The more numerous miracles that Jesus worked in Galilee led people to wonder about his identity. Fewer miracles are now worked because Jesus encounters less faith. Here, the miracle punctuates the ensuing dispute that highlights the increasing rejection of Jesus as he nears Jerusalem. The crowds were amazed. However, opposition is also evident.

Some discredit the miracle by claiming that by "Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he drives out demons." Second, some to "test him" – literally to *tempt* him – some ask for a sign from heaven. The word Beelzebul is a contraction of Baal – "master" or "lord" – and *zebel* – "exalted dwelling." Therefore, the meaning is "master of the exalted house." But by changing the last letter from "l" to "b" rendering the word Beelzebub rather than Beelzebul, Satan is mocked, for the meaning is of his name becomes "Lord of the flies."

Jesus shows the absurdity of their charge, for Satan is certainly not trying to destroy his own kingdom by fighting against himself. Besides, Jesus asks the rhetorical question: "by who do your own people drive them out?" Jesus casts out demons "by the finger of God," which was a reference of the claim of Pharaoh's magicians that the plagues Moses cast on Egypt were "by the finger of God" – deeds they could not match. As for the demand of a sign from heaven, Jesus ignores this presumptuous request. Rather, he warns his listeners that no one can remain neutral to him, but must stand with him or against him. Putting it bluntly, Jesus declared: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." Jesus' statement certainly applies to us today.

Mk 12:28-34; Friday, March 29, 2019

Today Gospel follows a series of disputes Jesus had with Pharisees and Herodians, the Sadducees, and other scribes. But the man who approached Jesus in this narrative was sincere. He was a scribe, that is, a professional scholar of the Mosaic law. He observed the astuteness of Jesus' earlier responses, so he sought Jesus' wisdom to resolve another live issue that was hotly debated by the scholars of the day. The Torah was full of commandments – 613 of them, according to the rabbinic tradition. Therefore, it scholars debated which of these laws was first, that is, was the most important because it provided the overriding principle that would summarize and ground all the other laws.

In response, Jesus quotes the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." Two points jump out to us. First, in a world of polytheism – of many gods – there is only one God. He is not just the God of the Jews; he is everyone's God for he created all things and hold everything in existence. Of course, we no longer worship idols of stone, wood and iron. Oh, no, we worship power, sex, wealth and ourselves! Secondly, loving God is where we discover the true meaning of holiness. We are called to be "all in", that is, to love God with our entire being. To convey this, Jesus used four terms that together mean the whole person. First, the *heart* – the inner depth of a person from where our decisions and actions flow. Secondly, the *soul* – our whole self as a living being. Third, our *mind* – to emphasize that our thoughts and reasoning must be animated by the love of God. Finally, with all your strength – which emphasizes that love is not a sentiment, but the committed decision to choose God regardless of the cost. This love is possible but only when we surrender to God who first loved us (Rom 5:5, 8; 1 Jn 4:11).