THE DAYS OF SALVATION HAVE ARRIVED

1st Sunday of Advent
Jer 33:14-16; Ps 24; 1 Thess 3:12-4:2; Lk 21:25-28,34-36

“…may he establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:13).

This is our hope as we begin once again this year the beautiful season of Advent. This is a time of hopeful waiting and preparation for the coming of the Lord into our world, into our lives, and into our hearts. It is a time for meditating on the prophecies of the Old Testament to see the hope of Israel for the Messianic days, in which there would be peace in the whole world, a heavenly peace, not of this world, not of this age. During Advent, we long for the fulfillment of these prophecies. This is why during Advent we prepare with eager expectation for the parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ, for in his coming with power and great glory on the clouds of heaven, accompanied by all his holy ones in great light, all the prophecies will be consummated. Then there will be new heavens and a new earth (Is 65:17), and we will be transformed, with the peace of heaven in our hearts, and the joy of the Lord filling us.

During Advent, we also prepare ourselves for the joyful celebration of the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In him the prophecies are fulfilled, and in him heavenly peace came down to earth to renew our hearts, making us a new creation, new men, filled with the Holy Spirit and the joy of the Lord. In the birth of Jesus Christ, the salvation prophesied was realized, and the kingdom of God began on earth. Those who believe in him are born again in him and now see and live in the kingdom of God that he brought upon the whole earth. The meditations of Advent and Christmas renew us, and the kingdom of God transforms the world. Christmas and the coming of Jesus Christ into the world is when the dream of peace and salvation seen by the prophets is realized on earth for our transformation and illumination. What the prophets prophesied for the end of the age came in Jesus Christ in the middle of the age instead of only at the end, as the Jews were expecting. No one expected what actually happened—namely, that the kingdom of God, prophesied for the last days, would come now in Jesus, the Messiah, in the middle of history. Nonetheless, this is what actually happened. The fulfillment of prophecy came on earth in the birth of Jesus Christ, and this fulfillment is with us still, renewing us and gladdening our hearts with the joy of the Lord.

During Advent, we enter into the beautiful mystery of the fulfillment of prophecy in Christ, and we prepare ourselves for its final consummation in manifest glory on the last day with the parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his holy ones in great light. We prepare ourselves now for his glorious parousia by believing in Christ as our Lord and Savior and by being born again in him and living in his kingdom, giving glory to God on high, and on earth living in his peace with our neighbor.
And this peace is not our own but the gift that Jesus brought to earth at his birth when the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk 2:14 KJV).

St. Paul’s wish for us today is that God “may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:13). We are to be blameless and prepared for that great day of final salvation. We are drawing ever nearer to that day. It is therefore now time for us “to wake from sleep. For our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (Rom 13:11). We should be more prepared now than when we began to believe. We should be in a continual state of preparation, growth, and sanctification. “…the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Rom 13:12). We are to cleanse our life. “…let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in gluttony … But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom 13:13-14).

Jesus tells us the same thing today. “…take heed to yourselves,” he says, “lest your hearts be weighed down with gluttony and drunkenness and the cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare; for it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man” (Lk 21:34-36).

If we did this, we would be in a constant state of preparation and vigilance. And this is precisely what we are supposed to do—we constantly preparing ourselves for that final hour by living now in the fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus Christ. We are now in the final days. We are living in the Messianic times, the times of the fulfillment of prophecy. In Jesus Christ we have heavenly peace, and we should give glory to God in the highest, and on earth live in Christ’s peace with our neighbor.

CALLED TO EVANGELIZE

Feast of St. Andrew, November 30
Rom 10:9-18; Ps 18; Mt 4:18-22

“And he said to them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. Immediately they left their nets and followed him” (Mt 4:19-20).

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Andrew, the brother of St. Peter. It was to Andrew and Peter that Jesus directed his call, promising to make them fishers of men. Their immediate, radical, and complete response to this call is the type of response that Jesus wants to see in those that he calls to enter into his kingdom and be apostles and missionaries to preach the kingdom of God and salvation in Christ to the world. They are our models, showing us the kind of response that we too should make to Jesus’ call.

St. Paul speaks today of the beauty of the missionary vocation, quoting the words of Isaiah, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good things, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation” (Is 52:7; Rom 10:15). It is true that all who invoke Jesus as Lord with faith will be saved, “For, everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:13), “because, if
you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved” (Rom 10:9-10).

The work of a missionary—as was St. Andrew—is to announce the gospel to those who have not yet heard it so that they too might have the opportunity to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. How can they believe if they have never heard of Christ? Someone has to go and and preach Christ to them so that they can hear, believe, and be saved. This is our vocation as Christians. But some are called very specifically and particularly as missionaries, sent to other peoples to preach to them salvation in Jesus Christ. We can preach by writing as well as by word of mouth, and we can use new means of communication to do this. But the important thing is that we give public witness to our faith and invite others to believe in Jesus Christ for their salvation; that is, for their liberation from sin and guilt. More is needed than simply social work. We invite people to enter into the kingdom of God, which is a reign of heavenly and universal peace over the whole earth. It is a miraculous gift of God for our illumination and transformation.

Jesus Christ reveals God to us. Through him we enter into communion with God. We enter into his kingdom now in the midst of this old world so that it might be transformed and renewed. By entering into the kingdom of God, we begin to live in a way that is new and different, for now we live for God and his service alone in every aspect of our life. We live a life of renunciation of all for Christ’s sake in order to love him with our whole heart, with an undivided heart. To believe in Jesus Christ is to be saved and to preach his salvation to others.

THE WAY OF LIFE

Thursday, 1st Week of Advent
Is 26:1-6; Ps 117; Mt 7:21,24-27

“Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee” (Is 26:3).

There are two ways: the way of life, and the way of death. “…therefore choose life, that you and your descendents may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days” (Dt 30:19-20). The way of life is the way of obedience to the will of God. The way of death is the way of disobedience to his will. God gives us the gift of his peace, but we will lose it if we do not obey him perfectly. But if we obey him with exactitude, he will preserve us in complete peace and joy of spirit. To be saved, we have to believe in the Savior, Jesus Christ. Then God will save us. He will forgive our sins and disobedience and put his perfect peace, his heavenly peace, into our heart. Then we will rejoice in the Holy Spirit and exult in the name of our God. If we continue in his will, obeying it perfectly, we will continue in this great joy and heavenly peace, glorifying God in our heart. We will then be among the righteous. Justified by Christ, they remain in his will, rejoice in his peace, and live in his glory. “They lift up their voices, they sing for joy; over the majesty of the Lord they shout” (Is 24:14). “The way of the righteous is level; thou dost make smooth
the path of the righteous” (Is 26:7). Truly, “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies” (Ps 24:10).

But if we disobey God, we lose all this peace and instead suffer agony of spirit and depression, for then we are under his wrath, and he is disciplining us in his love for us for our good (Heb 12:5-11). This is why the prophet Isaiah says that the Lord “has brought low the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, casts it into the dust” (Is 26:5). This is because they are disobedient. In their pride, they do not follow God’s will. They have chosen the way of death, not of life. They have built the house of their life on sand, and it collapsed; but the house of the one who built on the rock of obedience to the will of God did not fall (Mt 7:24-27). The point is that we must do more than just believe. We have to do the will of God as he reveals it to us in our life, our heart, our experience, and in his word. Thus “Not every one who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus says, “but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21).

If you want to have peace in your heart and not live in the pain of guilt and depression, you have to believe in Jesus Christ for your salvation and forgiveness and for the gift of the joy of the Holy Spirit and then do his will with exactitude. This is the way of life.

THY KINGDOM COME

Friday, 1st Week of Advent
Is 29:17-24; Ps 26; Mt 9:27-31

“In that day … the meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel” (Is 29:18,19).

This is a Messianic prophecy. With the coming of the Messiah into the world, we live in the time of the fulfillment of this prophecy. Those who believe in Jesus Christ and are born again in him live in this happiness of God, present in their hearts and in the world, transforming all things if only they can continually obey him and keep from falling into sin and imperfections. Yet even if they do fall into imperfections and experience God’s wrath, they are saved from it by Christ’s vicarious suffering of their punishment for them on the cross. They live, therefore, in the kingdom that has already come. This kingdom, present in Jesus Christ, is the source of all human happiness. This is true happiness of spirit, which God alone can give, and he gives it through his Son, made man, incarnate in the world, to transform it and bring it heavenly peace. Those who live in him have their sins forgiven and the pain of their guilt removed. They live in the splendor of his kingdom here on earth, in the midst of this old world with all its problems. In the kingdom of God, the meek and the poorest “shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord and … shall exult in the Holy one of Israel” (Is 29:19). Thus is fulfilled today’s entrance antiphon, “The Lord is coming from heaven in splendor to visit his people and bring them peace and eternal life.”

This antiphon is also the expression of our hope for the future. It is our joy, especially during Advent, to prepare ourselves for this beautiful future when we shall see
Jesus Christ, all surrounded by light, coming in glory with the clouds of heaven, accompanied by all his holy ones. We live now in this shining vision in the midst of the darkness of the present life. We see Christ now by faith and in the joy of our heart; but he is still veiled from us because his kingdom has not yet been consummated. We therefore live in hope. But it is a joyful hope, full of activity and preparation. Every day, regardless of how we feel, we continue preparing ourselves more for the coming of his kingdom in its fullness on earth—a universal kingdom of heavenly peace (Is 9:7; Lk 1:32-33). We try to avoid sin and disobeying God in order not to lose his peace. We help our neighbor, using the gifts that God has given us for this purpose, and we dedicate ourselves completely to the Lord in all that we do. This is our joyful preparation for the coming of the Lord for the transformation of the earth. We hope with eager expectation for the day when the Lord will come “from heaven in splendor to visit his people and bring them peace and eternal life” (Entrance Antiphon). When he comes in splendor, he will fill us with this same splendor in the joy of our heart. We long for that great day of splendor. We live by faith, hoping for that great day, and it is our joy to prepare ourselves for it now. We do so by faith and perfect obedience to the will of God, and by divesting ourselves of all else to live for him alone in this world with all our heart, with a heart that is undivided in its love for him.

A KINGDOM OF SPLENDOR AND LIGHT

Saturday, 1st Week of Advent
Is 30:19-21,23-26; Ps 146; Mt 9:35-10:1,6-8

“Moreover the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days” (Is 30:26).

We continue meditating today on God’s salvation as the fulfillment of prophecy. In this way we realize that we are living in the time of fulfillment and salvation, the times that were prophesied, the Messianic times. The Messiah has come. Therefore the Messianic prophecies are about our times. Hence, for those who have the eyes of faith, the moon is brighter now. It is like the light of the sun. And the light of the sun is seven times greater than before. It is like the light of seven days (Is 30:26). We live in the light. We are illuminated by the Son of God. He illuminates us, and we are made resplendent in his light. We live in his light and bask in his splendor.

All this is interior now, but one day it will also be exterior, and every eye shall see it. But that which is interior for those who believe in Jesus Christ is very important. In Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God came before the end of the world, in a very humble way, like a mustard seed. But this small seed will produce a great shrub, which will appear at the second coming of Jesus Christ (Mt 13:31-32). Then the splendor of its great light will be seen by all.

When Jesus sent out his twelve apostles, he said to them, “go … And preach as you go, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 10:6,7). They were the agents of the kingdom of God on earth, the kingdom of universal peace over all the earth, which has come into the world with the arrival of Jesus Christ. They are to invite many to enter into
this kingdom of heavenly peace over all the earth, this kingdom of splendor and light, this splendid kingdom of heaven on earth, in which all live in peace with God, with God’s peace in their hearts, and in peace with their neighbor for the love of God. It is the kingdom of those who love God with all their heart, with an undivided heart, reserved for him alone. It is the kingdom in which all pour out their lives for the salvation of their neighbor for the sake of the love of God. We can live in this kingdom now by accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and by resolving to live from now on completely for him in every aspect of our life, renouncing the pleasures of the world and of this old creation, and spending our life and energy in the service of our neighbor. Then we must extend this kingdom of splendor and light, of heavenly peace and divine love, to all parts of the world for the world’s transformation, that is be prepared for the return in glory of our Lord Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven.

THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS:
PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

2nd Sunday of Advent
Baruch 5:1-9; Ps 125; Phil 1:4-6,8-11; Lk 3:1-6

“Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low” (Lk 3:5).

John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. He was a voice crying in the desert, saying, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Lk 3:4-6).

The time of fulfillment has finally arrived, and the salvation of God is about to appear. John, therefore, has gone into the desert to prepare there the way of the Lord, to call the nation to repentance for the forgiveness of its sins so that it might be prepared to receive its Messiah and Savior when he comes. All must be prepared. The way of the Lord has to be made straight. The mountains must be brought low, and the valleys filled in. All must be made level. It is a new way of salvation for God’s people and for all flesh, for “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Lk 3:6).

The time of salvation has come. The prophecies are about to be fulfilled. This is the message of John the Baptist. The new age of salvation is about to begin, and the kingdom of God will come with splendor and glory. The time of this splendor has finally arrived.

And where does John go to prepare for this? He goes to the desert, far from the distraction, noise, music, entertainment, and conversation of the world; far from its pride, its way of dressing, its feasts, banquets, dances, interesting cultural events and activities, diversions, and temptations. He chose to live in solitude and silence with God, in purity; detached and divested of all that divides the heart from a pure and undivided love of God alone. He wanted to prepare his heart and the hearts of the people that they might be
undivided, reserved for the Lord alone. And in what better place could he live in order to do this than the desert? There, he could purify himself and the people for the Lord.

He went into the desert to be one of the blessed poor of the Lord. The kingdom of God is theirs (Lk 6:20). In this, John is our model during Advent. In the desert, our way can be made straight, leveled, made smooth, filled in, and lowered, so that all is a plain. We too can live this way—namely, for the Lord alone, with all the love of our heart, detached from all else, from all that can divide our heart. Living in this way, we can reserve our heart for the Lord alone in every aspect of our life and thus experience the joy of his coming into the world and into us.

The kingdom of God came into the world in Jesus Christ, and those that are prepared—those who prepare in the desert the way of the Lord—enjoy its happiness and splendor. The great and unexpected revelation of Jesus Christ is that this splendid kingdom came ahead of time, in the midst of history, in Jesus Christ, instead of only at the end of the world, as the Jews were expecting. Therefore they did not recognize the kingdom’s coming in Jesus, because they thought that the world must end first and that the splendor of God would be openly manifested before his kingdom could be established in the world. But the great secret of God is that the reign of God came into the world at the birth of Christ, and that all that believe in him can live in this glorious kingdom now, enjoying its heavenly peace and blessings. They have the forgiveness of their sins and the cancellation of their guilt now through Jesus Christ in his sacrificial death on the cross.

To experience this great joy, we have to go with John into the desert and live there, detached from everything in this world, from all its pleasures.

And how are we to live in the desert? We should live there in eager expectation for the complete consummation of the kingdom of God when Christ will come again in all his glory on the clouds of heaven. This is why we hope and prepare ourselves for the parousia during Advent, knowing that he who began a good work in us “will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6). We should live in the present fulfillment of prophecy, hoping and preparing ourselves for its final consummation so that we might be “pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness” (Phil 1:10-11). We should live as if we were in a desert, detached and divested of the things of the world so that our hearts might be “blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:13).

Thus we will be able to live in the joy of the forgiveness of our sins and in the heavenly peace of the kingdom of God, preparing the way of the Lord in our heart and in the world so that all might be prepared when our Lord Jesus Christ comes again in his glory on the clouds of heaven with all his holy ones in great light.
“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom” (Is 35:1).

This beautiful Messianic prophecy gives us a good sense of what our times are really like, this new age of salvation, these final days of the world in which we live. We live in the prophesied and longed-for days of the Messiah, the Messianic days, the days of fulfillment. With the coming of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has entered the world for our salvation to bring us the splendor of God. In him, our sins are forgiven, and we are restored to union with God. This gives us true joy in our heart and fills us with God’s splendor and illumination. It makes us new, renewing us interiorly, making us a new creation. Jesus Christ transforms us, putting divine life into us and giving us the gift of eternal life with him now. It is a new quality of life which elevates us, making us new men (Eph 4:22-24), seeking now the things that are above and no longer the pleasures of the world (Col 3:1-2). The forgiveness and justification of Christ give us true happiness, which only God can give.

This new power entered the world at the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. It is a reign of peace on earth, the reign of God over the hearts of men. It is a new age, already begun in the midst of this old age, and those who accept Christ are born again in him and see the splendor of this kingdom. Christ shines in their hearts (2 Cor 4:6), illuminating them from within, filling them with splendor.

Today Isaiah prophesies this new age in which we now live in Christ. And today Jesus proves that he has power on earth to forgive sins and introduce us into his kingdom by curing the paralytic after telling him that his sins are forgiven (Lk 5:20,23-24).

Isaiah describes the Messianic era in which we now live with Jesus, the Messiah: The desert “like the crocus … shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing” (Is 35:2). There is no greater interior joy than the forgiveness of sins and the light of Christ shining in our hearts, making us resplendent before God. Then our desert blooms, and we sing for joy. “The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it [to our desert], the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God” (Is 35:2). The glory of Lebanon is its trees: cedars, cypresses, and pines (Is 60:13). They will grow in the desert of Judah in the Messianic days. We now live among these glorious trees. We live in the glory of Lebanon, for our Messiah has come and is with us, renewing us, filling us with God’s love and light.

This is waters breaking forth in the wilderness, “and streams in the desert” (Is 35:6). So does God treat us in this time of forgiveness and fulfillment. The Messianic times are days of splendor, glory, and light. Let us then rejoice in them, forgiven and justified, clothed in the robe of righteousness (Is 61:10), and adorned with the diadem of the glory of God (Bar 5:2).
“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Mt 11:11).

A new era begins after John the Baptist, the era of the kingdom of God. From Adam until John was the time of preparation, “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John” (Mt 11:13). John was the last prophet. “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” (Lk 16:16). After John, is the time of fulfillment, the time of the kingdom of God. It began with the preaching of Jesus Christ. We live in this time of fulfillment, which is much greater than the time of preparation, so much so that although John was the greatest of the prophets, “he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Mt 11:11). As a person, John was a man of great spiritual stature, yet the advantages and blessings of the kingdom are so much greater, that a mere youth that lives in the kingdom is greater than John.

This is the greatness in which we now live in Jesus Christ, in his kingdom of heavenly peace and universal brotherhood over the whole earth (Is 9:7; Lk 1:32-33). We are blessed in him, for he justifies us by his vicarious and sacrificial death, whereby he served our death sentence for our sins for us. He illuminates our hearts (2 Cor 4:6) and fills us with the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:7), making us resplendent before him.

Now is also a time of violence. “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and those of violence take it by force” (Mt 11:12). This verse has various meanings, one of which is that violent people are now entering the kingdom in a violent way, in the sense that those who are now entering do so with their whole heart in a radical way, doing holy violence to themselves. And truly, Jesus’ teaching invites us to this kind of holy and single-minded violence to ourselves, to the point that we cut off and renounce all else to enter it with all our heart, with an undivided heart. We cut off our hand and foot and pluck out our eye if they cause us to sin (Mt 5:29-30)—that is, we are to make great sacrifices for the kingdom of God, even to the point of renouncing our family (Lk 14:26; 18:29; 9:59-62) and all that we have (Mt 13:44-46; 19:21; Lk 14:33) to serve Christ alone as our only master (Mt 6:24). This is holy violence done to ourselves, and those who take away or enter the kingdom in this way do so violently—with violence. These are the ones that truly enter it and are true disciples. The more violently—the more radically—we can do this, the better!

We now live in the kingdom of God. Blessed are our eyes that see what we see (Mt 13:16-17), for God fulfills for us the words of the prophet Isaiah. He opens rivers for us on the bare heights, “and fountains in the midst of the valleys.” And in the desert he gives us cedars, cypresses, and pines (Is 41:18-19), symbols of the richness and blessings in which we now live.
IN THE DESERT, PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

Friday, 2nd Week of Advent
Is 48:17-19; Ps 1; Mt 11:16-19

“John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He has a demon” (Mt 11:18).

During Advent, John the Baptist is one of our models, along with the Virgin Mary and the prophet Isaiah. John, as we see in this verse, is an ascetic, who neither ate as the rest did, nor drank wine. His food was “locusts and wild honey” (Mt 3:4), and the angel Gabriel told John’s father, Zechariah, that “he shall drink no wine nor strong drink” (Lk 1:15). John, furthermore, lived in the desert from his youth. St. Luke tells us that “the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel” (Lk 1:80). He was probably in the desert because Isaiah said, “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Is 40:3-4). This text was important for John, for when they asked him, “what do you say about yourself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord” (Jn 1:22-23).

John was already in the desert when he received his call to be a prophet. St. Luke tells us that “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (Lk 3:2). But in reality, John was called before his conception when the angel Gabriel announced his birth to his father, Zechariah, saying, “he will go before him [God] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1:17).

And in what better place could an ascetic live than in the desert? as the Egyptian monks discovered three centuries later. There, he prepared the way of the Lord, making “straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Is 40:3). There, he lived an ascetical life of prayer and fasting. Jesus also recommended fasting, even though he himself did not fast, for he was living in the special wedding time of the inauguration of the kingdom. But he said, “The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Mt 9:15).

The life of John in the desert is our model during Advent; and for monks, it is their model for the whole year and for their whole life; and not only for monks, for every believer is invited to follow the example of John and the ascetical teaching of Jesus (Mt 13:44-46; 19:21; 6:24,19-21) and St. Paul (Gal 6:14; Col 3:1-2).

John awaited the coming of the Messiah and the kingdom of God in the desert, in a life of prayer and fasting, renouncing the pleasures of the world in order to live for God alone with all his heart, without any division of heart, to be prepared when the Messiah would come; and he preached in order “to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1:17). John taught as much by his life and example as he did by his word. Following him, we should turn to the Lord with all our attention and heart and live in silence, solitude, and fasting from the pleasures of the world to have a heart that is undivided in our love for God, and thus be prepared for the coming of the Lord.
AWAITING THE LORD’S COMING

Saturday, 2nd Week of Advent
Sir 48:1-4,9-11; Ps 79; Mt 17:10-13

“Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” (Mt 17:10).

According to the prophecy of Malachi, Elijah is to return again to the earth before the
day of the Lord to prepare the people for his coming. “Behold, I will send you Elijah the
prophet before the great and terrible day of the lord comes,” said Malachi. “And he will
turn the hearts of Fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal
4:5-6).

Jesus told us that John the Baptist was Elijah who was to come. That is, John
fulfilled the role of Elijah in making “ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1:17).
“…and if you are willing to accept it,” Jesus said, “he [John] is Elijah who is to come”
(Mt 11:14). The angel Gabriel announced to John’s father John’s role as the Elijah who
is to come, saying, “and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn
the hearts of the Fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to
make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1:17).

This was John the Baptist’s role, to prepare in the desert the way of the Lord. We
also are awaiting and preparing for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in his glory on
the clouds of heaven, accompanied by all his holy ones in great light (Mt 24:30; 16:27;
Zech 14:5-6; 1 Ts 4:16). It is our task and joy now to be prepared for his coming (1 Ts
3:13). This is the joy of Advent, a time of eager expectation and joyful preparation for
the coming of the Lord. John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary are our models for how we
are to prepare ourselves and others for the Lord’s coming. John prepared both himself
and the people in the desert; and the Virgin Mary prepared herself for nine months in a
life of holy moderation and modesty, guarding her heart in all purity.

We also should prepare ourselves more each day in the desert by abstaining from the
pleasures of the world, thus imitating the solitary and ascetic life of John in the desert.
We should also live in moderation and quiet joy a simple and austere, peaceful and
recollected life, like John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary, in our preparation to receive
the Lord at his coming. Advent is a time of quiet joy and moderation. “Rejoice in the
Lord always,” says St. Paul; “again I will say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known to
all men. The Lord is near” (Phil 4:4-5). We should live then in peaceful and recollected
moderation, in simplicity and quiet joy, renouncing worldly pleasures, and living “sober,
upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the
glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12-13).
THE LORD IS NEAR

3rd Sunday of Advent
Zeph 3:14-18; Is 12; Phil 4:4-7; Lk 3:10-18

“And the multitudes asked him, What then must we do? And he answered them, He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise” (Lk 3:10-11).

These are the words of John the Baptist. There was great expectation at that time.

“...the people were in expectation, and all questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ” (Lk 3:15). John was “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Lk 3:4). Everyone went out to hear him (Mt 3:5), and he said to them, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 3:2). “Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair, and a leather girdle around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey” (Mt 3:4). John dressed and lived like a prophet, like Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). But he was more than a prophet. He preached that the kingdom of God was at hand, and that he was now preparing the way of the Lord. The “people were in expectation” because they had heard that the kingdom of God was at hand—that is, that the new age of salvation, the Messianic age, was about to appear at any moment. And they wanted to know what they should do. How were they to live in this kingdom that was about to appear? John responded, saying that from now on they should live in a new way, not as before. They should dedicate themselves to others and practice the love of neighbor. They should live righteously, not collecting more than their due and not falsely accusing anyone.

The kingdom of God has come as John said. It came at the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, incarnate here on earth for its transformation. Christ came to change the world into a universal kingdom of heavenly peace and brotherhood. In the kingdom of God, we are to live in a new way, not as formerly. We should now live in righteousness, peace, and love of others, dedicating ourselves to their salvation and well-being. We see the new motivation and interest of ordinary people—publicans and soldiers, practical and simple men. They have been motivated by John’s preaching to change their life.

Such is the kingdom of God in which we live. We see that we have to change our way of living, to live justly and righteously, dedicating ourselves to others, not living for ourselves but rather for God and the service of our neighbor for the love of God.

God transforms us by his kingdom, brought into the world by Jesus Christ. He puts his peace into our heart and illuminates us. He reveals his splendor to us and fills us with his own splendor, love, and light. We are then to live in accord with this new reality that has come into the world: in brotherhood, dedication, and love of neighbor, giving glory to God in the highest and living in the peace of heaven, which Christ, the Lord, brought into the world at his birth.

With Emmanuel, God now lives with us, among us, and within us. Therefore “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! ... The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more ... The Lord your God is in your midst” (Zeph 3:14,15,17). This prophecy has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ and in us, for he is with us still. He lives with us and within us. He is in the world—in his kingdom—for the transformation of the world and
for our transformation into new men, a new creation, new creatures, with a new way of life, no longer seeking the pleasures of the world (Col 3:1-2), no longer dividing our heart by them, but rather living now in righteousness and simplicity, in love and peace, giving glory to God in the highest and living in peace with our neighbor, dedicating ourselves to his salvation and sanctification.

We are different now, for the kingdom of God is within us, and we live in this reign of universal peace in Jesus Christ. “…behold,” said Jesus, “the kingdom of God is within you” (Lk 17:21). It is also in our midst; and so if we are in the kingdom, we live in a new dimension, and hence we live in a new way.

And how, more precisely, ought we now live in the kingdom of God that was preached by John the Baptist in the desert and inaugurated by Jesus Christ? St. Paul gives us our answer. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” he says; “again I will say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known to all men. The Lord is near” (Phil 4:4-5). We are to live in joy, moderation, and a sense of the nearness of the Lord—“The Lord is near.” We should guard and protect the flame of divine love that is burning in our heart by living in moderation, living “sober, upright, and godly lives in this world,” renouncing “world desires,” and “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12,13). Our whole way of life should be one of moderation, paying close attention to all its details, renouncing the pleasures of the world, and preparing ourselves at all times for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory on the clouds of heaven with all his holy ones in great light.

THE COURAGE TO GO AGAINST THE CURRENT

Monday, 3rd Week of Advent
Num 24:2-7,15-17; Ps 24; Mt 21:23-27

“And Balak said to Balaam, What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them” (Num 23:11).

Balaam was a pagan prophet from the river near Moab, and Balak, the king of Moab, hired him to come and curse Israel for him, for Israel was encamped in his land on their journey to the promised land. Balaam went to Moab, but instead of cursing Israel, he blessed it. When King Balak asked him why he blessed them instead of cursing them, Balaam said, “Must I not take heed to speak what the Lord puts in my mouth?” (Numb 23:12).

Here we see Balaam’s courage to obey God rather than the king when the two were in conflict. Balaam continued blessing Israel and at last said to King Balak, “If Balak should give me his house full of silver and gold, I would not be able to go beyond the word of the Lord, to do either good or bad of my own will; but what the Lord speaks, that will I speak” (Numb 24:13).

The liturgy today presents us with three figures, Balaam, John the Baptist, and St. John of the Cross, whose memorial we are celebrating. All three have one thing in common, the courage to go against the current; that is, they chose the narrow gate of the
few, the gate of life and truth, rather than the broad way of the many, the way of the world, which is the way of perdition.

We need to have the courage stop following the crowd when their path is not correct, and rather do what is right even if we have to do it alone, without any community whatsoever. It is difficult to do this, because it is always easier to imitate those who are around us, to follow the crowd, and just do as everybody else in our group is doing. But we are not to follow worldly customs and ways when God calls us to something higher, for to do so would only be cowardly conformism. “Do not be conformed to this world,” says St. Paul, “but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2). We should abandon cowardly conformity to the world and its styles and rather be transformed in Christ and give witness to others, showing them by our behavior the correct and more perfect way. And we should do this even if we are the only ones in our environment to do so, as did Balaam, John the Baptist, St. John of the Cross, and the Blessed Franz Jägerstätter.

We are to live the mystery of the cross, which is the narrow gate of the few, not the wide gate of the crowd. We need the courage to go against the current and not conform ourselves to the world. Therefore “Do not love the world or the things in the world,” says St. John. “If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” (1 Jn 2:15). “Unfaithful creatures!” says St. James. “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Community in good things is good; community in mediocre things is mediocre; and community in bad things is bad. We need to discern well and clearly distinguish between good, mediocre, and bad community, and then have the courage to go against the current when necessary.

THE TIMES OF ABUNDANCE HAVE COME

December 17
Gen 49:2,8-10; Ps 71; Mt 1:1-17

“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Gen 49:10).

This is a Messianic prophecy that the kingship will not depart from Judah until a ruler shall come to whom the ruler’s staff truly belongs and to whom the peoples—not just Israel—will render homage. This is the new David that will come in the final days to inaugurate the new and universal reign of peace on earth. Today’s psalm speaks of this son of David that is to come. “In his days the righteous shall flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth” (Ps 71:7-8 KJV). It will be a time of peace—“abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth.” It will be the new age of the last days, the age of peace on earth, and his reign will include the whole world. “He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.” Will this be the millennium (Rev 20:2-7)? It will be a universal and eternal reign—“as long as
the moon endureth.” “…all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him” (Ps 71:11 KJV). “His name shall endure for ever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in him: all nations shall call him blessed” (Ps 71:17 KJV).

We believe that Jesus Christ fulfilled these prophecies and began this new, universal, and eternal reign of peace on earth. We live in this kingdom now if we have faith. He blesses us and makes us righteous, for “In his days the righteous shall flourish”—that is, those whom he makes righteous with his own righteousness, for he is the Sun of righteousness (Mal 4:2). He is the one to whom the ruler’s staff and the eternal scepter truly belong. And to him all peoples pay homage. All nations serve him; all kings fall down before him (Ps 71:11). All this is true for those who believe in Jesus Christ, but it will only be openly, visibly, and fully realized in the future. In his days there will be great abundance. He will bind his colt to a vine (Gen 49:11), without fear that it will eat the grapes, for there will be such an abundance of fruit in those days that he will wash “his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes” (Gen 49:11). Wine will be as plentiful as water in his days, and he will use it to wash his clothes!

Today St. Matthew gives us “the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David” (Mt 1:1). Although he is the son of all these people, St. Matthew points out that he is above all the son of David. David is of the tribe of Judah, and Jesus is the new David prophesied in Jacob’s blessing. He is the awaited son of Judah, he who is to come, he to whom the scepter and ruler’s staff truly belong.

We now live in these Messianic times, these days of abundance and peace if only we believe in Jesus Christ and dedicate our lives to him. He will then reign within our hearts with his mysterious, secret reign of heavenly peace.

THE RIGHTEOUS BRANCH BRINGS JUSTICE TO THE EARTH

December 18
Jer 23:5-8; Ps 71; Mt 1:18-24

“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is God with us” (Mt 1:23; Is 7:14).

God came to dwell on earth with us and to live in our midst. This prophecy that the virgin would bring forth a son whom she would call Emmanuel, God with us, was fulfilled in an extraordinary way in the birth of Jesus Christ. In him, God is truly with us, and through his sacrament of the eucharist, he is within us, in our body and heart, illumining us. He shines in our hearts through our faith (2 Cor 4:6). We can walk with him and live in him. He directs us and consoles us. Above all, he forgives our sins through his vicarious death on the cross, through which he redeemed us, suffering for us our penalty for our sins, and allowing us to go free, justified and made truly righteous. All this is what Emmanuel, God with us, did and does for us. We live intimately with God in our heart through Emmanuel. He is the God who comes. He came, he comes, and he is with us now, revealing his glory among us, in our world, and in our hearts.
This is the glory of his kingdom, which he brought to earth at his birth. Emmanuel is the righteous Branch of David, who now reigns on earth in peace in Jesus Christ, executing justice and righteousness in the land. He brings the riches of salvation and the righteousness of God to the earth, establishing in the world a new reign of peace and justice. He fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah, who said, “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: YAHWEH OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jer 23:5-6).

Jesus Christ is Yahweh, our righteousness. He is God, Yahweh; and our righteousness is in him. He is the Sun of righteousness (Mal 4:2) that shines on us with his own righteousness, making us also righteous through our faith. He is this righteous Branch, the new David, who shall reign as king, the new and perfect sacral king, executing justice and righteousness on earth (Jer 23:5). We now live in this kingdom of righteousness on earth, for Jesus is the Messiah, he is this sacral and blessed king. “He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment. The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills … righteousness. He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy” (Ps 71:2-4 KJV).

This is the richness of the kingdom of God in which God now dwells with us on earth. His righteousness, with which he justifies us and makes us truly righteous, is his salvation. We are to extend this kingdom of peace in the world by all that we say and do, for we are the agents of the kingdom of God in the world, those who are sent by the righteous Branch of David.

HOW WE SHOULD PREPARE OURSELVES FOR THE COMING OF THE LORD

December 19
Judges 13:2-7,24-25; Ps 70; Lk 1:5-25

“…for he will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Lk 1:15).

John the Baptist was a Nazirite, dedicated to the Lord for life from his mother’s womb. A Nazirite drinks no wine or strong drink, lets his hair grow long, and avoids all contact with the dead (Num 6:3-6). He is completely dedicated to God. In addition, John the Baptist lived a solitary life in the desert; renounced normal clothing, dressing himself in camel’s skins; and instead of bread, wine, and normal food, ate locusts and wild honey (Mt 3:4). Jesus tells us that John neither ate bread nor drank wine (Lk 7:33).

John was furthermore “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the Fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Lk 1:15-17).

This desert ascetic, John the Baptist, is our model during Advent, which is the time of preparation for the coming of the Lord. We are to prepare ourselves and our world as
John prepared himself and his people to receive the Lord at his coming. We should live as though we were in the desert, living simply, in austerity and simplicity, reserving our heart for Christ in silence and solitude, in prayer and fasting, in moderation and love, not dividing our heart among worldly pleasures.

In the desert, we shall see the glory of the Lord if we are prepared. In the desert, we prepare the way of the Lord. How many things in our life still need rectifying? How, for example, do we spend our time? Are we really using our time in the way God wants us to? Are we spending enough time in spiritual reading and study of the word, or are we using up too much time in the small details of life, setting aside the essence of a life dedicated to God, not spending sufficient time in spiritual reading, study of the word, and prayer? All this must be set right if we want to have peace with God and peace in our heart. These things are the mountains that we have to make low, and the valleys that we have to lift up. These things are the uneven ground that we must make level, and the rough places that we must smooth out so that the glory of the Lord may appear to us in the desert (Is 40:3-5). These are the things that we must do to be prepared to receive the Lord at his coming at Christmas.

Then “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God” (Is 35:1-2).

FOR NOW HE SHALL BE GREAT TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

4th Sunday of Advent
Mic 5:1-4; Ps 79; Heb 10:5-10; Lk 1:39-45

“In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah” (Lk 1:39).

What great joy Mary must have had at this moment, leaving Nazareth and undertaking a journey of four days into the hill country of Judah and going with haste to share with her relative, Elizabeth, the good news that she was to be the mother of the Messiah! And when she arrived, the babe leaped for joy in Elizabeth’s womb, because John recognized within Mary the presence of the Messiah, whose precursor he would be. Elizabeth herself was filled with the Holy Spirit, through whose inspiration she recognized that Mary would be the mother of the Messiah, Christ, the Lord, and her Lord. Mary truly found a worthy and receptive environment, an environment of faith, to receive her good news of the coming birth of the Messiah and Lord, and that she herself had been chosen among all women to be his mother. This was the greatest news possible in Israel.

Mary would later go to Bethlehem with Joseph, her husband, and there give birth to the Savior of the world, Christ, the Lord. Then would be fulfilled the prophecy of Micah that from Bethlehem “shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days ... And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will dwell
secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And this one shall be peace” (Micah 5:2,4-5).

How beautiful is this prophecy, that the Savior, the Messiah, “shall be great to the ends of the earth. And this one shall be peace” (Mic 5:4-5)! This was the hope of Israel, the hope of the prophets, that one day the Messiah would come to reign over the whole world, unto the ends of the earth, and his dominion would be vast, without limit, a universal reign of justice and peace over the whole earth that would last forever, and he would be the Prince of Peace (Is 9:6-7). It will be a reign of peace, recognized by all, for in his days, it shall be that “all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (Ps 97:3). In that day, it shall be that “the Lord has made known his salvation; his righteousness he has revealed in the sight of the nations” (Ps 97:2 NKJV). In his day, the shoot from the stump of Jesse shall judge the poor with righteousness, and “Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist and faithfulness the girdle of his loins … [and] The wolf shall dwell with the lamb” (Is 11:1, 4, 5-6).

All this is the good news that Mary came to announce to Elizabeth; and Elizabeth accepted and believed it. But there is still more. Mary surely also came to announce the way in which she conceived this infant, namely, by the Holy Spirit, not by man. Mary was, in fact, carrying the Son of God in her womb. Her son is God himself, his only Son. He would be a sacred king over the whole earth, would inherit the throne of David his Father, would have an everlasting kingdom, and would truly be the only divine Son of God. “...and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:33). And Mary was to be his mother!

This eternal and universal reign of heavenly peace began with the son of Mary. We can all enter and live in this kingdom, enjoying this heavenly peace. This kingdom of God on earth transforms our hearts, for the Messiah has become great unto the ends of the earth, and he is our peace. We live in this peace if we believe in him and live for him with all our heart.

And how do we live in this kingdom? We live in quiet joy, the same quiet joy that Mary had when she visited Elizabeth and shared with her this good news, the greatest news the world has ever heard. For this reason, St. Paul says that a Christian should “Rejoice always” (1 Thess 4:16). “Rejoice in the Lord always,” he says, “Again I will say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known to all men. The Lord is near” (Phil 4:4-5).

How should we then live? We should live in moderation and quiet joy, in secret and interior joy, guarding this joy, being careful not to break the spell of heavenly peace in which we live, the heavenly peace that the angels wished the world at Christ’s birth. We should live “sober, upright, and godly lives in this world,” awaiting the glorious return of our Lord on the clouds of heaven (Titus 2:12-13). So do we live in the enchanted time of his present and future kingdom. His present kingdom is a mystery, known only by those who believe in him, but his future kingdom will be known by all, and every eye shall see it. Believers see his glory now reigning in their hearts and they rejoice; but on the day of his return on the clouds of heaven with all his holy ones in great light, his glory will be seen by everyone.

Christ’s kingdom has come, but in a mysterious form. If we live well in the spell of his kingdom now, we will be judged worthy of reigning in glory with him eternally. He has become great now unto the ends of the earth for those who live quietly in the spell of his reign; but one day this glory will be manifest and visible to all.
“He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:32-33).

This child is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, that “the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). This child will be conceived by the Holy Spirit, not by man, and shall therefore be the only Son of God. He is the promised Davidic king that will bring in the new age and “reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:33). “…the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David” (Lk 1:32). He will be the Prince of Peace prophesied by Isaiah (Isaiah 9:6), and “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore” (Isaiah 9:7). This child is the fulfillment of the prophecy to David that God would forever establish the kingdom and throne of his promised son. The prophet Nathan told David, “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom … and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever … And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (2 Samuel 7:12,13,16).

We live in this eternal kingdom of peace that has no limit, this everlasting reign of righteousness over the earth. It is the kingdom on earth of the Messiah, the promised son of David, and Son of God. He came to fill our world with heavenly peace, changing the hearts of men and women. This is the kingdom of God, which began in the world with the birth of Jesus Christ.

Christ puts us in peace with his heavenly Father, bringing peace to our hearts, forgiving our sins, and removing our guilt. He came to die to save us from the punishment for our sins, and our greatest punishment here is the inner suffering of guilt. This he suffered in our place, experiencing God’s wrath instead of us in his death on the cross. He then rose from the dead to illuminate us with the splendor that streams from his resurrection so that we might walk in its light, in the newness of life (Romans 6:4). He thus makes us a new creation, for everyone that is in Christ “is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17 KJV). This is the splendor we celebrate in the birth of Jesus Christ, the splendor of the new world that we have in him. He is Emmanuel, God with us, God in our midst, God within us. The kingdom of God is within us and around us if we do his will. Only thus will we walk in his heavenly peace and bask in his splendor, for “The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me” (Psalm 17:20). Through our obedience, we keep the righteousness Christ has given us.
TODAY YOU SHALL KNOW THAT THE LORD WILL COME,
AND IN THE MORNING YOU WILL SEE HIS GLORY

Christmas Eve, December 24, Morning Mass
2 Sam 7:1-5,8-12,14,16; Ps 88; Lk 1:67-79

“...the rising sun shall visit us from on high to shine on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lk 1:78-79).

Christ is the salvation—present to us now—that Zechariah is prophesying. Jesus Christ is the rising sun (\textit{anatolē}) from on high that has visited and shone upon us. We were in darkness, and he came and shone upon us. He freed us from our enemies so that we “might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (Lk 1:74-75). He is “a horn of salvation” raised up for us “in the house of David his servant” (Lk 1:69). He is the light of salvation, prophesied by Isaiah, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you ... the Lord will rise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Is 60:1-3). We should shine in his glory, for the splendor of heaven has come to us, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon us. In the birth of Christ, God dawns upon us, illuminating us with his light, and upon us is seen his glory. Even kings come to us, attracted by such splendor, and they too now walk in his light.

This is the fulfillment of God’s salvation for us in Jesus Christ. The light and salvation prophesied for the last days have been inserted into the middle of history for us in Jesus Christ. Thus “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Is 9:2). Christ is Emmanuel, God with us, illuminating us from within. He is the Star of Jacob, prophesied by Balaam (Num 24:17), the rising Sun from on high (Lk 1:78), the Sun of righteousness (Mal 4:2), the horn of salvation (Lk 1:69). He is the epiphany of the grace of God, our Savior, for all men (Titus 2:11). He has appeared to us. He has come to us. We now bask in his splendor and walk in his radiance. He is with us now.

Tomorrow, we celebrate his coming. “Come, Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice; shine on those lost in the darkness of death!” says the liturgy (Gospel acclamation). “Today you will know that the Lord is coming, and in the morning you will see his glory” (Invitatory). “Tomorrow the wickedness of the earth will be destroyed, and the Savior of the world will rule over us” (Responsory, OR).

This salvation is always with us. We live with Emmanuel. In him, God shines upon us, illuminates us, and expands our hearts, giving us his heavenly peace. This is the meaning of the birth of the Savior, which we celebrate tomorrow. Tomorrow we shall go forth, and the Lord will be with us. Salvation will be with you tomorrow, for Christ has been born. In him, God’s salvation has come to us.
“And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger” (Lk 2:16).

Today is Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ, and the birth of our new life in him. He is our Savior. This means that we need to be saved, that without the Savior, we would be lost in sin and without hope. When we were distant and alienated from God, walking in darkness, God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to save us from our sins. He came to bring us the kingdom of heaven, a kingdom of heavenly peace on earth, of which the angels sang at his birth (Lk 2:14). He came from ineffable light, from the splendor of the Father, to illuminate us, to give us new life, divine life, a participation in the very life of God himself. He came to introduce us into the kingdom of God, a kingdom of splendor and light, in which we could live in union with God, with our sins forgiven and our guilt removed. The pain of guilt is punishment for our sins, and Christ removed this punishment from us by suffering it himself, alienated from God on the cross. It is a just punishment, which a just God must impose on us, but since the Son of God himself—in the plan of the Blessed Trinity—suffered it on our behalf and in our place (instead of us), we do not have to suffer it again. Once this debt of ours was paid for us by him, we have nothing more to pay, and so we can go free, absolved of all debt and all weight of sin and guilt, to live a new life in the freedom of the sons of God (Rom 8:21).

All this is God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ. It is not something which we can earn by our good works. St. Paul tells us today that God “saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:5-6).

God saved us by sending us his only Son, born today as a man. Christ illuminates and transforms us. He puts his life into us and shines in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6). He renews us, making us a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). All this is Christ’s gift to us.

Now forgiven by him, we should walk in the Spirit (Gal 5:25) and live a life in the Spirit and no longer according to the flesh. We should live a new life, a new kind of life, totally dedicated to him, and emptied of ourselves. We rise with Christ to walk now in his light and live a new and risen life, seeking the things that are above, and no longer the pleasures of the world, which divide our heart (Col 3:1-2). We are to leave all for him and live only for him with all our heart. This is the new life of the new man in Jesus Christ (Eph 4:22-24). How completely stripped of all things was the way in which Christ was born, laid in the hay in a manger, “because there was no room for them in the inn” (Lk 2:7). This is an example for us of the evangelical poverty that he preached. If the very Son of God was born in this way—and by choice—how should we not then strip ourselves of everything of this world and live only for him! Thus will we be illuminated by him and walk in his light (Jn 8:12).
A CHRISTIAN WILL BE PERSECUTED

Feast of St. Stephen, First Martyr, December 26
Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-60; Ps 30; Mt 10:17-22

“...and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

Today, so near Christmas, we learn very quickly what it means in actual life to be a follower of Christ. Among other things, it means being persecuted for obeying the will of God. This is illustrated today in the martyrdom of St. Stephen, the first martyr. We cannot live our faith without being persecuted. This was the pattern of the life of Jesus Christ himself, of St. Paul, and of the prophets before them. It will also be the pattern of the lives of the martyrs and saints. Jesus prepared us for this. He told us that a time would come when we will be hated by all for his sake (Mt 10:22). When this time comes, we are to remain faithful to God’s will, as was St. Stephen. The wisdom of his preaching infuriated the Jews until “they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him” (Acts 7:57-58). In this situation, what did St. Stephen do? While they were stoning him, “he prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them” and he died (Acts 7:59-60).

St. Stephen did not stop his wise preaching in order to save his life. He continued preaching. He knew that “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:39). If he had tried to save his life by stopping his preaching, he would have lost his life with Christ; but losing his life in this world for the sake of Christ, he found true life. We should do the same. We are not to stop following the will of God out of fear of those who will persecute us if we do his will; rather we should give witness to the truth in word and deed and be martyred. In this way we will find true life and be illuminated by Christ.

We should not be troubled about divisions that may come because we do God’s will, for “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” said Jesus (Mt 10:34). It is necessary that divisions for the sake of Christ and the truth will come. Our task is simply to confess Christ before men, do his will, and remain faithful to him in danger and persecution. Then he will confess us before his Father who is in heaven. But if we deny him before men by not doing his will out of fear of being persecuted, he will also deny us before his Father in heaven (Mt 10:32-33). Our life should be a life of the cross and persecution for doing the will of God before those who persecute us, for “he who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:38). If they persecuted Jesus, they will persecute us, for “A disciple is not above his teacher” (Mt 10:24). If necessary, we may flee to another city (Mt 10:23), but we should always remain faithful, proclaiming from the housetops what we have heard from Jesus (Mt 10:27) and living according to his will.
“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:10-11 KJV).

We are now in the beautiful Christmas Octave. Jesus Christ is present in our midst, and our world is transformed by his presence. God is with us. We rejoice now in the joy of his presence among us and within us, transforming and illuminating us from within. We bask these days in the splendor of his presence among us. The kingdom of God is now here on earth. The Messiah has come. The Messianic days, the prophesied times, have arrived. Now then is the time of fulfillment, of interior joy, and heavenly peace over all the earth. A great light has come down to the earth today, and the heavens drop down sweetness in all parts of the world. Those who sat in darkness have seen a great light—namely, the kingdom of heaven on earth in Jesus Christ. This is the light that renews our hearts, filling them with love and heavenly peace.

We still eagerly await the glorious parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven with all his holy ones in great light, but that glorious future event has already partially revealed itself in the midst of this old world in the birth of the Son of God on earth for our salvation. He transforms us into new creatures (2 Cor 5:17), making all things new by his presence through our faith (Rev 21:5). In him, the salvation promised for the last days has already begun, illuminating this old world. The new age has already started in him in the midst of this old age, in order to transform all who believe in him.

As the Holy Family of Mary and Joseph basked these holy days in the splendor of the new-born Son of God, we join them in silent adoration before the manger. With them, we adore the Son of God, present among us, illuminating us with his splendor and shining within our hearts (2 Cor 4:6). He came that we too might shine like lights in the world “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (Phil 2:15) to show it the way to salvation.

The mystery of the Christmas Octave is the mystery of quiet, interior joy and silent adoration in the darkness of the night with the Holy Family in the illuminated cave of Bethlehem. It is the mystery of a life of moderation and modesty, of simplicity and meditation, of holy reading and contemplation. The Christmas Octave is the time of adoring the light of the world in the silence of the night, as did Mary and Joseph on the plains of Bethlehem, on the edge of the desert, alone, and unknown. It is the time to bask in the splendor of God made man in Jesus Christ.

We are meant to live in the kingdom of heaven on earth, the kingdom of the presence of God among men, the kingdom in which we experience now the goods of the world to come when the kingdom of God will be manifested in all its glory for all flesh to see together. These goods of the world to come, which Jesus brings us now, are salvation, the forgiveness of our sins, and the removal of our guilt, together with the interior illumination of our heart by the light of the risen Christ (2 Cor 4:6) and the renewal of our mind (Rom 12:2).
If we live in his kingdom, basking in his splendor, walking in his light (Jn 8:12), we will obey his will and thus keep guard over the righteousness that Christ has given us through his death and resurrection. Thus we will live like the Holy Family in “compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience,” living as a family, “forbearing one another and … forgiving each other” (Col 3:12-13). Thus we will live in the peace of God, brought to the world by Jesus Christ when he was born among us, filling us with light, love, and splendor. He transforms us and makes us merciful, kind, humble, and meek. And these qualities should manifest themselves in our new life of faith, especially in our families or religious communities, where we live.

Wherever we live should be our family now whether it be a natural family or a religious community, and these virtues should help our family or religious community. All should see the new quality of our life in Jesus Christ. St. Paul tells us that our moderation should be known by all men (Phil 4:5); that is, our new way of behaving after being illuminated by the light of Jesus Christ should enrich everyone. Thus do we extend the light of Christ in the world, being ourselves lights in the world (Phil 2:15) and the light of the world (Mt 5:14-15).

**THE FIRST FRUITS OF THE CONSECRATED LIFE**

The Holy Innocents, December 28
1 Jn 1:5-2:2; Ps 123; Mt 2:13-18

“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the Magi” (Mt 2:16).

Today we celebrate the memory of those male children of Bethlehem and her environs that were two years old or under, whom King Herod ordered killed in an attempt to safeguard his throne. The Church considers these children as martyrs, baptized in their own blood. They died for Christ without knowing it. They lost their lives in this world for the sake of Christ. They are therefore rewarded with a heavenly recompense. It is their voices that we hear in the responsorial psalm today, “We have escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped” (Ps 123:7). So soon did they escape from this world to enter into the kingdom of their Father! Herod, without intending it, did them a favor. Furthermore, “It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless” (Rev 14:4-5).

In commemorating these Holy Innocents, we are strengthened in our faith that our goal goes beyond this present life. We are made for something more, which is to see God and live in intimacy with him forever, first in heaven after death, then in the new heavens and new earth (Is 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13) with our risen bodies when Christ returns again to the earth in his glory with all his holy ones. Then we shall shine like the sun in the kingdom of our Father (Mt 13:43). The Holy Innocents escaped from the sufferings of
this world in a very short time and were thus among the first to enter into heaven, opened by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were “as first fruits for God and the Lamb” (Rev 14:4).

As virgins, they are also the first fruits of Christian virgins and celibates, consecrated to God and to the Lamb as to their only spouse with a completely undivided heart (2 Cor 11:2; 1 Cor 7:32-34). They are the first fruits of “those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (Rev 14:4). They are, therefore, the first fruits not only of martyrs but also of Christian virgins and celibates, who are consecrated to God with all their heart, without any division whatsoever, not even for a human spouse. These are those who renounce marriage and family to follow the Lamb wherever he goes with all their time—full-time. They are therefore the first fruits of the religious life, the consecrated life. They are pure. They “have not defiled themselves with women” in fornication (Rev 14:4). They live only for God and his kingdom. They represent for us the ideal of the religious life.

THE WORD DWELT AMONG US

7th Day in the Octave of Christmas, December 31
1 Jn 2:18-21; Ps 95; Jn 1:1-18

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14 KJV).

Jesus Christ is the only man that existed before his conception. All other human beings began their existence at the moment of their conception. Jesus Christ, however, existed eternally in the bosom of his Father in ineffable glory. He was always a person, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. He is God’s only Son, who always existed. God always had a Son, who was born from him. Although he was born of the Father, there was, nonetheless, never a time when he was not yet born. His birth was eternal, from all eternity.

But for us and for our salvation, this eternal Son of the Father, the eternal Word of God, was made flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, through the work of the Holy Spirit, not by man, “and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory” (Jn 1:14). And he was “full of grace and truth” from his mother’s womb (Jn 1:14). He came to reveal to us his glory, which he had from God, so that we might live with him in his glory and contemplate it. He is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that “the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel,” which means God with us (Is 7:14). Jesus Christ is Emmanuel. He reveals the glory of God to us.

He came to pay our debt of sin, which we had with God. He suffered our punishment for us, served our sentence on our behalf, and thus satisfied divine justice so that we might go free, absolved from all sin, punishment, and sense of guilt, to live in the freedom of the sons of God, rejoicing in his glory. He clothes us in his own righteousness, with which we shine in the world and before God. This is a transformation and splendor which are real, for it is God, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that transforms and justifies us, giving us new birth that we might live in his light and walk in his splendor.
We should walk in his light (Jn 8:12; 1Jn 1:5-7). We should be illumined by his light (2 Cor 4:4,6). This is why Christ became incarnate in our nature and was born and lived among us. He came for our illumination, to give us this light in which he himself lives. In forgiving and justifying us by his death and in shining upon us by his resurrection, he illuminates us from within, rejoicing our spirit. We see his glory in our heart, which rejoices us. In him, a great light has come into the world, “And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (Jn 1:16). In this fullness, we now live. In this splendor, we now walk—the splendor of Emmanuel, God with us. This splendor flows from his resurrection. Truly, we have seen his glory, “glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (1 Jn 1:14 KJV).

TODAY A NEW LIGHT SHINES UPON US

Octave of Christmas, Mary, the Mother of God, January 1
Num 6:22-27; Ps 66; Gal 4:4-7; Lk 2:16-21

“And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger” (Lk 2:16).

A new light shines on the world today in the birth of Christ, the Lord. The angels announced this good news to the shepherds, “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk 2:13-14 KJV). This is the joy that was in heaven over this event on earth, that God was born as a man of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, without man, and that he remained God while being born as man. This was the beginning of the kingdom of God, a kingdom of heavenly peace without end over all the earth.

This kingdom first appeared in Jesus Christ and in those who believe in him. Its peace consists in the happy removal of all sin and sense of guilt from the hearts of those who believe in Jesus Christ and make use of his sacraments, which channel his merits and power to us. In Jesus Christ is our reconciliation with God, the removal of our alienation from him, caused by sin. Christ himself is one with God, and those that believe in him receive his gift of union with God and heavenly peace in their hearts. A new light shone upon the shepherds this day, and so they went with haste to see and adore the new-born Christ in the manger. Afterwards, they “returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (Lk 2:20). The light of Christmas, the light of Christ, shone upon them.

This same light and joy is transmitted to us through Christ’s death and resurrection, and made powerfully present for us in the celebration of the eucharist. His death removed our alienation from God; for in his death, he paid for us our debt of suffering for our sins, and rose from the dead to new life in eschatological glory to shine upon us (2 Cor 4:6). His crucified, risen, and glorified body is now sacramentalized for us in the eucharist. The sacrifice of his death on the cross is made present for us in the celebration of the eucharist, where we offer it together with him to the Father in the Holy Spirit. This is the sacrifice that brings us reconciliation with God and the peace of heaven in our
hearts. We then eat his eucharistic body, sacramentalized for us in Holy Communion. Thus do we walk in the light of his resurrection, in the joy of being forgiven and restored to friendship and union with God, which was lost by sin.

Thus does the presence of Christ for us in the eucharist give us the same heavenly light and joy that the shepherds experienced in visiting Bethlehem and seeing and adoring Christ, the Lord, in the manger with Mary and Joseph. We can join them in their adoration and contemplation of the light of the world in the manger, for this is the new light that shines on us today. “A light will shine on us this day, the Lord is born for us: he shall be called Wonderful God, Prince of peace, Father of the world to come; and his kingship will never end” (Entrance Antiphon).

HOW A CHILD OF THE KINGDOM LIVES

January 2
1 Jn 2:22-28; Ps 97; Jn 1:19-28

“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said” (Jn 1:23).

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare Israel for the coming of her Messiah. He lived in the desert and made his preparations there, first by his own way of life, and later through his preaching, calling the people to repent for their sins and receive his baptism.

We also are in a state of preparation for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in his glory on the clouds of heaven when every eye shall see him in his majesty. Then, he shall judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42). For this coming, we must be prepared, and now is the time to prepare ourselves. Since we do not know the time of his coming, we should be always prepared, always preparing ourselves. We should live in a constant state of preparation. This is the Christian life, a life of hope, eager expectation, and constant preparation. This is how Jesus Christ wants his followers to live. “Take heed, watch, and pray,” he said; “for you do not know when the time will come” (Mk 13:33), and “Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Mt 24:44).

John the Baptist is our model of a life of constant preparation for the coming of the Lord. He lived in the desert, an ascetic and solitary life, a life of prayer and fasting, dressed in camel’s skins and eating locusts and wild honey (Mt 3:4). His life was far from the entertainments and pleasures of the city and of the table. He lived in simplicity, in order not to divide his heart between God and the pleasures of the body and of this life. He lived only for God with an undivided heart.

So should we also live if we want to be prepared not only for his final coming but also for his proximate coming in our hearts. To receive him well, even now, we have to be prepared. We have to guard our heart so that it does not divide between God and the pleasures of the world. For this reason, we too need to live a simple life. Evangelical poverty is for all. The more we can live only for God in this world, the better. In this, John is our model—our model for living only for God. We should prepare ourselves in the desert, as he did, far from the entertainments of the city, in plainness and simplicity,
in austerity and solitude, in prayer and fasting, in reading and study, and in work, preparing the world for the coming of the kingdom of Heaven on earth. With our life and word, we should preach the gospel of the kingdom of God. Christ has sent us to preach his kingdom in this world. We do so by our way of life and by our word.

HIS GLORY WILL BE SEEN UPON YOU

Epiphany
Is 60:1-6; Ps 71; Eph 3:2-3,5-6; Mt 2:1-12

“And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (Mt 2:11).

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord, his manifestation to the world, represented by the Magi, pagan sages from the East. They stand for all the nations and kings of the world that would one day become Christ’s followers and worshipers. These are they who have believed in him and received from him the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Lord’s own righteousness. In him, they have a new life. We recognize with joy today that all—pagans as well as Jews—are offered new access to the Father through Christ’s blood. Christ unites us to God through the sacrifice of himself to the Father in our nature. His blood poured out cleanses all who accept him in faith—pagans as well as Jews—making us new in him, forgiving our sins, removing our guilt, and making us righteous and resplendent before God.

This is what we are celebrating today. “...now in Christ Jesus,” says St. Paul, “you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13). Jesus Christ is for all the elect, from all nations, cultures, and religions, for he is the only Son of God, who sacrificed himself for all who believe in him.

The Magi are the first fruits of the Gentiles that would come to worship him. We are among them. The Magi were able to see Christ with their own eyes and prostrate themselves before his manger, presenting him their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. By divine inspiration, they recognized him as the Savior of the world, expected by the Jews. They saw and followed the light of his star, and when they arrived, they fell down and worshiped him. Even King Herod told them that he too wanted to come and adore him. “...and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him” (Mt 2:8). Even though he spoke deceitfully, he nonetheless realized that this is what he himself should do.

Christ is the light of the world, the star of Jacob, prophesied by Balaam (Num 24:17). “Arise, shine,” said Isaiah to Jerusalem; “for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you ... the Lord will rise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Is 60:1-3). The Magi saw his light, his star, and set out in search of the new-born king, the Savior and light of the world. And they came to Jerusalem, saying: “Where is he who
has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him” (Mt 2:2).

God’s light shone over Jerusalem, attracting the Magi to worship the Savior of the world. The Magi fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, who said, “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord” (Is 60:7). And now the Magi come with their camels and dromedaries from Midian, Ephah, and Sheba, bringing gold and frankincense for the new-born king in Bethlehem. In this, the Magi also fulfilled the prophecy of the psalmist, who said, “The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts … And he shall live, and to him shall be given of the gold of Sheba” (Ps 71:10,15 KJV).

The Magi have now arrived in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, following the star, and they worship the child, presenting him their gifts: gold for a king, incense for God, and myrrh, an aromatic spice from the East. These Magi are the first fruits of many more that will follow after them, coming from all parts to worship the Savior, the light of the world, and they will find in him what they have been searching for, a new life in the light (Jn 8:12) and his heavenly peace in their hearts (Jn 14:27), peace with themselves, and peace with God.

“Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him,” says the psalmist. “For he shall deliver the needy when he crieth; the poor also, and him that hath no helper. He shall spare the poor and needy, and shall save the souls of the needy” (Ps 71:11-13 KJV). All shall serve him, because in him they will find that for which they were seeking. He is the Sun of righteousness (Mal 4:2), the Sun King. His kingdom shines with the splendor of God. It is a universal kingdom of righteousness and peace over all the earth. “In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth. He shall have dominion … from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth” (Ps 71:7-8 KJV).

In him is righteousness and peace. He is the prophesied Messiah, and we are now living in his days, in the days of the Messiah, in his light. We worship him with the Magi. His light shines upon us. We bask in his brightness. In him, we have new life, and he makes us a new creation, new creatures, new men. It is he that pours the riches of the sea into our hearts. “Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice,” prophesied Isaiah; “because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you” (Is 60:5). In him, “the glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine … You shall suck the milk of nations, you shall suck the breast of kings … Instead of bronze I will bring gold, and instead of iron I will bring silver … The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light” (Is 60:13,16,17,19-20).

We now live in the days of light with the Messiah, whom we worship with the Magi. He illumines us from within and shines upon us from without. In him we drink the milk of the nations, and through him the riches of the sea are poured into our hearts. We walk in his splendor (Jn 8:12), for he is our sun (Is 60:20; Mal 4:2). Having received all this, we now prepare ourselves for his final coming in great power and glory on the clouds of heaven at the parousia.
WE LIVE IN THIS GREAT LIGHT

Monday after Epiphany
1 Jn 3:22-4:6; Ps 92; Mt 4:12-17,23-25

“A holy day has dawned upon us. Come, you nations, and adore the Lord. Today a great light has come upon the earth” (Entrance Antiphon).

Today Jesus Christ, the light of the world, enters into Galilee and begins his ministry. He dwelt in “Zebulun and Naphtali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali … the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned’” (Mt 4:13-16; Is 8:23-9:1). John was already a prisoner, and so the time of preparation had ended. Now then was the time of the kingdom of heaven on earth; the Messianic times had begun, and Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17). Jesus has begun his mission of bringing and establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. This kingdom of God is present in him; and his cures and exorcisms are the signs of its arrival. Thus “he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people” (Mt 4:23).

His preaching of the kingdom of God would create his Church, the community of those who believe in him and are saved by him. This community, this creation of the kingdom of God, lives in the light of Jesus Christ. Where does this light come from? It comes, above all, from his death and resurrection, for his death was a vicarious, sacrificial, propitiatory, redemptive death, which took place instead of our death. That is, all of us that believe in him die in him. His death counts as our death. We had a death sentence hanging over our heads, and he served it for us, instead of us, and in place of us—in our place. That is, his death took the place of our death and was counted as our own death. His death became our death. In his death, it was we that died. Since we die in his death, our sentence was justly served and was accepted by God as though we had served it ourselves. “…we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died” (2 Cor 5:14). Since he died for us, we died. Since he served our death sentence for us, his death was vicarious (for us). It was the sacrifice that placated the just wrath of God and propitiated him, having satisfied the necessary wrath of a just God against our sins. This was God’s way of placating and satisfying his own wrath. It was the Trinity’s way of propitiating itself. Hence his death was propitiatory. It was the sacrifice that satisfied divine justice on behalf of those who believe in Christ. It was therefore also a redemptive death, paying the price for our manumission or redemption from slavery.

This is why Christ is a great light, freeing us from the just wrath of God and making us just, justifying us, putting us into Christ’s great light, restoring the love of God to our hearts. Hence we can now live in the kingdom of heaven on earth, doing God’s will, and loving one another as he commanded us.
THE PROPHECIES ARE FULFILLED IN JESUS CHRIST

Thursday after Epiphany
1 Jn 4:19-5:4; Ps 71: Lk 4:14-22

“And he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21).

Today, in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus proclaims the fulfillment in himself of the prophecy of Isaiah that he has just read to them; namely, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19; Is 61:1; 58:6). Isaiah prophesied these blessings for the future, and today Jesus assures us that their day of fulfillment has now arrived in himself. He is the one whom the Spirit of the Lord has anointed to proclaim and offer the good news of salvation to the poor. He offers them a new life of freedom from sin and from the burden of guilt, which crush the spirit and darken the soul. Today, in him, even the poor, who are excluded from the good things of this world, receive the good news of salvation and peace, forgiveness of their sins, and happiness of spirit. He is the only Savior from God that can now offer us these blessings of salvation that belong to the last day. They are now present in him ahead of time because he is the Son of God incarnate as man in this world. These blessings will always remain in the world after his resurrection and ascension through his sacraments, which he has left us to perpetuate his saving presence among us. The sacraments extend in space and time in the world his personal and physical presence, and through them we can touch God and receive from him his benefits: his forgiveness for our sins and his corporal presence, sacramentalized for us in the eucharist. Thus did he inaugurate the kingdom of God in this world, a kingdom of heavenly peace over all the earth, a universal kingdom of peace without end, in which captives are freed from darkness, the blind see the beauty of God, and the sad and oppressed receive freedom from sorrow. He has brought us a year without end of blessings, a year acceptable to the Lord.

It is his death and resurrection that finalized all of this for us. Having ransomed us from captivity to sin and guilt by the price of his death on the cross in payment for our debt of suffering—having suffered it himself for us—he rose from the dead, shining upon us the light of his glory so that we might walk in his splendor.

If we do his will, keeping his commandments, we will remain in this light, which streams from his resurrection. “For this is the love of God,” says St. John today, “that we keep his commandments” (1 Jn 5:3). “If you keep my commandments,” said Jesus, “you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (Jn 15:10). We must always do his will to remain in his peace and enjoy his Messianic blessings. Among his commandments, the most important are: to love God with our whole heart and to love our neighbor. In addition, we are to do all that God directs us to do.
“A light rises in the darkness for the upright; he is gracious, merciful, and just” (Ps 111:4; Entrance Antiphon).

This beautiful verse is the antiphon for the third psalm of Vespers of Christmas in the old office, which was used throughout the Christmas season. Carthusians sing it to this day in the evenings during this time of year; and it is the Entrance Antiphon today. Truly, the birth of Christ shined in the darkness for the upright, and “he is gracious, merciful, and just.” Christ was a light that rose in the darkness of this world, and those who had faith received him, and found him to be “gracious, merciful, and just.” Actually, it was this light which made them upright and just, but they had to be open and seeking salvation with an attitude of faith. In this sense, they were upright, and so a light rose for them in the night of Bethlehem. The shepherds and Magi believed the message given to them by the angel or by the star and followed it.

Probably many others also saw the star, but paid it no attention and perhaps even mocked the Magi for their faith and for undertaking such an arduous journey to pay homage to the new-born king of the Jews. So they were the upright of heart that saw the Savior of the world and adored him at his birth, offering him their gifts. A great light arose in the darkness for them. Thus they received their reward.

The shepherds too came with simplicity to see Christ the Lord, lying in the manger, just as it had been announced unto them by the angel, and they worshiped him. They too were upright in their simplicity and faith, and as a reward became participants in this beautiful scene in Bethlehem, which has enchanted the world.

This same light arises in the night for us too if we are upright, and illuminates our hearts. If we have the same faith as the shepherds and Magi, we too will be rewarded and made righteous and resplendent like them. We will become lights in the world for others, showing them the way of light and salvation (Phil 2:15). We need this gracious righteousness of God, which he most mercifully gives us in sending us his Son to die for us, thus canceling our sentence of death, suffering, and guilt, serving it himself instead of us and on our behalf. This sacrificial and propitiatory death gives us the peace of heaven, of which the angels sang at his birth. His resurrection is also our resurrection to walk in his light (Jn 8:12). If we believe, we live in the splendor of his resurrection, having been redeemed by his death from the darkness of sin. Truly, a light has arisen in the darkness for the upright; he is gracious, merciful, and just (Ps 111:4).
“And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace” (Jn 1:16; Communion Antiphon).

All during the Christmas season we have been reflecting on this—namely, how “from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace” (Jn 1:16). Jesus Christ came to divinize us; that is, to fill us with divinity, with heavenly peace and light. He came to fill us with the life of God himself, to make us sons of God in himself, the only Son. He came to make us a new creation, new creatures, new men. He became man to make us like God, participants in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). He did this by dying to serve our death sentence for us, thus satisfying divine justice on our behalf, justifying us, forgiving us, and cleansing us of all guilt. Thus did he make us truly righteous and holy before God, filled with light. He then rose from the dead to shine upon us and within us, illumining us from within. We can now, therefore, live a new life and walk in the light of his resurrection (Jn 8:12), illuminated by him.

Christ always existed in the bosom of his Father, covered with glory. He came to us from this light to give us a participation in his own splendor. Thus he was born among us. He assumed our nature and filled it with divinity by animating it with his divine person, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. In doing this, he divinized all human flesh in principle if only we believe in him and imitate his life. It is through our contact with him—above all in baptism, the eucharist, and penance—that we are progressively divinized and transformed.

The sacraments have great importance for our transformation and sanctification. Our sins are forgiven in the sacrament of penance, which personally and individually channels the merits of Christ’s death to us, and we receive his divine person and his divinity into our body and soul through the eucharist. The eucharist is a great help for our contemplation; for after we receive it, we are physically and sacramentally united to Jesus Christ risen and glorified, the only Son of God. During this time after communion, we can contemplate the presence and glory of God within us and experience the sweetness of his life and love. This is a participation in his divinity, making us participants in his divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

Truly, “from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace” (Jn 1:16). We receive new life from him, and we bask in his splendor. We have meditated on all this during this beautiful Christmas season, which ends tomorrow with the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. But during the whole year, we should continue growing in this new life that we have in Christ.
WE MUST BE BORN AGAIN TO SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Baptism of the Lord
Is 40:1-5,9-11; Ps 103; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7; Lk 3:15-16,21-22

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased” (Lk 3:21-22).

Today is the last day of the Christmas season, the beautiful time when we bask in the splendor of God made man, dwelling among us to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. He came so that we might be illuminated (Jn 8:12), filled with heavenly peace (Lk 2:14), renewed in our mind (Rom 12:2), and made new creatures (Rev 21:5), a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), and new men (Eph 4:22-24). The kingdom of God, which Jesus brought into the world, is the Messianic kingdom of the last day, the kingdom of the new age that will come after this present age, the kingdom of heavenly peace over all the earth, which will have no end (Is 9:7). This kingdom has already begun, ahead of time, in the middle of history, with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world.

Today we celebrate his baptism, which inaugurated our sacrament of baptism, through which we are born again in Christ and begin to live even now the new life of the kingdom of heaven on earth. By baptism we are made members of the new creation and of the new age that Christ brought into the world. If we were baptized as infants, we need to renew our baptism now through living faith, activating it by believing in Jesus Christ. He saved us and gave us this new birth in him with all our sins forgiven, the pain of our guilt removed, and the peace of God in our hearts. This is the heavenly peace of the kingdom of God, in which we can now live.

Jesus Christ is the beloved Son of God, with whom God is well pleased, as said the voice from heaven at his baptism (Lk 3:22). This is not only a reference to the second psalm (Ps 2:1) but also to Isaiah 42:1, which speaks of the Suffering Servant of the Lord, saying, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations.” It is precisely this Suffering Servant of the Lord that “hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows … he was wounded for our transgressions, and carried our sorrows … he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed … the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:4,5,6 KJV).

The baptism of Jesus was an epiphany or manifestation of who Jesus really was: the Son of God, upon whom rested the Holy Spirit, and the Suffering Servant of the Lord, who would save the world through his suffering. We now live in the splendor of this epiphany of the salvation of our God. It is he who puts joy into our hearts by serving our death sentence for us. It is he who frees us from the slavery of sin, buying us for God with the price of his blood poured out in sacrifice for us. Through our baptism we inherit all of this.

Since we now live in the kingdom of the last day, we are to live in a new way in this world. We have risen with Christ to seek the things that are above, no longer those of the earth (Col 3:1-2). We are to walk according to the Spirit, and no longer according to the flesh (Rom 8:7-9). We are to renounce worldly desires (Titus 2:12), to be crucified to the
world (Gal 6:14), and to “live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12-13). So are we now to live in this new age in Jesus Christ, in the kingdom of God in this world, always preparing ourselves more for his ultimate coming in glory, which all flesh shall see together (Is 40:5). We should live as though we were in a desert, preparing a way for the Lord, in order to be prepared for the ultimate epiphany of his glory, which all will see at the same time (Is 40:5).

To enjoy his heavenly peace even now, we have to renounce worldly desires (Titus 2:12), which divide our heart, for a divided and distracted heart can hardly experience the glory of God, because its affective energy is dispersed and the mind is pulled in different directions. This then is our task now in this world—to prepare ourselves for the Lord’s ultimate coming in glory. These then are the valleys that need to be exalted, and the mountains and hills that must be made low, until “the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together” (Is 40:4-5 KJV).

It is our joy to be always preparing ourselves more in this way for “our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND

Monday, 1st Week of the Year
1 Sam 1:1-8; Ps 115; Mk 1:14-20

“No after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:14-15).

Today Jesus begins to preach the good news that the kingdom of God—so long awaited by the Jews, who believed that it would come on the last day—is now at hand, has come near to them in himself. This was something truly new. The Jews knew and believed that the kingdom of God was near, but now that John had been arrested, indicating that the time of preparation was over, Jesus preaches that “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” The time of preparation is over, it has been fulfilled. In Nazareth he will preach, saying, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). It was the scripture which he just read to them, that “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor” and release to captives (Is 61:1).

The time following the ministry of John the Baptist was the time of the kingdom of God, as Jesus clearly indicated when he said, “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” (Lk 16:16). A new period of salvation history begins after John. This is why Jesus could say, “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Mt 11:11). So great are the blessings of the kingdom of God that even the least in the kingdom is greater than so great a prophet as John, who lived before the kingdom of God and only prepared for it.
Now then what needs to be done is to repent and believe in this good news, in this gospel, which Jesus is preaching and bringing into effect before them. In Jesus Christ the kingdom was arriving, sins were being forgiven, demons driven out, the dead raised up, and the poor are hearing and experiencing the good news of the arrival on earth of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 11:5).

The kingdom of God is a good of the new age that begins after the end of the world as we now know it, and will not be complete until the parousia of Jesus Christ, but this eschatological kingdom has come near to us in Jesus and is with us now if we believe in him. We can enter it now and live in it in peace with God, forgiven for our sins and at peace with others, even though we still live in the old age of this present world. Believers live in both ages, but it is the new age that is transforming the old one. Our task now should be to live in the kingdom of heaven on earth, in peace with God and in peace with our neighbor. We should leave all else to live only for God and his kingdom, as did the first disciples, leaving their nets, boat, and father to follow Jesus. He calls us to be fishers of men, sons of the kingdom, persons filled with the blessings of the kingdom of God and of its peace, who now live only for God and the expansion of his kingdom in the world.

THE DUTY OF A WATCHMAN FOR THE PEOPLE

Thursday, 1st Week of the Year
1 Sam 4:1-11; Ps 43; Mk 1:40-45

“And the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain” (1 Sam 4:11).

Israel was defeated in a battle against the Philistines, thirty thousand Israelites fell, the Ark of the Covenant was captured, and its two priests, the sons of the priest Eli, were among the dead. When Eli heard the news, he fell backwards in his chair and died. All this happened in fulfillment of the prophecy of the man of God who came to Eli and told him that God was going to punish him for the sins of his two sons, the priests of Shiloh, who disregarded the law of God, disrespected the offerings to the Lord (1 Sam 2:27-34), and even “lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting” (1 Sam 2:22). This defeat of Israel and the loss of the Ark of the Covenant was God’s punishment “for the iniquity which he [Eli] knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them” (1 Sam 3:13). Eli himself did nothing wrong. His fault was that he did not restrain his two sons, who were priests but did not live in a manner worthy of the priesthood. He should have restrained them, but because he just let them be, to do as they pleased, all Israel was punished, and the Ark of the Covenant was captured.

There is a lesson here, I believe, for us as well. We should not think that we have done all that God wishes of us if all we do is avoid sin. If there is sin and worldly living all around us, and we do not say or do anything to correct it, we ourselves are also at fault, and the whole people of God will be punished because we neither said nor did anything to correct the situation. We are the watchman for the people of God, as was
Ezekiel, and “if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are warned, and the sword comes, and takes any one of them; that man is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman’s hand” (Ez 33:6).

We, therefore, have a responsibility to warn people of the error of their ways for the good of the whole Church. How many people all around us today, for example, live as though they had never heard of the basic principles of Christian spirituality, living worldly lives of pleasure, completely ignoring the importance of evangelical poverty, simplicity, austerity, sacrifice, and fasting? How many have forgotten that “whosoever would save his life will lose it; and whosoever loses his life for my sake shall save it” (Mk 8:35)? How many lose their lives in this world for the sake of Christ? They are the ones who will save their life. How many try to have an undivided heart in their love for God, not dividing their heart with the unnecessary delights of this world?

If we see this error all around us, what are we doing to rectify it? What kind of example and witness are we giving? What kind of life are we living? What words do we preach to them? Are we like Eli, doing nothing; or like Ezekiel, serving as a watchman for the people?

THE JOY OF THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Friday, 1st Week of the Year
1 Sam 8:4-7,10-22; Ps 88; Mk 2:1-12

“And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, My son, your sins are forgiven” (Mk 2:5).

Jesus Christ is the Son of Man, a preexistent being who lived in the glory of God (Dan 7:13-14) and is now present on earth, preaching salvation and the arrival of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Today he shows that “the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Mk 2:10). What one requires to be forgiven is faith in him. Thus Jesus forgave the paralytic when he saw his faith and that of the four who carried and lowered him through the roof. To prove that his sins were forgiven, Jesus cured him of his paralysis. If Jesus could do this more difficult thing, which could be verified, then surely he also had the authority to forgive sins, as he claimed.

Only God can forgive sins. Jesus’ forgiveness of sins is a veiled claim to divinity. As the Son of Man, he had this power on earth, and he gave it to his Church so that his apostles and their successors could forgive sins on earth in his name. He promised them this power when he said, “whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 18:18). And he gave them this power when, after the resurrection, “he breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (Jn 20:22-23).

Isaiah prophesied that in the days of the Messiah, at the time of the Messianic banquet, “the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces” (Is 25:8). This means that in the Messianic days, God will forgive all our sins; for without the forgiveness of sins, the human heart cannot rejoice. In forgiving the paralytic’s sins, Jesus indicates that he is the Messiah, who is now bringing the peace and joy of the kingdom of God into the world.
The day has finally arrived when “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined … and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces” (Is 25:6,8).

We now live in the Messianic kingdom. The Messiah is with us. In him, we have the forgiveness of our sins and the heavenly peace of the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus’ power to forgive sins continues in the sacrament of penance. He has given to men the power on earth to forgive sins, thus freeing us from the sadness, depression, and pain of heart that come from guilt, which is our greatest suffering.

It is through the merits of his death on the cross that we have this forgiveness, for on the cross he suffered all this pain and alienation from the Father for us to free us from this suffering. This forgiveness is the source of the joy of the kingdom of God, in which we can now live through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the joy of having our sins forgiven and living in the peace of the kingdom of heaven on earth. The kingdom of God, which will be consummated in splendor on the last day, is present with us now in Jesus Christ in the middle of history, in the midst of this old world and old age, renewing all things.

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Saturday, 1st Week of the Year
1 Sam 9:1-4,10,17-19; 10:1; Ps 20; Mk 2:13-17

“And as he passed on, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, Follow me. And he rose and followed him” (Mk 2:14).

Now is the hour of the kingdom of God. That which the Jews so long awaited has at last come, and the appropriate response is to repent, leave all, and follow Jesus Christ. This is the response that Jesus expected and received from his first disciples. St. Luke says concerning Levi that Jesus “said to him, Follow me. And he left everything, and rose and followed him” (Lk 5:27-28). This is the same wholehearted response which he received from Simon, James, and John: “And Jesus said to Simon, Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men. And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him” (Lk 5:10-11). They responded with all their heart and life, leaving all else for the kingdom of God, which had come into the world in Jesus Christ. From then on, they would live only for the kingdom of God, only for God with all their heart, with an undivided heart. They would love God with their whole heart (Mk 12:30), and Christ and his kingdom would be their only treasure (Mt 6:19-21), their only master (Mt 6:24). They chose the narrow gate of life (Mt 7:13-14). They are seeking now the things that are above, and no longer the pleasures of the world (Col 3:1-2). They discovered a buried treasure and a pearl of great price, and sold everything to obtain it (Mt 13:44-46). From now on, they will lose and hate their life in this world for the sake of Jesus Christ (Mk 8:35; Jn 12:25).

This is the kind of response Jesus wants to find in us too. We should live only for him and find our joy only in him in this world, without dividing our heart among other worldly and unnecessary pleasures, including the delights of the table. We should be able
to say with the psalmist: “Thou art my Lord; I have no good apart from thee … those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their libations of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup” (Ps 15:2,4-5). The Invitatory of Friday of week four should be our motto: “Come, let us praise the Lord; in him is all our delight.”

The more we divide our heart among the unnecessary delights of this world, the less affective energy we have for God. Thus we are dispersed, divided, and our love for God is weak. We are rather to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk 12:30), without division of heart among the unnecessary delights of this world. This is to have only one master (Mt 6:24), only one treasure (Mt 6:19-21). This is leaving everything for him (Lk 5:11,28; 14:33). This is losing and hating our life in this world for the sake of Christ (Mk 8:35; Jn 12:25).

This is the authentic response to Jesus’ call and to the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth in him, and these are the basic principles of Christian spirituality. This is the way of the saints, the difficult way of life (Mt 7:13-14). This is life according to the Spirit, and not according to the flesh (Rom 8:5-8,13; Gal 5:24,16-17; 6:8). This is being crucified with Christ to the world (Gal 6:14).

AN EPIPHANY OF THE SPLENDOR OF OUR MESSIAH AND LORD

2nd Sunday of the Year
Is 62:1-5; Ps 95; 1 Cor 12:4-11; Jn 2:1-11

“This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (Jn 2:11).

Today is a continuation of the mystery of the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ. The three parts of this mystery of the initial manifestation of Christ’s glory are the adoration of the Magi, led by the miraculous star; the baptism in the Jordan with the Father’s voice coming from heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove; and the wedding feast at Cana with the transformation of water into wine.

This third manifestation his glory is full of splendor because wine in great abundance, as we see it here, is a symbol of the restoration of paradise on the last day, a symbol of the presence of the eschaton, the new age. The prophet Amos said, “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13). This sign of changing water into wine for the wedding in Cana was a manifestation of Jesus’ glory, an epiphany of the splendor that he came to bring into the world.

A wedding is in itself also a symbol of the Messianic times when the Lord will marry his people and rejoice over them as a husband rejoices over his wife. In the Messianic days, “as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,” says Isaiah today, “so shall your God rejoice over you” (Is 62:5).

Jesus Christ himself is moreover the bridegroom. “And Jesus said to them, can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the
bridegroom with them, they cannot fast" (Mk 2:19). Jesus therefore did not fast during his ministry—after fasting for forty days in the desert—because he was the Messiah, the bridegroom, and the days of his ministry were the time of his wedding with the new Israel. “He who has the bride is the bridegroom,” said John the Baptist about Jesus (Jn 3:29). The bridegroom of the Messianic banquet is present at the wedding at Cana, and the wine is abundant, and miraculously provided. This wedding then is an epiphany of the presence of the new age of the last day.

By this epiphany in Cana of Galilee, Jesus shows that the Messianic times have arrived. Now is the time of the wedding between God and his people, now the mountains drip sweet wine, and all the hills flow with it (Amos 9:13). Now is the time of Messianic splendor, of the abundance of wine, and of the restoration of the peace of paradise. The eschaton, the new age, has come in Jesus Christ; the salvation of the last days is here for us in him. This is the time prophesied by Hosea, saying, “And I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me for ever” (Hos 2:18-19).

Such are the days which Jesus Christ brings us. We are thus invited to live in his splendor in these Messianic days, in these days of fulfillment. This is what it means to be a Christian. Jesus frees us from the demons that attack us and exalts us to be participants in his glory, rejoicing in the mountains that drip sweet wine.

Today Isaiah describes our days of glory with the Messiah: Our righteousness, he says, shall go forth as splendor, and our salvation shall burn as a torch (Is 62:1). “And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory” (Is 62:2 KJV). Our light has come (Is 60:1), God has become man and lives on earth with us as one of us, our sins have been expiated, and our guilt removed by the sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross, the perfect sacrifice, the consummation of all sacrifices since the foundation of the world, the one sacrifice which unites man with God and makes perfect reparation for all sin. Thus are we restored to our primal innocence. Jesus Christ brings the kingdom of heaven to earth with its gift of universal peace. This is the mystery that we now begin to live in Jesus Christ, a mystery that will be consummated in the new world that begins on the last day.

The Gentiles will see our righteousness and our glory in that we are justified and made a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). “Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God,” says Isaiah today (Is 62:3 KJV). This is the splendor in which God now invites us to live in his Son. This is the salvation and forgiveness that he wants to give us. God answers our prayers and saves us from darkness and oppression. He vanquishes Satan and destroys his power over us when we ask him in faith in the name of Jesus Christ. For “Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken,” says Isaiah; “neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate … for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married” (Is 63:4).

The canticle of Hannah is most appropriate in the mouth of a Christian: “My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord … there is no rock like our God … The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength … He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor … He will guard the feet of his faithful ones; but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness” (1 Sam 2:1,2,4,8,9).
Today we rejoice in the splendor of our Messiah and Lord.

HOW TO GIVE EFFECTIVE WITNESS

Monday, 2nd Week of the Year
1 Sam 15:16-23; Ps 49; Mk 2:18-22

“And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better that sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22).

Today we hear of the importance of doing the will of God. Disobedience destroys our relationship with God and our peace. Christ came to vanquish Satan and his influence over us, to renew us in God’s grace and splendor, and to restore us to a life of joy and obedience. Then, redeemed by Christ, restored to God’s splendor, and living in his kingdom of heavenly peace, we have to do more than simply call ourselves Christians, more than simply offer external sacrifice, more than only offer the sacrifice of the Mass. We also need the interior disposition to do God’s will, and we have to do it practically in our life. Only practicing the external rite of offering sacrifice without the interior intention of doing God’s will and without actual obedience does not please God anymore than Saul’s sacrifices pleased God, for he did not obey his will.

If we are priests or religious, for example, to be obedient means that we are to live in accord with our state in life, a life of prayer and renunciation of the world in its worldliness. We should rather be a transforming presence in the world, living only for God in all that we do, in our whole way of life. Then our witness—the witness of our life and of our way of living—will make a difference in the world. Yesterday we saw the example of St. Anthony of Egypt and the tremendous impact he had on his age and afterwards. He lived faithfully according to his vocation, and therefore greatly influenced the world. He was obedient to the will of God, and his simple life of prayer and fasting in the desert had a tremendous impact on the entire world.

The life of a priest or religious, to continue with our example, can have an important influence on the world if he is obedient and faithful; that is, behaving, dressing, eating, and living in general in a way that is coherent with the will of God. In today’s gospel, we have the example of fasting, which Jesus says his followers will practice after he is taken from them. Fasting means that we should live only for God, not in gluttony, not seeking the unnecessary pleasures of the world, but rather living in simplicity with an undivided heart in our love for God in all that we do, in our whole way of life. If we are not obedient, consistent, and coherent in such basic and fundamental areas as our way of eating, dressing, and living in general, we greatly weaken the effectiveness of our witness and our impact on others. We must have an obedient, consistent, and coherent heart and life, and not merely practice a ritual of offering sacrifice.
“Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him but had departed from Saul” (1 Sam 18:12).

We see a great contrast here between David and Saul. The Lord had departed from Saul because he disobeyed God’s will in not destroying Amalek, as Samuel had ordered him to do. Samuel therefore said to him, “Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king … The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you” (1 Sam 15:23,28). Then for his disobedience, “the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him” (1 Sam 16:14). At the same time, “the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam 16:13), i.e. from the day of his anointing by Samuel. Saul knew that the Lord had departed from him and was now with David and that he himself was tormented by an evil spirit from the Lord. David was then Saul’s servant and played the harp before Saul when the evil spirit was upon Saul, and so he found relief (1 Sam 16:15-16). But even so, it three times happened that “an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand; and Saul cast the spear, for he thought, I will pin David to the wall” (1 Sam 18:10-11; see 19:9-10).

How important it is to obey God and avoid the great sin of disobedience to the will of God! We see that because of his disobedience, Saul was tormented by an evil spirit sent to him by God to punish him for his sin and for not abdicating the kingship. David, on the contrary, lived in the joyful presence of God, and the Lord was with him. Even when he was in great danger, fighting against Goliath and the Philistines, and later with Saul, David was happy in his heart, for the Spirit of the Lord was with him. We see here the difference between happiness and depression. David was happy, while Saul was tormented.

To be happy, we must be with God; and to be with God, we must obey him. Then he will be with us. If we lose our peace and happiness by disobeying God in some way, i.e. by sinning or falling into an imperfection, we should repent and change our behavior. We should take refuge in Jesus Christ and receive from him, through the merits of his death on the cross, the definitive forgiveness of God and the Spirit of God once again shining in our heart, and thus be like David, and not like Saul. This is why Christ gave us the sacrament of penance; namely, to personally and individually channel to us the merits of his death, by which he absorbs the wrath of God against us for our sins and imperfections, so that we may be sacramentally absolved and walk once again, like David, in the light and favor of God.
“And afterward David’s heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul’s skirt” (1 Sam 24:5).

David and his men were hidden in a cave when King Saul entered the same cave to relieve himself. David could have killed him, but instead he only secretly cut off the skirt of his robe. But “David’s heart smote him” even for this, for Saul was the king of Israel, the Lord’s anointed; and he said, “The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my Lord, the Lord’s anointed, to put forth my hand against him, seeing he is the Lord’s anointed” (1 Sam 24:6).

Jesus is the Christ, the Lord’s anointed, the new King David, the Messiah, the promised successor of David, who would fulfill all God’s promises to bring a kingdom of universal peace to the whole earth. “In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth” (Ps 71:7-8 KJV). He will be the Prince of Peace (Is 9:6), and “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore” (Is 9:7). “…and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:32-33).

Today Jesus Christ, the new David, the Messiah, “appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons” (Mk 3:14-15). We see that he chooses twelve, symbolizing the twelve tribes of the New Israel, the eschatological people of the Messianic age. In him, the kingdom of God has come into the world. We are now living in the Messianic age of the New Israel and of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

What the twelve are to do is primarily be with Jesus and be sent out to preach the kerygma, that is, the basic Christian message that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah; and that we are saved from our sins by his death and resurrection. This is the fundamental New Testament and gospel message that the twelve and their successors will preach until the parousia of Jesus Christ in glory on the clouds of heaven. We can never cease preaching and proclaiming this basic Christian kerygma, the message about salvation from our sins by the death of Christ on the cross, and the new life that he gives us in his resurrection. If we do not preach this, we have not yet begun to preach the gospel. The apostles will, moreover, give signs showing that the kingdom of heaven has arrived on earth—that is, they will cure the sick and cast out demons.
THE SCORN OF THE WORLD

Saturday, 2nd Week of the Year
2 Sam 1:1-4,11-12,17,19,23-27; Ps 79; Mk 3:20-21

“Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. And when his friends heard it, they went out to seize him, for they said, He is beside himself” (Mk 3:20-21).

Often it seems to the world that true Christians are beside themselves. To the world, they seem to be crazy. How many times did people say that Jesus had a demon (Mk 3:22; Jn 10:20; 7:20; 8:48,52)? After hearing St. Paul’s defense, the governor “Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad” (Acts 26:24). It is the same even in the Old Testament. At the last judgment when the wicked will see the just man in glory, they will say, “This is the man whom we once held in derision and made a byword of reproach—we fools! We thought that his life was madness and that his end was without honor” (Wisdom 5:4).

Why is this the case? It is because the true Christian does not love the world in its worldliness and does not imitate its ways. He preaches to the world to save it, but he renounces its pleasures in order not to divide his heart. “Do not love the world, or the things in the world,” says St. John. “If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” (1 Jn 2:15). “If you have been raised with Christ,” says St. Paul, “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1-2). A true Christian distances himself from worldly ways. He rejects the broad and comfortable way of the world, the way of the many, the way of perdition; and chooses instead the difficult way and the narrow gate of the few, the way of life (Mt 7:13-14). But to those that are on the broad way of the world and its delights, those that are taking the difficult and narrow way of life seem to be crazy, beside themselves. If those on the broad path think that theirs is the correct path, then they will naturally think that the few that have rejected their path are crazy. But they are mistaken.

The way of the few is the way of renunciation of the unnecessary pleasures of the world in order to have an undivided heart in their love for God. This is the way of life which few choose (Mt 7:13-14). Even in the Old Testament, those who fasted an lived an austere life were the laughingstock of the rest. “When I humbled my soul with fasting,” says the psalmist, “it became my reproach. When I made sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them. I am the talk of those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me” (Ps 68:10-12).

The Christian also trusts completely in Jesus Christ for his salvation and new life in the light. For the world that does not believe in Christ, this also is madness. To the world that lives only for things that are seen, only for the sensible pleasures of this present life, a life of faith seems like madness. The true Christian must, therefore, put up with the scorn of the world. This is the cross he must bear.
“And he began to say to them, Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21).

These are Jesus’ first adult words in the gospel of St. Luke. And he speaks of the fulfillment in himself of the Old Testament hope, of the Messianic prophecies. The particular prophecy to which he is referring today is: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19; Is 61:1). Jesus says here that he is the one who does these prophesied things. He is the one who has good news for the poor, news of salvation. From all that oppresses them he came to save them; but above all, he came to save them from their sins.

Sin is our greatest problem. Nothing oppresses us more than our sins. Nothing robs us of joy more than our sins and imperfections. Only God can save us from this great oppression and sadness. God alone is the remedy, the medicine that can cure us of this sickness of the spirit. The gospel reveals to us that it is through Jesus Christ that God forgives sins. Only through the merits of his vicarious, sacrificial, atoning death on the cross is there forgiveness for sins. The cross is the only remedy for this sickness that depresses the human spirit, the only remedy that gives us relief.

Even for those who lived before the birth of Jesus Christ on earth, God forgave their sins through the merits of the death of his Son on the cross by means of their faith in the one who was to come. And now we have the fulfillment of God’s salvation standing before us, Jesus of Nazareth, reading today the prophecies about himself, and openly telling us that he is the one who was to come, the fulfillment of God’s salvation, for whom the Jews so long awaited. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” he says (Lk 4:21).

This “today” of the gospel is our “today” too. Today these prophecies have been fulfilled for us, and in Jesus Christ we hear the good news of our salvation and new life in him. Although we continue to be plagued by sin and imperfections, which depress us, we also continue to have God’s remedy for them, which ever cures us anew from this illness. For a Christian who is growing in faith and holiness, his imperfections become ever smaller and are generally not even recognized as imperfections by the world; yet a true Christian is nonetheless saddened by them and needs the remedy provided for them in Jesus Christ.

In Christ there is good news for us that are poor in spirit. In him there is freedom from this captivity. He looses us (Mt 18:18), freeing us with the beautiful freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21). He gives us a new life and makes us a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Rev 21:5), truly justifying us. He himself shines in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), illuminating and rejoicing us so that we might walk in his light (Jn 8:12), illumined by him from within. He fills us with new joy and clothes us with a robe of righteousness (Is 61:10). He changes our desert into springs of water and puts in it the cedar, acacia, myrtle, olive, cypress, and pine together, as Isaiah prophesied (Is 41:18-19). In Christ,
God gives to the poor in spirit that take refuge in him in faith “water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people” (Is 43:20). In Jesus Christ, “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God” (Is 35:1-2).

Christ gives recovering of sight to the blind. He opens the eyes of our spirit to see, experience, and rejoice in his glory within us. Without him, we are in darkness and sadness, blinded by our guilt, and weighed down by the weight of our sins and imperfections. But in coming to him, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation, which he left us for this purpose, he heals this blindness and makes God’s light shine anew in our hearts, rejoicing our spirit. It is he who fulfills the prophecies and has begun the Messianic age, in which we now live. The kingdom of God, so long awaited by the Jews, has at last come in him, and we can actually enter into it and live in its heavenly peace through our faith in Christ.

Christ sets at liberty those who are oppressed. He gives us a life that is truly new and filled with light. He gives us a new beginning. He erases our sins and imperfections and rejoices us with his presence within us and with the gift of his righteousness, with which he justifies us.

This is the acceptable year of the Lord, a time of jubilation, a jubilee year of restoration. Christ restores us to our original and joyous state of innocence, vanquishing sin and Satan. In Christ, Satan falls like lightning from heaven (Lk 10:18) and is bound by Christ, the stronger man (Mk 3:27), so that we might live in this time of jubilation, this acceptable year of the Lord (Lk 4:19), the new jubilee year proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

**CALLED TO OPEN THEIR EYES**

The Conversion of St. Paul, January 25
Acts 22:3-16; Ps 116; Mk 16:15-18

I send you to the Gentiles “to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:18).

Today we celebrate the conversion of St. Paul. Above are the words that the Lord spoke to him on the road to Damascus, showing him his mission and giving him his message. He was sent by the Lord to the Gentiles to open their eyes that they may see that through faith in Jesus Christ they can receive forgiveness of their sins, and thus leave the darkness, enter into the light, join the sanctified, and become coheirs with them. Thus will they be freed from the power of Satan and from then on belong to God. Paul, therefore, went forth, almost immediately, to preach the gospel to every creature (Mk 16:15).

With this mission and message, St. Paul changed the world, opening the eyes of the Gentiles to see that there is salvation from the darkness of guilt, in which they lived. This salvation for the gentiles is now revealed in the Son of God, Jesus, the Messiah, the
The anointed of the Lord. In him, by faith in his name, there is forgiveness of sins and relief from guilt. God raised him up for this. He had to suffer to free us from death, which is the punishment for our sins. His suffering freed us from the darkness in which we were suffering for our sins. He came to illuminate us, bearing for us our burden of guilt. By invoking the merits of his death, we leave the darkness and enter into the wonderful light of the Lord (1 Peter 2:9). Once we were darkness, but now we are light in the Lord (Eph 5:8). Jesus Christ and faith in him make this difference. They illuminate us. Christ came for our illumination. Without him, we are in darkness and guilt. But with him, we walk in his new light (Jn 8:12), freed from the power of darkness to walk in the light of the Lord (Col 1:12-13).

The Gentiles did not know this. They had not heard this good news of salvation, sent to us in Jesus Christ. It would be St. Paul’s mission to announce this good news to them for the first time. It is our mission too, to live in this light and proclaim this salvation to the world, as did St. Paul. This is the light that we should live in from now on and share with others.

“Thus it is written,” said the risen Christ, “that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Lk 24:46-48). “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior,” said the apostles, “to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things” (Acts 5:31-32). In him, we are illuminated. He is the one “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:14). “He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness” (Col 1:13) “to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col 1:12).

THE RENEWAL OF THE WORLD

Thursday, 3rd Week of the Year
2 Sam 7:18-19,24-29; Ps 131; Mk 4:21-25

“Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand?” (Mk 4:21).

Jesus was kindling a light on earth, but he had not yet put it on a stand to illuminate the whole world in an open way with its splendor. This will happen on the last day, at his parousia, when he comes with all his saints in glory on the clouds of heaven, for on that day there will be a great light. Then the whole world will be lit up with his glory, and every eye shall see his splendor.

The kingdom of heaven came to earth in Jesus Christ and is now in the world in him in a hidden way. It is the kingdom of light that on the last day will illuminate the entire world. It has come ahead of time for those that have faith. We can live now in this splendor by faith in Jesus Christ, for in him we have salvation—namely, the forgiveness of our sins in his blood, which paid our debt, satisfying divine justice. Through Christ, God justifies us, making us truly righteous and resplendent in his sight. Christ then rose from the dead to eschatological life and now lives in the glory of the Father. This also is...
his lamp stand, from which he now illuminates us. He is the Sun of righteousness, shining on all who believe in him.

This splendor, which was hidden in Jesus during his ministry, is now revealed to the eyes of faith and shall be manifested for all to see on the last day, “For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light” (Mk 4:22).

This splendor, which Jesus Christ brought into the world, and in which we can now live, is the kingdom of heaven on earth, the eternal kingdom promised to David. Christ is the offspring of David, whose kingdom shall be established forever. The prophet Nathan promised David, saying, “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom … And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam 7:12,16).

We can live in this eternal kingdom of heavenly peace now by believing in Jesus Christ, by being saved by him from our sins, and by walking, illuminated by the light of his resurrection. In him, we live already in the last days, in heavenly peace, in the new creation that is coming to birth in the midst of this old creation (2 Cor 5:17). God is renewing the world through his kingdom. He is renewing us, shining in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), illuminating us from within. Jesus Christ is the great light that has come into the world. He shines on those that believe in him. We should walk, therefore, in his light (Jn 8:12), giving witness to it in the world for its illumination and renovation.

THE MUSTARD SEED

Friday, 3rd Week of the Year
2 Sam 11:1-4,5-10,13-17; Ps 50; Mk 4:26-34

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (Mk 4:30-32).

Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables to hide from them the inner mystery of the kingdom of God, for the time was not yet ripe to openly reveal this mystery to them. To his disciples, though, he explained everything in private (Mk 4:34), saying, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables” (Mk 4:10). He did this “so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand” (Mk 4:12).

The mystery that Jesus wanted to reveal to them in a veiled way is that in him the kingdom of heaven had come into the world, and that they were therefore now living in the Messianic times. Only after his vicarious death and glorious resurrection and ascension, and after Pentecost, would the time finally be right for the multitudes to understand this mystery. Then they would remember his parables be able to understand them.
What then is the inner mystery of the parable of the mustard seed? It is that the kingdom of God was now present on earth in Jesus, and that they should not be discouraged or scandalized by its insignificant and unlikely appearance. The Jews were expecting something glorious and spectacular, a splendid military leader that would conquer the entire world and set up the Jews as its rulers. They expected the kingdom of God on earth in visible splendor and glory. And into this context of expectation comes Jesus, claiming that the kingdom of heaven has arrived on earth in him (Mt 12:28). His insignificant appearance was a scandal to them.

He therefore told them the parable of the mustard seed. Look at how insignificant this seed appears, he says, “the smallest of all the seeds on earth” (Mk 4:31); yet it is nonetheless the seed of a great bush. So also is the kingdom of God, which has just then entered the world in Jesus, the Messiah. Just as the seed will grow into a great bush; so too, at his parousia, the kingdom of God will appear in all its glory. Do not, therefore, be discouraged by its present humble appearance.

And so it is also with us. For those who believe in Jesus Christ, the kingdom of heaven, hoped for in visible splendor and glory on the last day, is already here on earth, redeeming them from sin and guilt, and giving them new life in God. They are justified by Christ’s death and illuminated by his resurrection. They are made new men, a new creation, and exult in God all the day long (Ps 88:16). The world does not see this splendor. But on the last day, the kingdom will be manifested in all its glory when Christ comes again on the clouds of heaven in great light.

CHRIST CALMS THE STORMS IN OUR HEART

Saturday, 3rd Week of the Year
2 Sam 12:1-7,10-17; Ps 50; Mk 4:35-41

“And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mk 4:39 KJV).

Only God can do what Jesus does today—in his own name, invoking no other power than his own—rebuke the wind and tell the sea, “Peace, be still,” with the result that “there was a great calm” (Mk 4:39). Today Jesus is asleep in a boat in the midst of a great storm. He calms the storm with a simple word of personal command, demonstrating that he has divine power. Jesus is, in fact, God, the only Son of the Father. He is a divine person (the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity) and shares the one divine nature with the Father. His divinity, though, is normally hidden beneath his humanity, but he often manifests his divine nature and divine person in his miracles. He did so above all in his resurrection.

Today we see his divinity shining through his humanity. Thus, being God, we can say to him, as the psalmist says to God, “Thou dost rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, thou stillest them” (Ps 88:9), and thou “dost still the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves” (Ps 64:7). As did his Father, so also Jesus “made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed” (Ps 106:29).
He who so displays his divine power can also calm the storms in our heart. “Peace I leave with you,” he said; “my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27).

Christ calms the storm in our heart that is caused by our sins, mistakes, and imperfections when we fail to do his will in something. It is only through the merits of the vicarious and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross that God forgives us for our sins and mistakes, saving us and restoring us to his friendship and favor. Jesus Christ absorbs the divine wrath against us for our sins so that we do not have to continue to experience it. Thus he restores God’s peace to our heart and enables us to live in the kingdom of God here on earth, a kingdom of heavenly peace and jubilation of spirit in God and in his salvation. In this kingdom, which is present for us now in Jesus Christ through our faith in him, the storms in our heart are calmed, and we can live in heavenly peace and joy of heart in the midst of the exterior storms of life. It is in him that we should always take refuge whenever we feel that we have fallen out of God’s peace by committing some fault. His merits then restore us to the peace of the kingdom of heaven on earth, which he came to bring us.

THE SUFFERING AND GLORY OF THE PROPHET

4th Sunday of the Year
Jer 1:4-5,17-19; Ps 70; 1 Cor 12:31-13:13; Lk 4:21-30

“And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land” (Jer 1:18).

This was the call and vocation of the prophet Jeremiah and of every prophet, those of New Testament times as well as those of the Old Testament. Jeremiah was called and sent by God to preach all that the Lord commanded him in order to correct and direct the people, showing them their errors and infidelity, and calling them to deeper conversion. Jeremiah is not to fear the people, for God will be with him and deliver him from them. They will, nonetheless, fight against him. “They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you” (Jer 1:19).

The task of a prophet is negative as well as positive. He is to point out and condemn the errors of the people as well as show them the correct path and the Lord’s will. Hence the Lord said to him, “See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10). In all this, God will strengthen the prophet, for he will have to go against everyone, “against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land” (Jer 1:18). God will therefore make him “a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land” (Jer 1:18).

A prophet, we see, will be rejected by his people. Jesus says the same thing today. “… no prophet,” he says, “is acceptable in his own country” (Lk 4:24). He also said, “you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22). We will be hated by all for his name’s sake, because he will give us a
message of salvation that many will not want to hear. They will not want to hear it because they do not want to change their mistaken ways. They will therefore become enraged at us, at those who prophesy, at those who preach the word of the Lord and his will to them.

We must therefore be prepared for this and not fear them, but rather speak to them all that the Lord has commanded us to say. This is what Jesus did today in Nazareth, and as a result, “they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong” (Lk 4:29).

We will, nevertheless, be blessed when this happens, for then we will truly be prophets, like Jeremiah, like Jesus, and our reward will be great in heaven (Lk 6:23). If we are faithful, this will be the pattern of our life. Our life will follow the pattern of the prophets, of Jesus, and of St. Paul. “Blessed are you,” says Jesus, “when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets” (Lk 6:22-23). When this happens, we will truly be prophets.

But “Woe to you, when all men speak well of you,” Jesus said, “for so their fathers did to the false prophets” (Lk 6:26). If, out of fear of the thoughts, judgments, words, and actions of others, we refuse to speak the word of God when he gives us a word to speak; then we will be like the false prophets that only spoke the smooth things they knew the people wanted to hear (Is 30:10-11). “Woe to you!” says Jesus, if this is what you do.

We must, therefore, be prepared for persecution if we preach prophetically, if we proclaim the truth that God gives us and that people need to hear. “Therefore,” Jesus said, “also the Wisdom of God said, I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute” (Lk 11:49). “Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?” said St. Stephen. “And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered” (Acts 7:52).

Persecution will therefore be an important aspect of our life if we are true Christians, living according to the will of God and preaching the truth that God gives and that people need to hear. But Jeremiah tells us today that God will be with us. They will fight against us, but they will not prevail over us, for God will deliver us (Jer 1:19). God will strengthen us, making us “a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land” (Jer 1:18). The ultimate victory will be ours. The martyrs are the true heroes, the real victors, and God rewards them, rejoicing them in the depths of their heart both in this life and the next. May we be among the true prophets of God’s word.
THE MESSIANIC AGE

Monday, 4th Week of the Year
2 Sam 15:13-14,30; 16:5-13; Ps 3; Mk 5:1-20

“So he gave them leave. And the unclean spirits came out, and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea” (Mk 5:13).

Jesus Christ brings the kingdom of God into the world, and this means the end of the kingdom of Satan. This exorcism illustrates Jesus’ mission. The legion of demons departs from the demoniac, destroying a herd of pigs, thus depriving themselves of a habitation. They must now return to hell. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies that promise a reign of universal peace on earth, and his exorcisms are the signs that in him this kingdom has arrived. With only a word of personal command, he casts out the demons, freeing the demoniac, who afterwards was “sitting there, clothed and in his right mind” (Mk 5:15).

In Jesus and his ministry, the kingdom of heaven has come upon the earth. “… if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons,” he said, “then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt 12:28). This is the meaning of his exorcisms. He is stronger than Satan (Mk 3:27) and came to destroy his kingdom and replace it with the kingdom of heaven on earth, a kingdom in which we have new freedom from the forces of evil, freed from sin to walk in the newness of life, risen in the risen Christ (Rom 6:4), and illuminated by him (Jn 8:12), with heavenly peace in our heart (Jn 14:27).

As this demoniac was made a new man by Christ, so all who take refuge in Christ are remade, becoming a new creation, new creatures in him. In Christ there is new freedom from the forces of evil, the freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21). This is because the kingdom of God is present among us in Jesus. “… behold,” he said, “the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Lk 17:21). It is in Jesus, who was in their midst.

This is the future kingdom of God, promised for the last day, and “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore” (Is 9:7). But this future kingdom is now revealed in Jesus Christ, and those that believe in him live in it. We still await the parousia and the Messianic banquet for all peoples on the holy mountain (Is 25:6-8), the new age, where “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb … and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Is 11:6,7), but those who have faith in Jesus live already in this future kingdom of heavenly peace on the earth. Since Christ redeems us and forgives our sins, we now live in peace with God and in love with our neighbor.

Jesus destroys Satan, who keeps us prisoners in sin and guilt. “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven,” he said (Lk 10:18), and “blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Mt 13:16-17). Jesus fulfills the prophetic vision, and in him we live in the Messianic age.
“... keep the charge of the Lord your God ... that the Lord may establish his word which he spoke concerning me, saying, If your sons take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a man on the throne of Israel” (1 Kings 2:3,4).

This is the conditional promise that God made to David and Solomon that if they and their sons kept the precepts of the Lord, walking before the Lord with all their heart and all their soul, then “there shall not fail you a man on the throne of Israel” (1 Kings 2:4). We know that neither Solomon nor his sons kept the precepts of the Lord, and the result was that during the Babylonian exile and afterwards they lacked a king of their line on the throne of David. This was a conditional promise. Since the kings did not keep their part, God did not keep his part.

But God also made an unconditional promise to David that God would establish forever the throne of the kingdom of David and Solomon (2 Sam 7:13). The Lord said to David, “And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16). This unconditional promise of an everlasting throne was confirmed in Ps 88, where the Lord said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant: I will establish your descendants for ever, and build your throne for all generations” (Ps 88:3-4). He also said, “My steadfast love I will keep for him for ever, and my covenant will stand firm for him. I will not violate my covenant, or alter the word that went forth from my lips. Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. His line shall endure for ever, his throne as long as the sun before me. Like the moon it shall be established for ever; it shall stand firm while the skies endure” (Ps 88:30-37).

This unconditional promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the son of David, of the lineage of David. Jesus inherited David’s throne and reigns forever with us in splendor and glory. The angel Gabriel promised Mary concerning her son that “the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:32-33). We live in this kingdom now, the kingdom of heaven on earth, with Christ as our king.

Yet we still wait in hope for his second coming when he will return in glory and reign forever in a manifest way in the new Jerusalem, the city “having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal” (Rev 21:11), a city of “pure gold, clear as glass” (Rev 21:16). On the last day, this unconditional promise to David will be consummated in glory. We live now in hope of this glory.
“And the king was exceedingly sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her” (Mk 6:26).

King Herod had imprisoned John the Baptist for saying, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” (Mk 6:18), that is, Herodias. Yet even so, “Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly” (Mk 6:20). Herod knew that John was a good man, a man of God, and a prophet, and so he protected him from Herodias, who wanted to kill him for condemning her marriage with Herod.

But on Herod’s birthday, everything changed. It was a big feast with many important guests, “his courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee” (Mk 6:21). Herodias’ daughter danced, greatly pleasing Herod and his guests, so that he promised her, saying, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it … even half of my kingdom” (Mk 6:22,23). After consulting with her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptist.

Now we can well imagine the problem Herod had. He knows that John is a good and holy man of God, he respects him, “heard him gladly” (Mk 6:20), and protected him from Herodias. But what should he do now? He has sworn to his wife’s daughter to give her whatever she wanted, even half of his kingdom (Mk 6:22,23). He was sitting in front of all his important guests and was afraid to refuse her after making such a public oath. He was afraid of what his guests would think of him and say about him if he did not grant her request. He feared their judgments and mockery if he did what was just and right. He did not have the courage of his convictions to do what he knew was right, so he went along with what was expected of him. He was not able to go against the current. He decided not to do what he himself knew was good and correct, and chose rather to do what he knew was wrong. Why? Out of fear of his guests. He wanted to do what they expected of him. So he did what he knew was wrong out of fear of men. He “was exceedingly sorry … and gave orders to bring his head” (Mk 6:26,27). He was deeply distressed because he knew he was acting wrongly.

How many act this way all the time? They know very well what is right but do the opposite out of fear of the negative thoughts, judgments, and words of others if they were to do what is correct. They should not live like this. We should rather have the courage of our convictions to do what we know to be correct despite what others may think of us. Only in this way will we become saints. Only thus will we live a heroically virtuous life—virtuous despite what others may think of us—which is the definition of a saint.
"I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days" (1 Kings 3:13).

This is the splendor and glory that the Lord promised to Solomon. His kingdom, says the Lord, will be glorious like none other. When the queen of Sheba, having heard of the fame, glory, and wisdom of Solomon, came to Jerusalem to see it all with her own eyes; she was amazed at his splendor. “And she said to the king, ‘The report was true which I heard in my own land of your affairs and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it; and behold, the half was not told me; your wisdom and prosperity surpass the report which I heard’” (1 Kings 10:6-7). She saw all his glory and the magnificence of his life and kingdom. And “when the queen … had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, the food at his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his cupbearers, and his burnt offerings which he offered at the house of the Lord, there was no more spirit in her” (1 Kings 10:4-5). And more than all of this, the Lord said to Solomon, “Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you” (1 Kings 3:12).

All of this is important to us because the splendor of the kingdom of Solomon is the image of the splendor of the kingdom of God in the Messianic times. There shall come days in which God will establish a kingdom of peace without end or limit over the whole earth, in which the Sun of righteousness shall reign (Mal 4:2). On that day, “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together” (Is 40:5). On that day, the son of David “shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jer 23:5). “In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel” (Is 4:2). “On that day … there shall be continuous day … not day and night, for at evening time there shall be light” (Zech 14:7). Then “The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory” (Is 60:19). On that day, “the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13). Then “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb … and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Is 11:6,7). On that day, there will be great physical changes in the earth.

Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-with-us, brought this splendid kingdom to earth, and we can live in it now by faith, a kingdom of peace and splendor. But we also live in hope of the consummation of these prophecies of glory on the last day with the second coming of Jesus Christ in splendor to establish his glorious kingdom on earth. Then every eye will see him in his magnificence, and the elect will reign with him in the new Jerusalem. We live for this hope of glory now, and the prophecies describe the splendor we shall see.
THE APOSTOLIC CALLING

5th Sunday of the Year
Is 6:1-2,3-8; Ps 137; 1 Cor 15:1-11; Lk 5:1-11

“But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk 5:8).

Today we see St. Peter’s call to be an apostle. Jesus first says to him, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” (Lk 5:4). Peter had his doubts since he had been fishing all night—the proper time for fishing—without catching anything. Nonetheless he obeys, saying, “at your word I will let down the nets” (Lk 5:5). Upon obeying Jesus, “they enclosed a great shoal of fish” (Lk 5:6). Although it appeared unlikely that they would succeed, Peter nevertheless obeyed Jesus and was amply rewarded. How often have we not experienced the same thing? When we obey God or an order of our superior, even though it does not seem likely that it will lead to any good, the good results astound us time and time again.

But there is still more. Peter feels unworthy and impure before Jesus after seeing this sign of his power. “… he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk 5:8). He does not feel worthy to follow Jesus. He has a great sense that he is a sinful man, and he knows his guilt. He is afraid to work with Jesus. But Jesus, who knows him better than he knows himself, reassures him, saying, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men” (Lk 5:10). This is his call to be an apostle, a follower of Jesus, a worker in the kingdom of God. Despite his unworthiness, Jesus still calls him to be his apostle and to collaborate with him for the salvation of the world.

Jesus treats us the same way. Even though we feel guilty, incapable, full of sin, and unworthy of being his followers, his apostles; Jesus calls us anyway, in the midst of our weakness, and forgives, cleanses, and justifies us, making us new men, a new creation. He is the one that makes us fit for his work, for his ministry. He is the one that calls us to be fishers of men and that strengthens us for this mission.

I remember forty-two years ago, when I was in the novitiate, I was assigned to teach a religion class to high school freshmen. I was twenty-two years old at the time. I taught them once a week, but I was not able to control the class. They did not listen to me and talked all through my presentations.

One day, I happened to read today’s gospel, and it made a deep impression on me. I felt like Peter in this reading, ready to give up and say to Jesus, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk 5:8). Then I felt Jesus say to me personally, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men.” I felt called to be his follower even though I did not feel worthy or capable of doing his work or being his collaborator. I sat down then and there and wrote a several page-long meditation on this gospel text, explaining how Jesus calls us despite our unworthiness.

When I went the next time to teach my class, I did something completely new. I read to them the meditation that I had written on this gospel. Previously, I never used a written text. I was amazed at the results. The class was completely silent and listened to every word, and at the end we had a serious and meaningful discussion on what I had read to them. From that day on, I wrote out and read my conferences to them. I learned
that even though we feel unworthy and incapable of being Jesus’ collaborators, even so, Jesus, who knows us better than we know ourselves, wants to call us and make us fishers of men. I believe that my class also learned that lesson that day.

Not only Peter felt unworthy of his mission, but Isaiah too, the greatest of the prophets, felt the same way, as we see today. When he saw the vision of the glory of God in the temple, he cried out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Is 6:5). But the Lord cleansed him, purifying his lips with a burning coal from the altar with these words, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven” (Is 6:7). Having experienced this cleansing, when God wanted to send someone to preach, Isaiah responded, “Here am I! Send me” (Is 6:8). So God sent him, and he became the greatest of the prophets.

Both Moses and Jeremiah also felt unworthy of their calling (Ex 4:10-12; Jer 1:6), but God strengthened them for their mission. And St. Paul tells us today that he too is unworthy of his calling. “I am the least of the apostles,” he says, “unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them” (1 Cor 15:9-10). These fearful and unworthy men became the greatest leaders of the people of God: Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, St. Peter, and St. Paul.

Jesus is calling you too in spite of the fact that you feel unworthy of his calling. He will make you too a fisher of men. He will send you to preach a word of salvation that will help many if only you accept his invitation and call.

THE MESSIANIC TEMPLE

Monday, 5th Week of the Year
1 Kings 8:1-7,9-13; Ps 131; Mk 6:53-56

“And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 8:10-11).

This occurred during Solomon’s dedication of the temple that he had just built. The Lord lived with his people Israel on earth in this temple. His presence is indicated by the cloud that filled it. In the same way a cloud covered the desert tabernacle: “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because of the cloud that abode upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Ex 40:34-35).

Ezekiel prophesied that in the future the glory of the Lord will also fill the Messianic temple. “And behold,” he said, “the glory of the God of Israel came from the east … and the earth shone with his glory … and I fell upon my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and behold the glory of the Lord filled the temple” (Ez 43:2,3-5).

The glory of God rested on Jesus Christ. He is the Messianic temple. “Destroy this temple,” he said, “and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:19), and the evangelist
explains that “he spoke of the temple of his body” (Jn 2:21). In him we experience the glory of the Lord and are able to walk in his splendor (Jn 8:12). He is the fulfillment of Solomon’s temple. He is the Messianic temple prophesied by Ezekiel. This is why there will be no temple in the new Jerusalem. Jesus Christ dead, risen, and present in the new Jerusalem in his glorified body will be its temple and its light. Therefore there will also be no sun or moon in the new Jerusalem. The glorified Jesus will serve this function too. “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk” (Rev 21:22-24).

This shall be our future; and even now, since the death of Jesus Christ, we have no temple for the offering of animal sacrifices. Jesus Christ is our only sacrifice, and therefore we do not need a temple. Instead we have churches where we offer the one and only sacrifice of Christ on the cross, for the eucharistic sacrifice makes us present on Calvary at the very moment of the unique sacrifice of Christ on the cross for our salvation.

In Christ we experience the glory of God. In him we walk in the light, the light of his resurrection that illumines us. He is our Messianic temple. His death is the sacrifice that saves us from death and takes from us the pain of sin and guilt. The sacrifices of the Jews represented ahead of time this one, adequate sacrifice. In Christ we have the reality that their sacrifices symbolized.

MODERN IDOLATRY

Thursday, 5th Week of the Year
1 Kings 11:4-13; Ps 105; Mk 7:24-30

… when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father” (1 Kings 11:4).

We see today that in his old age Solomon’s heart became divided by serving other gods, and he “did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done” (1 Kings 11:6). Hence “his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father” (1 Kings 11:4). How important it is then to have an undivided heart in our love and service of God and not allow our heart to become divided among other things! We should not allow other things to take the place of God in our heart. Therefore “the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel” (1 Kings 11:9).

There are many things that we can put into our heart that should not be there and that divide the love of our heart so that it is not undivided as it should be. The pleasures of the world are idols that divide our heart. They are our false gods that make us worldly instead of pure followers of the Lord, and only of the Lord.

Solomon thought that he had good reasons for his actions, for he made political alliances by marrying the daughters of various kings, such as the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Kings 11:1). Since his foreign wives were not Israelites, he built temples for them where
they could offer sacrifice to their gods and he joined them in their sacrifices. But this did not please God.

We too can think that we have good reasons for putting other pleasures into our heart, but this also does not please God, who wants to see in us a heart that is integral and undivided in our love and service of him. We do not need as many things as we think we need, unnecessary things that are only for pleasure. All this only divides the heart.

We have to beware of the culture that we live in and guard ourselves against it and not uncritically imitate its ways and fashions. We should rather discern the styles of our culture and reject what is not in accord with gospel living. The great sin of the Israelites was to mingle with the nations about them and imitate their ways. “They did not destroy the peoples, as the Lord commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and learned to do as they did. They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with blood. Thus they became unclean by their acts” (Ps 105:34-39). Let us not do the same!

Although we do not worship idols in the same way that they did, there are nonetheless many idols in our culture that are served and that divide the heart. The cult of pleasure is the great idol that is served today and it divides the heart.

WHERE IS OUR HAPPINESS?

Friday, 5th Week of the Year
1 Kings 11:29-32; 12:19; Ps. 80; Mark 7:31-37

“Then Ahijah laid hold of the new garment that was on him, and tore it into twelve pieces. And he said to Jeroboam, Take for yourself ten pieces; for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon, and will give you ten tribes” (1 Kings 11:30-31).

For not being faithful to the Lord, the kingdom was torn from the hand of Solomon, and ten tribes were given to Jeroboam. This is the punishment of the Lord, announced by the prophet Ahijah, for the sin of Solomon in forsaking the Lord. “… he has forsaken me,” said the Lord to Jeroboam through the prophet Ahijah, “and worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god of the Ammonites, and has not walked in my ways, doing what is right in my sight and keeping my statutes, as David his father did” (1 Kings 11:33).

But afterward Jeroboam too would stop serving the Lord with all his heart. He would make two golden calves and put one in Bethel and the other in Dan and would say to the people, “Behold your gods, oh Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (1 Kings 12:28). He also “appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites” (1 Kings 12:31), and he offered sacrifices on the altar in Bethel (1 Kings 12:32), something which should only be done in Jerusalem (Deut. 16:2; Lev. 17:1-9; Deut. 12:4-6).
Therefore Jeroboam would also be punished for his sin. The same prophet Ahijah would say, “therefore behold, I will bring evil on the house of Jeroboam, and will cut off from Jeroboam every male” (1 Kings 14:10). Thus we see the evil of idolatry. The kingdom was torn from the hands of these two kings because they had ceased walking with the Lord with all their heart. The Lord is a jealous God, and he wants all our love, our whole heart.

Jesus Christ revealed the same message. His first and most important commandment is, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). And he said, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24).

But how many continue trying to serve two masters? How many continue dividing their hearts by the way they live? How many believe they can serve God and other things too? How many believe they can live a worldly life and also serve God with all their heart, with an undivided heart, as God wishes? Many, I think; but it is impossible. We should seek our happiness only in the Lord and not in the delights of the world, which only divide our heart and diminish the love we have for God. God wants all our love, not just part of our love. He also wants to be all our happiness, not just part of our happiness. This is why monks live a life of prayer and fasting in the desert far from the world—namely to love God with all their hearts.

OUR ONLY TREASURE
Saturday, 5th Week of the Year
1 Kings 12:26-32; 13:33-34; Ps. 105; Mark 8:1-10

“If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah” (1 Kings 12:27).

Since its conquest by David, Jerusalem was the central location chosen and blessed by God in which the Israelites were to offer sacrifice. This was in accord with the law of the one sanctuary of the Mosaic Law (Deut. 12:1-27). But Jeroboam saw that if the Israelites continued going up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice, “then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah” (1 Kings 12:27). Therefore Jeroboam chose two places in his kingdom, one in Dan, the other in Bethel, and in each he made a golden calf so that in the future the people would offer their sacrifices before one or the other of these and no longer in Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:28-32). He also “appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites” (1 Kings 12:31).

This was Jeroboam’s great sin. “And Jeroboam drove Israel from following the Lord and made them commit great sin. The people of Israel walked in all the sins which Jeroboam did … until the Lord removed Israel out of his sight” (2 Kings 17:21, 22, 23).

In Israel it was important to offer sacrifice only in the place designated by the Lord; not in just any place. “Take heed that you do not offer your burnt offerings at every place

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that you see; but at the place which the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings” (Deut. 12:13-14). Jeroboam broke from this law, and this did not please the Lord.

We see here the importance of obeying God’s will. Although the ten tribes of Jeroboam were stronger than Judah, they were finally completely destroyed. Only the descendents of Judah preserved the faith of Israel until the coming of the Messiah.

In our lives too we have to obey God’s will if we want to be blessed by him. And what is his will for us? It is to serve the Lord, and only the Lord, with all our heart, for, as the psalmist says, “Thou art my Lord; I have no good apart from thee” (Ps. 15:2). And “Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their libations of blood I will not pour out or take their name upon my lips. The Lord is my portion and my cup; thou holdest my lot” (Ps. 15:4-5). Jeroboam lost God’s favor because he did not serve him with all his heart and did not obey him. To serve God with all our heart is to serve him alone and to serve him in the way he wants to be served. It is to leave all for him (Luke 5:11), to be crucified to the world for him (Gal. 6:14), to have only one treasure (Matt. 6:19-21), and only one Lord (Matt. 6:24). It is to seek the things above, not those of earth (Col. 3:1-2), and to renounce the pleasures of the world, so that God be our only happiness.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD BELONGS TO THE POOR

6th Sunday of the Year
Jer 17:5-8; Ps 1; 1 Cor 15:12,16-20; Lk 6:17,20-26

“And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples and said: Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven” (Lk 6:20).

This verse begins the beatitudes, Jesus’ programmatic sermon where he proclaims the poor blessed, and woe upon the rich. We need to understand what he is saying here and grasp the message of this important sermon, for it is an outline summary of much of his teaching in other places in the gospels. He is proclaiming here a whole way of life, a new way of living. In short, we can say that we have before us in the beatitudes the outline of a whole new way of living in this world, which is a life lived for God with all one’s heart. Jesus Christ wants us to live completely and radically for God, leaving all else to live for him alone. God should be our happiness, and we should therefore leave everything else for love of him.

The first disciples did this by leaving their nets, boat, and father, to follow him (Lk 5:11; Mk 1:17-20). Levi did it when “he left everything, and rose and followed him” (Lk 5:28). Jesus blessed his disciples for having done this to serve him completely with all their life and all their time. “And every one who has left houses … or lands, for my name’s sake,” Jesus said, “will receive a hundredfold” (Mt 19:29). These are the true poor, to whom belongs the kingdom of God (Lk 6:20). They live for him alone with an undivided heart. Their heart is not divided by the pleasures of the world. Worldly pleasures choke us so that we do not bear fruit, as weeds choke a seed (Lk 8:14). Those that love these pleasures lose their life, while those that hate their life in this world will
save it (Jn 12:25). He that loses his life for love of Christ will save his life (Mk 8:35).
Such is the true poor person, to whom the kingdom of God belongs.

The purpose of our life is not our own pleasure. We should not try to increase our worldly pleasure. Rather we should sacrifice our life for the love of Christ, losing our life in this world for love of him. We should have only one treasure, and that in heaven, for where our treasure is, there also will our heart be (Mt 6:19-21). We should live a life of austerity and simplicity, renouncing worldly delights. Thus, and only thus, will we serve only one Master, and not two masters, for we cannot serve both God and mammon (Mt 6:24). If we want to possess the kingdom of God, we have to renounce everything of this world, as did the man who discovered the buried treasure. He had to sell all he had to obtain the treasure, which is the kingdom of God (Mt 13:44). The kingdom of God, which we seek, is a pearl of great price, which, Jesus tells us, is only obtainable at the price of all else (Mt 13:45-46). “So therefore,” Jesus said, “whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:33). St. Paul said the same thing. “If then you have been raised with Christ,” he said, “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1-2). About himself, he said that he was dead to the world, crucified to the world, for the love of Christ. “But far be it from me to glory,” he said, “except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

This is the evangelical poverty proclaimed by Jesus in the beatitudes. This is to live only for God with all one’s heart, without division. This is the first commandment of Jesus, to love God with all one’s heart, all one’s soul, all one’s mind, and all one’s strength (Mk 12:30). This is to live a simple and austere life for the love of Jesus, for “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24).

Those who ignore these counsels are like a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle (Mt 19:23-24). Woe to them, for they have already had their consolation. “But woe to you that are rich,” said Jesus, “for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:24). Where have they received their consolation? In the delights and pleasures of this world, and thus they have divided their heart. This is the same thing that Abraham said to the rich glutton “who feasted sumptuously every day” (Lk 16:19). From paradise, he told him, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish” (Lk 16:25). He already received his consolation. We should avoid such a scenario. It is better to live a life of perfection, a life in which we leave everything of this world to find our happiness only in God, not dividing our heart with the pleasures of this world. Therefore Jesus said to the rich young man, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). Truly, those that are first in this world will be last in the kingdom of God, while those that make themselves last in this world for the love of Christ, will be the first in the kingdom of God (Mt 19:30). We should lose all for Christ and consider it rubbish in order to gain Christ (Phil 3:8). “… whatever gain I had,” said St. Paul, “I counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil 3:7).

“Blessed are you that hunger now,” Jesus said, “for you shall be satisfied” (Lk 6:21), but “Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger” (Lk 6:25). Here we see sketched
in a few words this entire teaching. “Blessed are you poor,” he says, “for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk 6:20), “But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:24). Blessed are those who put this into practice and live a simple, austere life for the love of God in order to love him with all their heart, with a heart that is not divided by the pleasures of this world. They will have an undivided heart, not divided in its love for God. Theirs is the kingdom of God, both now and hereafter.

**REJOICE IN PERSECUTION**

Monday, 6\(^{th}\) Week of the Year
James 1:1-11; Ps. 118; Mark 8:11-13

“Count it all Joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials” (Jas. 1:2).

The Christian life is full of trials. If we live as God directs us, we will find ourselves in various conflicts with the expectations of other people who do not understand why we act as we do. Since the fundamental principles of Christ and those of the world are so often opposed to each other, the world will often neither understand nor accept us. We will be different because of Christ, and this difference will cause hatred, rejection, and persecution (Mt 10:34-36). Jesus himself prepared us for this, saying, “you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes” (Matt. 10:22-23). Jesus warned us that this is what our life would be like if we follow him with all our heart, as he wishes us to do. Our life will be full of persecution. “A disciple is not above his teacher,” he said, “nor a servant above his master; it is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (Matt. 10:24-25).

We should not be afraid when this happens. If necessary, we can flee to another location, to another city and take refuge there, but we are not to expect that our life will have less persecution than Christ’s life. He himself told us that it would have more!

But this should not break our spirit. St. James tells us that we should count it all joy when we meet various trials (Jas. 1:2). Jesus told us the same. “Blessed,” he said, “are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven … Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:10, 12). How true this is! We are blessed when we are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for then God rewards us, and his Spirit resides upon us (1 Peter 4:14). It is in the midst of persecution for the sake of Christ and his will that we feel his peace and true happiness in our hearts. God rewards us for being faithful and suffering for him. This is when we confess Christ before men, and he acknowledges us before his Father (Matt. 10:32).

This is our life. This is our cross. This is our happiness. Thus do we offer ourselves as a sacrifice of love to the Father, and thus does God reward us with the gift of his Spirit and joy. Therefore “Count it all joy, brethren, when you meet various trials” (Jas. 1:2).
“If you are reproached for the name of Christ,” says St. Peter, “you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Peter 4:14). Therefore “rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:13).

LOSING ONE’S LIFE TO SAVE IT

Thursday after Ash Wednesday
Deut. 30:15-20; Ps. 1; Luke 9:22-25

“And he said to all, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

The cross of Jesus Christ redeemed us and brought us the kingdom of God in which we can now live, forgiven for our sins and reconciled with God. It is a kingdom of heavenly peace on earth that will come in its fullness at the Parousia of Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven but exists already ahead of time for those who believe in him.

But today we see that the cross is for us too in the sense that we also have to bear the cross if we want to be Jesus’s followers. How should a Christian live? What is the purpose of our new life of faith, of our new life in Christ? We are not here for a life of pleasure in this world but in order to deny ourselves and take up our cross every day and follow Jesus, as Jesus tells us today. This means to preach the truth of his gospel and offer ourselves in sacrifice with him to the Father. If we do this in a way that is faithful to his will, we will be persecuted in this world. Those who accept this and continue living for him with all their heart and mind will be his true followers. They will bear their cross of persecution and rejection every day. Thus will be their life in this world.

In addition, the Christian life is one of sacrifice and renunciation of self, for we wish to serve but one master (Matt. 6:24) and have only one treasure in this world (Matt. 6:19-21), namely Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. If we want this treasure, we have to sacrifice everything else to obtain it as did the man who discovered the treasure buried in a field. He sold everything he had in order to be able to buy that field and all it contained and thus gain possession of the treasure (Matt. 13:44).

What does this parable teach us? It teaches us that if we want to obtain the kingdom of God, we have to renounce everything else, all the pleasures of the world, which only divide our hearts. Only in this way will we be able to possess this great treasure. To possess the kingdom of God is to have Jesus Christ shining in our hearts, filling us with heavenly peace and the joy of the Holy Spirit. But to receive this we have to have an undivided heart in our love for him, not divided by worldly pleasures.

Therefore Jesus says today, “Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it” (Luke 9:24). We lose our life for his sake by denying ourselves, by renouncing the world, and by renouncing the pleasures of the world. Therefore during Lent we sacrifice the unnecessary delights of the table, and other things too, something we should be doing all year long, but for those who have not done so, they should at least do so during Lent. Thus they will deny themselves, take up their cross of sacrifice, sell all to obtain the treasure, have only one treasure, and serve
only one master. In this way they will lose their life in this world for the sake of Christ, and in losing it they will save it.

FASTING: WHY AND HOW?

Friday after Ash Wednesday
Isa. 58:1-9; Ps. 50; Matt. 9:14-15

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast’” (Matt. 9:15).

The time of Jesus’s ministry was a special time in salvation history. It was the messianic time when the Messiah was physically present on earth. Jesus was the bridegroom, and his ministry was the time of his wedding with the New Israel. Therefore his disciples did not fast during those special wedding days although he himself fasted for forty days in the desert. But he said that when the bridegroom is physically taken away from them, then they will fast. We are in those days now, and during Lent we emphasize fasting and its importance in the life of a Christian.

Isaiah teaches us today that our fasting should be accompanied by alms giving and helping the poor if we want it to have a good effect. He says: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free … Is it not to share your bread with the hungry … Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard” (Isa. 58:6, 7, 8). If when we fast we also help the poor with our wisdom and money, our light will break forth like the dawn, we shall shine with the righteousness of God, and the glory of the Lord shall be with us.

Why does fasting have such power? It is because fasting cuts away the things that divide our hearts and enables us to have an undivided heart in our love for God. By fasting, we reduce our food to the essentials for health and set aside delicacies. This is something we should do in every aspect of our life in order to be able to live only for God with all our heart, with an undivided heart. Thus we can say with the psalmist, “Thou art my Lord; I have no good apart from thee … Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows … The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup” (Ps. 15:2, 4, 5).

If one fasts in a healthy way, one can fast every day of the year—it can become a whole way of life. What I do is eat only once a day, at noon, never eat meat or use seasoning, except salt, and never eat delicacies (things made of sugar, artificial sweeteners, or white flour) or fried foods. Thus one can eat all the essentials every day and in sufficient quantity for health but without dividing the heart with unnecessary pleasures. By eating in this way, my food is completely digested when I rise at three in the morning for prayer and contemplation. For contemplation, it is important to have an empty stomach. I then prolong this time with God in silence during the rest of the morning, quietly doing my work; and at noon, I eat again. We should then organize all the other parts of our life so they are in harmony with our fasting, avoiding unnecessary
pleasures of the world in general in every aspect of our life so that our life is harmonious and homogeneous.

MISSIONARY ZEAL AND THE INTERNET

Saturday after Ash Wednesday
Isa. 58:9-14; Ps. 85; Luke 5:27-32

“There are who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32).

Today we see the zeal of Jesus Christ to go out and call sinners to repentance. He goes, seeking them out where they live and work. He called Levi while he was sitting in his tax office, and he went to a banquet in Levi’s house to call tax collectors and sinners. He was the physician, sent by the Father to call sinners to repentance and salvation; and he did not just wait for them to come to him but actively went out himself in search of them.

We should have this same missionary spirit and zeal. As Christians, we have received salvation through Jesus Christ, and we should share this salvation with the whole world, using our talents, wisdom, and money—all that we have. We should not be content with just waiting until they come to us. We should take the initiative and go out in search of them, where they live and work.

A new way of doing this is to use the internet for evangelization. Through the internet, we can preach Christ and God’s salvation in him unto the ends of the Earth, in all parts of the world simultaneously, in every country, without ever leaving our home, our hermitage, and our cell. By means of the internet, we can use our money and wisdom, leaving all for Christ in order to preach the gospel to the ends of the Earth and at the same time live a monastic, contemplative, and even hermit life within an enclosure, in the desert, far from the world, in solitude and silence. Thus we can exercise the same missionary zeal as Jesus Christ, seeking out sinners in their homes, offices, and places of work, preaching salvation to them through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross and at the same time live a contemplative and even hermit life.

This is giving bread to the hungry and aiding the afflicted. In doing so our own light will dawn, and we will live in the glory of God, as Isaiah says today: “If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not” (Isa. 58:10-11).

If we want to live in this light, we should have the same missionary zeal as Jesus Christ. We should have the same zeal as the man who gave a great banquet, to which his invited guests did not come; who then said to his servant, “Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.” And when the servant did this and returning, told his master that there was still room; his master said to him, “Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:21-23). So should our missionary zeal be to preach Christ
on the highways and hedges and unto the ends of the Earth so that all may hear, and the house of God be filled.

LENT, OUR ANNUAL RETREAT

1st Sunday of Lent
Deut. 26:4-10; Ps. 90; Rom. 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13

“And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry” (Luke 4:1-2).

Today is the First Sunday of Lent, a time when we commemorate the paschal mystery, which save us. It is also a time of penance and renunciation of the pleasures of the world, especially the delights of the table. It is the time par excellence of fasting. It is also a time of prayer, and so we see Jesus leaving the world to pray and fast in the desert for forty days. And finally, it is a time to help the poor. It is, as we see, a spiritually rich time.

The paschal mystery is the center of Lent, and Lent culminates with the celebration of the Paschal Vigil on Holy Saturday. This is the mystery of our salvation. We live from this mystery. By it our sins are forgiven, and we have new life, the life of God within us. Through this mystery we are saved from eternal death. By the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—which is the paschal mystery—the gates of heaven are opened for us.

It is true that Jesus Christ “was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). By his death he perfectly satisfied divine justice, for he suffered for our sins. He carried our sins upon himself (2 Cor. 5:21) and suffered the just punishment for them in place of us. He substituted for us before the Father and paid our debt of suffering for our sins to allow us to go free, absolved from the death sentence. In his death is our life. In his death is the death of our death. And in his resurrection we have new life, a new chance, a new beginning. We rise with him now to a new and illuminated life, to a forgiven and justified life. He illuminates us, and we walk in the splendor of his resurrection, in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4). This is the paschal mystery that we commemorate during Lent and celebrate at the Paschal Vigil.

St. Paul speaks of the paschal mystery today, saying, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved … For, every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:9-10, 13).

This salvation is an experience of new life. Through the death of Christ—if we believe in him in our heart and publicly confess him with our lips—the pain of our guilt will be removed from us, and we will rise with him to walk in the light of his resurrection. He will shine in our hearts, illuminating us from within (2 Cor. 4:6). We experience this cleansing action of Christ in our spirits above all in the sacrament of penance, and we experience his interior illumination above all in the eucharist.
The great biblical type or image of the paschal mystery is the Exodus from Egypt. And so during Lent we read the book of Exodus. The first reading today speaks of the Exodus, saying, “The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 26:8-9). It is the Lord who freed Israel from slavery, destroyed her enemies in the sea, and brought them to the promised land, “a land flowing with milk and honey.” This is a type or image of what God does to us in Jesus Christ. He frees us from the slavery of sin, vanquishes our great enemy, Satan, on the cross, and brings us into a new world, a new age—that is, the kingdom of heaven on earth, present now in Jesus Christ. By being born again in him through faith and baptism, we live in his kingdom of universal peace over the whole earth, with our sins forgiven and our guilt removed. And we await the consummation of the kingdom of God in the future with the coming in glory of Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven.

Made new in this way and living in a new world and in a new age, walking in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ; we now live in a new way. We live only for God in all that we do. Our happiness is now in God, and no longer in the pleasures of the world (Col. 3:2). Therefore, during Lent we make an effort to do more diligently what we should be doing all year long, all the time—that is, we renounce the unnecessary pleasures of the world to have a completely undivided heart in our love for God, to live for him alone. Therefore, we fast during Lent. Those who have not been doing this during the whole year should at least do it during Lent.

So Lent is our annual retreat, a time to meditate on the paschal mystery, with prayer, fasting, and the giving of alms to the poor.

**PETER’S FAITH AND THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM**

Feast of the Chair of St. Peter, February 22
1 Peter 5:1-4; Ps. 22; Matt. 16:13-19

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter. The chair is like the throne, a symbol of the authority in the Church of Peter and his successors, an authority given to Peter on this occasion by Jesus. Christ gave to all the apostles the power that what they bind or loose on Earth would be bound or loosed in heaven (Matt. 18:18), but to Peter alone he gave the keys of the kingdom of heaven. “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus said to Peter (Matt. 16:19). He gave Peter the keys because the Church was to be built upon the rock of Peter and his successors. “You are Peter,” Jesus said to him, “and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). The powers of death shall not prevail against it because this is to be the structure of the Church forever—always built on Peter. Jesus gave Simon the new name, Peter, meaning rock (John 1:42), because Peter confessed
Peter’s faith is fundamental. It is through faith in Jesus as the Messiah that we can enter into the kingdom of heaven on Earth, the messianic kingdom promised by the prophets. This is the new order, the new age, which begins in the world now, ahead of time. It is the kingdom of the last days, the universal kingdom of heavenly peace over all the Earth, a kingdom in which we are made new creatures, new men, forgiven for our sins, and filled with the holy Spirit. It is a kingdom of true happiness, peace, and reconciliation with God and our neighbor.

The power of this kingdom comes from the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins. He absorbs the divine wrath against our sins in his death in order to free us from this wrath. He suffered this wrath for us to give us the freedom of the children of God in the kingdom of heaven on Earth.

But we also await the second advent of Jesus Christ in glory with his saints on the clouds of heaven in great light to consummate this kingdom, establishing a reign of righteousness and splendor on Earth for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-7), with Jesus Christ reigning as the Sun of righteousness (Mal. 4:2). Then “the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end,” the angel Gabriel announced to Mary (Luke 1:32-33). Then “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid” (Isa. 11:6), and all the messianic prophecies will be fulfilled on the millennial Earth. At the end of the thousand-year reign of righteousness will come the new heavens and the new Earth (Rev. 21:1), and the new and heavenly Jerusalem will descend from heaven (Rev. 21:2) and settle upon the new earth, and God will dwell with us forever in the new world, the eternal state (Rev. 21:3-22:5).

SEEK YE FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD, AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS

Thursday, 1st Week of Lent
Esther 14:1, 3-5, 12-14; Ps. 137; Matt. 7:7-12

“Ask it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7).

God wants to grant our petitions if we ask in accord with his will (1 John 5:14), in the name of Christ (John 14:13-14; 15:16), and with faith, believing that we will receive what we have requested (Jas. 1:5-8; Matt. 21:21-22). It also helps to pray with others if we can, for “if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven” (Matt. 18:19).

So what should we ask for? Above all, we should ask to live in the kingdom of God, the kingdom of righteousness on Earth, so that we may enjoy this great blessing that Jesus brought into the world. This is what Jesus himself told us to pray for above all other things, saying, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Matt. 6:33).
Jesus will grant us this petition, for he came into the world precisely to proclaim and inaugurate the kingdom of heaven on earth. His first recorded adult words are, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). The kingdom that he brought is the fulfillment of what the Jews were awaiting: the peaceful kingdom of the Messiah, the son of David, reigning on the throne of David forever, a universal kingdom of peace and righteousness over the whole Earth that would remain forever. It would be a kingdom of peace in our hearts and of peace with God, a kingdom in which God forgives our sins and removes our guilt. It is a kingdom in which the Holy Spirit fills our hearts, giving us true happiness and heavenly peace, a kingdom in which the risen and glorified Christ shines in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), illuminating us from within.

If we ask with faith to live in this kingdom, not doubting but believing in our hearts that we will receive our request; Jesus will grant us our petition if we make it in his name, for it is his will to give us this. This is praying in accord with God’s will, and the Bible says that “if we ask anything according to his will he hears us” (1 John 5:14). We know that it is his will to give us this, because it was for this that he came into the world—namely to establish a reign of heavenly peace on Earth and in our hearts. He came to die on the cross as a sacrificial victim, absorbing in himself the divine wrath against our sins to free us from this wrath. This is how he brought us this kingdom of peace and light. If we make this request with faith, he will shine in our hearts, making us a new creation, new men, to walk in the new light of his resurrection, in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4) and in the newness of the Spirit (Rom. 7:6).

THE ONE WHO REPENTS WILL LIVE

Friday, 1st Week of Lent
Ezek. 18:21-28; Ps. 129; Matt. 5:20-26

“If a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die” (Ezek. 18:21).

We are individually responsible before God. “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deut. 24:16). It is true that we are influenced by our culture, and that many choose to do evil because they are influenced by their evil environment. It is also true that the innocent suffer because of the sins of the majority—for example, even the good, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, suffered in the exile, which was caused by the sins of the nation. Yet before God, each individual is responsible for himself. God will judge each person individually, giving eternal life to the good and eternal death to the wicked. This is what Ezekiel is teaching us today, namely that “the soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Ezek. 18:20).

Therefore it is important that we leave behind our wicked ways in order to live before the Lord. If a wicked man converts from his wickedness, he will not die. “None of the
transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness which he has done he shall live” (Ezek. 18:22). At times we can become discouraged and think that we have lost the way of peace because we have fallen into an imperfection or sin and are suffering God’s wrath for our sin, have lost his peace, and feel the pain of guilt in our hearts. But Ezekiel tells us today that we have hope, that there is hope for the sinner and for the wicked man if he converts and “turns away from all his sins” (Ezek. 18:21). He does not have to remain like this, punished in his heart and sad. God wants to forgive him.

Our forgiveness comes from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. He paid the just price for our liberation from this punishment and sadness in our hearts. He paid the price for the return of the peace of God to our hearts. He suffered for us, in our place, and instead of us this same pain in his heart—namely, alienation from the Father—caused by our sins and imperfections. Therefore in repenting and invoking the merits of his death on the cross, our whole world opens up. It is the new world of the redeemed of the Lord. It is the freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). It is the new life of those who are risen with Christ to walk in the light of his resurrection. It is the freedom of those who have been freed from the burden of their sins and guilt. It is life in the Spirit.

There is always hope for the man of faith. He can always return to God through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The sinner can always return to the Lord, repent for his sins, be saved and absolved by Jesus Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit.

IS THERE A CURE FOR DEPRESSION?

Saturday, 1st Week of Lent
Deut. 26:16-19; Ps. 118; Matt. 5:43-48

“This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances; you shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 26:16).

We want to be happy. God wants us to be happy, and he teaches us what we should do to be happy. What does he say? He says, obey me, do my will, keep all my laws and rules. He says, “You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). He also says, “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who do no wrong, but walk in his ways!” (Ps. 118:1-3).

But how often do we fail in this? We forget what we are supposed to do, we make unintentional mistakes, and we see that often we are not doing God’s will. We are not perfect in our way of living and fall into many unintended imperfections, with the result that we often feel bad, guilty, and depressed. We feel like sinners, far from God, and we lose our peace, God’s peace in our hearts. Instead of his peace and love, we feel his wrath against us for our imperfections, and we fall into sadness and depression. We lose the light and splendor of Christ in our hearts.

So what should we do? What is the solution to this problem? What can cure us? How can we regain the peace of Christ in our hearts?
It seems to me that the more we live in splendor with God through Jesus Christ, rejoicing in the true happiness he gives us; all the more do we fall into darkness and sadness of spirit when we see that we have disobeyed him and fallen into an imperfection. These two things—light and darkness—go together, despite the fact that we wish they didn’t. We see this in the psalms. There is a constant variation of joy and sorrow: joy in living with God, obeying him perfectly; and sorrow or depression when we fall out of his love and instead experience his wrath for falling into an imperfection or sin. We must accept this. The saints suffered from this variation. The book, *The Imitation of Christ*, is full of this variation of inner light and inner darkness.

But when we fall into this sadness, we have a Savior, Jesus Christ, who suffered this inner darkness on the cross for us. He suffered the wrath of God, the abandonment of his Father (Mark 15:34), because of our sins, which were laid upon him (2 Cor. 5:21; Isa. 53:4-6; 1 Pet. 2:24). He suffered this darkness to free us from it when we invoke the merits of his suffering in our place on the cross. This invocation of his merits is especially powerful in the sacrament of penance (John 21:21-23), for “if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven” (Matt. 18:19).

THE COMING GLORY OF THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM

2nd Sunday of Lent
Gen. 15:5-12, 17-18; Ps. 26; Phil. 3:17-4:1; Luke 9:28-36

“And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29).

Today we see Jesus Christ in splendor. It is a glimpse of his glory as the only Son of God. In his providence, God gave us this glorious glimpse to strengthen us in our life of faith now in this world where there is so much darkness. In the Bible, there are many glimpses like this of the glorious future that awaits us. In fact, we await a glorious kingdom of righteousness and peace over all the Earth. The Jews had this hope, for this is how their prophets spoke. They prophesied a kingdom of splendor that would come, a kingdom of righteousness that would fill the Earth and remain forever. Daniel, for example, spoke of a stone that was cut not by hands that would destroy all the kingdoms of the Earth, become a great mountain, fill the whole world, and remain forever (Dan. 2:34-35, 44). This stone is the kingdom of God.

The Jews hoped for the Messiah, the son of David, who would be great, be born of a virgin, and be called God-with-us, Emmanuel (Isa. 7:14). He would also be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). His kingdom would be a universal kingdom of heavenly peace on Earth, and “of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore” (Isa. 9:7). The psalmist said, “In his days may righteousness flourish, and peace abound till the moon be no more! May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth!” (Ps. 71:7-8), and
“may all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!” (Ps. 71:11). This king, the Messiah, when he comes “shall command peace to the nations,” prophesied Zechariah, and “his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the Earth” (Zech. 9:10).

This is a vision of glory to be realized in the future. This is what the Jews expected, and this was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He brought this peaceful kingdom to the Earth in a hidden form that will later be gloriously manifested in all its splendor in his second advent when he comes again with the clouds of heaven, accompanied by all his holy ones. We are now awaiting the manifestation of this glory.

God’s promise to Abraham was the beginning of the revelation of this future glory. We see today that God promised him much land. “To your descendants I give this land,” said the Lord to him, “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen. 15:18). His descendants would inherit it forever. “All the land which you see,” said the Lord to Abraham, “I will give to you and to your descendants for ever” (Gen. 13:15). “And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession” (Gen. 17:8). This promise was partially fulfilled for a while under David and Solomon, but we still look for its complete and lasting fulfillment in the future.

All these glorious prophecies of a kingdom of righteousness on Earth were fulfilled in Jesus Christ in a hidden way. He was like the tiny mustard seed that would one day become a great bush. So we are awaiting his Parousia to see the kingdom that he brought to Earth come in manifest glory. It is good and important for us that the prophets gave us these glimpses of glory. We now live from this vision of future glory that will one day be ours. The transfiguration is another glimpse of the future glory of Jesus Christ when he will return in his risen and glorified body to illuminate the Earth. Then every eye will see him, “for as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of man be in his day” (Luke 17:24). Then he will come to establish his millennial kingdom of righteousness on Earth, and we will be transformed (1 Cor. 15:51). “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43), and the Sun of righteousness shall reign (Mal. 4:2).

According to the Apocalypse, this reign of righteousness on Earth will last for a thousand years, during which time Satan will be bound (Rev. 20:4-7). Then after a brief time, the present world will be destroyed, the new heavens and the new Earth will be established (Rev. 21:1), the new and heavenly Jerusalem will descend (Rev. 21:2) upon the new Earth, and the eternal state will begin.

This is our hope. St. Paul says that God has not rejected his people (Rom. 11:1), and that in the future “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26)—not every individual, but Israel as a nation, “for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). So we hope for the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that his descendants will possess the whole land of Canaan forever, “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen. 15:18). The scriptures give us a glimpse now of this future glory, which will be fulfilled on the millennial Earth. We also glimpse today the glory that Christ will have in those days, reigning over his kingdom of righteousness on earth—his whole person will shine, as it shone on the mount of Transfiguration.

So we are to prepare ourselves now for this glory, for we do not know the hour of his coming. We therefore avoid the style of many, whose “god is their belly” (Phil. 3:19),
for “our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:20-21).

HOW GOD SAVES US FROM DEPRESSION

Monday, 2nd Week of Lent
Dan. 9:4-10; Ps. 78; Luke 6:36-38

“All Israel has transgressed thy law and turned aside, refusing to obey thy voice. And the curse and oath which are written in the law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us because we have sinned against him” (Dan. 9:11).

Today we read Daniel’s prayer of repentance for the sins of his people, which have resulted in their being exiled to Babylon. Because the people sinned, the wrath of God has been enkindled against them. Daniel says that all that the people is suffering is the punishment of God that Moses predicted would fall upon them if they did not obey his laws. Moses told them in God’s name, saying, “If you will not hearken to me and will not do all these commandments … I will do this to you: I will appoint over you sudden terror, consumption and fever that waste the eyes and cause life to pine away … I will set my face against you, and you shall be smitten before your enemies” (Lev. 26:14, 16, 17). Moses also said, “If you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God … the Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out one way against them, and flee seven ways before them” (Deut. 28:15, 25).

So we see that God in his wrath against his people for their sins punishes them. Therefore Daniel prayed, “O Lord, according to all thy righteous acts, let thy anger and thy wrath turn away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy hill; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people have become a byword among all who are round about us” (Dan. 9:16).

So is our life also. When we obey God, we are blessed and happy, but when we disobey him, he punishes us in his anger and wrath. A good and just God always has just anger against every sin we commit, and he lets us feel his wrath in the pain he causes us to feel in our heart. When he is angry with us, we lose our peace—which is his peace—and we experience his anger in our heart in the pain, sadness, darkness, and depression that we feel in our spirit.

This is why we need a Savior; and God has sent us a Savior, Jesus Christ, his only Son, who died on the cross, abandoned by his Father (Mark 15:34). On the cross he suffered the just and necessary anger and wrath of God for all our sins, and he will absorb all this just anger for whoever invokes the merits of his death on the cross, especially in the sacrament of penance (John 20:21-23). This is the great salvation that God gives us for this sorrow and depression of heart that we suffer whenever we disobey him, whenever we fall into an imperfection or sin. Thus without violating his perfect justice, he saves us from this just punishment of our spirit, for the just price and punishment has been paid and suffered for us by his Son on the cross. God himself suffered our punishment for us to free us from it.

THE RICH GLUTTON
“But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish’” (Luke 16:25).

We see today that not everyone is saved. Some are eternally tormented in hell, as is the rich glutton here, for “between us and you,” as Abraham said, “a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us” (Luke 16:26). We see the same thing in Jesus’s teaching about the final judgment—those who have not lived rightly will go to eternal fire. “Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’ ... And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:41, 46). This does not mean that Christ’s sacrifice was not perfect or that it lacked the power to save everyone. It was fully successful and powerful to save all the elect—that is, all those whom God had predestined for salvation, which are those who respond with faith.

But why was this rich glutton tormented in eternal fire? Jesus tells us that he “feasted sumptuously every day” (Luke 16:19). And Abraham tells him that he already received his reward in his lifetime, and now he is in anguish (Luke 16:25). He lived a self-indulgent life, centered in worldly pleasures and delights, feasting sumptuously every day. So he has already had his reward. Jesus says the same thing in the beatitudes. “Woe to you that are rich,” he says, “for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24). On the contrary, he said, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20).

A self-indulgent life, filled with worldly pleasures, is a divided life at best, divided between God on the one hand and the false god of the unnecessary pleasures of this world on the other hand. It is a life that has a divided heart, that does not live only for God with all its love (Mark 12:30). Those who divide themselves like this are like a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle (Matt. 19:24). Therefore Jesus said, “It will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:23). They do not serve only one master (Matt. 6:24). They do not have but one treasure only (Matt. 6:19-21). They are like seed planted among thorns that choke them so that they do not bear fruit. “They are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” (Luke 8:14).

How much better to live only for God, and completely for him, with all the love of our hearts, without division!
THE SAVING DEATH OF JESUS CHRIST

Friday, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Week of Lent

Gen. 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28; Ps. 104; Matt. 21:33-43, 45-46

“The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Matt. 21:42; Ps. 117:22-23).

In the first reading, Joseph, the favorite son of his father, is sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers and there becomes the governor of all Egypt and saves his brothers in time of famine. He is a figure of Christ, who in being rejected and killed by his own people, came to be the Savior of all who believe in him.

In today’s gospel, we have a parable about the salvation that Jesus Christ would bring to the world by his death. He is the son whom his father, the owner of a vineyard, sent to the tenants to receive his share of the fruit. After rejecting, maltreating, and even killing the servants that the owner had previously sent to them, they now kill even his son. But Jesus gives the interpretation that this son—who is himself—is the “stone which the builders rejected [that] has become the head of the corner” (Matt. 21:42; Ps. 117:22).

This parable and the history of Joseph in Egypt are figures of the death of Christ and its saving significance. Although his brothers rejected him, Joseph became their savior; and the son killed by the tenants has become the cornerstone, the Savior of the world. Moreover, “this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Matt. 21:42; Ps. 117:23).

The marvel is that only through the death of the Son of God can we be saved. It was a necessary death, for a just God could not justly forgive us without the death of his Son in payment of our just sentence of death. But once paid by Christ, the just Father could forgive us. He forgave the Old Testament saints ahead of time through the merits of the death of Christ on the cross, and now everyone who believes in Christ will be saved from the just punishment of God for his sins. He will be made a new creature, a new man.

Christ infinitely pleased his Father by his death on the cross, which was a sacrifice of love to his Father. And the Father laid our sins on him and punished them in him so that he would not have to punish them in us. Thus he freed us from punishment and restored us in his love, pouring into us his Holy Spirit and true happiness (Rom. 5:5).

Without a Savior, life would not be worth living, nor would it be tolerable; but with the Savior, we have the happiness of God and the light of Christ shining in our hearts, illuminating us from within. We have a new life in Christ, a life of peace and joy, for in dying for us, he established the kingdom of heaven on Earth, the kingdom which brings his heavenly peace into our hearts. This is the kingdom that will be definitively established on the Earth in the last days, the millennium of righteousness, with Christ reigning over us in glory. It is anticipated now for all who believe in him; and in him, we enjoy its fruits ahead of time. It is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which has brought us this salvation, freed us from the depression of our sins and guilt, and enabled us to walk in the new light that streams from his risen and glorified body. Thus do we anticipate the future glory of the millennial Earth.
THE PRODIGAL SON AND GOD'S JUST MERCY

Saturday, 2nd Week of Lent
Mic. 7:14-15, 18-20; Ps. 102; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

“Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:22-24).

This is the treatment that the prodigal son received when he returned home repentant before his father. He expected only to be treated as one of his father’s hired servants, but it was not so. When his father saw him from a distance, he “ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

Jesus teaches us that this is how God will receive us when we repent and return to him. It is for this reason that God sent his Son into the world—to call us to repentance and faith in the Son so that we could receive God’s mercy and forgiveness. This is the form that his mercy took. Although God is just and had to forgive us in a just way, his justice is infinitely merciful. That is, God himself—in the person of his Son, who is one being with him—suffered the just sentence due to our sins in order to be able to forgive us justly without having to punish us. He punished his Son instead. See how merciful his justice is! It is in fact more merciful than if he were to forgive us outright without regards to justice. We are looking at infinite mercy and infinite justice. It is the mercy and justice of God.

To receive this just and merciful forgiveness, we have to believe in Jesus Christ, confess our sins (especially in the sacrament of reconciliation, John 20:21-23), repent, and change our bad behavior. We have to invoke the merits of his death on the cross for us, whereby he absorbed the divine wrath for us and suffered it instead of us. By invoking these merits in faith—especially in the sacrament—he will absorb this wrath for us, and we will instead experience God’s infinite mercy and love in our hearts. He will justly forgive us, take from us all sense of guilt, and make merry with us, and we will rejoice with him. We will be like someone who has died and come back to life. God will dress us in the best robe and kill the fatted calf for us.

This is a description of the joy of the Christian life. We always need this forgiveness anew, for we are always falling into new imperfections that darken our spirit and make us feel sad and depressed. We have to return to our Savior Jesus Christ again and again with a repentant spirit and ask him for his mercy and forgiveness. He will always grant this humble request. “He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities underfoot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19).

This is the great message of the New Testament—the mercy of God in Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of our sins and imperfections, and the restoration of God’s grace and love in our hearts.
“Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14).

Jesus Christ gives us living water, as he said to the Samaritan woman, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10). Christ promised to give us living water that refreshes our exhausted spirits. “Come to me,” he said, “all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). He can do this because he is the Savior of the world, as the Samaritans discovered and said, “We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world” (John 4:42). And how we need a Savior! Only a Savior can make our life livable; for without a Savior, we would be in darkness, confusion, guilt, and sadness. This is the great message that the Church preaches: There is a Savior, and he gives us living water, which is the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39). With this gift, we have the love of God in our hearts and are illuminated from within. Through Jesus Christ, we are at last at peace: at peace with God, at peace with ourselves, and at peace with our neighbor. Christ gives us all that the prophets longed for: living water, the life of God in our hearts, the light of God in our spirits, and a peace that knows no bounds. “I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,” prophesied Isaiah (Isa. 43:20). This will be in the messianic times.

With Jesus Christ we are now in the messianic times, the times of fulfillment and blessing, the times of peace on Earth. All this is in Jesus Christ, for those that believe in him. We can live now in these times of prosperity and happiness of spirit, for we have seen a great light (Isa. 9:2). The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul says today (Rom. 5:5), and “justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

All of this is because “while we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). We were those ungodly ones, lost in darkness and guilt, far from God, sad, and confused. Christ then made all the difference for us. He freed us from this sad and lost condition, and poured the love of God into our hearts (Rom. 5:5), filling what was empty and rejoicing our spirits. He is the light that illuminates us, shining in our hearts with the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:6). He transforms us into his own glory—from glory to glory—remaking us in his likeness (2 Cor. 3:18), for God has “shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

Christ can do all this because he is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He is the lamb of sacrifice that died for the ungodly, thus absorbing the wrath of God against us for our sins, and so restoring the peace of God, heavenly peace, in our exhausted and empty hearts. His sacrifice removes our guilt, for he justly
paid our debt of interior suffering due to us for our sins. Thus has God enabled himself to pour his love and light into us.

This is the living water that he promises and gives us today. Of this, he spoke to the Samaritan woman. These are the rivers of living water that he makes flow in our interior (John 7:37-39). But he had to die to gain for us this salvation, this great messianic gift of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39). With his resurrection, all was fulfilled; and on the day of Pentecost, he poured this gift upon his Church.

Jesus Christ came to give life to the world. Through faith in him and by invoking the merits of his death, we can live in his messianic kingdom now, this kingdom of peace on earth, peace with God, and peace in our hearts. His kingdom has come. The kingdom of heaven is here, and we can enter into it and live in it, with the Holy Spirit flowing within us like rivers of living water (John 7:37-39; 4:14, 10).

But all this makes us “rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2 KJV). Our ultimate hope is for the kingdom of Christ on the millennial Earth when he returns in glory in his Parousia or second advent. Then the Old Testament prophecies will be fulfilled in an even more literal way when the lion and the lamb shall live together in peace (Isa. 11:6-9) and “living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem” (Zech. 14:8), for then “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together” (Isa. 40:5), and “the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13), and the Sun of righteousness shall reign (Mal, 4:2). Then shall Satan be bound for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4), and the saints shall live and reign upon earth with the glorified Christ for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4). We can anticipate this life of glory now through our faith in Jesus Christ.

THERE IS A CURE FOR DEPRESSION

Monday, 3rd Week of Lent
2 Kings 5:1-15; Ps. 41-42; Luke 4:24-30

“And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, ‘Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean’” (2 Kings 5:10).

This is the history of Naaman, the Syrian commander whom the king of Syria sent to the king of Israel to cleanse him of his leprosy. He was then sent to the prophet Elisha, who sent him a messenger telling him to wash in the Jordan seven times. He did so and was made clean. “So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean” (2 Kings 5:14).

Naaman was renewed and cured of his leprosy by washing seven times in the Jordan. We are renewed and cured of the leprosy of sin and guilt, which cause depression, by washing ourselves in Christ through the sacraments of baptism and penance. We can think like Naaman, though, and despise these sacraments, but remember—it was only when Naaman humbled himself and washed in the Jordan that he was cured of his leprosy. How many today disdain the sacrament of penance (John 20:21-23) in
particular? But if we did not need it, would Christ have given it to us? He said to his apostles: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (John 20:23).

Naaman did not think that washing in the Jordan was important or worth doing; but when he did so, he was cleansed like a child. The sacraments of baptism and penance have even more power—they cleanse the soul and cure depression. How many people seek for a cure for this sickness of the soul but reject the cure that God has given us, thinking it too simple or that it is only for children, not for grown men? So they continue to suffer and are not cured.

The power of these two sacraments comes from the passion and death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The Son of God himself was sent by his Father to suffer the curse of the Father (Gal. 3:13) as a substitute for us. And the efficacy of this substitution is personally and individually communicated to us through these two sacraments. The curse of God and his wrath against human sin are absorbed by the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross. The result is that we can go free, cleansed of our sins, imperfections, and the guilt that causes us depression. Thus is this sickness of the soul cured, and we are cleansed and renewed.

We are now in Lent, the time when we meditate on the passion and resurrection of the Lord and the saving and renewing power of this mystery. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ cleanse us of sin and give us new life. They remove from us the burden of guilt, which saddens our spirit, and they give us the joy of the resurrection. We rise with Christ to a new, cleansed, and risen life, to walk with him in his light. By means of these two sacraments, the saving power of the paschal mystery is communicated and channeled to us in a personal and individual way.

GOD’S REIGN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS ON EARTH

Thursday, 3rd Week of Lent
Jer. 7:23-28; Ps. 94; Luke 11:14-23

“But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20).

In this important verse, Jesus teaches us that in him the kingdom of God has arrived in the world. His exorcisms are the proof of its arrival.

The Jews expected that the kingdom of God would come in the last days, at the end of the world, when all God’s promises to Abraham and David would be fulfilled, and the anointed son of David would reign in righteousness on Earth forever. They were expecting a kingdom of universal and heavenly peace on Earth, a glorious kingdom of righteousness. Jesus transformed this whole expectation by saying that the kingdom of God has arrived in himself! This is the great novelty of his kingdom teaching.

We therefore believe that by faith in him, we can now live in this messianic kingdom of peace on Earth, in this kingdom in which heaven is near the Earth, and in which God lives with us as Emmanuel. Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, God with us. He is Christ the Lord, the promised son of David, the anointed of the Lord, and at the same time the Son of God, sent by the Father to reign over the Earth forever.
In him, we have all that the Jews longed for and all that we need to live a new life in the new creation. The new age has begun in him, and those that believe in him live now ahead of time—that is, before the end of the world—in his kingdom of peace and brotherhood, with a pure conscience and the happiness of God in their hearts. Jesus announced the kingdom of God, this heavenly kingdom on Earth. It was present in him. He established it by his vicarious death on the cross. In his death, we have salvation from our sins. In his death, the sin of Adam and of the whole human race is absolved, and man is reunited to God. And in his resurrection, we see God’s new light already shining in the world.

Those who are in Christ live in this new age, in the last days, in the messianic times of fulfillment, and they already enjoy the goods of the world to come. In Jesus Christ, Satan is bound and vanquished. We take refuge in Christ to be freed from the power of Satan, for Jesus is the stronger man who conquers the strong man, Satan (Luke 11:22). Christ satisfied divine justice by his death on the cross, and rose so that we might live a new and forgiven life in him, a life at peace with God and at peace with ourselves.

We still wait in hope for the final consummation of the kingdom of God when Christ will return at his Parousia to reign gloriously on Earth in peace and righteousness for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-7). But while hope for his second coming, we already live in his glory through faith.

THE CALL TO PERFECTION

Friday, 3rd Week of Lent
Hos. 14:2-10; Ps. 80; Mark 12:28-34

“The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’” (Mark 12:29-30).

Here Jesus quotes the great Jewish prayer, the Shema (Deut. 6:4), as his first and most important commandment. We are to love God with all our resources. This is the first commandment. It is also the call to perfection. Jesus called the rich young man to a life of perfection, saying, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21). For Jesus, the life of perfection is to love him with all that we have, with all our heart, mind soul, and strength. If the rich young man had left everything for Jesus’s sake, he would be on the way of perfection. Therefore Jesus says, “Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). A true disciple lives completely and uniquely for Jesus Christ, and renounces everything else. He hates his life in this world (John 12:25). He loses his life for the sake of Christ, and therefore he saves it (Mark 8:35). He seeks the things that are above, where Christ is, rather than the pleasures and riches of this world, for he has risen with Christ and now lives a risen life with him (Col. 3:1-2).

The true disciple, who has chosen the way of perfection, is crucified to the world, as St. Paul was (Gal. 6:14). He is dead to the world and its pleasures in order to have a
completely undivided heart in his love for the Lord. He leaves family, houses, lands, and can even renounce marriage to dedicate himself completely and uniquely to Jesus Christ with all the love of his heart, without dividing it even with a Christian spouse (Matt. 19:29; 1 Cor. 7:32-34). He chooses the narrow way of life, which is the way of the renunciation of the world and its pleasures rather than the wide and comfortable way of the world (Matt. 7:13-14).

The true disciple has found the pearl of great price and the buried treasure, and he sacrifices everything else to obtain them (Matt. 13:44-46). He regards as loss all that was once his gain, and he does this to gain Christ (Phil. 3:7-8). Having sacrificed everything, he now lives for one master only, no longer for two (Matt. 6:24), and he has now but one treasure only, not many (Matt. 6:19-21), because he wants his heart to be where his treasure is (Matt. 6:21). He does not want to divide his heart among the loves, pleasure, and riches of the world but rather reserve it integral, only for the Lord. Nor does he want the thorns of the riches and pleasures of the world to choke him (Luke 8:14). He leaves everything else, because he does not want to be like a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle, since he knows that such is a rich man, surrounded by his pleasures, trying to get into the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:24).

If we live in this new way, we have chosen the way of perfection (Matt. 19:21), and God will in turn be to us like the dew, and we will blossom like the lily (Hos. 14:5).

THE LORD HAS STRICKEN, AND HE WILL BIND US UP

Saturday, 3° Week of Lent
Hos. 6:1-6; Ps. 50; Luke 18:9-14

“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other” (Luke 18:13-14).

It is God, and only God, that justifies us, not we ourselves. It is only he that forgives our sins and frees us from the sadness caused by guilt. We cannot forgive ourselves nor lift ourselves out of the pit of spiritual death. And God does this through his Son Jesus Christ. The Father sent his Son into the world precisely for this, to save those who believe in the Son from this most serious sickness of all. He cures us from the sickness of our spirit, changing our sadness into light, inner happiness, and peace. He shines in our hearts, illuminating us from within with heavenly light, and at the same time pays our debt for having sinned. Thus he restores us to the Father’s favor and satisfies the divine wrath against us for our imperfections into which we continue to fall—although as we grow spiritually, they become smaller and smaller. When we fall into an imperfection and again feel God’s wrath, we repent again and invoke the merits of Christ’s vicarious death on the cross, and God restores us again, and in all justice, for his Son suffered our punishment for us.

On the other hand, the Pharisee justifies himself. About this, St. Paul says that he wants to “be found in him [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on
faith” (Phil. 3:9). How weak, in comparison, is our own righteousness! How fragile! Today we do a good work, and tomorrow we fall again into an imperfection and lose our peace. If all we do is depend on our own righteousness, how weak we are! And when we fall, we cannot lift ourselves out of the pit of sadness into which we have fallen.

But if we depend on the righteousness of God, given to us through the vicarious death of Jesus Christ by means of our faith in him, it is completely different. He illuminates us from within and shines upon us from without. Our illumination comes from him, not from ourselves. His righteousness is far more splendid than our own, and he always restores us to this splendor whenever we fall out of it by committing an imperfection.

Then we should live as well as we can, totally dedicated to him in every aspect of our life, even renouncing everything else and serving him alone with all our heart, with an undivided heart. Thus do we grow in holiness, and our reward will be all the greater, in proportion to the goodness of our life and our works.

Thus, as Hosea says, “Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us; he has stricken, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; and on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him” (Hos. 6:1-2). It is the Lord who restores us when we repent and take refuge in him, believing and invoking the merits of the death of his Son on the cross.

HE WHO FOLLOWS ME WILL NOT WALK IN DARKNESS

4th Sunday of Lent
(Readings of Year A, as permitted)
1 Sam. 16:1, 6-7, 10-13; Ps. 22; Eph. 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

“Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing” (John 9:7).

Christ anointed our eyes; and by washing in him, we now see. What happened to the man born blind also happens to us when we believe in Jesus Christ. This is a lesson for the catechumens that will be baptized during the Easter Vigil. Their eyes will be opened, and they will see a whole new world, a new reality, the world of faith, and the new creation of Jesus Christ. In being thus renewed by baptism, they themselves will become a new creation, new men, new creatures, persons renewed by Jesus Christ.

We are those persons because we have been baptized in Jesus Christ. When we come to have faith in him, we are remade and renewed. We have been anointed by Jesus Christ. He anointed our eyes; for as the natural children of Adam, we were blind from birth. He anointed us, and we bathed in the pool of Jesus Christ. In doing this with faith, we return seeing. Christ opens our eyes. “Once you were darkness,” said St. Paul, “but now you are light in the Lord” (Eph. 5:8). Christ says, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). For this, Christ came into the world, to be its light, to illuminate us, to bring us the splendor of heaven, the heavenly light whence he came, the light in which he lives eternally with his Father. If we believe in him and follow him, we will not walk in darkness, he promises us, but will have the light of life.
Christ has given us a promise and a condition, as St. Augustine points out in the Office of Readings today. In order to realize and receive the promise, we have to fulfill the condition. In other words, to walk in the light (which is the promise), we have to follow him, we have to do his will (which is the condition). When we fail to do his will, we fall out of his light, for we have not kept the condition, and are once again in darkness until we repent and receive his forgiveness anew. How important it then is to always clearly know his will for us and do it with exactitude. By doing this, we will walk in his light; and he will shine in our hearts (2 Cor. 4:6).

How different was the life of the man born blind after believing in Jesus. And this is only a symbol of the much greater difference in our life after we believe in Jesus Christ. Everything changes for us. Now we have a clear goal in life, a purpose for which we live and work. But more important than that, we now live in the light, whereas previously we lived in darkness. We are now light in the Lord, as once we were darkness (Eph. 5:8). We have awakened and risen from the dead, and Christ shines on us (Eph. 5:14). We now proclaim the wonders of him who called us “out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). We now live in these wonders and see his splendor within us. He reveals his light to us, and we walk in it. He makes us sons of light. We are “sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness” (1 Thess. 5:5).

Many do not walk in the light, for they do not know what God’s will for them is, and they do not follow it. Nor do they know the Savior who can save them from the darkness. There is a Savior; and with faith in him, we can get out of the darkness and live and walk in the light of Christ, completely illuminated by him.

So what exactly is God’s will? He will reveal it to us if we listen to him. The details of his will are different for each person, and these he will reveal to us individually. But in general his will for all is that we love him with all our heart. This is Jesus’s first and greatest commandment (Mark 12:30). This means not dividing our hearts among the unnecessary delights and pleasures of this world but rather living simply, in evangelical poverty, a life detached, apart from worldliness, and recollected in him. Such detachment is necessary if we want to love God with all our heart, without any division of heart. Those who live like this and follow the other personal indications that he gives them are fulfilling the condition that Jesus laid down for walking in the light. They follow him with all their hearts. And he who does this will receive the promise, he “will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Christ came into the world to die on the cross so that we might walk in the light, for his vicarious death substituted for us on the cross and served our death sentence for our sins in our place. When we fall out of the light by sinning or by falling into an imperfection, we can once again invoke the merits of his vicarious death and be saved from the pit of darkness into which we have fallen. God knows our condition and weakness and saves us from darkness when we believe in him and invoke the merits of his death on the cross. Then we should try harder in the future to remain in his will in order to remain in the light. In this way, we will also remain in his love, for he said, “Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (John 15:9-10). To remain in his light is to remain in his love.
THE MILLENNIUM AND THE NEW EARTH

Monday, 4th Week of Lent
Isa. 65:17-21; Ps. 29; John 4:43-54

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (Isa. 65:17).

This is our ultimate hope. After the end of our present world, God will create a new heavens and a new earth. St. Peter tells us that “according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13). This will happen after the destruction by fire of the present heavens and earth, as St. Peter affirms, saying, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:10). St. John had a vision of this new heavens and new earth and said, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (Rev. 21:1). When he saw this, he also saw the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. This is our final eternal state where we will live forever with God after our resurrection. John said, “I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:2).

The prophets often mix and present as a single event things which in reality are distinct and separated by many years. Isaiah does this today. He begins by speaking of the new heavens and the new earth, and then he speaks of the millennial earth, saying that in that day someone who dies a hundred years old will be regarded as only a child or as someone who was cursed (Isa. 65:20), and that “they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit (Isa. 65:21). In the eternal state, though, there will be no death at all, nor will we eat anything.

This time of longevity and abundant food is a description not of the new earth (that is, the eternal state) but rather of the millennial earth. St. John says that after the Parousia (Rev. 19:11-21), Christ will reign with the saints and martyrs upon the earth for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4), while Satan will be bound in a deep pit (Rev. 20:1-3, 7). After the millennium, the eternal state will be established—that is, the new heavens and the new earth; and the new Jerusalem will come down from heaven (Rev. 21:1-4, 10).

It is during this millennium that we are to understand the prophecy of Isaiah that “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, [and] the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Isa 65:25). On that day, says Isaiah, “be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy” (Isa. 65:18).

For that day and that time we now hope, a time of glory and righteousness on earth, a time of splendor and light. Christ will reign in glory among us, and Satan will have no more power over us—he will be bound (Rev. 20:2, 7). Perhaps those who are resurrected will live already in the new Jerusalem, which has not yet come down upon the earth; but in any case, they will live in glory and light with Christ for a thousand years.
CHRIST, OUR GREAT INTERCESSOR

Thursday, 4th Week of Lent
Exod. 32:7-14; Ps. 105; John 5:31-47

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves’” (Exod. 32:7).

While Moses was on the mountain receiving the law of God, Aaron and the people below “made a molten calf; and they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” (Exod. 32:4). We see here the perversity of the human heart. After seeing all that the Lord had done for them in the exodus from Egypt and in miraculously crossing the sea; when Moses disappeared from them, they began to worship false gods. The people “have corrupted themselves,” the Lord said to Moses. “They have turned aside quickly out of the way I commanded them … behold, it is a stiff-necked people” (Exod. 32:7, 8, 9).

God became angry with his people and threatened to destroy them, until Moses interceded for them. Then “the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people” (Exod. 32:14). Moses’ intercession placated the divine wrath, and instead of destroying his people, he forgave them.

We also are a stiff-necked people who are always going against the will of God. How slow we are to understand his will clearly and do it exactly! We are constantly understanding it wrongly and turning aside from the correct way. We learn from our mistakes, little by little, what we should do and what we should avoid. Every time that we fail to do his will perfectly, we suffer in our hearts. Our conscience attacks us, and we feel guilty. We have a pain in our hearts. Thus does God constantly teach us more of his will for us, so that we may know it with ever greater precision. This way of learning is painful, because God disciplines his children, those whom he loves (Heb. 12:5-11). “The Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:6). “Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3:19).

The Israelites had Moses as their intercessor before God, and we have Jesus Christ as our intercessor. Christ is he “who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:34). “He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). “Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands … but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb. 9:24).

Christ not only prayed for us, asking God’s mercy, as Moses did, but he offered himself as a victim of the divine wrath to absorb in himself this just and necessary wrath, paying in this way the just penalty for human sins so that God could justly and mercifully forgive us. In him, we have freedom from the divine wrath that burns our hearts when we depart from the way of God’s will.
ST. JOSEPH, OF THE HOUSE AND LINEAGE OF DAVID

Solemnity of St. Joseph, March 19
2 Sam. 7:4-5, 12-14, 16; Ps. 88; Rom. 4:13, 16-18, 22; Matt. 1:16, 18-21, 24

“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom” (2 Sam. 7:12).

Through St. Joseph, whom we honor today, Jesus Christ is of the house and lineage of David, for St. Joseph was his legal father. The kingdom of David was established in Jesus Christ. About this son of David, the prophet Nathan prophesied, saying to David, “I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever … And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam. 7:13, 16). God swore to David, saying, “I will establish your descendants for ever, and build your throne for all generations” (Ps. 84:4). And God said about David, “I will establish his line for ever and his throne as the days of the heavens … His line shall endure for ever, his throne as long as the sun before me. Like the moon it shall be established for ever; it shall stand firm while the skies endure” (Ps. 88:29, 36-37).

Jesus Christ inherited the throne of David and reigns in glory over us now. We now live in his eternal kingdom of peace, forgiveness of our sins, and brotherhood. This is the beginning of the new creation, and we are new creatures, new men, in him. In him, there is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), and he makes all things new (Rev. 21:5). His death on the cross is our redemption from sin, his resurrection is our illumination to walk in his splendor, and his Holy Spirit gives us new life. Thus the new age, expected by the Jews in the last days, has already begun for those that believe in him.

Yet we still await an even more glorious fulfillment in the future, at the second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth, when he will come with all his saints in great light (1 Thess. 3:13; Zech. 14:7). Then he will establish his glorious kingdom on earth for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-7) and reign over us in righteousness, peace, and splendor. After a thousand years and after the destruction of the present heavens and earth, he will establish the new Jerusalem on the new earth, and the millennial kingdom will merge with the new Jerusalem in the final eternal state (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:2, 10; 20:11; 2 Pet. 3:10, 12).

We live in the glory of this kingdom now, with Christ reigning over us as king, yet we hope for its even greater fulfillment in the last days when Christ will come again on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory to reign over the earth.

St. Joseph contemplated this glory in the manger, in the cave of Bethlehem. He guarded the light of the word and lived with God in the flesh, Emmanuel, God-with-us. He contemplated him in the darkness of the night, on the edge of the desert, in a cave, warming himself over a fire. He was unknown in Bethlehem, alone with the redeemer of the world and the Virgin Mary. He lived in a silence filled with God, filled with light, peace, and divine happiness. This is St. Joseph, whom we honor today.
THE PERSECUTION OF THE RIGHTEOUS

Saturday, 4th Week of Lent
Jer. 11:18-20; Ps. 7; John 7:40-53

“So there was a division among the people over him” (John 7:43).

Such was Jesus’ life. Some believed in him, while others rejected him and wanted to arrest him. Opinion was divided over him. So will it also be with his followers, and so it was with the prophets before him. Jeremiah experienced this today. “I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter,” he says. “I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, ‘Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more’” (Jer. 11:19). His enemies said to him, “Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord, or you will die by our hand” (Jer. 11:21).

They did not want to hear the truth, the word of the Lord. They did not want to be challenged or converted. It was the same with Isaiah. He too prophesied to “a rebellious people, lying sons, sons who will not hear the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, ‘See not’; and to the prophets, ‘Prophesy not to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel’” (Isa. 30:9-11).

The prophet’s word is too strong for them. It is contrary to their own worldly desires, calling them to conversion; and they do not want to hear it any more. This happened to Jesus. It also happened to the righteous man in the book of Wisdom. Not only his words but his whole way of life annoyed the wicked, for his ways were different from theirs. Concerning him, they said, “Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training … He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange” (Wis. 2:12, 14-15).

Such is the life of a prophet, of a preacher of the truth, of a preacher of the word of God. He will preach a challenging word that those that live in a worldly way do not want to hear or follow, and they will reject and persecute him. They do not want to change their lives and their mistaken ways. Such was the life of Jesus Christ, and in the end they crucified him. It is true that “a servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also” (John 15:20). Jesus prepared us for this, telling us, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18).

This is how it will be. We have been sent by Jesus Christ to preach his word of truth to the world and to live in a new way. Many will not accept us, for they do not accept the truth that they need to hear; and in their reaction against this truth, they will persecute us. We have to be prepared for this and suffer it with Christ when it happens.
THE FUTURE RESURRECTION IS PRESENT
FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST

5th Sunday of Lent
(Readings from Year A, as is permitted by the Roman Missal)
Ezek. 37:12-14; Ps. 129; Rom. 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26).

Among the Jews, the resurrection was their hope for the last days (Dan. 12:2), as Martha affirms today, saying, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (John 11:24). But now Jesus reveals to her something new, saying that the resurrection of the last day is here now for those who believe in him. He himself is the resurrection and the life, and he who believes in him will live forever. He has already passed from death to life (John 5:24). We have eschatological life, the life of the last day, in Christ, now, ahead of time, if only we believe in him. He raises us now and completely changes our life. In him, our hope for the last days is already fulfilled, and it is for all who believe in him. They can enter, through their faith in him, into this eternal kingdom of peace and brotherhood over all the earth that he, as the Messiah, brings into the world. By believing in him, we are born again, see the kingdom of God, and begin to live in it already, for “unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

By being born of water and the Spirit, one enters the kingdom of God (John 3:5) and at the same time rises with Jesus Christ to walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4). We now rise with him (Rom. 6:4; Col. 3:1) to a new life, to a new kind of life in this world. This is realized eschatology, now, already, ahead of time, in him, for those that believe in him. Through him, we now live a risen life. He is our resurrection and life. Yet we still hope for the final consummation of this hope on the last day when we shall rise bodily from the dead, or when we will be transformed and given our resurrection bodies while still living—without dying—if we are alive when Christ comes to take us (1 Thess. 4:16-17). This will be our ultimate glory—to live with God forever and see him as he is (1 John 3:2). But we begin to see the realization of this hope even now if we believe in Jesus Christ.

He washes us from our sins, for “with him is plenteous redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities” (Ps. 129:7-8). In Jesus Christ, we have the realization of this hope of abundant redemption. He came so that we might have life in abundance (John 10:10), and this means: the forgiveness of our sins through the merits of his vicarious death on the cross. Moreover, his resurrection also saves us, for he gives us a participation in his resurrection. Forgiven by his death for our sins, we now rise with him in his resurrection to live a risen life in this old world. He makes us lights in the murk of this world, beacons in the mist, luminaries in the world (Phil. 2:15).

The future is present in Jesus Christ and is present for us if we believe in him. In him, the resurrection life begins now. Therefore “if … you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above” (Col. 3:1). “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God” (Col. 2:12).
God “raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). He who believes in him “has passed from death to life” (John 5:24).

How should we then live if we are risen with Christ to a new kind of life in this world? How do we live a risen life? St. Paul tells us, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1-2). It is not only a new life that he gives us but also a new way of living. We will now live in a new way, because we have been raised with him. We will leave behind our old way of living, which was only for the things of this world, and will now instead live a risen life with our mind set on heaven, our final goal. We will live for God, as once we lived for ourselves and the riches, honors, and pleasures of this old world. We will instead live in the new creation and will dedicate ourselves to the mission that Christ gave us to convert the world, to preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15), and to make disciples of all nations, teaching them all that Christ has taught us (Matt. 28:19-20).

Thus we will dedicate ourselves to the transformation of the world through the power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit, calling all the elect to their future life on the millennial earth, with Christ reigning over us in glory. We are his agents, his missionaries, for the transformation of the world, when he shall come to establish his glorious reign of righteousness.

CUSTODY OF THE HEART

Monday, 5th Week of Lent

Dan. 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62; Ps. 22; John 8:1-11

“You offspring of Canaan and not of Judah, beauty has deceived you and lust has perverted your heart” (Dan. 13:56).

In the account of Susanna, the beautiful woman for whom the two elders that had been appointed as judges were overwhelmed with passion, we see clearly illustrated the danger of division of heart. Even two elders that were respected by the people and placed in positions of authority and trust fell into a disastrous situation because they did not sufficiently guard their hearts. They fell in love with the beauty of Susanna, and their infatuation cost them their lives.

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?” said Jeremiah (Jer. 17:9). Knowing this, we have to take precautions to guard our whole way of life so that our heart does not divide. If we fall in love with forbidden beauty or with worldly pleasures, we are divided in our love of God and can no longer love him with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength, as we should (Mark 12:30). Part of our heart will be reserved for forbidden beauty or worldly pleasures, and our heart will be divided. But God wants all of our heart. He wants a heart that is undivided in our love for him. He does not want to have to compete with the delights of this world or with human beauty for our attention. He wants all of our attention, all of our interest, and all of our love, without any division. This is the life of perfection. Marriage is necessary and blessed; but apart from that, we should love God
with an undivided heart; and celibacy, for this reason, is superior to marriage, for it enables us to love God with a more undivided heart (2 Cor. 7:32-34, 38).

Therefore we are to serve only one master (Matt. 6:24), have only one treasure (Matt. 6:19-21), and renounce all to gain all, as did the man that discovered the buried treasure and sold all that he had to obtain it (Matt. 13:44-46). Thus we hate our life in this world to guard it for eternal life (John 12:25). But those that love their life, falling in love with forbidden beauty or with worldly pleasures, lose their life. Those that save their lives in this way lose them; while those that lose their lives for Christ save them (Mark 8:35). Therefore we are to be crucified to the world (Gal. 6:14). In dying to the world, we live for God.

Custody of the heart and of the senses is the job of a lifetime, as we see in case of these two elders who fell in old age.

EMMANUEL, GOD-WITH-US

The Annunciation, March 25
Isa. 7:10-14; Ps. 39; Heb. 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14 NKJV).

Jesus Christ fulfilled this prophecy of Isaiah. He was born of a virgin, without human seed, and was the only Son of God, the second person of the Blessed Trinity. He was born with a divine nature and a human nature. He was Emmanuel, God-with-us, God living among us as a man, with a human mind, will, and body, and a divine person. In his divine nature, which he shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he had in common with them a divine mind and a divine will. So constituted, he could save the human race and reconcile God to man. It was at the initiative of the Father that he was sent to work this reconciliation (Rom. 8:32).

Having a human nature, he could die in sacrifice and thus serve on behalf of man the death sentence justly given to man for his sins. By dying on the cross, he served this sentence for us to free us from it. Thus “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all … for by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb. 10:10, 14). Thus Jesus Christ satisfied the divine wrath and reconciled us with God. He suffered our punishment for us so that we could be freed from it and be justly forgiven. For this reason, he became man.

Once we are reconciled, Christ brings us the peace of heaven and the kingdom of God. In this way, he fulfilled the promises to David that his kingdom would be established forever. The prophet Nathan said to David concerning his descendant, “I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever” (2 Sam. 7:13), and to David he said, “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom … And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam. 7:12, 16).

Christ fulfilled this prophecy, for the angel Gabriel said to Mary concerning her son, “The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the
house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32-33). Christ is the promised child that will bear the government upon his shoulder and shall be called the Prince of Peace, a peace of which there will be no end upon the throne of David forever (Isa. 9:6, 7).

We now live in this kingdom of peace, reconciled to God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In him we have the forgiveness of our sins and the removal of our guilt. We reign with him now in splendor and long for the coming of his kingdom of righteousness on earth (Rev. 20:1-7) and the ultimate transformation of the earth into the new earth (Rev. 20:11; 21:1; 2 Pet. 3:13; Isa. 65:17), where we will live with him in the new Jerusalem in a manifest way forever (Rev. 21-22). God’s promises to David will be fulfilled and consummated in glory in a kingdom of righteousness on earth (Rev. 20:1-7) and eternally in the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21-22).

JEREMIAH, A CHRIST FIGURE IN HIS SUFFERING

Friday, 5th Week of Lent
Jer. 20:10-13; Ps. 17; John 10:31-42

“I hear many whispering. Terror is on every side! ‘Denounce him! Let us denounce him!’ say all my familiar friends, watching for my fall. ‘Perhaps he will be deceived, then we can overcome him, and take our revenge on him’” (Jer. 20:10).

Jeremiah suffered much. He followed God’s guidance and preached against the vices of his people, calling them to conversion. But the people rejected and mocked him. This is the suffering of a prophet in every age. God sends him to preach the truth that people need to hear, and they do not want to hear his message. They do not want to be challenged. They reject the word of God and the true way in order to follow their own ways and gods. They prefer their own idols that they put in the place that should be reserved for the Lord alone. They serve two or more masters instead of only one (Matt. 6:24), and for this reason they cannot stand their prophet. They reject his holy way of living, his good example, and his word of warning. Instead they follow the so-called wisdom of the world and depart from the way of truth.

So the prophet suffers. He is persecuted by those whom he came to save and help. Such was the life of Jeremiah. But Jeremiah knows that God is with him. Therefore he says, “The Lord is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten” (Jer. 20:11). His confidence comes from the words that God spoke to him when he called him, saying, “Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord … They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you” (Jer 20:8, 19).

So we shall see the confusion of our enemies who persecute us for following God’s guidance and for preaching the truth they need to hear.

The same thing happened to Jesus, and finally they crucified him, but God raised him from the dead. The suffering of Jeremiah is a type or figure of Christ’s suffering, which saved us and put us in a new condition. Christ’s suffering freed us from the guilt that
weighs us down and darkens our spirit. His suffering frees us from all that. He offered himself to his Father as a victim on our behalf to absorb the righteous and necessary wrath of God for our sins.

In his death is the salvation of the world, of all who believe in him. He came and suffered so that we might have a new life with him in the light of his resurrection. Through his death, we can rise with him to a new and illuminated, divinized and transformed life, a life in the light (John 8:12). “He was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). His resurrection demonstrates that his death was victorious over sin. He now lives in glory, and we share his glory.

**PEACE ON EARTH**

Saturday, 5th Week of Lent
Ezek. 37:21-28; Jer. 31; John 11:45-56

“They shall dwell in the land where your fathers dwelt that I gave to my servant Jacob; they and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there for ever; and David my servant shall be their prince for ever” (Ezek. 37:25).

Here we see the great messianic prophecy of Ezekiel that the Israelites will live forever on their own land as a united kingdom with David their prince reigning over them forever and with the Lord’s sanctuary, or temple, forever in their midst. In those days, says Ezekiel, “my servant David shall be king over them … and David my servant shall be their prince for ever” (Ezek. 37:24, 25). God shall “make a covenant of peace with them” and will set his “sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore” (Ezek. 37:26).

This prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the son of David, in the new Israel, the Church. God, Emmanuel, is in our midst. He is our perpetual sanctuary. He is always with us.

Yet we still hope for the final consummation of this promise when Jesus Christ will return a second time in glory on the clouds of heaven to establish a reign of righteousness on earth for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-7) when Satan shall be bound (Rev. 20:1-3) and the risen and glorified Christ shall reign in our midst in bodily form. At that time, the saints of the past (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-52) and the Old Testament saints (Dan. 12:2) shall rise, and David himself shall rise with them and shall, as Ezekiel says, “be their prince for ever” (Ezek. 37:25). “My servant David shall be king over them,” says the Lord; “and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes” (Ezek. 37:24).

We await and long for these days of glory now. Then the temple, the sanctuary that has lain in ruins for nearly two thousand years, will be rebuilt (Ezek. 40-47), and the Lord shall set his “sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore” (Ezek. 37:26). In another place, Ezekiel says, “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken” (Ezek. 34:23-24).
All those who are alive at the second coming of Christ will enter the millennium (Rev. 20:1-7) in their natural bodies, for they will have children and grandchildren (Ezek. 37:25). All the dead and risen saints (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; Rev. 20:4; Dan. 12:2) will also live in the millennium. Perhaps those already risen will live in the new Jerusalem, which has not yet come down to earth (Rev. 21:2, 10), but they will have a connection with the millennial earth, which will be a kingdom of heavenly peace without end over the whole world (Isa. 9:7). David himself (now risen) can reign as Christ’s vicar—coregent—for a thousand years of righteousness, peace, and prosperity, until the millennial earth merges with the new Jerusalem on the new earth (Rev. 21:2, 10), which will be the eternal state (Rev. 21-22).

References

For further explanation and bibliography about the millennium, see my four brief articles on my web site (www.DailyBiblicalSermons.com) under OTHER WRITINGS, second page, entitled: “The Millennial Earth,” “Who Will Enter the Millennial Kingdom?” “Where Will the Tribulation Martyrs Go?” and “What Will Happen during the Tribulation?”

THE VICARIOUS SAVING DEATH OF JESUS CHRIST

Palm Sunday

Isa. 50:4-7; Ps. 21; Phil. 2:6-11; Luke 22:14-23:56

“And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground” (Luke 22:44).

Today is Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday, the day on which we commemorate the passion and death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. See how much he suffered, even in the garden of Gethsemane before his passion actually began. He sweat blood! And from the cross, when “there was darkness over the whole land … Jesus cried with a loud voice … My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:33-34). How intensely he suffered, more than all the martyrs, many of whom died with joy. But Jesus Christ died feeling abandoned by God. This is because he was “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He was the lamb of sacrifice upon whom all the sins of the world were placed (Isa. 53:4-5). This is the great burden that he experienced on the cross. No martyr experienced this. He suffered the wrath of God against all the sins of the world and suffered God’s punishment for them on the cross. He was cursed by God in our place (Gal. 3:13) and suffered our punishment (Isa. 53:4-5), what we would have had to undergo in order to be set free and be forgiven for our sins. “You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers … with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24). God placed our sins
on Christ, filling him with sin, although he had no sin, so that we might receive his justice. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Thus “he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows … He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed … The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all … For the transgression of my people was he stricken … It pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed … By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities … He bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:4-6, 8, 10-12 KJV).

We see here the doctrine of the vicarious death of the Messiah. He died for our sins; he was punished for our transgressions; he bore our guilt. Jesus Christ fulfilled this prophecy in his vicarious death on the cross.

The death of Christ on the cross renews us interiorly, because his death takes away our guilt, which weighs us down. Freed from the burden of guilt, we are truly renewed in our spirit and human experience. It is something real and actual, and this experience is communicated to us above all through the sacraments, which Christ left us for this purpose.

Christ gave his life as a ransom for us, “for the Son of man … came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). At the Last Supper he said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). We are saved by his blood poured out for us! “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph. 1:7). “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13). Through Christ, God reconciled all things to himself, “making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20).

The vicarious death of Christ on the cross, in which he was punished instead of us for our sins, was the great sacrifice that saved us, “for if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls … sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your consciences from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:13-14). This sacrifice reconciles us to God, and “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10), “for by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb. 10:14).

Christ was made a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). He suffered the curse of God instead of us and suffered its punishment in our place to free us from this curse. “The chastisement of our peace was upon him” (Isa. 53:5). Thus Christ demonstrated that God is just even though he forgave the sins of the Old Testament saints without adequate expiation. His death demonstrates God’s justice because in his death, past sins were justly punished, propitiated, and expiated. Therefore Jesus Christ is the one “whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed” (Rom. 3:25 NKJV). Hence we are truly justified—that is, made righteous and holy—through our faith in Jesus Christ. Thus “a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). No one has observed the law perfectly, and so everyone needs
to be justified by faith in Jesus Christ, “for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose” (Gal. 2:21).

Christ therefore is our advocate (1 John 2:1) and our intercessor with the Father (Heb. 7:24; 9:24). He is the one “who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:34). In his death is our life and salvation.

OUR MISSIONARY VOCATION

Monday, Holy Week
Isa. 42:1-7; Ps. 26; John 12:1-11

“I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those that sit in darkness” (Isa. 42:6-7).

Jesus Christ came into the world precisely for this, to be a light to the nations, to give us light. This light is the life of God in us, which we receive through Christ when we believe in him. He removed our alienation from God when he died for us. His death destroyed the obstacle that separated us from God, which was the sin of Adam and our own sins. Our guilt for having sinned blinded us so that we could not see the light of God nor enjoy the happiness of his friendship or love. It put us in darkness, in a dungeon, in prison, and we dwelt in darkness. Therefore Christ came into the world. By his death, he became our light and our righteousness.

Isaiah says today that “he will bring forth justice to the nations” (Isa. 42:1). For this he came, so that we might be righteous, clothed with his own righteousness, righteous as he is righteous. He justified us through his death, for as St. Augustine says in today’s Office of Readings, “He loved us so much that, sinless himself, he suffered for us sinners the punishment we deserved for our sins,” and “He bore the punishment of sinners, though without sin himself.” This is the doctrine of the New Testament, the great Christian doctrine of our salvation through the vicarious, sacrificial death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We are saved by his blood poured out on the cross. His death is what saves us, forgives our sins, propitiates and expiates them, and justifies us. Through this means, he brought righteousness to the earth and became a light for the nations. By this means, he opens the eyes of the blind—he opens our eyes and cures our blindness—and liberates the captives that dwell in darkness.

This is the good news, the gospel, the joyful proclamation that missionaries are sent to all parts of the world to preach. It is a message of liberation for every tribe and nation of the world. Missionaries therefore go to announce this salvation, this liberation of the human spirit, this new life, this light, this righteousness, unto the ends of the earth so that all might be clothed with the righteousness of God—the gift of Jesus Christ. The missionary has a message of liberation for the renewal of the human spirit in Jesus Christ. He preaches the saving and vicarious death of the Lord, the only Son of God, the Savior of the world. He proclaims new life and light in Christ, and thus brings God’s illumination unto the ends of the earth.
God has given Christ as “a light to the nations” (Isa. 42:6). By means of his missionaries, “the Lord has made known His salvation; His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations … All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (Ps. 97:2-3 NKJV).

THE EUCHARIST, THE REMEDY THAT GOD GAVE US

Holy Thursday, Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper
Exod. 12:1-8, 11-14; Ps. 115; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; John 13:1-15

“And when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (1 Cor. 11:24).

Today, Holy Thursday, we commemorate the institution of the eucharist. In the eucharist, the body of Jesus Christ is sacramentalized for us so that we can both offer and receive it. Jesus was the first to offer his body in sacrifice on Calvary. Then we who believe in him should continue offering it, as he told us to do, saying, “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:24), and “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

Christ’s death is our salvation. The eucharist is the commemoration of the sacrificial death of Christ that saved us. In fact, it is the same sacrifice, for the eucharist makes present for us the one sacrifice of Christ on Calvary so that we can participate in it. Christ wanted us to have this memorial and this actualization of his sacrifice, in which he suffered the just punishment for our sins to free us from this punishment and suffering. He suffered the wrath of God for our sins instead of us in order to absorb it and so free us from it. By his death on the cross, we are freed from the wrath of God against our sins, which burns our hearts.

Christ fulfilled the role of the paschal lamb of the Hebrews. This lamb substituted for the families that put its blood on their doorposts. The lamb died instead of the firstborn of those families, and they were saved. Christ was “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He was struck instead of us who drink his blood. He was our substitute in suffering for our sins instead of us, thus freeing us from suffering this wrath of God against our sins.

Then he gives us his own divinized and sacramentalized body to eat for our divinization. Having saved us from our sins by his sacrificial death, made present for us in the sacrifice of the Mass, he divinizes us by giving us his divinized and sacramentalized body and blood as our spiritual food and drink. We eat his divine person with its divine nature, contained in his body. The presence of his divine person in his sacramentalized body, which we eat, divinizes us, filling us with divinity, with the love and presence of God. The daily reception of his body and blood sanctifies us more and more. It is the spiritual food we need to grow spiritually.

In offering the eucharistic sacrifice, the merits of the death of Christ on the cross are communicated to us for our salvation and for the forgiveness of our sins; and his body, which we share and eat, helps us for our sanctification.
The sacrifice of Christ, commemorated and made present in the sacrifice of the Mass, saves us from the darkness of our sins and imperfections. It is the remedy that God himself gave us for this darkness.

THE VICARIOUS DEATH OF JESUS CHRIST

Good Friday
Isa. 52:13-53:12; Ps. 30; Heb. 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

“He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed … The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5, 6 KJV).

Today is Good Friday, the day on which we commemorate the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for us. He saved us through his death on the cross. But what is the meaning of his death? Is it only a good and inspiring example of dedication, even to the point of death, or an example of obedience to God even to death, and death on a cross? Is it only an impressive and almost unbelievable example of loving forgiveness, that he even forgave those that were killing him? It is, of course, all of these, but none of this really gets at the essence of his death. Its essence is that his death is redemptive. He redeemed us by his death from the wrath of God and from God’s just punishment of our sins. His death was redemptive in that it satisfied both the divine justice and the divine wrath.

The wrath of God is holy and necessary. It is not like our wrath, which usually involves a loss of control. God’s wrath is his strong moral reaction against all sin and all that is morally wrong. Jesus speaks of the wrath of God against the cities of Corazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum for not repenting after seeing his miracles (Matt. 11:20-24), and St. Paul says that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men” (Rom. 1:18).

Jesus Christ was sent by the Father to absorb and satisfy his own wrath in order to free us from it. His death on the cross was the act by which he paid our debt and suffered our punishment in place of us. He was the propitiation that God put forward to satisfy his own justice, for in the Old Testament God forgave sins without demanding an adequate punishment or satisfaction. Therefore Christ shows the divine justice and that God is just even through he forgave former sins without adequate expiation. So St. Paul says that Christ is the one “whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed” (Rom. 3:25 NKJV). God, moreover, justifies all sinners who believe in his Son, and their justification comes from this same death of the Son on the cross. He is our justification.

Christ thus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “He was wounded for our transgressions” (Isa. 53:5 KJV). We sinned, and Christ was wounded by God for our sins instead of us; and as a result we were forgiven and healed. He served our sentence for us. “He was bruised for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5 KJV). Because he suffered our punishment for us, we receive God’s peace. “The chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5 KJV). “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all”
(Isa. 53:6 KJV). He substituted for us, bearing our sins and suffering their just punishment, with the result that we are forgiven and saved. This is the essence of Christ’s death, its redemptive character.

IT WAS NECESSARY THAT HE BE CRUCIFIED AND RISE FROM THE DEAD

Easter Vigil
Exod. 14:15-15:1; Exod. 15; Rom. 6:3-11; Luke 24:1-12

“Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise” (Luke 24:6-7).

With these words, the two men in dazzling apparel (Luke 24:4) reminded the women at Jesus’ tomb early in the morning of the third day, of the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples—namely, that his death and resurrection were necessary. The women discovered his tomb empty when they came to anoint his body. He had risen as he had said and was not there!

The message of the angels was that his death as well as his resurrection was necessary. They were necessary for our salvation. If such suffering and so great a miracle as his resurrection into glory were necessary for our salvation, how great and important indeed is our salvation from sin, from the weight of guilt, from alienation from God, and from spiritual death. If we could save ourselves through medicine and psychology, God would not have sent his own Son to become incarnate and suffer all this for us.

But the fact is that we are not able to save ourselves, using human means. Only God can save us from the guilt that weighs us down for having sinned. When we disobey God, he strikes us down in our spirit, causing sadness, heaviness, guilt, and depression. Even the saints experienced this, in their great spiritual sensitivity, for very small imperfections of disobedience to God. No one is free from this suffering, and no one can free himself from it. Only God can forgive our sins, and he does so justly and mercifully through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Then his resurrection is for us the beginning of new life. He gives us relief through the light and splendor of his resurrection. How much we need this divine relief from this suffering of our spirit for having sinned, for having disobeyed God in something, for having fallen into an imperfection that torments our spirit, wounds our conscience, and robs us of our peace! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the remedy that God gave us for this sickness of the spirit, for this pain of heart. By taking refuge in him in faith, we are saved and healed, forgiven and illuminated.

It was indeed necessary that the Son of Man be delivered into the hands of sinful men. Thus he suffered in our place what we would have had to suffer for our sins, and he did so in order to free our spirit from this suffering and give us a new life in the light. It was necessary that he be crucified for our salvation and rise on the third day for our justification and illumination. Thus, and only thus, are we able to walk in the light, as he promised (John 8:12).
RISEN WITH CHRIST FOR A NEW LIFE

Easter Sunday, Mass of the Day
Acts 10:34, 37-43; Col. 3:1-4; John 20:1-9

“But God raised him on the third day and made him manifest … To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:40, 43).

Today is Easter Sunday. Christ has risen and is with us still. In him, and in his name, we have repentance and forgiveness of sins. In him, we have a new, forgiven, justified, and illuminated life. Through faith in him, we walk in the light (John 8:12), the light that streams from his risen and glorified body and shines in our hearts (2 Cor. 4:6). His resurrection proves that he is the Son of God, as he said, and that his death was successful in gaining for us the forgiveness of our sins. His death was accepted by his Father, who then raised him from the dead. His resurrection shows that by his death the divine justice was satisfied, the wrath of God was absorbed, and our sins are truly forgiven when we believe in him.

Christ’s death was necessary for our redemption, because he was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). He was the lamb of sacrifice, on whom we placed our sins, and he suffered for them, paying in full for us our debt of suffering so that we might be freed from the burden of guilt and rejoice in the freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). His resurrection then follows as his victory over Satan and sin. We who believe in him can therefore now live a new and risen life with him in the light.

This is why the risen Christ said to his apostles, “Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46-48).

How we need the forgiveness of sins! We are always falling into new imperfections that disturb our peace. Jesus Christ is the remedy that God has given us for this. In his death and resurrection, we have the salvation that we long for. God knows what we need, and he has given us the right solution—a Savior; and the means he used to save us is his death and resurrection. “Let it be known to you therefore, brethren,” said St. Paul, “that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39). After the death and resurrection of Christ, the disciples received the power of the Holy Spirit and went unto the ends of the earth to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name.

Dying he destroyed our death, and rising he restored our life. His death freed us from spiritual death, which is separation from God, for he paid the price for us, suffering instead of us our debt of suffering in punishment for our sins. Freed by his death when
we believe in him and have recourse to him in faith, our life with God is restored to us in his resurrection. We rise with him from spiritual death, and he illuminates and rejoices us with his resurrection. We rise with him for a new risen life with God.

Therefore we should now live in a new way. “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God,” as St. Paul says today. “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1-2). Our new way of living shows that we have truly risen with Christ, with all our sins forgiven.

Unfortunately not everyone lives in this new way. Many continue living as they did before, seeking their pleasure and enjoyment in the things of earth. St. Paul speaks of them, warning us not to follow their example, but rather to be truly new men, living a new and risen life. “Many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears,” he says, “live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:18-20).

Christ has given us a new life in the light, an illuminated, divinized life, and he wants us to walk with him with all our heart, with an undivided heart. We should therefore seek and find our happiness in him and not lose the great gift he has given us by living as enemies of the cross. Rather we should be crucified to the world, and the world crucified to us (Gal. 6:14). The cross not only redeems us; it also shows us how to live. We are to live crucified with Christ. If we do so, we will also be raised with Christ now in this present life. “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith of the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12). If we live his cross, we will also live with him the mystery of his resurrection. We will live risen with him in this world by embracing his cross and by living according to its pattern.

THIS IS THE DAY THAT THE LORD HAS MADE

Easter Monday
Acts 2:14, 22-33; Ps. 15; Matt. 28:8-15

“This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 117:24).

We now live in this day of joy, this day of fulfillment, the day of Easter, the day of the resurrection into glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. This day that the Lord has made, this day of joy, begins the prophesied time, the messianic age, the time of the fulfillment of prophecy. It is the beginning of the new age, the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Rev. 21:5 Gal. 6:15), and in it we are made new—new men (Eph. 4:22-24).

If we are born again in Jesus Christ, we share with him in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4) and in the newness of the Spirit (Rom. 7:6). By faith, we rise with him to a new, transformed, and illuminated life, with the light that streams from his risen and glorified body shining in our hearts (2 Cor. 4:6). In him, our sins are forgiven through his death that expiated them, satisfying divine justice and placating the divine wrath. So now we can walk free and new in the new world of the resurrection. In his resurrection, we are
the new strain of a redeemed and renewed humanity. This is the new, purified, and illuminated humanity that renews the world. In the risen Christ, we are a new creation in the midst of the old creation for the sake of the renovation of the human race.

In the risen Christ, we live in the kingdom of God now present ahead of time in the world in him for its transformation. We are witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, witnesses of the renewal and transformation which is now at work in our midst through his death and resurrection. We have been redeemed by his blood poured out on the cross, and now the light of his resurrection shines upon us. Dying, he destroyed our death of alienation from God; and rising, he restores our life with God.

“This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 117:24). This is our Easter song, the new song of the redeemed of the Lord, the song of the new world, of the new creation, of the new age, of the time of fulfillment. Let us walk then in a new day, the day that the Lord has made, the day of forgiveness and renewal.

Let us rise with Christ and “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” Let us set our “minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1-2). We have been renewed. Let us then live a new life, a life centered in Jesus Christ, sacrificing all else for him, to love him with a completely undivided heart.

OUR FUTURE HOPE

Easter Thursday
Acts 3:11-26; Ps. 8; Luke 24:35-48

“Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old” (Acts 3:19-21).

St. Peter’s message here is that after hearing the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, all should repent, be converted, and receive forgiveness of their sins and new life in him. For this he suffered, for the forgiveness of our sins. Then we should wait in hope for the refreshing times that will come to us from the Lord when Jesus Christ returns a second time to the earth to restore all the things that God promised us.

This is the perspective of St. Peter and of the New Testament. We should live this way now, repentant for our sins and mistakes and dependent for our salvation on the forgiveness that comes to us through our faith in the death of Christ on the cross. Through his cross and resurrection, we are renewed and reconciled with God. Then we should live in a completely new way with a new perspective, waiting in hope for the times of refreshment at the second coming of Jesus Christ in glory on the clouds of heaven in order to restore all that God promised his people through the mouths of his prophets. We should live in hope and longing for the glorious establishment of the kingdom of God on earth and Christ’s reign of righteousness over us. St. Peter reminds
us today that we need to be oriented toward the parousia and should be preparing ourselves for it now. Times of splendor and glory await us, Christ’s reign of righteous and peace on earth at his return.

We can live now in spirit in the times of ultimate fulfillment. We are now living in the messianic days of the fulfillment of prophecy in a mysterious way in Jesus the Messiah, and we will better appreciate our own times if we also see them within the perspective of their still greater fulfillment in the future when Christ returns in glory with all his saints to reign on earth for a thousand years of righteousness, peace, and light before the establishing on the new earth of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 20:1-7; 21:2, 10). Then we will be able to overcome our sins and errors. We long for those glorious days now, and we keep guard over our spirit lest it become distracted and dissipated in the things and pleasures of this world. We want our attention to be focused on Christ and on his kingdom of blessing and peace on earth.

Only by spending time in contemplation can we live within the spell of this new Christian perspective, living with Christ, longing for his coming, and always preparing ourselves more for it. By living in this hope, we will live correctly in the present time, which is a time of continuous happy and hopeful preparation.

IN NO OTHER NAME

Easter Friday
Acts 4:1-12; Ps. 117; John 21:1-14

“This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11-12).

In these two verses we have the confession of faith of the earliest Church. They discovered that in Jesus Christ, who was rejected by the Jews, there is salvation, and that in no one else, nor in any other name, is there a similar salvation. He, and only he, has been given to the world for our salvation. And this salvation was primarily understood as the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of the life of God within us. Christ reconciled us to the Father.

In Jesus’ death is this reconciliation. His death removed the obstacle that separated us from God. This obstacle was sin, which alienated us from God; and a just God had to punish sin. This put us into a state of alienation from God, which for us was a state of sadness, darkness, and depression. We suffered under the burden of guilt. The death of Christ on the cross addressed this problem and definitively solved it. This was a great discovery of the primitive Church.

They discovered that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead and therefore was the Messiah, and that his death was in accord with the divine plan, for it saved us from our sins. In Christ they had new life. They were saved and forgiven. Christ was therefore like a stone rejected by the builders that later became the cornerstone of God’s plan for the salvation of the world.
No other person has been given to the world who has this role and power—only Christ. Only through Jesus Christ can we be saved. From this realization was born the mission of the Church. Jesus himself sent his apostles to preach this salvation unto the ends of the earth. “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature,” he said (Mark 16:15 KJV), and “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). He also said, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46-48).

We have inherited this same faith and have personally discovered the same thing that the apostles discovered, namely that in Jesus, and in no one else, is God’s salvation. In his death, we are made clean and freed from guilt; and in his resurrection, we rise with him to a new life, to a life with God, filled with the Holy Spirit, to a life in the light (John 8:12). It is therefore our obligation and mission to spread this salvation to all parts of the world. This is God’s plan. He gave us this mission. Therefore we proclaim Jesus Christ everywhere, and we base our sermons on the essence of this message of salvation, which the primitive Church discovered.

THE UNIVERSAL SAVIOR

Easter Saturday
Acts 4:13-21; Ps. 117; Mark 16:9-15

“And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15 KJV).

This is the mission of the Church. God sent his salvation to the earth in his Son Jesus Christ. Those who have experienced this salvation cannot keep silent about it. They feel the need to proclaim to others what they themselves have seen, heard, and experienced. This is what the apostles said today when the council charged them not to speak or teach any more in the name of Jesus. They answered, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

Many want to do good in the world and help others. There are many forms of service—doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, etc. But there is no greater service to which we can dedicate ourselves than that of preaching the gospel, for thus we share with others the gift of salvation that God gave to the world. We always need to hear the gospel anew, the basic message of salvation, freshly explained, thought out, and presented in ever new ways and from ever new perspectives in order to illuminate our understanding and increase our appreciation of it. We grow in faith and are spiritually edified by listening and reading. But for this, we need preachers and Christian writers that study the word and write sermons and books and preach in the churches. This is a marvelous way of loving God with all our heart and soul and energy and mind, and of loving our neighbor for the love of God (Mark 12:30).
We should preach Christ and salvation. We preach God’s salvation that he gave the world in Jesus Christ. It is a salvation for everyone, for people of every language, nation, culture, and religion. It is for people in China, Arabia, and Israel, as much as it is for those in Europe, the Americas, and Africa. It is for all cultures. Christ is God’s Savior, sent to everyone, and those that believe in him should do all they can to share their faith with others for their illumination and salvation. This is God’s will.

God’s salvation frees us from our sins and from the guilt that weighs us down, giving us new life and renewing us interiorly, filling us with the Holy Spirit and with joy. Christ became incarnate to divinize us. We eat his divinized and sacramentalized body in the eucharist for our transformation into him. This makes us participants in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). Through his death on the cross, he suffered the punishment due for our sins, thereby freeing us both from our sins and from their punishment. Then he rose from the dead to remain alive with us, shining in our hearts (2 Cor. 4:6). We contemplate him and are transformed into his image by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). Thus do we grow daily “from glory to glory” in him (2 Cor. 3:18).

This is the salvation that we have received, experienced, and now wish to share with people of every culture and religion, for he is the Savior of all.

IN THE RISEN CHRIST, WE HAVE NEW LIFE

2nd Sunday of Easter
Acts 5:12-16; Ps. 117; Rev. 1:9-11, 12-13, 17-19; John 20:19-31

“And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (John 20:22-23).

The risen Jesus, whose death expiated our sins, gives his apostles the power to forgive sins in his name through the special working of the Holy Spirit. This is one of the great sources of peace and resolution of inner conflicts. It gives us peace of heart and makes us happy to the depths of our spirit with the happiness of God himself. We can believe without seeing and have all the peace which the risen Lord wants to put into our hearts. In fact, blessed are those who believe without seeing (John 20:29)!

Some have the idea that God is only love; that is, that he has only one attribute—namely, love. They deny his justice, which is also everywhere revealed in the Bible. They have a God of their own invention, according to their own liking, and have denied and rejected the God of revelation, the biblical God, the God that is revealed to us by the scriptures and by Jesus Christ.

This new God, this modern God, is most convenient, for he allows them to live in any way they like and never becomes angry with them, never punishes them, never disciplines them (Heb. 12:5-11).

Since God, for them, is only love, they have no need of redemption from God’s just wrath, or of a redeemer either; and so Christ’s saving death is reduced by them to merely an inspiring example of his love. They deny that his death actually redeems us from the just wrath of God for our sins, since they deny God’s just wrath.
This modern version of God, however, does not—unfortunately for them—match their actual experience, for they still feel guilty and depressed when they sin. Even though they deny it, they still experience God’s righteous wrath (Rom. 1:18) and discipline (Heb. 12:5-11) when they sin or fall into imperfections, and they still need and seek relief from this pain of heart—that is, they still need redemption and salvation from this.

This is why God sent us Christ and why he died on the cross. His death, according to the Bible, is far more than merely an inspiring example of his love. It actually redeems and saves those who put their faith in him. It saves us from the just and holy wrath of God against us for our sins.

That God does not have only one attribute, which is love, is clear to all who read his word. We see the just, holy, and necessary wrath of an all just God in the garden of Eden when he threw Adam and Eve out of the garden. We see it in the flood in the days of Noah, and in the destruction of the tower of Babel. We see it when Abraham interceded for Sodom (Gen. 18:16-33) and in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19). We see it when Moses interceded for Israel after they made the golden calf (Exod. 32:10-14). We see it in the sin offerings God gave to his people (Lev. 4). We see the wrath of a just God when Jesus cursed the unrepentant cities of Corazin and Bethsaida (Matt. 11:21), and when St. Paul said to the Romans that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men” (Rom. 1:18). We see it when St. Paul, speaking of fornication, idolatry, and avarice, said to the Ephesians, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 5:6). We see God’s justice and wrath again when the letter to the Hebrews speaks of how the Lord disciplines us to correct us when we go astray in something (Heb. 12:5-11).

Today Jesus gives us a way to have our sins forgiven and to feel genuinely forgiven, clean, happy, and united once again with God. He gives us a sacrament of forgiveness, a sacrament that personally and individually channels to us the merits of Christ’s death on the cross. By these merits, Christ absorbed the just wrath of God against us for our sins, suffering it himself instead of us and for us. Through this sacrament, we have relief from this pain of heart, from this discipline and just wrath of God against us for having sinned. It relieves the pain of guilt and gives us the peace and joy of Christ.

By this means, we can live in the presence of the kingdom of God and experience the blessings of the messianic times. Thus do we experience the newness of life and of the resurrection as new-born children. It makes us, like children, drink pure, new milk (1 Pet. 2:2).

This is the newness of life that we have in the risen Christ. He is “the stone which the builders rejected” which “has become the head of the corner. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 117:22-24). Christ is now the source of our new life. He who was dead now lives and will live for evermore (Rev. 1:18), and in him is life. All who believe in him will live and have life, new life, eternal life. It is he who gives us peace and gives us his spirit so that we might live in and through him. In him repentance and forgiveness of sins is preached to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:47). It was necessary that he die and rise for this, to be the source of new life for us.
St. Thomas did not believe until he saw; but Jesus says today, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29). For this was the gospel written, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). In his name we have new life, life with God. If we believe in him, he will forgive us and give us this new life. “He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life” (1 John 5:12). He redeemed us from the just wrath of God and introduced us into the kingdom of light (Col. 1:12-13). In him, “we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:14).

BORN AGAIN

Monday, 2nd Week of Easter
Acts 4:23-31; Ps. 2; John 3:1-8

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3 NKJV).

Jesus Christ was sent from the Father to save the world. We cannot save ourselves. No one has ever justified himself by his good life or good works. “‘None is righteous, no, not one,’” said St. Paul (Rom. 3:10), “for no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law” (Rom. 3:20). This is because “a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). Our faith in Christ justifies us before God—that is, it makes us truly righteous, new, and holy, for Christ paid our debt of punishment for our sins, thus absolving us from all sin and guilt. This is not something that we can do to ourselves, nor can we merit it through our good works.

It is, in fact, to be born again, born anew and from above as an adopted son of God in order to see and enter now, ahead of time, into the kingdom of God that was expected by the Jews for the last days. So by our faith and baptism, we now live a new, forgiven life, freed from the burden of guilt. It is an illuminated life, with Jesus Christ shining in our hearts (2 Cor. 4:6) and with the Holy Spirit flowing through us like streams of living water rejoicing us from within (John 7:37-39).

This is the new life to which we are called by God. Baptism, together with faith, is “the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace” (Tit. 3:5-6). So has God saved us, making us a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), new men in Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:22-24). It is God that “saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy” (Tit. 3:5) through the “washing of regeneration” (Tit. 3:5).

In Jesus Christ, through faith in him, we are born again and from above. We are made new by his merits on the cross, and we rise with him, illuminated by his resurrection, to walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4). So now we seek the things that are above, for we have risen with Christ (Col. 3:1-2; 2:12; Eph. 2:6).

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Only Christ can enable us to be born anew in God. Without him, we remain only flesh, born of flesh. It is he who begets us to be born anew as God’s adopted sons.
By faith, we are those “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13), and by his cross, we are forgiven and made truly new. This is the new life in the kingdom of God that Jesus Christ has given us to live now ahead of time in the midst of this old world.

A NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

Thursday, 2 \textsuperscript{nd} Week of Easter
Acts 5:27-33; Ps. 33; John 3:31-36

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him” (John 3:36).

God gave us salvation in his Son. This salvation is eternal life in him and with him. This life begins now if we believe in him. We have already passed from death to life when we believe in the Son (John 5:24). We can live through him now by faith (1 John 4:9). He came that we might have life in abundance (John 10:10). If we have the Son, we have this life; but if we do not have the Son, we do not have life (1 John 5:12). If we believe in him, we will never die, for we will continue living with him (John 11:25-26). God gave us his Son so that in him we might have life (John 3:16). This life is life with God and in God, a new kind of life in this world. Without the Son, we do not have this life. If we reject the Son, we will not have this life, for “he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him” (John 3:36). Truly, “he who has not the Son of God has not life” (1 John 5:12).

This life is not automatic. We have to believe to have it. It is a new life with God. It consists in the forgiveness of our sins and our justification by God although of ourselves we are not worthy of this. God himself saved us through the death of his Son on the cross. Without the cross, we would be condemned to death or left to our own devices and merits, which is the same thing, for no one has ever been able to justify himself before God by his own merits (Rom. 3:10, 20; Gal. 2:16). Only God can save us, but he requires that we have faith. By faith in his Son, we confess our sins and depend on the merits of Christ on the cross for our salvation and justification, not having our own righteousness but that which is through faith (Phil. 3:9), that which comes to us through the sufferings of the Son of God for our sins. God absolves us in this way from all sin and imperfection and makes us resplendent with the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself.

If we live in Christ, with his life in us; we live in hope, knowing that this present life is a trial and a test. Our hope is for an eternal life with God in the new Jerusalem, city of gold and light, of ineffable and indescribable beauty. This city has “the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal” (Rev. 21:11). It is made of pure gold but transparent as glass, and its light is God himself and the Lamb (Rev. 21:18, 23). The foundations of its wall are adorned with every jewel (Rev. 21:19-20), and the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flows down its main street of gold (Rev. 22:1), with the tree of life bearing twelve kinds of fruit every month (Rev. 22:2).

Thus shall we live forever with God in his light, without sinning again, without ever falling into an imperfection. But this new life begins now for those that believe in the
Son. It is a risen life in this world with the risen Christ (Col. 3:1-2; 2:12; Eph. 2:6). Those who live this new life have relief from their sins and guilt, and they walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4), in the light of Christ (John 8:12).

**HAPPINESS IN PERSECUTION**

Friday, 2nd Week of Easter
Acts 5:34-42; Ps. 26; John 6:1-15

“When they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:40-41).

The apostles were persecuted and beaten for preaching Jesus Christ. And so it has been ever since. In this world so far from God, true Christians will be persecuted. The world—and those that think and live like the world—do not want to hear their preaching or see the example of their lives. Jesus himself prepared us for this, saying, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18). This persecution comes because true disciples are different from the world. “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19). As people persecuted Jesus, so will they persecute us (John 15:20). In this sense, “a servant is not greater than his master,” as Jesus told us (John 15:20).

But the apostles did not cease preaching Christ in order to avoid persecution. In fact, “daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ” (Acts 5:42 KJV). They did not obey the order of the chief priests that they not speak in the name of Jesus. They rather obeyed God, saying, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), and “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). They knew that they had to follow the will of God and preach Christ; and for doing so, suffer persecution, beating, and even martyrdom.

We have to do the same. We are not to follow the crowd when it is wrong. We should have the courage to do what is right—in accord with the will of God—even if we are the only ones in our environment to do so. This then will be our witness, the witness that God wants us to give in this world. And our witness will help many. Good example always helps others. We give good example by our words and actions, by our sermons in which we preach the truth, and by our way of living and conducting ourselves, following the will of God and rejecting the worldly and secular lifestyles around us. We will be persecuted for this way of preaching and living, but we will please God, who will reward us.

In all this, we should rejoice when we are persecuted. “Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account,” Jesus said. “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12). We are not to fear being alone on this narrow and difficult path of the truth (Matt. 7:13-14), for, as Jesus said,
“You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22).

EVANGELIZATION AND SERVICE IN THE CHURCH’S MISSION

Saturday, 2nd Week of Easter
Acts 6:1-7; Ps. 32; John 6:16-21

“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4).

We see here the importance of the ministry of the word and of public prayer. The apostles completely dedicated themselves to the ministry of preaching salvation in Jesus Christ and of leading the Christian community in worship and in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. They had no time even for a service as important and sacred as the administration of charity to widows. They decided not to do this themselves but to give it to seven men that would exercise it in the name of the Church.

In many places where we work as missionaries, people have physical needs similar to this. It is important that individuals be appointed to administer this charity, but it should not replace evangelization, the preaching of salvation in Jesus Christ. We should not cease preaching repentance, and the forgiveness of sins that we receive through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross when we believe in him. We can never leave aside this ministry of preaching salvation from sin and the new life of faith whereby we walk in the light of the risen Christ. Nor are we to reinterpret the basic gospel message of salvation from sin as merely liberation from political, social, or economic oppression. The gospel of salvation from sin cannot be reduced to a mere socio-economic or socio-political message, although we may include this perspective.

We are always to preach that we can have a new life through faith in Jesus Christ, a life in which God frees us from the burden of guilt by suffering himself in the person of his Son (who is one being with him) the just punishment for the sins of the world. This salvation liberates our spirit and conscience, giving us the freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).

Then in the Church there are various services, as there are many members in a body. Some will preach in the churches. Others will carry out services of charity (Rom. 12:4, 6-8), as the seven men ministered to the widows.

Those charged with the ministry of the word should exercise it with zeal, ever preaching redemption from sin, which we have through the vicarious, sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross when we take refuge in him in faith, especially through the sacraments of penance and the eucharist. We preach a new life in the light through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Then we should provide for widows and other needy persons by appointing people to administer this charity in the name of the Church.
ANNOUCE ALL THE WORDS OF THIS LIFE

3rd Sunday of Easter
Acts 5:27-32, 40-41; Ps. 29; Rev. 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord” (John 21:12).

After the resurrection but before the ascension, Jesus appeared various times to his disciples. On at least three occasions, he ate with them after he had risen from the dead (Luke 24:30-31, 41-43; John 21:13). Today he appears to his disciples while they are in a boat fishing in the Sea of Tiberias. “Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach, yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus” (John 21:4). Later “when they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread,” and “Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish” (John 21:9, 13).

In a certain sense, this is what we do when we celebrate the eucharist. We eat with the risen Christ in the morning on the beach. For this reason he gave us this sacrament of communion with him. He wanted to remain with us always. He is present with us when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. He himself feeds us with his own flesh and gives us his blood to drink, which contain his life. Thus he gives us the gift of his own divine life for the life of our spirit, so that we might always live in and from him, so that he might be within us. And instead of us transforming this food into ourselves—as we do with ordinary food—it transforms us into itself; that is, into Christ.

We contemplate Christ during and after receiving the eucharist and are transformed little by little into the one we are contemplating. We are changed through the eucharist into the image of the risen Christ, growing thus “from glory to glory,” in his image (2 Cor. 3:18 KJV). Thus the reception of the eucharist is a great help to our contemplation and transformation. The eucharist divinizes us, for we eat the human but also divinized and sacramentalized body of Jesus Christ, and his body contains his divine person with its divine nature. Thus we are made participants in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) through this sacrament. It sanctifies us if we receive it with faith and devotion. The risen Christ manifests himself to us in the eucharist. And in the silence after receiving the eucharist, we can experience the richness of his love for us and contemplate his glory in our spirit.

Today the angel said to the apostles in prison, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life” (Acts 5:20). So they began to proclaim and teach God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. St. Peter also preached the basic Christian message before the council, saying, “The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things” (Acts 5:30-32). Jesus Christ is the source of this life that the angel told the apostles to teach the people.

And what is this life for us? It is the same life that the apostles preached today in the temple. It is a completely new life. It is to live now already ahead of time in the new age which began with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is the age which the Jews were expecting to begin in the last days at the end of the world. These final days have already begun for us with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can live in these days of fulfillment now. They are the renovation of the world and of our spirits.
In Jesus, hung from a tree, we have repentance and forgiveness of sins. He was cursed by God for us in being hung from a tree, “for a hanged man,” Deuteronomy says, “is accursed by God” (Deut. 21:23). And St. Paul says that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree’—” (Gal. 3:13).

We are all under the curse of the law, for the law says, “Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them” (Deut. 27:26). We are cursed by God for not having obeyed all the words of his will. But Christ made himself a curse for us and in place of us, being himself cursed by God in being hung from a tree. Thus he absorbed the curse of God for us to free us from this curse. God’s wrath exhausted itself in him on the cross. He suffered the just punishment for our sins, freeing us from this punishment and forgiving our sins justly and mercifully, as is fitting for God.

The result is that God raised him from the dead and made him “Leader and Savior” (Acts 5:31) to give us this life without sin and without punishment, this life of the last days and of the new age. God gives us this life now in the midst of history if only we believe in Jesus Christ, repent of our sins, and receive forgiveness from his hands. This life, which is renewed and forgiven through our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the life that the apostles preached in the temple, the life that we too can live in him. He is our propitiation before God, sent to us by God. He is our salvation. We have a new life in Jesus Christ. This, in short, is the gospel.

Through faith in him, we live a new life, and we grow in this life through the sacraments that he has left us, especially penance and the eucharist, through which we experience his forgiveness, and his presence shining in our hearts.

WE SHALL NOT HUNGER OR THIRST

Wednesday, 3rd Week of Easter
Acts 8:1-8; Ps. 65; John 6:35-40

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst’” (John 6:35).

Jesus is what we need. If we have him, we know that we need nothing more. If we do not have him, we are lost, lacking in everything, and satisfied by nothing. Without him, we are needy, unhappy, and incomplete. Without him, we are hungry and thirsty and lack peace. It is he that gives us the peace that we seek and need. Having him, we have a good conscience, for he cleanses our conscience by taking away our guilt. Jesus Christ is the Savior of the human race, he who renews humanity by his vicarious sacrifice on the cross, through which he paid our debt of punishment for our sins, allowing us to go free, justly forgiven. He served our death sentence instead of us for us. Every time we fall into a new imperfection, we can take refuge in him in faith, and he will forgive us anew by his blood, cleansing our conscience and restoring us in his peace.

We live through Jesus Christ if we believe in him. He said, “Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also” (John 14:19). We shall live because he lives. We draw life from him. “From his fulness
have we all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). In him, we have union with the Father. He is the source for us of the Holy Spirit. As he lives because of the Father, so we live because of Christ. In Christ, we find the fullness that we are seeking, the light that illuminates our hearts. In him is forgiveness and union with God. By eating him in the eucharist, we live through him. “As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me” (John 6:57). His drawing life from the Father is the model of our drawing life from him.

He is the source of our life and happiness. He nourishes our spirit. With him, we have no more spiritual hunger or thirst. Truly, “God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). Yes, we live through him, by means of him, because of him. We draw life from him (John 1:16). “He who believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:36). In him is our life, happiness, and peace. In him is our light. With him, we walk in the light, in his light.

The eucharist is the bread of life. It is Christ sacramentalized. Through the eucharist, Jesus Christ enters our heart and illuminates and rejoices us. He gives us living water (John 4:10) that will become in us “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). If we have a spring of living water within us, we will not thirst. We have security in him. He gives us the Holy Spirit that flows through us like rivers of living water (John 7:38). With these rivers in us, we will not thirst.

THE GLORIOUS AND SUFFERING MESSIAH

Thursday, 3rd Week of Easter
Acts 8:26-40; Ps. 65; John 6:44-51

“And the eunuch said to Philip, ‘About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about some one else?’” (Acts 8:34).

Today Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch seated in his chariot reading chapter fifty-three of the book of Isaiah about the Suffering Servant. The eunuch asks Philip about whom is Isaiah speaking—that is, he wants to know who this Suffering Servant is.

For the Jews this was a problem. They could not understand how the glorious Messiah that would inherit the throne of David and reign over the whole world in righteousness could also suffer humiliation and be killed for the sins of the world. The prophecy of Daniel about the glorious Son of Man (Dan. 7:13-14) and the prophecies about the son of David that would reign in glory (2 Sam. 7:12, 16; Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-5; Ps. 71:7-11; Jer. 23:5; Ezek. 34:23-24; 37:24-25) seemed to contradict Isaiah’s prophecy of a Savior that would come and suffer great humiliation and be killed for our sins (Isa. 53).

This problem was only solved after the coming of the Messiah. Only then did it become clear that he would have two comings: 1) His first coming was humble, and he was killed, fulfilling the prophecy of the Suffering Servant (Isa. 53); and 2) His second coming will be glorious, fulfilling the glorious prophecies. In his second coming, he will sit on the throne of David (Luke 1:32-33) and rule over Israel and the whole world (Dan. 7:13-14) in righteousness for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-7). He will come on the clouds of heaven (Dan. 7:13; Matt. 24:30) and shall be given “dominion and glory and kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting domi
nion which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:14).

Philip probably explained all this to the eunuch, beginning with the text that the eunuch was reading (Isa. 53), probably telling him: The kingdom of God has already begun (Mark 1:14-15), and we are now in the messianic times, the times of fulfillment and salvation, the times of grace. The new age has already begun with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ suffered the punishment that brought us peace, smitten by God for our sins. “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6 KJV). “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5 KJV). “For the transgression of my people was he stricken” (Isa. 53:8 KJV). “When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed” (Isa. 53:10 KJV). “By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities” (Isa. 53:11 KJV).

Christ suffered instead of us what we should have suffered as punishment for our sins. He suffered as our substitute, and we were healed by his wounds. God forgives us through the expiation that Christ worked for us on the cross. Because of his suffering, we are set free.

THE CHURCH’S MISSION IS TO PREACH CHRIST

Friday, 3rd Week of Easter
Acts 9:1-20; Ps. 116; John 6:52-59

To the Gentiles “I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:17-18).

Today we commemorate the conversion of St Paul, the great persecutor of the Church who became its great missionary. Transformed himself by the power of Christ, St. Paul was sent by him to proclaim this same salvation to the world. The words quoted above are those of the risen Christ who appeared to Paul on his way to Damascus. What Jesus sends him to do is that which happened to Paul himself. His eyes were opened, he saw a great light, he left the darkness of error and persecution, and received from Christ the forgiveness of sins, invoking his name. St. Luke tells us that once baptized, “in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’” (Acts 9:20). We see in this his great zeal. He had discovered the salvation of the world—namely that Jesus is the Messiah, and that in his name there is repentance and forgiveness of sins. From now on, his entire life would be dedicated to preaching God’s salvation in Jesus Christ.

St. Paul’s mission is also our mission. How many today still do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the only Son of God, the Savior of the world, sent to us by God? Even among those who have already heard all of this, how many really have saving faith in him? They still need to hear this basic message of salvation preached to them. They
need true witnesses that can testify that this is indeed true and that they themselves have personally experienced it. Saving faith is built on this kind of sincere personal witness. A missionary is a witness to Christ and to his faith in him. He gives his own personal testimony that through his faith in Jesus Christ, he has passed from spiritual death to life (John 5:24), from darkness to light, from depression to true happiness in the depth of his spirit.

A missionary wants to share his experience of salvation in Jesus Christ with the whole world, for he knows that the world needs this message, this salvation, this forgiveness of sins and imperfections, this removal of guilt, and a new life. The world needs a new and risen life in the risen Christ, a life in the light, illuminated by him. The risen Christ himself gave us this mission, saying, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46-48). “And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Such is the missionary vocation. This is the greatest possible service that a human being can render to another human being: bringing him to his Savior, to the one who paid our debt, suffered our punishment, and sets us free.

**WORDS OF LIFE AND SALVATION**

Saturday, 3rd Week of Easter
Acts 9:31-42; Ps. 115; John 6:60-69

“Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God’” (John 6:68).

The words of Jesus Christ are words of life and salvation. He said, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). He came that we might have life and have it in abundance (John 10:10). An angel told Cornelius that St. Peter “will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household” (Acts 11:14). And when St. Peter recounted to the apostles what had happened in Cornelius’s house—namely that the Holy Spirit fell upon those Gentiles also while he (Peter) preached Christ to them—the apostles “glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life’” (Acts 11:18). It was a great discovery for the apostles that even Gentiles could be saved, just like themselves, only by hearing with faith the words of God preached to them by St. Peter. They discovered that preaching Christ saves everyone that accepts it with faith, even Gentiles. These words of and about Jesus Christ are indeed words of life and salvation. They are words by which we may be saved and have life. This is why Peter does not want to leave Jesus—because in his words are life and salvation.

This is the basis of the Church’s mission and of all missionary work. It is because we believe that the words of and about Jesus Christ are words of spirit and life for the whole world that we go to the ends of the earth, to every nation and tribe, to preach Christ. And
St. Peter said in the council of the apostles in Jerusalem that we should not try to make the Gentiles into Jews who observe the whole law of Moses, for now all are equally saved by faith in Christ. He said, “But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:11). Therefore when the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, saying, “Men, what must I do to be saved?” They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:30-31). It was clear to St. Paul that faith in Jesus Christ would save them. They would have life if they believe in him.

This message is valid for the entire world. We should invite all to believe in the Savior that God has sent into the world. We always need new sermons and new people to preach Christ to the nations, to every tribe and people. It is a proclamation of repentance and salvation, of spirit and life. This gift of salvation that God has sent us in his Son is the gift of eternal life, liberation from guilt, and the forgiveness of sins. Through faith in Christ, our sins are forgiven by his vicarious, sacrificial death on the cross. And by his resurrection, we walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4), in the light that streams from the risen and glorified body of Christ. This is why the angel released the apostles from jail and told them, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life” (Acts 5:20).

THE GOOD SHEPHERD, LIGHT FOR THE NATIONS

4th Sunday of Easter
Acts 13:14, 43-52; Ps. 99; Rev. 7:9, 14-17; John 10:27-30

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28).

Many of the Jews rejected Jesus, but all those that believe in him find good pasture, like sheep that follow a good shepherd. He gives them eternal life, and they live forever. They shall not die and will never perish. They live in security. No one can snatch them out of his hand. Even if they are martyred for their faith, they will never perish. They will not lose the security they have in being in the hand of Jesus Christ.

We are among those sheep if we believe in Christ. St. John, in the book of Revelation, gives us a picture today of this security. We see the martyrs “who have come out of the great tribulation” (Rev. 7:14; see Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21-22) of the final days. They are Gentiles “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). They are now in heaven awaiting the second coming of Christ on the clouds with all his saints (Matt. 24:30-31), but even though they are awaiting the final end, they are happy with Christ in heaven. “They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14). Christ redeemed and saved them by his blood—that is, by his vicarious, sacrificial death on the cross. His death washed them from all their sins. That their robes are washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb symbolizes that their souls are washed clean by the merits of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.
The blood of Christ washes the souls of all who believe in him and have recourse to him for their salvation. Christ is he “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5). The Church, which is already in heaven during this time of great tribulation in the final days, sings to the Lamb, saying, “Thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransomed men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). Christ not only redeems us with his blood, but also shepherds us. He came that we might have life in abundance (John 10:10). He is the good shepherd who “lays down his life for his sheep” (John 10:11). We live because of the merits of his death. “I lay down my life for the sheep,” he tells us (John 10:15).

No one can snatch us out of Christ’s hand (John 10:28), not even death, for Christ will continue shepherding us in heaven, as we see in the prophetic vision of St. John that he will shepherd the Gentile martyrs who will die during the great tribulation of the final days. “He who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence,” John tells us. “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:15-17).

This will be our future too if we believe in Jesus Christ. He will wash us, making us white and resplendent, even in this present life. No one will be able to snatch us out of his hand. Even when he disciplines us for our imperfections (Heb. 12:5-11) to teach us better the way of perfection, we will not fall out of his hand. As we see today, our hope for the future is bright. It is a life with God in heaven, and after a thousand-year reign of righteousness and splendor with the glorified Christ ruling over us on earth while Satan is bound (Rev. 20:1-7), we will live for all eternity with risen and glorified bodies in the new Jerusalem, a city of gold and light illuminated by God himself, on the new earth after the destruction of the present earth (Rev. 20:11; 21:1-2, 10; 2 Pet. 3:11-13).

This is our hope, a future full of light and happiness, a future with God in a magnificently beautiful celestial city full of splendor, made of pure gold, transparent as glass. God himself is its light shining all through its many-colored precious stones, and there is no need for sun or moon, nor will there be any more night (Rev. 21:11, 23, 25). We shall see God as he is, face to face (Rev. 22:4; 1 John 3:2). The tree of life will be there bearing twelve different kinds of fruit every month (Rev. 22:2), and there will be “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Rev. 22:1).

Today St. Paul, after being rejected by the Jews, turned to the Gentiles to preach Christ to them. He had a mission to them to bring them this message of salvation from sins through the blood of the Lamb and about eternal life with God. Christ was set up “to be a light for the Gentiles” that he might “bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 14:47). St. Paul was Christ’s great missionary to the Gentiles to bring this light to them, to open their eyes, give them new hope for the future, and a new life in the light of Christ in the present.

We too are sent by Jesus Christ, as was St. Paul, to open the eyes of the Gentiles “that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith” in Christ (Acts 26:18).
He “will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved” (Acts 11:14 NKJV).

This is what an angel said to Cornelius about St. Peter—that Cornelius should invite St. Peter to his house, for he “will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.” God sent Jesus Christ into the world precisely for this, to save us. We do not save ourselves by our good works. We are saved only through the power of God, and this power comes to us through Jesus Christ if we have faith in him. The Jews were saved ahead of time through their faith in the Messiah that was to come. But now that the Messiah has come, one is saved through faith in him who came. It is not faith that saves us but the vicarious, sacrificial death of the Son of God on the cross. It is this death that justifies us, making us righteous, because it reconciles us with God and enables God to forgive us in a way that is supremely just and also supremely merciful, as it is fitting for God, for on the cross God himself paid our debt of punishment due for our sins. Faith, then, is our acceptance of this atonement which God worked for us through his Son. This faith—this acceptance—activates this salvation for us.

St. Peter went to Cornelius’s house to preach to him this message of salvation. What St. Peter preached was that “to him (Jesus) all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). Jesus is the great gift of God to the world, giving us what we most need: forgiveness of our sins and imperfections, and liberation from guilt so that we can rejoice in God’s salvation and walk in his light.

Jesus himself says the same thing today. He says, “I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:9). If we enter through him, we will find what we most need: true happiness in God and salvation. We pass from death to life by faith in him (John 5:24). “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Our works then manifest our faith, and we will be rewarded according to our works, but salvation is the gift of God in Jesus Christ for those that believe in him. It is not something we can merit or earn by our works.

Only Christ has this salvation. Other teachers that do not believe in him cannot save us or lead us to the pastures of salvation. He is the door into salvation (John 10:9). He is the good shepherd (John 10:11). He came that we might have life and have it in abundance (John 10:10). And he is for all, for Gentiles as well as Jews; for those in Asia and Africa as well as for those in Europe and America. He is for the entire world, and we are to bring this salvation to the ends of the earth. This is the Church’s mission.
“Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39 KJV).

Today we hear St. Paul’s first sermon, which he preached in Antioch of Pisidia. The above cited verses are the most important part of the sermon. St. Paul is preaching Christ and the salvation that is in him. This is what people want to hear and need to hear—it is the proclamation given to us by God that we are to preach. The message is that in Jesus Christ “forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,” and that now you can be justified, even though under the law of Moses you were not able to justify yourselves.

This is because God condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus Christ, fulfilling in this way the justice of the Mosaic law. Since the law requires death for sin, Jesus fulfilled this requirement of the law by dying for our sins. Because God did this, “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). This is what St. Paul says in Romans 8:3-4, saying, “Sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he [God] condemned sin in the flesh [of his Son], in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.” In other words, Jesus fulfilled the just requirement of the law for us, suffering himself in his own flesh the penalty required by the law for our sins. God put our sins upon him and punished them in him, in his own flesh, so that we might be freed from this penalty. That is, “for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus Christ was charged with our sins by God so that we might be made righteous in him through faith.

Thus the law was not abolished by Jesus but upheld and fulfilled. “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets,” he said; “I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Jesus fulfilled and suffered in his own flesh the penalty required by the law for our sins.

Thus Christ suffered in our place, being cursed by God for us, as St. Paul says, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree’—” (Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:23). This is the great gospel of St. Paul, and we see this doctrine even in his first sermon. In short, his message is that “therein [in the gospel] is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17 KJV). Christ is, in St. Paul’s words, the one “whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). In him, we are saved, liberated, justified, and sanctified. He frees us from our sins and from the burden of our guilt so that we might walk in the light, in the freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).
“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:2-3).

Here Jesus speaks of his coming for his Church. He is now going to prepare a place for us. Later he will return to take us to himself that we might be with him in heaven. St. Paul clarifies this, saying that in his coming for his Church, he will take up with him both the living and the dead, and all will be transformed—that is, given their resurrection bodies. The living will be transformed while still alive. St. Paul says, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:51-53).

Once this has happened, all those destined for salvation will be in their resurrection bodies. No saved person will remain alive on earth in his natural body, for they will all have been “caught up … in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:17). Indeed, “the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

But St. John tells us that there will be a reign of a thousand years with Christ (Rev. 20:1-7), and the Old Testament prophets indicate that there will still be people in their natural bodies to enter into this millennial kingdom and cultivate the land (Isa. 65:17-25). So if there is to be kingdom of righteousness and abundance on earth with the risen and glorified Christ bodily present and reigning from the throne of David in Jerusalem over Israel and the whole world for a thousand years, where will the saved people come from that are still in their natural bodies, to enter it, cultivate the land, and have children and grandchildren, as the prophecies indicate (Isa. 65:17-25)? Remember, all the saved have already been caught up into heaven and been transformed.

This problem is solved if there is a time interval between the translation of the Church and the second coming of Christ to set up the millennium. During this interval, the tribulation mentioned in Revelation 6-19 will occur. This suffering will create the new saints, still in their natural bodies, who will enter the millennium and cultivate the land.

Then after a thousand years, the earth will be destroyed (Rev. 20:11; 21:1), the new Jerusalem will descend upon the new earth (Rev. 21:2, 10), and the eternal state will begin (Rev. 21:1-22:5).

So we should live now in eager expectation of the Lord’s coming for his Church.
“And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” (Gen. 1:28).

Today we commemorate St. Joseph the Worker, the foster father of Jesus Christ. It is a day on which we reflect on the importance of human work—all types of work, intellectual as well as manual. We were created to work, to “have dominion over the fish of the sea … and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28). For this we were created, and therefore we are happy when we work.

Being a contemplative does not mean that we stop working and only sit praying. No one can be happy living like that, for it is contrary to God’s plan for us. Monks who leave the world to live a contemplative life in the silence of the desert, far from the noise, distractions, and entertainments of the world, work. The Desert Fathers in Egypt made baskets, mats, and ropes; or copied manuscripts; or wrote books, as did Evagrius Ponticus. They worked according to their ability, personal inclination, and interest, using the gifts and talents God gave them. Thus each individual contributed to the well-being of the rest, making his own contribution to the community and the world.

God did not put us here in this world only to entertain ourselves, but rather to help others. We should not only receive. We are also to give to others. We receive the services of other people while at the same time we serve them with our talents. Living in this way a person will be happy, for he is living in accordance with God’s will.

Our work can change as we grow older or develop some physical disability. We can give up a type of work that requires much physical activity, distraction, and travel for a more contemplative type of work. A professor, for example, may stop teaching and instead occupy himself in writing books, in this way making the wisdom of his many years available to a much wider audience and in a more durable form, while at the same time living a quieter and more contemplative life. Thus he simplifies his life and greatly reduces the distractions he once had as an active professor.

A monk works in silence, far from the world, so as not to be distracted. He does not travel. He always stays in the same place, within an enclosure (cloister), far from worldly entertainments in order to live recollected in God, happily occupying himself with his manual or intellectual work, which he does for the benefit of the community and the world. He lives in silence and prayer, even when working. But he also spends much time sitting in silent contemplation without words or ideas, united to God.

St. Joseph is for us an example of silent, contemplative work.
“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:1-2).

This is the new Jerusalem, our final and eternal state, where we will live for all eternity in our risen bodies with the risen and glorified Christ. This is our hope for the future: a happy life, without end, in this city of gold and light. This city has no sun or moon, “for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the lamb” (Rev. 21:23). The whole city is made of pure gold but is nonetheless translucent like glass (Rev. 21:18). Therefore the glory of God shines through it, illuminating it from within. St. John says that “its radiance [is] like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal” (Rev. 21:11).

It is difficult to imagine the beauty of this city, which will be our dwelling place for all eternity. Completely transparent, reflecting the splendor of God himself, it will be all light. Its twelve foundations are adorned with jewels, which also allow God’s light to pass through them in many colors. They are filled with jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, topaz, and others. (Rev. 21:19-20). Its wall is “built of jasper” (Rev. 21:18). Even “the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass” (Rev. 21:21). God himself is its temple, therefore there is no temple in it (Rev. 21:22). All is light, “and there shall be no night there” (Rev. 21:25).

We shall live there with risen bodies, not as pure spirits without bodies. Jesus’ risen body is an example of what our risen bodies will be like. He could eat, and his disciples could touch him and place their fingers in the wounds in his hands and side. But he could appear and disappear at will and pass through walls and bolted doors, and he did not have to eat. So will we be. Therefore we will have a city in which we can live, but a city unlike anything we have ever seen on earth. In fact, this present world will already have been destroyed before the new Jerusalem comes down and settles upon the new earth. St. John “saw a new heavens and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:1). The new Jerusalem will come down and settle upon the new earth after the destruction of this present world.

There will also be there “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb through the middle of the street of the city” (Rev. 22:1). On its bank will be the tree of life, bearing twelve different kinds of fruit each month of the year (Rev. 22:2). Eating this fruit and drinking this water, we will live forever with God in this city of splendor and light. And best of all, we shall see God. “They shall see his face” (Rev. 22:4). “When he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

This city will be enormous—it is a square, each side being one thousand five hundred miles long, and equally high (Rev. 21:16)—it could never fit on the present earth, certainly not in Palestine. It comes down from heaven only after the destruction of the present earth, settling upon the new earth. St. John says that the Spirit “showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:10). It is clear that
this city is not the messianic Jerusalem of the last days. It is not the millennial Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem only comes down upon the new earth (Rev. 21:1), after the destruction of the present earth (Rev. 21:1) which takes place at the end of Christ’s thousand year reign of righteousness upon the earth (Rev. 20:1-7).

According to the scenario of the book of Revelation, the second coming of Christ will occur first (Rev. 19:11-21), then a thousand year reign of righteousness and abundance with the glorified Christ on the present earth (Rev. 20:1-7). Then at the end of this millennium comes a great judgment (Rev. 20:11-14) together with the destruction of the present earth (Rev. 20:11), and only after all this will the new Jerusalem come down and rest upon the new earth (Rev. 21:1, 10).

We do not know whether this city will be newly created at this final time or whether it already existed in heaven and only descends at this final hour. All that is revealed to us is that at the end of Christ’s thousand year reign of righteousness on earth (Rev. 20:1-7) and after the subsequent destruction of the present earth (Rev. 20:11; 21:1), this city will come down from heaven and settle upon the new earth (Rev. 21:1, 10). Will it be visible in the sky during the millennium? Perhaps. No one knows. This has not been revealed to us.

God knows that we need hope to live well in this present world, and for this reason he has revealed to us this beautiful vision of our future. It is relevant for our life now, for we are to live in the light of this hope, illuminated by it. It lights up our present life. It illuminates the murky mist of this present world so full of problems and suffering. This city shines out before us as a beacon in the present darkness, showing us the way, lest we lose the path of life. We do not want to lose this hope, so we avoid a worldly life that dissipates our energy, clouds our vision, divides our heart, and darkens our spirit. Rather, we are called to be sons of light, sons of the day (1 Thess. 5:5), destined to inherit this beautiful city of gold and light through which the glory of God shines.

References

For more background, reflection, and bibliography on the millennial kingdom and the new Jerusalem, see my brief articles on my website (www.DailyBiblicalSermons.com) under OTHER WRITINGS (page 2).

THERE IS SALVATION IN NO ONE ELSE

Feast of Saints Philip and James, Apostles, May 3
1 Cor. 15:1-8; Ps. 18; John 14:6-14

“Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me”’ (John 14:6).

Jesus is the revelation of the Father in this world. No one has seen the Father but he alone (John 1:18). He lives in the bosom of the Father and was sent into the world by the Father to reveal the Father to us (John 1:18). If we want to go to the Father and be united to him, the way is through Jesus Christ. Through his sacrifice on the cross, we can be
united to the Father, for he paid the price of our redemption. We were alienated from God because of the sin of our father Adam and because of our own sins, and a just God had to punish us. But in his justice, he himself mercifully paid the price of our redemption by sending us his Son to pay it for us on the cross. By receiving him with faith, we will by this means be united to the Father.

Christ is our life, for he communicates the divine life to us. God justifies us through our faith in Jesus Christ, giving us thereby a participation in his divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

Since Jesus is in the Father, and the Father is in him; if we receive Christ, we also receive his Father. If we receive Christ sacramentalized in the eucharist, we also receive the Father who is in the Son.

If we want to know the truth about man, our life, its purpose, and its end, it is Jesus that reveals this truth to us. He is the truth, the life of God in us, and the way to become united to God. There is no other way given to men by God through which we can be saved. “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). He is the only way given to us for our salvation.

In his sacrifice on the cross, he paid our debt of suffering for our sins. Only through this sacrifice can we be forgiven, justified, and saved. Jesus sent us into the whole world to preach this—that is, that in him is repentance and forgiveness of sins. Sin is man’s great problem, and Jesus Christ is the only solution. This solution has to be preached to every creature (Mark 16:15) and every nation (Matt. 28:19-20), for “he who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life” (1 John 5:12). “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (John 1:18). “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27). By believing in the Son, we know the Father. “If you had known me,” Jesus said, “you would have known my Father also … He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:7, 9).

It is the Church’s mission to make Christ known in all parts of the world. We want to preach to all this unique means of salvation given to the world by the Father. This treasure that God has given us has to become known to all so that all might believe in him for their salvation.

BASKING IN THE LOVE AND JOY OF CHRIST

Thursday, 5th Week of Easter
Acts 15:7-21; Ps. 95; John 15:9-11

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9).

Christ came into the world so that we might remain in his love, as he remains in his Father’s love. He is the intermediary between the Father and us. He basks in his Father’s love and radiates his own love upon us so that we too might bask in his love. This is possible if we believe in and obey him. Then we remain in his love and can bask in it. Nothing gives us greater joy than basking in Christ’s love. Therefore Jesus tells us today
that “these things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). “These things” are remaining in his love. If we remain in his love, he tells us that his joy will be in us. His joy comes from remaining and basking in his Father’s love. It is this same joy that he wants to communicate to us. If we remain in Christ’s love, his joy will be in us.

The thing that knocks us out of this love is disobeying Christ. Therefore we should avoid disobeying him. If we know his will for us, we should do it if we want to remain in Christ’s love and joy. He always obeyed his Father and so he always lived and basked in his Father’s love. It is, therefore, very important to discern well and clearly know his will for us and do it. When we fall outside of his will by doing something contrary to it, we lose the experience of his love and joy. When this happens, we should repent, confess our sin or imperfection, and receive anew God’s forgiveness through the merits of Christ’s death on the cross. Thus we will return to his friendship and love and once again bask in it, and Christ’s joy will be in our hearts. This is what Christ tells us today, saying, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10).

This love and joy is for everyone, as much for Gentiles as for Jews if only one believes in Jesus Christ and does his will. This was a new discovery for the apostles. Saints Peter and Paul discovered that when they preached Christ to the Gentiles, the Gentiles also believed and received the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of their sins. They saw that in Jesus they were saved just as the Jews were. Therefore St. James concluded that in Jesus they were seeing the fulfillment of prophecy, that it was about him that God spoke through the prophet, saying, “After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name” (Acts 15:16-17; Amos 9:11-12). In other words, the apostles saw that in Jesus the house of David was being rebuilt for the salvation of the Gentiles and that in him are fulfilled the prophecies about the kingdom of God that will come to save everyone and bring God’s peace to the world.

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH’S MISSION

Friday, 5th Week of Easter
Acts 15:22-31; Ps. 56; John 15:12-17

“Since we have heard that some persons from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us in assembly to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul” (Acts 15:24-25).

This reading today concerns the great discovery of the primitive Church that God’s salvation is now available to the entire world in Jesus Christ through faith in him. It is no longer necessary to be circumcised and obey the ceremonial Law of Moses. It is no longer necessary to be a Jew. The apostles discovered that they could preach Christ to the Gentiles; and they, while remaining Gentiles, would be saved if they believe in him.
Gentiles will receive forgiveness for their sins only by believing in Christ. They do not merit this forgiveness by their obedience to his will. Rather, this forgiveness is given freely when one takes refuge in Christ, confessing one’s sins. This is so because we do not justify ourselves by our obedience or good works. Only Jesus Christ justifies us—that is, only he makes us truly righteous, not by our merits or by the merits of our obedience but only by his merits on the cross. Only the merits of his death on the cross can reconcile us with God and pay our debt of suffering for having sinned and offended God. Only his suffering satisfies divine justice and atones for our sins. This whole atonement has nothing to do with the Mosaic Law or our own merits.

Even in the Old Testament, a person was justified ahead of time by the merits of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross through his faith in him as the coming Messiah and not by his good works according to the law. Genesis says, Abram “believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3-4). How much more now that the Messiah has come will a person be justified not by his good works but only by the merits of Jesus Christ when he believes in him.

Now that the Messiah has come, neither circumcision nor the Mosaic Law is required for Gentiles that believe in Christ. Only by faith in him will they be forgiven, justified, and made new men, a new creation, and new creatures in Jesus Christ, who makes all things new (Rev. 21:5). Then in order not to lose this new life, they should obey his will and avoid all sin. And their good works will increase their heavenly reward.

With this great discovery, the Church’s universal mission was born. Now the apostles could fulfill the command of Christ to preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15) and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). The Church’s mission was born with this discovery and decision of the apostles.

This, of course, also has the greatest relevance for us, for we know that we can be forgiven for our sins, have our guilt removed, and be made righteous, with Christ shining in our hearts only by the merits of Christ’s death on the cross. So we turn to him in faith and through the sacraments to be made new men in him and then share this treasure with others by preaching the gospel to all we can reach.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS A LIFE OF THE CROSS
Saturday, 5th Week of Easter
Acts 16:1-10; Ps. 99; John 15:18-21

“If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19).

A Christian will be persecuted. We have to be prepared for this and not be surprised when it happens. Christ prepared us for this. Our faith in him makes us different from the world if we do his will and live for him with all our heart, as he wishes. The world lives for itself and its pleasures. A Christian mortifies and sacrifices himself for love of Christ so that all his love goes directly to him. He detaches himself for the sake of Christ to love him with all his heart. Therefore he renounces the pleasures of this world and lives a mortified and ascetical life, a life of sacrifice and love of God. He renounces the
world and its delights, delicacies, and pleasures in every aspect of his life, from his diet and way of dressing to how he spends his free time. He renounces the diversions and entertainments of this world in order to love God with all his heart, not with a heart divided and dissipated by the pleasures of the world. Thus he lives only for God, only for Christ, and his life is very different from the life of the world, from a worldly life.

Therefore the world does not love him. It neither understands nor accepts him. The world rejects and persecutes him. But he continues living this way, only for God with all his heart, with a radically undivided heart, and he continues preaching the gospel.

As Christ was rejected and persecuted by the world, in the same way the Christian will also be rejected and persecuted by the world. But he knows this. It does not surprise him. It is what he expects, for Christ prepared him for this. He told us, “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (Matt. 10:22-23). So we continue with our way of life and our ministry in another place, as did St. Paul, who was imprisoned, stoned, beaten, and driven out of one city after another. Again and again he departed from where they persecuted him and went to another town and preached Christ there. We should do the same, not daunted by past rejection and persecution.

“Do not wonder, brethren, that the world hates you” (1 John 3:13). “Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). “If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (Matt. 10:25). “The world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (John 17:14). “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (John 15:20).

This will be our life if we want to be Christians. It is a life of the cross. As they persecuted Jesus, so will they persecute us if we follow him with all our heart, renouncing the way of living of the world in its worldliness in order to live for Christ with all our heart.

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THE ETERNAL SPLENDOR OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

6th Sunday of Easter
Acts 15:1-2, 22-29; Ps. 66; Rev. 21:10-14, 22-23; John 14:23-29

“Jesus answered him, ‘If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him’” (John 14:23).

This is Jesus’ great promise, given to his apostles during the Last Supper. He promises to remain with them forever if they keep his word. He will remain with them by dwelling within them. This then is the promise of his indwelling in his faithful that obey him. Obeying him is the sign that we love him; and if we love him, he will love us and make his dwelling within us together with his Father. This is far more than just an abstract doctrine. It is the real and actual experience of those that believe in him and love him, showing their love by obeying his word. If we do not obey him, we do not really love him (John 14:24), and so he will not dwell within us in this way. This is how Christ will manifest himself to us but not to the world.
This was the question of Judas (not Iscariot). “Lord,” he said, “how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” (John 14:22). He will do so by loving us and dwelling within us if we also love him and show our love by keeping his word. If we do not keep his word, we do not love him (John 14:24). Therefore obedience is essential to experiencing this indwelling. In this way, we who believe in him and love him will also have him dwelling in our hearts, and we will experience his great love for us. He will illuminate us interiorly, shining in our hearts (2 Cor. 4:6).

We can remain in his love by obeying him, by doing his will, and by avoiding sin. Christ himself is the best example of this in his love for and obedience to his Father. As he does, we also are to do. “If you keep my commandments,” he said, “you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10).

Christ told us this for the sake of our happiness, so that we would be happy in him, with him and his Father indwelling in us in this special way that the world does not experience. He said immediately after this, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). Thus does he give his believers a new, interior joy.

If we disobey him, we lose this happiness, and we then have to confess our sins anew and take refuge in him again with faith and hope. Then through the merits of his death on the cross, he will forgive us and indwell in us anew, making us even happier than before.

All of this was a new discovery for the primitive Church. In the beginning, they thought that this was only for Jews, and that Gentiles first had to convert and become Jews, be circumcised, and keep the whole Mosaic Law. But, as we see today, they quickly discovered that this was not the case, but rather that Christianity was for everyone, for Gentiles as much as for Jews. They discovered that all can be transformed by believing in Jesus Christ and observing his commandments—that is, by doing his will. This is what St. Peter says today, saying, God “made no distinction between us [Jews] and them [Gentiles], but cleansed their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9). “And God … bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us” (Acts 15:8). Therefore the Church today sees that it has a mission to the whole world, that all might hear the gospel preached to him and have the opportunity to believe in Jesus Christ for his salvation. The result will be that all who believe in him will be saved, have their sins forgiven, and Christ will love them, manifest himself to them, and will come with his Father to make his home with them (John 14:23). They only have to believe in him and love him, showing their love by obeying his commandments.

Then the second reading today shows us our final hope. When we die if we believe in Jesus, love him, and obey him, we will go to heaven—or to purgatory, then to heaven. We will wait there until the second coming of Christ to the earth to establish a kingdom of righteousness over the whole world (Jer. 23:5; Ezek. 34:23-24; 37:24-26) for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-7). We will be associated in some way with this reign of righteousness. We do not yet know exactly how we will be associated with it. That has not been revealed to us. We will receive our resurrection bodies when Christ comes for his Church (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-53) near the time of his second coming to set up the millennial kingdom (Rev. 19:11-21). Then at the end of the millennium, the earth will be destroyed (Rev. 20:11; 21:1), the wicked will be judged (Rev. 20:11-13) and thrown into the lake of eternal fire (Rev. 20:15), and the new earth will be created (Rev.
21:1). After the new earth has been created, the new Jerusalem, described today (Rev. 21:1-22:5), will come down from heaven and settle upon the new earth forever (Rev. 21:2, 10). Then our permanent dwelling for all eternity will be in this new Jerusalem, this magnificently beautiful city of pure gold, clear and transparent as glass (Rev. 21:18, 21), whose radiance is like jasper, translucent as crystal (Rev. 21:11). There we will live forever with Christ and the Father, and we will see the face of God (Rev. 22:4). The city will be totally luminous, with the glory of God and the Lamb shining through it (Rev. 21:23, 25; 22:5). This will be the consummation of all that we have ever experienced of Christ in this life, but it will be infinitely greater and more glorious, and will have no end.

The prophecies that David will rule forever over Israel in peace and plenty, in righteousness and prosperity (Ezek. 34:23-24; 37:24-26) have been fulfilled in Christ and in the kingdom that he has established on earth, but they will also be fulfilled in a more literal way in the thousand-year kingdom that Jesus will set up at his second coming (Rev. 20:1-7). Those that enter into this kingdom will enter in their natural bodies, for the prophecies say that they will have children and grandchildren, work the land, and have abundant crops (Ezek. 34:25-27; 37:24-26). But if all the saints living and dead have already been given resurrection bodies when Christ comes for his Church (1 Cor. 15:51-53; 1 Thess. 4:16-17), then a period of time will be needed between Christ’s coming for his Church and his coming to set up his millennial kingdom. During this interval, all the tribulation of Revelation 6-19 will take place in order to punish the wicked and convert a whole new generation of living saints capable of entering into the millennial kingdom in their natural bodies to work the land and have children and grandchildren (Ezek. 37:24-28). Then at the end of the millennium, they too will be given resurrection bodies and enter into the new Jerusalem on the new earth, and so the thousand-year kingdom of Christ will merge with the eternal kingdom of God in the new Jerusalem.

**TRUE OBEDIENCE AND PERSECUTION**

**Monday, 6th Week of Easter**
Acts 16:11-15; Ps. 149; John 15:26-16:4

“They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father, nor me” (John 16:2-3).

Persecution will be a permanent factor in the Christian life. Jesus prepares us for this today. Those who lack spiritual experience persecute Jesus’ disciples. Those who do not know the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their own hearts do not respect his guidance in the hearts of Jesus’ disciples. Those who do not recognize God’s voice in their own consciences do not respect the consciences of other people. They do not believe that God guides people interiorly, and so they are intolerant of people who seek to follow the interior guidance of the Spirit in their lives. Those who do not recognize how God wants to guide them persecute people whom God is guiding and who are obediently following
him. Thus a disciple will always be persecuted by the world and by those lacking in spiritual experience.

We are not to fear persecution, nor should we stop following the interior guidance of the Spirit out of fear of being persecuted. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). We should obey God’s interior guidance even if this causes us to be persecuted, and not swerve from this guidance to avoid persecution. Instead of fearing persecution, we should fear one who can destroy our soul by guiding us to sin. We should not do something to save our body if this will destroy our soul. He who saves his life in this way loses it. But he who loses his life for Christ’s sake will save it (Matt. 10:39).

We lose our life by being persecuted for doing God’s will, but in losing it in this way, we save it with God. At times those who persecute us will have great zeal, thinking they are acting correctly, but because they have little interior experience of how God guides souls, they are mistaken. They think they are “offering service to God,” as Jesus says today. “And they will do this because they have not known the Father, nor me” (John 16:3). Their lack of interior spiritual experience leads them to think and act in this way. The result is that the obedient disciple is persecuted for the sake of Christ by those who think they are offering service to God in persecuting him. But the reality is that his persecutors do not know God. They lack spiritual experience. They have zeal, but without knowledge.

Therefore “beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues” (Matt. 10:17). Instead of trying to avoid persecution, we should do God’s will and give witness to Christ. “Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32-33). In doing this, we have to obey God rather than men (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29).

**THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD**

Ascension Thursday

“Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb. 9:24).

Today we celebrate the ascension of the Lord. His sacrifice is finished; and after rising from the dead, he enters today into heaven “to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb. 9:24). He intercedes for us before the Father, presenting to him the blood of his sacrifice. “He entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12). Christ opened for us a new way to enter heaven through his blood offered in sacrifice. This sacrifice paid our debt of suffering in punishment for our sins, and God thereby forgives us. Christ now intercedes for us before the Father, showing him the blood of his sacrifice that expiated our sins. “He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).
Therefore “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus” (Heb. 10:19). Christ is the one “who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:34). “He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26).

Since Jesus has completed his sacrifice, he rose from the dead and today ascends into heaven from where he came. His work on earth for our salvation is now complete. Having ascended, he will send forth the Holy Spirit from the Father upon those that believe in him, and they will be his witnesses in the world. “Thus it is written,” Jesus said, “that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46-48).

We are his witnesses now in the world, witnesses that in his name and through the power of his sacrifice, there is repentance and forgiveness of sins for all who believe in him. There is a new life through faith in him. Having explained all this, “as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9).

Christ now reigns in glory, seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven while we live in his kingdom here on earth, a kingdom of forgiveness of sins and peace with God. We live in the peace that Christ gave us in his kingdom, and he reigns over us from his heavenly throne.

One day he will come again in the same way that the disciples saw him ascend into heaven (Acts 1:11). He will come personally “in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27) to vanquish his enemies (Rev. 19:11-21) and establish his kingdom of righteousness upon the earth (Rev. 20:1-7).

THE MINISTRY OF PREACHING CHRIST

Feast of St. Matthias, May 14
Acts 1:15-17, 20-26; Ps. 112; John 15:9-17

“One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22).

Jesus chose twelve apostles to live with him and witness his life, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension. Judas turned aside from this ministry; so the apostles, praying, asked the Lord to show them whom he had chosen to take his place. They cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias.

The institution of the twelve came to an end with the death of the original apostles, for after them, there were no more eyewitnesses of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The apostles had successors down to the present day, but the number twelve was only for the first generation of the Church. The twelve were important, for they were the official eyewitnesses, chosen by Jesus himself, who lived with him, heard all his teaching, and spoke and ate with him after his resurrection. In order to preach the resurrection, it was necessary in the beginning that there be eyewitnesses of his
appearances after his death. The faith of the Church—our faith—is built upon them and their testimony that they had seen him risen from the dead.

The work then of the apostles was to give witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and preach God’s salvation in his name. They preached a living and vital message, that God saves us through the death on the cross of Jesus Christ and that his resurrection confirms that his sacrificial death was successful and was accepted by the Father. They preached that all who take refuge in Christ with living faith, confessing their sins, will be saved, forgiven their sins, and given a new and risen life in the risen Christ (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12; 3:1-2; Eph. 2:6).

Whenever we sin or fall into an imperfection that alienates or distances us from God, we have to turn to Christ anew with faith and invoke the merits of his vicarious and sacrificial death on the cross, for his death paid our debt with God and expiated our sins. God will then cleanse our consciences anew and restore us to his love.

We are to live in the love of Christ, who lives in his Father’s love, and we are to try to always remain in this love (John 15:9). It is this new life of faith and love that the apostles proclaimed. It is a life in which we try to always abide in the splendor of Christ’s love, for this love is his great gift to us. The successors of the apostles, who are the bishops and priests, should clearly preach this message and also give witness by their holy way of life that they are living this new life. If they only preach interesting stories and peripheral things, leaving aside the central message of the saving death of Jesus Christ, they are not exercising their ministry properly, and their parishioners will remain in the dark. What we now need in the Church today is the clear preaching of God’s salvation through the vicarious, sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

THE CURE FOR OUR SPIRIT

Saturday, 6th Week of Easter
Acts 18:23-28; Ps. 46; John 16:23-28

“Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:24).

Christ came for this, namely that we might take refuge in him with faith, ask for what we need, and receive it with joy. But what should we ask for? More than anything else, we should ask for the forgiveness of our sins and imperfections, which depress our spirits, and for the peace of God in our hearts. We should ask for the gift of a good conscience, which knows that God has totally forgiven it through the merits of the death of his Son on the cross. If we ask for this, we will receive it; and our joy will be full. This is the most important thing in our lives, and this is also the reason why Jesus was sent into the world by the Father. He was sent to die for us on the cross and to thus bear for us the just punishment for our sins, to reconcile us with God, and to enable God to justly forgive us, as is fitting for God.

A bad conscience is the worst sickness that we can have, and there is no human remedy that can cure this malady of the spirit. Only God can cure us of this, and he does so through the death of his Son on the cross. “God has exalted him at his right hand as
Leader and Savior,” proclaimed the apostles, “to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31). This is what he came to give us, and this is what we should ask for in prayer with faith and in the sacrament of reconciliation; and as Christ told us, we will receive it, and our joy will be full.

Nothing destroys our joy more than a bad conscience for having sinned or fallen into an imperfection. This is our greatest problem. If, through the action of Christ, we have a clean conscience, we will be happy even in the midst of other problems and sicknesses. “A man’s spirit will endure sickness,” says the Bible; “but a broken spirit who can bear?” (Pro. 18:14). Christ came to cure us of this sickness of the spirit if only we ask him with faith. He suffered our just punishment for us for our sins so that we would no longer have to suffer it. He came to call us “out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). He came that we might abide in his love (John 15:9) and contemplate his glory (John 17:24). He came to cure our broken spirit so that we could endure our other illnesses and problems even with joy. He will give us a cheerful heart if we ask him, for “a cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones” (Pro. 17:22). Only Christ has this remedy. And this cure of the spirit is of the greatest importance to us, for “a glad heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken” (Pro. 15:13).

Christ told us, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). His salvation gives us true joy. He also said, “These things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves” (John 17:13). His salvation gives us great interior joy with which we can endure all else even with happiness.

CONTEMPLATING THE GLORY OF CHRIST

7th Sunday of Easter
Acts 7:55-60; Ps. 96; Rev. 22:12-14, 16-17, 20; John 17:20-26

“The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them” (John 17:22).

Jesus Christ is now seated in glory at the right hand of the Father in heaven. He reigns over us from his throne with the Father. At the same time, he is also with us, and he tells us that he has given us his glory. This glory is the Father’s glory, which the Father gave to his Son. Christ has given to us the same glory that he himself received from the Father. He gave it to us so that we might contemplate it. He wants us to be where he is in order to behold the glory that the Father gave him. This contemplation is to take place now for the sake of our transformation in him. By contemplating his glory, we are transformed into what we contemplate, namely Christ. This is a process. Little by little we advance from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18).

The Bible tells us all this. We read: “The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them” (John 17:22). “Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me” (John 17:24). And “We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).
We are to contemplate the glory of Christ, which he has given to us, and be transformed in the image of Christ by this contemplation.

To see or behold this glory is to contemplate it; that is, to see it interiorly as light and joy which delights and illuminates us. “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). This is the wealth of glory from which we receive, for when he became incarnate, “we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14).

Jesus Christ wants us to be one with him, to be united to him, and through him, be united to the Father. This is because Christ is in us, and the Father is in Christ. Therefore through Christ, the Father is also in us and is united to us. We contemplate the glory of Christ, and this glory is the glory of the Father, for it was the Father that gave it to him. Thus the glory of the Father enters into us and illuminates us. It was for this that Christ came into the world, sent by the Father, namely to illuminate us with his glory.

Christ not only gave us his glory to contemplate but also gave us his love. The Father loved Christ, and Christ loved us. Therefore through Christ we are in the love of the Father. Christ revealed to us that the Father loves us as he loves Christ, and moreover that the same love with which the Father loves Christ is in us. So through Christ we live in the love of the Father, just as the Son lives in his love. So does Jesus tell us today, praying to the Father that the world may know that thou “hast loved them even as thou hast loved me” (John 17:23). Through Christ, the Father loves us even as he loves his Son. Jesus also says, “I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them” (John 17:26). The love with which the Father has loved the Son has come to us through the Son. We are to live in this love.

So what should we then do? Jesus also told us this. “As the Father has loved me,” he said, “so have I loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9). We are to abide in the love of Christ. This is why Christ came into the world—that we might abide in his love. We will abide in his love if we discern well his will for us and do it. So has he told us, saying, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10). Obedience to the will of God then is the key to abiding in the love of Christ, which is the love of the Father.

This is the kingdom that Christ brought into the world, a kingdom of light, love, and glory. He came for the illumination of the world, for its transformation in his image. Christ wants us to live in his light and love, and contemplate his glory. “I am the light of the world,” he said; “he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). He wants us to live now in his kingdom of light. He freed us from the darkness of sin and transferred us into his kingdom of light, which is the kingdom of God that he inaugurated in this world by his coming. St. Paul says that he gives “thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:12-14).
THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Monday, 7th Week of Easter
Acts 19:1-8; Ps. 67; John 16:29-33

“On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied” (Acts 19:5-6).

We are now approaching the feast of Pentecost when we remember the importance of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit is the anointing from God that brings our faith to life and gives us the courage to bear public witness to Christ and preach the gospel with power. The Holy Spirit is an interior inspiration that unites us to God in love and enables us to contemplate the glory of Christ and be transformed in his image (2 Cor. 3:18). The Holy Spirit gives us happiness in our spirit and puts us in peace with God. There are also the special gifts of the Spirit, such as the gifts of tongues and prophecy, as we see today in the twelve men who received the Holy Spirit when St. Paul laid hands upon them (Acts 19:6).

It is the Holy Spirit that clothes us with power to go to the ends of the earth to be witnesses to God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” Jesus said; “and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This is the power we proclaim so that all might believe in Jesus and be interiorly renewed, with rivers of living water flowing within them, rejoicing them in the Lord (John 7:37-39). The Holy Spirit becomes within us “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). This fulfills of the prophecy of Isaiah: “I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people” (Isa. 43:20).

We now live in the days of fulfillment of prophecy, in the messianic days, in the days when the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon all flesh that believes in the Son of God. “And it shall come to pass afterward,” prophesied Joel, “that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Joel 2:28). This Spirit renews and rejoices us with the true happiness of God. When we receive him, we want to share this treasure with others by preaching Christ and the salvation that he gained for us by his death on the cross. The Spirit unites us to God and gives us a happy conscience, enabling us to contemplate the glory of Christ, which the Father gave him (John 17:24). The Spirit directs us interiorly, showing us individually God’s will for us and giving us the inspiration and courage we need to follow it. Then God rewards us for our obedience by sending us this same Holy Spirit to dwell within us and delight us. Through this Spirit, Christ wants us to remain in his love, as he always remains in his Father’s love. The Spirit enables us to abide in Christ’s love and share it with others.
“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs’” (John 21:15).

Here we see the connection between loving Jesus and pastoral work. Three times Jesus asks Peter whether Peter loves him, and three times Peter responds that he does. Then three times Jesus adds, “Feed my lambs.”

We can also see in this verse Peter’s superior position among the apostles. The question that Jesus poses is whether Peter loves him more than the rest of the apostles who were then with him on the beach having breakfast. Peter is then singled out by Jesus as the pastor of the rest, of the Church. Other apostles are there, but only Peter is told to feed the sheep. He is to feed the sheep precisely because he loves Jesus more than the other apostles.

Peter is also a model for all who believe in Jesus and love him. One who loves Jesus should feed his sheep. And conversely, one who wants to do pastoral work should love Jesus. This should be the primary motive of anyone who wants to do pastoral or missionary work. Without this, all other motives are unworthy of a Christian. Other motives might be: love for people whom one wants to help, the desire to do something great and important in this world, or the desire to make a name for oneself as a great speaker, builder, etc. But without love for Christ, all these other motives are inadequate and unworthy.

If we love Jesus Christ, we live a new life in him. We are at peace with God because of him. Before we loved him, it was he who loved us and “freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5), as the entrance antiphon says today. All our love for him comes from his love for us and from the benefits we have received from him. By his sacrifice, his blood redeemed us, paying our death sentence for us for having sinned. We are redeemed and put at peace with God by his blood; and the gift of the Holy Spirit gives us happiness. Then we feel sent by this experience to save as many others as we can, so that they too might believe in Jesus and be saved and redeemed by him from their sins by his blood. The Spirit puts this love for Christ into our hearts and gives us this desire to feed his sheep. Christ asks us too whether we love him, and if we say that we do, he will say to us also, “Feed my sheep.”

There is more than one way to feed the sheep. One can do so by preaching, by serving, or by writing. What is essential is that it be Christ, his death, and God’s salvation in him that we preach, not our own ideas and experiences or just interesting stories. We are to love Jesus Christ and preach him. Only one who loves him will be able to do this in a way that is of real benefit to others.
THE COMING OF THE LORD

Saturday, 7th Week of Easter
Acts 28:16-20, 30-31; Ps. 10; John 21:20-25

“Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!’ The saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?’” (John 21:22-23).

This was St. Peter’s question. He wanted to know what would happen to the beloved disciple. Jesus does not give him a definite answer, but only asks Peter what concern is it of his if he wills that John remain until he returns.

We see in these two verses the same doctrine St. Paul taught—namely that those that are alive when Christ returns for his Church will not die, but will be changed and given their resurrection bodies without having to die first. Hence if St. John remains until Christ comes to take his Church, he will not die. The final generation of the Church will not die.

About this coming of the Lord Jesus, St. Paul says, “Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:51-53). In this coming of the Lord, “the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left” (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Thus the whole Church—those that are saved—will rise with resurrection bodies when Christ returns.

But Scripture also says that when Christ returns, he will reign on the earth for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-7), during which time Satan will be bound and sealed in a bottomless pit (Rev. 20:1-3). That is, it will be a kingdom of righteousness on earth with the glorified Christ reigning over us (Isa. 9:7; 11:5). Scripture also says that at the end of a thousand years, Satan will “be loosed for a little while” (Rev. 20:4), and that at that time there will be a rebellion and a war against the saints in Jerusalem (Rev. 20:7-9). From this, we see that at least some of the inhabitants of the millennial earth will still be in their natural bodies, for they will rebel and make war, and only mortals do that.

But if all the saved have already been transformed at the coming of Christ, where will the saints come from that are still in their natural bodies that can enter the millennium, have children, and work the land (Isa. 65:20-22), and some of whose children will later rebel?

It seems that will be an interval between the coming of Christ for his Church on the one hand and his definitive second coming to establish the millennial kingdom on the other hand. During this interval will occur all the tribulation of Revelation 6-19 that will give birth to a whole new generation of saints that can enter the millennium in their natural bodies.
“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4).

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day when we remember how Jesus Christ sent to us the gift of the Holy Spirit from the Father. At Pentecost the Church was born. The Church is the community of all who have believed in Jesus Christ for their salvation and who have received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is like water from above that moistens the earth, making it bring forth fruit. The gift of the Holy Spirit makes our lives fruitful. The fruits which the Holy Spirit brings forth in us are: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23).

The Church is the community of those who have been saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ we have what we most need—salvation; that is, the forgiveness of our sins, which overwhelm and depress us, and a new life. This new life is according to the Spirit, not according to the desires of the flesh that are opposed to those of the Spirit. The Christian walks in the Spirit and does not satisfy the desires of the flesh which are against the Spirit.

“Walk by the Spirit,” says St. Paul, “and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other” (Gal. 5:16-17). “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:24-25). “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:7-8).

Writing to the Romans, St. Paul says, “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God … For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live” (Rom. 8:6-8, 13).

Today we commemorate and celebrate the coming and presence of the Spirit in the Church and in our lives. It is only by the power of the Spirit that we can overcome the attractions of the flesh and of the things and delights of this world that divide our hearts. How easy it is to be deceived by the delights of this world that can gain control over us and dominate our emotions and thoughts, distancing our spirits from God and robbing us of our peace. We think that in the delights of this world we will find the happiness and joy we crave, but afterward we discover that we have lost our peace and disturbed our spirit. In allowing ourselves to be dominated by the things of this world, our hearts are divided, the seed of the love of God dies within us, and we are filled with remorse. The happiness and joy we thought we would find in these things escapes us, and we are left without either happiness or joy. On the contrary, we become depressed and feel guilty before God for having acted as we did and for not having followed more faithfully the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit.
In this way, we learn that we are to live a life in the Spirit, not a life that follows the attractions of the flesh and of the world. In Christ we have this new life. He gives us something that we cannot give to ourselves, the forgiveness of our sins and the life, love, and joy of God in our hearts. Christ gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to his Church for the forgiveness of sins; that is, he gave us a sacrament through which we can receive the effects of the merits of his death on the cross and have them individually and personally applied to us in a truly experiential way so that we really feel forgiven with the happiness and peace of God restored in our hearts. Christ gave us this sacrament when he breathed on his apostles and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22-23).

The Holy Spirit applies to us the merits of the death of Christ on the cross, giving us a new life as a result. Christ paid for our sins by his death. He was punished instead of us for our sins. He suffered what we should and would have suffered for our sins, for having let ourselves be dominated by the desires of the flesh and of the world. This salvation is then applied to us by the Holy Spirit, particularly in the sacrament of reconciliation when our sins are forgiven by God through the ministry of one of the successors of the apostles. It is the Father that forgives our sins, the Son that expiates them, and the Holy Spirit that communicates this forgiveness to us in a real, personal, and experiential way so that we truly feel forgiven and made new and clean, basking once again in the splendor of God’s love.

Thus God gives us a new, transformed, and illuminated life; and all three persons of the Blessed Trinity cooperate in this work. The Father forgives us, the Son pays our just debt of suffering, and the Holy Spirit applies this atonement to us in a personal and experiential way, particularly through the sacraments of penance and the eucharist. Thus the Holy Spirit causes to flower within us the new life in God that Christ was sent from the Father to bring us.

EVANGELICAL POVERTY

Monday, 8th Week of the Year
1 Pet. 1:3-9; Ps. 110; Mark 10:17-27

“How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:23).

This is the great mystery of evangelical poverty—namely that it is the poor in this world that are blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20). This means the anawim, the poor of Yahweh, who are meek, humble, and righteous, who have lost everything in this world except the Lord, who is their only happiness. This is the condition that Jesus blesses. For us this means renouncing all luxury, delicacies, and unnecessary pleasures, and living only for God in every aspect of our lives, in simplicity and evangelical poverty. Thus we will be able to have an undivided heart in our love for the Lord, not divided by the delicacies and unnecessary pleasures of this world. This applies to our diet, our way of dressing, and how we spend our time—it should be with great simplicity, all for the Lord, with an undivided heart, with all our heart, soul, mind,
and strength (Mark 12:30). Our food should be simple and healthy, without delicacies and things added only for pleasure. Our life should not be worldly. It should therefore exclude things like television and movies that put the world into our hearts. If we are priests or religious, we should dress as such in all simplicity, giving good witness in a world so forgetful of God.

We should live like this because “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25). How can a rich man surrounded by his pleasures have an undivided heart in his love for God? He is like a seed sown among thorns that choke it (Luke 8:14). Therefore “woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24). They are like the rich glutton in hell “who feasted sumptuously every day” (Luke 16:19), to whom Abraham said, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things” (Luke 16:25). He tried to save his life in a worldly way, and so he lost his life with God (Mark 8:35). “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth…” Jesus said, “for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:19, 21). But how many divide their hearts even though Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters … You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24). If we want the great treasure of the kingdom of God, we must renounce everything else as did the man that discovered the buried treasure (Matt. 13:44). Only in this way will we possess the treasure of the kingdom. Therefore when the disciples heard the call of Jesus, “when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:11). This is the narrow way of life, not the wide way of destruction (Matt. 7:13-14). This is living according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh (Gal. 5:16; 6:8, 14). “So therefore,” Jesus said, “whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

WITNESSES OF THE LIGHT

Thursday, 8th Week of the Year
1 Pet. 2:2-5, 9-12; Ps. 99; Mark 10:46-52

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Those who are baptized into Christ and believe in him are the new Israel even though they are Gentiles. St. Peter calls them by all the special titles of Israel. They are “God’s own people,” a “chosen race” (Isa. 43:20), “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). The promises to Israel will be fulfilled in them. St. Peter tells them, “Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:10). Once they were Gentiles and pagans, but now they are the people of God, the new Israel, the heirs of the promises of the prophets.

They have received mercy through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is this that has made them a holy people. He cleansed them by his death and illuminated them by his resurrection so that they might walk in his light, abstaining “from the passions of the flesh” that wage war against the soul (1 Pet. 2:11). If they do not abstain from the passions of the flesh, they will lose the light of Christ in their hearts.
Not only can they now walk in the light of Christ but they are also to proclaim this light to others. They themselves are to become missionaries of the light, declaring the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

We are this people taken from among the Gentiles and acquired by God through the death of his Son on the cross. It is now our vocation to declare the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). Christ wants us to walk in his light. For this he came. For this he saved us. He came for our illumination and for us to illuminate others by our word and example. By taking refuge in Christ with faith, we are saved from our sins, which are our greatest problem. It is our sins and the burden of guilt that depress us and darken our spirit. Christ came to cure us of this by paying our debt, suffering on the cross.

Then we can live in his peace and light even in the midst of many problems and conflicts, and we can help others too to be saved from the darkness and live in God’s marvelous light. “I am the light of the world,” said Jesus; “he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). If we follow him, we will not walk in darkness. He will illuminate us through our faith; and if we do his will, we will not lose his illumination. Rather we will be “sons of light and sons of the day” (1 Thess. 5:5). “Once you were darkness,” says St. Paul, “but now you are light in the Lord” (Ef. 5:8). God has given his servant as “a light to the nations” (Isa. 42:6). Jesus Christ is that servant. He illuminates us by his death. This illumination then gives us the vocation to be the witnesses of the light to the world.

BLAMELESS IN HOLINESS FOR THE DAY OF THE LORD

Friday, 8th Week of the Year
1 Pet. 4:7-13; Ps. 95; Mark 11:11-26

“The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer” (1 Pet. 4:7 KJV).

This is how a Christian is to live. It makes no difference that the coming of Christ may still be a long way off. What is important is that we live in a state of constant vigilance, always watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord, always prepared and preparing ourselves lest he catch us off guard. We should live in joyful expectation and eager preparation for the Lord’s coming. One who lives this way avoids worldly pleasures that distract and dissipate his spirit, filling it with all sorts of images and disordered desires. A Christian, on the contrary, wants to live in the enchantment of the coming of the Lord, recollected and at peace with God, and wants to be now in that state that he would want to be in at the Lord’s coming.

For a Christian, “the end of all things is at hand” (1 Pet. 4:7). He therefore lives soberly. St. Paul also says that we are now waiting “for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7). It is Christ “who will sustain you to the end,” St. Paul says, “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8). This is what we want—to be “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” “Therefore,” says St. Peter, “gird up your
minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13). We must live in hope and be a people of hope. The coming of Christ is nearer each day. “The night is far gone, the day is at hand” (Rom. 13:12). “Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). Therefore “let us conduct ourselves becomeingly as in the day” (Rom. 13:13). “So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober” (1 Thess. 5:6). “Watch therefore,” said Jesus, “for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming … Be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:42, 44). “Take heed, watch and pray,” says Jesus; “for you do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:33).

We should grow in love for one another, serving others with love. This is “so that he [Christ] may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess. 3:13).

If we live in hope, we live a different kind of life than the rest who live only for the pleasures of this world. We live in another world, in another dimension, in the true world, the world of God and of Jesus Christ, and our goals are different. We live for another kind of happiness, the true happiness of God in our heart that comes from the cross of Christ and from a life obedient to his will in all we do. This is to live soberly and vigilantly, awaiting the coming of the Lord.

GOD’S GUIDANCE IN OUR LIVES

Saturday, 8th Week of the Year
Jude 17, 20-25; Ps. 62; Mark 11:27-33

“The chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?’” (Mark 11:27-28).

The authorities did not believe that God was guiding Jesus to act and speak as he did, therefore they attacked him. They knew that Jesus himself believed he was being guided by God, but they did not believe that this was actually the case. In order to attack him on this point, they publicly ask him, “By what authority are you doing these things?” (Mark 11:28).

It seems that these authorities do not believe that God guides us in the way we are to live. We see the same dispute occurring today. There are people who carefully try to follow the interior guidance of the Holy Spirit, and so they live in a radical way, rejecting many of the customs of their culture and the lifestyle of the world. They live for God alone, renouncing worldly pleasures and many practices that are considered normal by the majority. Some, for example, live a life of prayer and fasting in the desert, far from the world—that is, they live a monastic life. They live for God with all their heart, recollected in prayer and much silence. Their whole life is different from that of most people. They have rejected the world in its worldliness. Their way of life is distinct from that of others, and their ways are different (Wis. 2:15).
Many will not accept such people, nor do they believe that God is guiding them to live as they do. At times they attack them and ask them, “By what authority are you doing these things?” (Mark 11:28). Those who ask this are people who follow and imitate the world and its lifestyle.

When people attack us and ask by what authority are we doing these things, we can respond by asking them a question, as Jesus did today. We can ask them, for example, “Was the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* inspired by God or was it just the personal ideas of Pope Paul VI?” They will immediately recognize that the correct and orthodox answer is that it was inspired by God, and they will also see the parallel to our case, namely that we are being guided by God. As they have rejected God’s guidance in the case of the encyclical, so have they also rejected it in our case. They will not be able to answer our question. If they say, “It was inspired by God,” they will condemn themselves for not having accepted it; and if they say that is was only the Pope’s personal ideas, they will reveal their true identity, and all will see that they are heretical, having publicly rejected the official Magisterium of the Church. They will therefore remain silent, but they will understand that as they have rejected God’s guidance in the case of the encyclical, so have they also rejected it in the case of our way of life. As they erred in the case of the encyclical, so have they also errored in our case. Their problem is that they reject God’s guidance not only in the lives of men but also in the official teaching of the Church. They reject it because they have departed from the ways of orthodoxy.

**THE ATONEMENT WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE TRINITY**

Trinity Sunday  
Pro. 8:22-31; Ps. 8; Rom. 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

Today is Trinity Sunday. The greatness of the mystery of the Trinity is best seen in the mystery of the justification of sinners by means of the death of Jesus Christ. Something took place in his death on the cross that saved us. What happened took place between the persons of the Blessed Trinity. Christ’s death was a sacrifice offered by the Son to his Father, and this sacrifice so pleased the Father that he saved us and sent the Holy Spirit upon us to justify us—that is, to forgive us for our sins and make us truly righteous before God.

In this mystery of justification, we see the three persons of the Blessed Trinity relating among themselves for our salvation. We see that although God is one and there is but one God, nonetheless God is also three distinct persons that interrelate with each other. The Son offers a sacrifice to the Father. The Father receives the sacrifice and is infinitely pleased by it. And because of this sacrifice of the Son, the Father sends the Holy Spirit upon all who believe in the Son, and thus saves them.

In God there is but one divine mind and one divine will that all three persons share—one in his own way—the Father, as Father; the Son, as Son; and the Holy Spirit, as Holy Spirit. Nonetheless using this one common divine mind and will, they are able to
know and communicate with each other as distinct persons and love each other. We see this in the saying of Jesus to his Father, “Thou lovest me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24 KJV). Jesus says here that the Father loved him before the incarnation, “before the foundation of the world.” It is not only Christ’s humanity that the Father loved. He did not love him only as a man. It was not just his human mind and will that the Father loved, but rather the person of Jesus Christ even before he had a human nature, even before his conception and birth in Bethlehem, when he existed in the bosom of the Father from all eternity. We see that the Father always knew and loved his Son as one distinct person knowing and loving the other from all eternity. “Thou lovest me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24 KJV).

Hence a God who is one and who has but one divine mind and will is also Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each of these three persons knows himself as a distinct person, and each one loves the other as a person distinct from himself. This is so because each person possesses the one divine mind and will in his own way or mode.

We know that there is but one divine mind and will in God because Christ’s human mind and human will pertained to his human nature, not to his human person, because he had no human person. He was only a divine person. He had a human mind and will, and if he had no human person to which they could pertain, they must pertain to his human nature. In this we learn that the mind and will pertain to the nature, not to the person.

It must be the same in God. His divine mind and will must pertain to his nature, not to his person. But in God there are three persons and only one nature. Hence all three persons have to share the one common divine mind and will that pertain to their one common nature. Therefore each person of the Trinity does not have his own mind and will, but rather all three persons share together in the one common divine mind and will that pertains to their common nature.

Yet even so, as we see in John 17:24 (“Thou lovest me before the foundation of the world” KJV), the three persons are distinct and relate among themselves as distinct persons that know and love each other. But with all this, they are still only one being.

Hence this is how they act in the atonement—as three distinct persons. The Father sent his Son into the world and had him suffer the just and necessary penalty for all the sins of the world. The Son willingly did this. By suffering on the cross, the Son satisfied divine justice, and God was thus able to justly forgive man, as is fitting for God.

But this action was not only supremely just but was also supremely merciful, for the Father is but one being with the Son, and so it was God himself—in the person of his Son—who suffered the just penalty for our sins, so that we might be justly forgiven. Therefore the Father was not cruel in doing this to his Son but rather was supremely merciful, for he sacrificed his own Son, who is one being with himself.

Having died for our salvation, the Son then rose from the dead and sent the Holy Spirit from the Father on all that believe in the Son and invoke the merits of his death on the cross. The Holy Spirit then pours the love of God into our hearts (Rom. 5:5) and makes us feel truly forgiven and renewed. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).
“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem … The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more” (Zeph. 3:14-15).

Today the Virgin Mary “arose and went with haste into the hill country to a city of Judah” (Luke 1:39) to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, the future mother of John the Baptist. This was the dawning of the messianic age. The Messiah was about to be born, and his mother was already with child with him. She is visiting her relative Elizabeth to tell her the good news and to help her, for she too was pregnant with John the Baptist, predicted to Zechariah his father by the angel Gabriel.

Mary knew that her own son “will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High” and that “the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32-33). She also knew that she had conceived by the Holy Spirit and that she would be the mother of God. The Lord is within her. He is in the midst of Israel and within this daughter of Zion. Therefore “shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 12:6). Emmanuel, God-with-us, is in the midst of Israel and within Mary. So “sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo, I come and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord” (Zech. 2:10).

These prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the Messiah, and with him the messianic age begins, the time of the fulfillment of prophecy. With the birth of Jesus, God will live in the midst of his people. Their light has come. The glory of the Lord has shone upon them (Isa. 60:1), and we live in that light. In Emmanuel, God is with us on earth. We dwell with our Emmanuel. The kingdom of peace over all the earth (Isa. 9:7) has begun with his birth. Therefore “sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem … The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more” (Zeph. 3:14-15).

We live with God on earth in Jesus Christ. We also hope for the final consummation of these prophecies in the age to come, in the reign of righteousness that Christ will set up on the earth when he comes again in glory on the clouds of heaven. Then he will live in the midst of Israel visibly present in his glorified body sitting on the throne of David in Jerusalem (Ezek. 34:23-25; 37:24-28; Jer. 30: 8-9; 23:5) reigning over Israel and the entire world in a kingdom of peace without end (Rev. 20:1-7). “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore” (Isa. 9:7).

We live with Emmanuel now, and we hope for his Parousia and the setting up of his kingdom of righteousness on earth. All this began today with Mary.
“Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’” (Mark 12:28-30).

Today Jesus teaches us the first and most important commandment of all. Not only is this the first commandment, but it should also be the central guiding principle of our life, directing us in all we do if we want to be perfect. If perfection is our goal, we will love God with all our heart without dividing the love of our heart among other things. Loving God with an undivided heart means serving but one master only (Matt. 6:24) and having but one treasure only, the Lord (Matt. 6:19-21). We are not to divide our life between serving God and serving the pleasures and diversions of this world. If we seek perfection, we are not to be divided between God and the delicacies of this world. This is why Jesus says to the rich young man, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21).

The life of perfection is the life of renunciation and evangelical poverty. Indeed “every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold” (Matt. 19:29). This is because in renouncing these things, they preserve an undivided heart. Evangelical poverty is loving God with all one’s heart in an integral and consistent way. Celibacy is a radical form of evangelical poverty in which we even renounce a human spouse to love God with all our heart without any division. On the contrary, a rich man surrounded by pleasures will hardly enter the kingdom of God. It would be “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” Jesus said (Matt. 19:24). Those that are surrounded by worldly pleasures are like seeds sown amid thorns that choke it (Luke 8:14).

Our affective energy should not be dissipated in many directions but rather be directed in only one direction—toward God—if we wish to be perfect. If we want to obtain the buried treasure—which is the kingdom of God—we must renounce all else and live only for God. Only by renouncing all that he had could the man who discovered the buried treasure gain possession of it. It is the same for us with the kingdom of God.

This is the narrow way of life that few choose (Matt. 7:13-14). Most try to serve two masters—God and pleasure—and so divide their hearts. He who desires perfection will choose the way of the renunciation of the pleasures of the world. So we see how the first commandment directs our whole life as its central guiding principle. It determines our whole way of living. “So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple,” Jesus said (Luke 14:33).
"Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

This is a basic principle of the Christian life. We have to accept and expect persecution for obeying the will of God. It is a great error to try to avoid persecution by ceasing to do the will of God. We are not to fear those who can only kill the body by persecuting us but should only fear one who can destroy our soul by leading us into sin (Matt. 10:28). If we are true Christians obeying the will of God, we will be hated by many that do not know God and do not understand his will (John 17:14; 15:21). We have to expect to be judged, rejected, and persecuted for obeying the will of God, for many will not recognize that we are obeying God.

A Christian does not follow the world and its worldly customs, and so many will reject him, because they do not understand him. What we must do is that which is correct—namely the will of God, and suffer the persecution of those that do not understand us. But in reality, this persecution will not harm us but will rather result in blessing for us if we remain faithful to God through it. “Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? But even if you do suffer for righteousness sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled: (1 Pet. 3:13-14). “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). We are not to fear someone that persecutes us for doing God’s will. He only kills the body. We are rather to fear someone who leads us to sin. He is the one that kills our soul. This one we must fear and not follow even if it means that our body will be killed. So we are to do God’s will and accept being judged, rejected, and persecuted in this world but blessed by God for being faithful to him and suffering for him.

“And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22). “If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet. 4:14). “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:10).

Therefore we are to do without fear what we know to be the will of God for us and accept being judged, rejected, and persecuted for what we do. Thus will we be blessed by God. Never should we stop doing the will of God out of fear or shame, “for whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). Those who think like the world will persecute us, for we are not of the world. “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19).
WIDOWS AND THE ANAWIM

Saturday, 9th Week of the Year
2 Tim. 4:1-8; Ps. 70; Mark 12:38-44

“A poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living’” (Mark 12:42-44).

This woman was a true widow who gave all that she had even though it was only a penny. She gave herself to God in this act of charity, and this is what Jesus praises here. In this, she is an example for us all of what we are to do—give ourselves completely to God, sacrificing all else. Jesus said, “So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). There are various ways of doing this. One can use his own personal wealth and resources for his ministry and evangelization projects, or he can give his money directly to the poor or to the Church. What is important is that we live for God with our whole heart without division. In this, this widow is our example. She lived in simplicity not in luxury or in the pleasures of the world. She did not divide her heart amid the pleasures of the world but lived only for God in everything.

St. Paul describes the true widow, saying, “She who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; whereas she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives” (1 Tim. 5:5-6). A true widow lives for God. She lives a life of prayer and fasting. She is one of the anawim, the poor of the Lord that have lost everything and whose only happiness is in God. True widowhood is a form of evangelical poverty through which one dedicates oneself completely to God.

St. Luke gives us a beautiful picture of a true widow in his description of Ana, who saw the child Jesus in the temple. She “lived with her husband seven years … and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day” (Luke 2:36-37). She had nothing in this world and lived only for God. In this, she is an example for us.

Another exemplary widow was Judith who “set up a tent for herself on the roof of her house, and girded sackcloth about her loins and wore the garments of her widowhood. She fasted all the days of her widowhood” (Judith 8:5-6).

A true widow is an unmarried person that lives only for the Lord without division of heart. About such people, St. Paul writes, “The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband” (1 Cor. 7:32-34).
“As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

Today is Corpus Christi, the feast of the body and blood of Christ. St. Paul tells us that when we celebrate the Eucharist, we proclaim the Lord’s death. The death of Christ was the center of his life. He came to die for our sins by suffering their just punishment to free us from this punishment. This is the salvation that Christ works for us, the salvation that we preach in him through faith.

Christ wanted this central act of his life to always be remembered and experienced. Therefore he gave us the Eucharist, which became the sacrifice of the New Testament. The sacrifice of Christ on Calvary fulfills all the Old-Testament sacrifices, and it alone is adequate for our redemption from sin. The former sacrifices were only types or symbols of the one and only adequate sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. The Old-Testament saints were forgiven and saved by offering their sacrifices, which God gave them, but only as types of the sacrifice of Christ yet to come. Only Christ’s sacrifice was efficacious, for Christ was the only truly worthy victim that substituted for us on the cross and received the just punishment necessary to make reparation for all the sins of the world, beginning with the sin of Adam. In his death on the cross, he suffered their just punishment, thereby expiating them.

The animal sacrificed in the Old Testament symbolized the sinner. In being killed, it suffered the penalty of death instead of the sinner, thus prefiguring what actually took place in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. So God in his forbearance passed over former sins because of the future sacrifice of his Son on the cross, which he knew would adequately expiate them (Rom. 3:25-26). Only the sacrifice of his Son was efficacious in itself to expiate and propitiate sins.

The Eucharist is important because it is the sacrament instituted by Christ to commemorate his one and only adequate sacrifice on the cross. When we celebrate it, we proclaim his death. And more still, the Eucharist makes present for us the one sacrifice of the cross. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we are present on Calvary at the moment of Christ’s death. The Eucharist does not repeat Christ’s one and only sacrifice on the cross, rather it makes us present at this one sacrifice that was offered once and for all on Calvary. The sacrifice of the Mass is a true sacrifice because it is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross on Calvary. Christ’s one sacrifice is made present many times, but it was offered only once, the day Christ died on the cross.

The Eucharist is important for us because through it we experience more and more each day the effects of the sacrifice of Christ. When we receive Holy Communion, we receive a cleansing of our sins and the presence of Christ within us. It is the body and blood of Christ that we eat and drink in Holy Communion. Although the body of Christ was human, not divine, nonetheless it was divinized by the presence in it of his divine person with his divine nature. When we eat his human body, now divinized and sacramentalized in the form of bread, this Eucharistic bread divinizes us more and more each time we receive it with faith and devotion.
Jesus told us, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (John 6:56). The Eucharist unites us interiorly to Jesus Christ, who thereby ever more transforms us into his image (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29). Through this sacrament, we grow in Christ, until we can say with St. Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Christ told us, “Abide in my love” (John 15:9). The Eucharist frequently, even daily, celebrated helps us to remain in his love. It transforms us little by little so that it is no longer we that live but Christ that lives in us (Gal. 2:20). “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

We should live through and because of Christ, drawing life from him, as Christ lives through and because of his Father, drawing life from his Father. The Eucharist helps us to live through and because of Christ, as he told us, saying, “As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me” (John 6:57). He also said, “Because I live, you will live also” (John 14:19). St. John says the same thing, saying, “God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). What better means is there—given to us by Christ himself—than the Eucharist to live through and because of Christ. We should draw life from him and live through and because of him, for “from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16).

We live through and because of Christ because he forgives our sins by his death that is commemorated and made present for us in the Eucharist. We also live through and because of Christ because he dwells in our hearts through faith and through Holy Communion, in which we eat his divinized and sacramentalized human body that contains his divine person with his divine nature. Thus he transforms us into himself (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29; Gal. 2:20).

THE BEATITUDES AND THE ANAWZM

Monday, 10th Week of the Year
1 Kings 17:1-6; Ps. 120; Matt. 5:1-12

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3).

In the beatitudes, Jesus blesses the poor, the humble, the meek, those who mourn, and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. He says that theirs is the kingdom of heaven and consolation. They shall inherit the earth, he says. And so Jesus was able to do. He could completely change their lot and make them happy and blessed, forgiven for their sins, and illuminated. He, and he alone, can make them walk in the light while the rest walk in darkness (John 8:12). Here Jesus shows that the things that the world believes are important have in reality very little importance; and what the world believes is vile and despicable he shows that it is not so.

For Jesus, what is important is our relationship with God and with one another. He can bless the poorest and most despised person and give him the kingdom of heaven. Christ can illuminate him so that he walks in the light and is a blessing on earth for all that see and know him. It does not matter that he is poor, meek, mourns, and is
persecuted for righteousness' sake. Christ blesses him if he believes and lives for God with all his heart.

The *anawim*, the poor of the Lord, the meek of the earth, the humble, the poor in spirit live only for God. They do not have any other treasure on earth but God alone (Matt. 6:19-21). They have abandoned and renounced a worldly life. They have lost and left all the pleasures of the world and of this life to love God with a pure, detached, divested, whole, and undivided heart.

There are so many things that we can put in the place of God in our hearts. The poor in spirit have lost and renounced these things, these pleasures. They live a simple and austere life, recollected in God. They are the blessed poor of the Lord, whose only happiness is God—they have lost and left all else. They live now only for God in everything. Their life is simple; their food, basic and ascetical, without adornment. Their way of living shows that only God is their happiness.

Jesus says that they are blessed, and that the kingdom of heaven is theirs. The kingdom of heaven is present in them, and they live in this kingdom. They had to leave the riches and pleasures of the world to inherit the kingdom of heaven. They are our models. So should we all live. We should be the poor in spirit that Jesus blesses. Even if they are persecuted for their way of living, they are happy in God and blessed by him. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” Jesus says, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:10).

How many live like this in simplicity and plainness, in evangelical poverty, only for God, renouncing the pleasures of the world and a worldly lifestyle? These are the ones blessed by God. They are the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13) and the light of the world (Matt. 6:14-16).

**LOVE OF NEIGHBOR**

Thursday, 10th Week of the Year
1 Kings 18:41-46; Ps. 64; Matt. 5:20-26

“You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire” (Matt. 5:21-22).

Jesus makes God’s law stricter and more spiritual for his followers. Few are tempted to murder, but Jesus applies this commandment not only to murder but also to anger, which is very common among us. A Christian should therefore be a person that loves his neighbor and lives in love with him. We should love God with all our heart without any division, and we should also live in love with other people, with our neighbor. This means not becoming angry with him, but serving him well and with love.

Each one of us has our own particular work through which we serve other people in some way. This service should be a service of love. We should pour out our lives in love to God by serving our neighbor. This service should be an expression of our love for God. We cannot see God, but we see our neighbor, and we can love and serve him for
the love of God. “If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his neighbor also” (1 John 4:20-21).

The Bible speaks much about the wrath of God (cf. Ps. 84; Rom. 1:18). But the wrath of God is different from our wrath, which is mixed with hatred and causes us to lose control of ourselves. If we become angry, we should not sin. “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,” says St. Paul (Eph. 4:26). We should renounce hatred and try to overcome our anger. “Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God” (James 1:19-20).

These commandments are very practical and can help us in our daily lives. We should have an explicit intention every day to try to love our neighbor. This is something that we should have consciously in our mind and intention when we are with other people. We should give a good witness and a good example to others, one that can inspire and help them, and we should try to speak in a loving way with everyone and show an interest in them. We should do this because “he who does not love remains in death” (1 John 3:14). But our more positive motivation is that “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16). Our life should be a life of love and service of our brethren for the love of God. Thus we will remain in God, for God is love.

CHRIST’S LOVE FOR US

Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus
Ezek. 34:11-16; Ps. 22; Rom. 5:5-11; Luke 15:3-7

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it upon his shoulders, rejoicing” (Luke 15:4-5).

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a feast of Christ’s love for us. We are the lost sheep that Christ came to seek out and save. He is now carrying us on his shoulders with joy. He gave his life for us. “I am the good shepherd,” he says. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep … I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:11, 15). He gave his life for us so that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Christ gives us abundant life, his own life that now flows through our veins and our spirit if we believe in him. We live with him present within us (Gal. 2:20), and we walk in the light of his resurrection. He illuminates us with the splendor that flows from his glorified body.

Christ justifies us through his death on the cross. When we were lost, he came among us to seek us out and save us. By his death for us on the cross, he paid our debt of suffering for us to free us from this suffering for our sins and so remove from us the guilt that depresses us. Then having saved us by his death, he put us onto his shoulders and rejoiced us with his life. He raises us from the dead with himself so that we might walk
with him in the newness of life (Rom 6:4), free from sin in “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21).

We are Christ’s sheep, saved by him. Of these sheep, Ezekiel prophesied, saying, “I will feed them with good pasture, and upon the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on fat pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel” (Ezek. 34:14). All this was fulfilled for us in Jesus Christ. When we were like sheep gone astray, he died for us; for “while we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). And now that we are “justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom. 5:9).

Christ saves us from the wrath of God for our sins and from the depression caused by this wrath by suffering it himself instead of us, substituting for us on the cross.

Then “if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10). Having reconciled us with God by paying our debt of suffering by his death on the cross, Christ now fills us with new life and the love of God by pouring into us his own life and love. Upon those that are saved, he sends from the Father the Holy Spirit, who fills us with the love of God, for “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

All this comes to us from the love that Christ has for us in his heart.

THE ASCETICAL MESSAGE OF JESUS

Saturday, 10th Week of the Year
1 Kings 19:19-21; Ps. 15; Matt. 5:33-37

“So he departed from there, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing, with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his mantle upon him. And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, ‘Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you’” (1 Kings 19:19-20).

This is the call of Elisha to be Elijah’s follower. Elisha asks permission to first say good-bye to his parents. He then slew the oxen and cooked them on the wood of their yoke, indicating his intention to leave his former life behind and begin a new life as a follower of Elijah.

The call which Jesus gives us is similar but still more radical. He does not even allow a would-be disciple to say farewell to his family. One said to him, “‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’” (Luke 9:61-62).

We see here the radicalism of Jesus’ call. It implies a radical renunciation of our former way of life, a sharp break with ordinary life. It is a call to a completely different way of living in the world. Most people try to eliminate this radicalism, and compromise with ordinary living. They try to serve two masters (Matt. 6:24), accommodating themselves to a comfortable but compromised life, divided between God and the pleasures of the world. They do not like to hear Jesus’ radical teaching that we have to renounce a worldly life to be his disciples.
But Jesus’ call is clear. “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple … So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26, 33). There is more than one way of doing this, but to try to follow Jesus without this radicalism and renunciation is to misunderstand his call.

Many today would like to remove asceticism from Jesus’ message. They want to be his followers in everything else but this. There are even those who would like to remove asceticism from the monastic and eremitic life. Yet asceticism is the foundation for mysticism and contemplation. Renunciation of the world and its delights is the first step, the foundation upon which everything else is built. This is how one loves God with all his heart, with an undivided heart. Without this sacrifice, this first step, it is impossible to serve only one master (Matt. 6:24) and love God with all one’s heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30).

Nowadays this is the message most people need to hear, for they have rejected it, and so they are building the house of their faith on sand. They lack a foundation. We need to remember what The Imitation of Christ is constantly saying: “The more you withdraw yourself from the consolation of all creatures, the sweeter and more blessed consolations you will receive from your Creator” (3.12.5).

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS AND THE DEATH OF CHRIST

11th Sunday of the Year
2 Sam. 12:7-10, 13; Ps. 31; Gal. 2:16, 19-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47).

Two truths are taught in this verse: 1) he who loves much will be forgiven much, and 2) he who is forgiven much loves much (and conversely, he who is forgiven little loves little).

We see here the importance of loving God much, for in this way he will forgive us much. And then once forgiven, we will love him all the more in return. Love for God obtains from him what we most need—the forgiveness of our sins and imperfections and relief from the burden of guilt that darkens and depresses our spirits. For this, Christ came into the world. Only God can cure us of this great evil—depression of spirit caused by guilt for having sinned or fallen into an imperfection. And God cures us through his Son Jesus Christ.

We need this cure, because no one has ever been able to justify himself before God by his own good works according to God’s law. It is too difficult, and we are always falling into new imperfections and need to be justified anew by the merits of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

By his death, Christ paid the price for our redemption. He satisfied divine justice for our sins, making us through our faith into new men, resplendent in God’s sight. “For if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose” (Gal. 2:21). St. Paul
teaches us what we have all discovered through our own experience—that Christ did not
die in vain, for no one can justify himself by works of the law, by a law-abiding life. No
one has ever been able to live so righteousness that he stands justified before God by his
own merits. Justification does not come to us through our works according to the law but
only through faith by means of the death of Christ on the cross. This is our only hope.
No one has ever succeeded in doing it through his own good works (Rom. 3:20). Only
through Christ can we be righteous before God, for “a man is not justified by works of
the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order
to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the
law shall no one be justified” (Gal. 2:16).

What we have to do is what this sinful woman did—have great love for God and for
Jesus Christ. Then Jesus will say of us what he said of her: “Her sins, which are many,
are forgiven, for she loved much” (Luke 7:47). Our love should also include repentance
and the confession of our sins and imperfections.

St. Paul also says today, “I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God”
(Gal. 2:19). All of us that believe in Christ are now dead to the law that says that we are
guilty and condemned to death for having sinned. We have died to this law and are now
freed from this death sentence. But we were freed from this law by means of this very
same law, for Christ died because of this same law that said that we were condemned to
death. If this law had not existed, Christ would not have died. It was only because of this
law that condemned us to death as sinners that Christ died. He died in accordance with
this law instead of us. He observed and fulfilled this law for us by dying in accordance
with it as a punishment for our sins. He suffered our just punishment (in accordance with
this law) for our sins in order to free us from this suffering so that we might be freed from
this law, dead to this law. This law was fulfilled for us by the death of Christ on the
cross. Christ in his death on the cross fulfilled this law and its just requirements for us.
Therefore, as St. Paul says, “I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God”
(Gal. 2:19).

The result of this is that he who is forgiven much will love much, just as the debtor
who was forgiven the greater debt loved more (Luke 7:42-43). This sinful woman loved
much because she was forgiven much, for “he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke
7:47).

Then after being forgiven for so many imperfections, we love Jesus Christ all the
more. We see that all our salvation is in him and that without him we can do nothing. We
realize that we cannot justify ourselves. We have learned from our own experience that
that is too difficult for us. Only God can make us righteous, “for if justification were
through the law, then Christ died to no purpose” (Gal. 2:21).

Nonetheless we should still do all that we can to obey God’s will in order that we not
lose our justification, break our relationship with God, sadden our spirits, and once again
fall into a depression for having sinned or fallen into an imperfection. The grace of God
will help us, and whenever we confess our sins, especially in the sacrament of penance,
the merits of Christ’s death on the cross will justify us anew, making us once again clean
and righteous before God.
FASTING

Wednesday, 11th Week of the Year
2 Kings 2:1, 6-14; Ps. 30; Matt. 6:1-6, 16-18

“And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:16-18).

Here we see that Jesus presumes that his disciples will fast although during his lifetime they had not yet begun to fast (Matt. 9:14-15). Fasting—together with almsgiving and prayer—is one of the three basic religious practices of the Christian, as well as of the Jew. Every age of the Church has its strengths and its deficiencies. One of the deficiencies of our time since Vatican II is fasting. Our age has forgotten the meaning of this basic practice of the Christian life and of Christian spirituality.

Today we see that Jesus simply takes it for granted that his disciples will fast. His only concern here is to make sure that they do not make their fasting a pretext for vainglory. Rather they are to fast in secret as a means of purifying their spirits and directing all the love of their hearts in only one direction—toward God. When they fast, they are not to look dismal in order to be praised by others for fasting. It is sufficient that God sees them, and he who sees what they do in secret will reward them.

We should not put our light under a basket but on a stand so that it shine before others so that they may see our good works and give glory to God (Matt. 5:15-16). Our way of living—as well as our words and sermons—should edify others and be a part of our work of evangelization, of our preaching the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). But we should not show our private religious practices to others for the sake of being praised by them. That would be vainglory.

Fasting is one of the private practices of the Christian that helps him in his personal sanctification. He can, for example, renounce delicacies, seasoning (except salt, which is a necessary nutrient for life), and meat as a means of directing all the love of his heart only to God so that God alone be his only happiness and so that his heart be not divided among the delights of this world. He may furthermore eat only once a day, at midday, for example, to be light for contemplation early in the morning. One does not do this out of vainglory or to receive the praises of others but only for the love of God. We do this to love God with all our heart (Mark 12:30), with an undivided heart—not divided among the pleasures of the world. And God who sees what we do in secret will reward us.

This kind of fasting enables us to serve but one master only, the Lord (Matt. 6:24) and to have but one treasure only, the Christ (Matt. 6:19-21). It is a concrete way to ensure that we do not fill our hearts with other things.
"Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven hallowed by thy name” (Matt. 6:9).

Today Jesus teaches us how to pray. He gives us the Our Father.

We should pray, “Hallowed be thy name.” This is the whole end and purpose of our life—that God be honored and glorified on earth. We should live for him with all our hearts, loving him with an undivided heart, not dividing it among the things of the world (Col. 3:1-2). In living like this, we will sanctify his name in our life.

“Thy kingdom come.” Jesus brought the kingdom of God into the world in his divine person, incarnate as a man in our midst. He said, “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). Yet even so, we are to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” His kingdom that has come needs to come more in the world. It is now like a mustard seed (Matt. 13:31-32). We pray that it grow and fill the world with its power and glory. We should pray that his kingdom come more in our lives. We also pray for the Parousia and the consummation of the kingdom in all its glory. We should live in hope of this, detached from the worldliness of the world.

“Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We should always do the will of God. We pray to know it better and to have the courage to do it, especially when it is difficult. Only in this way will we be able to remain in the joyful spell of the kingdom of God on earth.

“Give us this day our daily bread.” We do not ask for riches, delicacies, or luxuries. As far as our food goes, we pray only for what is necessary—the simple basic food that we need to live. We do not live for the pleasure of eating. Our life should be simple and divested of the pleasures of the world and of the table. We should pray therefore for the simple basic food that we need.

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” If we fall into an imperfection and fail to perfectly do the will of God in something, we have to ask God for forgiveness. God will forgive us through the merits of the death of his Son on the cross, for his death made complete and perfect reparation for all the sins of the world. It is for this that he came into the world. And having received his forgiveness, we should forgive those who offend or attack us.

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” The devil is always discovering and devising new ways to tempt us. We ask for God’s help to avoid these temptations and be delivered from evil, to always do the will of God and thus remain in the spell of his kingdom and sanctify his name.
“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth … but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven … For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:19-21).

There is only one treasure in this world that is worth having—God, and his Son Jesus Christ. This is because “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21). If we have treasures here on earth, there will our heart be; and our heart will be divided between this treasure and God. Then we will no longer have an undivided heart in our love for God.

The consecrated life, as it is lived by religious, priests, and celibates, has its greatness in that those that live it try to have but one treasure only, the Lord. They even renounce a human spouse and a family of their own as well as many other things in this world for the love of God to live for him alone with all the love of their hearts. They do not want to divide the love their hearts even with a human spouse, for they want all their love to go in one direction only—toward God. They want to love him with all their hearts in as literal a way as possible—with an undivided heart. They therefore simplify the rest of their lives as well in many ways.

In the monastic tradition—especially in the Desert Fathers—we see their practice of austerity in every aspect of their lives so as not to have treasures here below but only in heaven. They live very simply, often alone as hermits. They eat with great austerity, renouncing all the delicacies of the city and of the world. They dress in habits, renouncing secular dress as an expression of their renunciation of the world with its pleasures and delights. They want to have only one delight: God. They want their hearts to be radically in him, and not in the world in its worldliness and quest for pleasure. They renounce all to find all in God, who is their only treasure.

God is the buried treasure that one can obtain only at the price of renouncing everything else (Matt. 13:44). The man that discovered this treasure could obtain it only by selling everything that he had, for only in this way could he buy the field in which the treasure was buried. This parable teaches us to do the same if we want the treasure that is God and his kingdom.

The life of perfection entails the renunciation of everything but God in order to have our treasure only in heaven and to possess it with an undivided heart, as Jesus told the rich young man, saying, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21).

If we live simply, without unnecessary trips, entertainments, and worldly diversions and if we dress simply, even renouncing secular dress, if we eat austerely, renouncing delicacies and the delights of the table, we will be on the way of perfection if we do all this in order to have but one treasure only, the Lord. Living in this way is indeed worthwhile, “for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21).
“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24).

This verse is a key to understanding the Christian life and Christian spirituality. How many people lose themselves by their way of living. They want to serve God but also the delights of this world, and they are divided. They are trying to serve two masters, and Jesus teaches us today that this is impossible. We cannot serve God well in this way. Their life is a constant round of pleasures, diversions, trips, recreations, and entertainments. They are in permanent orbit. They are completely divided and cannot sit still or stay put in any one place. They are always going on some new trip to a new place or to visit a relative or a friend, or they are sitting before a television set.

They do not understand that life should be a sacrifice of love for God and of service to others for the love of God. They do not understand that they should serve him alone with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30). They do not understand that all the love of their heart should go in only one direction—toward God.

A hose full of holes will not run a sprinkler very well because the water pressure will be reduced by so much water escaping on the side through the holes before it reaches the sprinkler. It is the same with someone who wants to love God, but the love of whose heart is dissipated in many directions by following this or that diversion or love. He lacks concentration. His affective energy is dissipated. He is trying to serve two masters, and he will not succeed. This is why “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24). This is why Jesus taught us that we must renounce all that we have if we want to obtain the kingdom of God, just as the buried treasure was only obtained at the price of everything else (Matt. 13:44).

This is why the Desert Fathers left the world and went to live in the desert. They wanted to escape from the activities, distractions, entertainments, and feasts of the world to serve God with all their hearts. We should try to do the same even though we do not live in a desert. If we want to live a holy life, this is the way we have to live especially if we have consecrated our lives to God as religious, priests, and celibates. To enjoy the advantages of this type of life, we have to serve only one master and live a life of sacrifice, asceticism, austerity, silence, prayer, fasting, and work, renouncing the pleasures of the world. Only in this way will we be able to serve one master only as we should. Only in this way will we have an undivided heart, and only in this way will we live a holy life, as God wants us to. If we fail in this, we will not be living the life that God wants us to live. We will rather be like seeds sown among thorns, which are worldly pleasures. They will choke us so that our life is not fruitful for God (Luke 8:14).
THE CROSS, MEANS OF SALVATION AND MODEL FOR IMITATION

12th Sunday of the Year

“And he said to all, ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it’” (Luke 9:23-24).

Today Peter makes a public confession that Jesus is “the Christ of God” (Luke 9:20). “But Jesus charged and commanded them to tell this to no one” (Luke 9:21). Jesus did this because he knew how the Jews understood the Messiah, and he did not want them to understand him in that way. The Jews expected the Messiah at the end of the world and believed he would save them from the Romans and set up a messianic kingdom in Jerusalem and reign over the world. Although Jesus would return in glory at his Parousia and reign over the world (Rev. 20:4), he had to die first on the cross in humility to save us from our sins. The Jews did not understand this part of his messianic mission, and so he was at pains to teach them about it. The Jews could not understand how the Messiah could suffer and die, as Isaiah prophesied in chapter fifty-three about the Suffering Servant, and at the same time reign in glory over the world. They did not understand that he would have two comings—one in humility, and one in glory. This then was the great lesson that Jesus had to teach them.

Zechariah prophesies about his suffering today, saying, “And they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his own son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn. In that day there shall be great mourning in Jerusalem, as the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the valley of Megiddon” (Zech. 12:10-11 KJV). It is God whom the Jews pierced in handing Jesus over to the Romans to crucify him. Although it was the Romans who pierced Jesus with a lance on the cross (John 19:34), they did it because the Jews handed him over to them to kill him, and Zechariah says it was the inhabitants of Jerusalem who look upon him whom they have pierced (Zech. 10:12).

But it seems that this is an eschatological prophecy referring to events that are still future for us. It will be fulfilled when at the Parousia the Jews see Jesus in his glory and recognize him as the one whom they pierced on the cross. Then they will weep for him in repentance and faith, and so will be saved. St. John says about the Parousia, “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (Rev. 1:7). All will weep—Gentiles as well as Jews—because they will see him in whom they did not believe, and they will recognize their great error. Jesus said the same thing about his Parousia, saying, “Then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30).

What is the meaning of this mourning? For some, it will be the mourning of despair of the reprobate when they see that they are condemned for having rejected their Savior. But for others it may mean repentance and recognition that Jesus is the Messiah. It seems that this latter is the case with the Jews, for Zechariah says, “And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of
supplications: and they will look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him” (Zech. 12:10 KJV). Their lamentation will be “grace” and “supplications.” It seems that this will be the moment in which “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26), for “has God rejected his people? By no means!” (Rom. 11:1).

Moreover Zechariah says that when the Jews mourn, “on that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness” (Zech. 13:1). It seems then that this is a prophecy that at the end times, at the Parousia, all Israel will be converted when they see Jesus coming in glory on the clouds of heaven, and they will recognize him as the one they pierced, and they will then mourn, repent, believe, and be saved.

But it is God himself that they pierced, according to Zechariah, for he says, “And they will look upon me whom they have pierced” (Zech. 12:10 KJV). It is the Son of God whom they pierced. In this way, the Son of God suffered the punishment due for all the sins of the world; and so in his death, a fountain of salvation is opened up (Zech. 13:1).

We see then that the Messiah will suffer and die, and in this way become our Savior. Moreover Jesus teaches us today that if we want to follow him, we too have to follow the pattern of life indicated by his cross; for “if any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). His cross not only saves us, but also shows us how to live as his followers. We have to live a life of the cross, a life of self-denial and renunciation, losing our life for his sake, not saving our life in a worldly way.

We lose our life for his sake by renouncing the world and living for him alone, loving him with all our heart (Mark 12:30), without any division of heart. Hence asceticism—which most people today reject—is an essential element of the Christian life. It means that we live only for Christ and his work in every aspect of our life, renouncing all else for his sake. This is to live according to the pattern of the cross. Living thus, we will have a pure heart in our love of him and be saved by our faith. Losing our life for Christ’s sake to save it means living a sacrificial life, living only for him with an undivided heart. Saving our life only to lose it means living a worldly life of pleasure seeking, centered on ourselves. We think we are saving our life; but in the end we realize that we have lost our life with God, for we have rejected the cross as the pattern on which we should have modeled our life.

FALSE PROPHETS AND THE DEATH OF SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE

Wednesday, 12th Week of the Year
2 Kings 22:8-13; 23:1-3; Ps. 118; Matt. 7:15-20

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:15-16).

False prophets have always been a problem, as much today as in both the Old and New Testaments. St. John gives us good advice about this, saying, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). We cannot trust ourselves to just
following the majority, even within the Church, for we may be following false prophets. This then would be nothing other than following the crowd, cowardly conformism, and taking the broad and comfortable way of the many that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13).

We have an example of false conformism in the first reading today. Hilkiah the high priest discovered the book of the law in the temple and gave it to King Josiah, who read it and rent his clothes in shock (2 Kings 12:11), for he realized that the people were not following the law. He then initiated his great reform, rooting idolatry out of the land.

Although we no longer worship idols of wood and stone, that does not mean that we are free from idolatry, which is putting things that are not God in the place of God in our lives. Since Vatican II, I believe we can characterize our age as one of relaxation and secularization. You can even see it in the way most people now dress—priests and religious as well as laity. But this is only the tip of the iceberg—the part most easily seen—indicating a whole new way of life. Even the faith of many has been affected by this new spirit. Are we then surprised that our Societies of Apostolic Life are dying today? Is this not the punishment of God for our disregard of his will, for just following the crowd, for cowardly conformism, for following false prophets, for taking the broad and comfortable path of the majority that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13)?

This is what the prophetess Huldah told King Josiah today—that all the punishments of God spoken of in the book of the law would come upon the people for disobeying God’s will. So just doing as everyone else does is insufficient when the majority is following false prophets. Something more than just following the crowd is required of us. Discernment is required, as St. John says. “Test the spirits,” he says, “to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

Not all that is new is good; and not all community is good community. Uniformity in following false prophets is community, but not good community. It lacks discernment and the courage to do what is right against social pressure.

We need a reform like King Josiah’s against our spirit of relaxation and secularization. Otherwise we will continue to experience God’s punishment until our Societies of Apostolic life die altogether.

A TRUE PROPHET—JOHN THE BAPTIST

Solemnity of the Birth of St. John the Baptist, June 24

“He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away” (Isa. 49:2).

Today we celebrate the birth of St. John the Baptist. Yesterday the readings were about false prophets. Today we have a true prophet, the greatest of them all. John had the courage to preach the truth from God that the people needed to hear—whether they wanted to hear it or not—and he suffered as a consequence. But in acting in this way, he restored a remnant for Israel, and even more the Lord used him as “a light to the nations” that his “salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). This is the role of the true prophet—not to listen to the people and then tell them what they want to hear but to
preach to them the truth of God that they need to hear. A true prophet is a witness to the truth in the midst of the people, which is often blind and neither sees nor wants to hear the truth. God therefore raises up prophets so that at their preaching the people may repent and return to the Lord and to his will. In our age of relaxation and secularization following Vatican II, we need true prophets like John that have the necessary vision and the courage to raise their voices and tell us the truth that we need to hear.

God said to John—and will say to any true prophet today—what he said to Jeremiah: “But you, gird up your loins; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you” (Jer. 1:17-19).

By his example as a desert ascetic living for God alone far from the pleasures of the world that divide the heart and by his words, John prepared the way of the Lord. He prepared for the arrival of the kingdom of heaven on earth in Jesus Christ. John was the greatest of the prophets, “yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11). The kingdom of God came into the world in Jesus the Messiah and Son of God, but John prepared the way for its coming. “The law and the prophets were until John,” Jesus said; “since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” (Luke 16:16).

When John’s ministry ended, the time of preparation for the kingdom of God was over, and Jesus began preaching, saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). This was “after John was arrested” (Mark 1:14).

We live in the time of the messianic kingdom of God, but we still have to preach and give witness to the truth as John did.

**WILL WE FALL AS JERUSALEM FELL?**

*Friday, 12th Week of the Year*

2 Kings 25:1-12; Ps.136; Matt. 8:1-4

“Nebuzaradan, the Captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the Lord, and the king’s house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. And all the army of the Caldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:8-10).

This was the fall of Jerusalem. The Jews thought this would never happen. How could the Lord abandon his people, his temple, the king who was the son of David, and his city Jerusalem? They did not think this was possible until the day it happened. But it happened, and it was the Jews’ fault for their infidelity. God sent them prophets to warn them, but they did not listen to them. They followed after other gods, but they still thought that the Lord would protect them and never abandon his temple, the Davidic
king, and Jerusalem. But God’s patience finally came to an end, and in punishment he abandoned all this to destruction at the hands of the Babylonians.

I believe there is a lesson here for us. It seems that we often have the same confidence as the Jews that God will never abandon us. He will never abandon our Societies of Apostolic Life. They will never die completely, so we do not have to repent or change. We can continue on our path of relaxation and secularization in which we have been walking for the past forty years. God will not punish us. There is no problem. All is well. So thought the Jews until the day the Babylonians burned the temple, knocked down the walls of Jerusalem, and put out the eyes of the king “and bound him in fetters, and took him to Babylon” (2 Kings 8:7).

May this not happen to us! What the Jews lacked was repentance for their infidelity. But this is what we also lack. We need the faith of the leper in today’s gospel. He knelt before Jesus, saying, “‘Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.’ And he stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, ‘I will; be clean.’ And immediately his leprosy was cleansed” (Matt. 8:2-3).

Jesus Christ has the power to save us from the leprosy of our sins. He can take away the burden of our guilt, which depresses us, because he died for our sins. His death is more than the death of a martyr. It is more than an example of his love in accepting being killed for us. His death itself, which was the death of a criminal executed on a cross, saved us by its own power in that it was the death of the Son of God (who is God) who by dying served our death sentence for us for our sins. Our debt of punishment having therefore been justly paid, we can justly go free, justified before God and made holy. All this was the great mercy of God for us, for he saved us justly at the price of his own Son, who is one being with himself. It is this kind of faith that will save us personally and will also save our Societies of Apostolic Life if we also change our way of living, abandoning the way of secularization that we have been on for the past forty years.

YOUR PROPHETS HAVE DECEIVED YOU

Saturday, 12th Week of the Year
Lam. 2:2, 10-14, 18-19; Ps.73; Matt. 8:5-17

“Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen for you oracles false and misleading” (Lam. 2:14).

Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians, and today we hear lamentations about its fall. Indeed Israel was deceived by its false prophets, who only predicted good news and false visions of a happy future. They did not tell them the truth so that they could discover their error and repent before this disaster came upon them. “They have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen for you oracles false and misleading” (Lam. 2:14).

They could have avoided this disaster if they had listened to their true prophets, but they paid them no attention. Jeremiah has this to say about these false prophets: “Thus
says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream, for it is a lie which they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord” (Jer. 29:8-9). They preached to them “false and deceptive visions” (Lam. 2:14).

Since Israel did not listen to Jeremiah’s advice, God himself became like an enemy to her and destroyed her. “The Lord has become like an enemy, he has destroyed Israel; he has destroyed all its palaces, laid in ruins its strongholds; and he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation” (Lam. 2:5). In his wrath, the Lord punished his people at the hands of the Babylonians. “The Lord has destroyed without mercy all the habitations of Jacob; in his wrath he has broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; he has brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers” (Lam. 2:2).

Nowadays the false prophets in our midst tell us that God does not punish. They say he is like a mother who never punishes her son no matter what he does. God, they say, is only merciful, never just. Therefore there is no need to fear or repent. They even deny that the death of Christ substituted for us to absorb the divine wrath against our sins if we believe in him, for God, they say, has no wrath—he is only love and mercy.

It is this kind of false teaching that is destroying us today. This kind of false prophet does not point out our sin so that we can repent and take refuge in Christ so that he absorb for us the wrath of God against our sins and errors.

The message of Lamentations is directed to us as communities—Societies of Apostolic Life, for example—as well as individuals. To avoid a disaster like the fall of Jerusalem, we have to discover our sin as a group, repent, and change our common way of life. If we continue to imitate the lifestyle of the world around us, we will die as a group. But if we repent of this secularization and take refuge in Christ, we will be saved. Christ will absorb the divine wrath against us, and we will avoid a great disaster.

**THE LORD IS MY INHERITANCE**

13th Sunday of the Year
1 Kings 19:16, 19-21; Ps.15; Gal. 5:1, 13-18; Luke 9:51-62

“Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’” (Luke 9:61-62).

In this verse we see Jesus’ radicalism and the radicalism of his call to discipleship. It is a call to leave everything else to follow him. His call even means leaving one’s family to follow him.

We see this same radicalism in other sayings of Jesus as well. He said, “So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). That is, if we want to be his followers, we cannot also follow other things that divide our interest, attention, and love. We can only follow him. We can only be followers of one master (Matt. 6:24). Jesus wants all of us, our whole heart, not just a piece of it or part of
it. To be his followers, his disciples, we must even hate everything else—that is, renounce it and leave it for his sake.

“If any one comes to me,” he said, “and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Hating these persons means renouncing them for God’s sake and leaving them behind in order to dedicate oneself completely to preaching the gospel unto the ends of the earth. We have to renounce them and leave them in order to live a completely new kind of life, which the world neither understands nor accepts—a life lived only for God in everything. We cannot live such a life in the midst of those that neither understand nor accept our way of living. We are even to hate our own life, Jesus says, not taking care of it as do the sons of this age, but rather sacrificing our life for the love of Christ, living a life of sacrifice, a crucified life for his sake.

We have to be crucified to the world with Christ, as was St. Paul. “But far be it from me to glory,” says St. Paul, “except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). Being crucified to the world means renouncing and leaving the world and its lifestyle in order to live only for God, which is a completely new and different way of living. We live crucified to the world and to its way of living because—being different from the world—we even hate our own life in this world. Christ said, “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25).

So we must live in a way very different from the way the world lives. Therefore the world will say about us what it said about the righteous man, “He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange” (Wis. 2:14-15). This is what our life will be like if we want to be followers of Jesus Christ. We have to hate our life in this world, not love it. We have to crucify it. Only in this way will we save our lives with God. He who loves his life in this world by living in a worldly way will lose his life.

Jesus’ call is radical. “To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ But he said to him, ‘Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God’” (Luke 9:59-60). Jesus’ call takes precedence over every other obligation, even that of burying one’s parents. If Christ calls us to preach the gospel unto the ends of the earth, we should not stay home to bury our parents first. We should rather make every sacrifice for him.

The Lord should be our only inheritance. We should say, “Thou art my Lord; I have no good apart from thee … The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup” (Ps. 15:2, 5). We should be like the Levites whose only portion and inheritance in Israel was the Lord, and so they had no inheritance among their brethren. “The Levitical priests, that is, all the tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel … They shall have no inheritance among their brethren; the Lord is their inheritance, as he promised them” (Deut. 18:1-2). The Lord should be our inheritance if we are followers of Jesus Christ. What the Lord said to Aaron, he says to us, “And the Lord said to Aaron, ‘You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel’” (Num. 18:20).

Nowadays many have forgotten the importance of renunciation in the life of discipleship. They want to continue on in their former ways without any radical break from their past and their former way of living even though they now want to be followers
of Christ. They want to be followers without being disciples. They have forgotten the cost of discipleship. That is why the consecrated, celibate, priestly, and religious life is dying today.

SAVED BY FAITH, NOT BY WORKS

Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, June 29
Acts 12:1-11; Ps. 33; 2 Tim. 4:6-8, 17-18; Matt. 16:13-19

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18-19).

Today we celebrate Saints Peter and Paul, the two principle pillars of the Church. The Church’s structure is built upon St. Peter as its head. He guides the Church and protects and ensures the purity of its faith. The Church’s doctrine is built primarily on St. Paul. It is he who developed the Church’s doctrine of our salvation in Christ—namely that we are justified and saved by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross through our faith, not by our works. He said, “We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (Rom. 3:23), “for no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law” (Rom. 3:20).

We cannot merit our salvation. No one can merit his salvation by his good works or good life. This is too difficult for us. Our salvation comes from the death of Christ on the cross, where he suffered our punishment for us, being cursed by God in place of us (Gal. 3:13). On the cross he absorbed the divine wrath for all the sins of the world and made perfect reparation, expiation, and propitiation for them. By his wounds we are healed. So we do not have to worry about earning our salvation, for that is impossible for a human being. Our good works, on the other hand, determine the degree of our reward in heaven, but getting into heaven is given to us through the death of Christ on the cross by means of our faith. St. Paul clearly says, We “know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified” (Gal. 2:16).

This is the center of our preaching—that Christ saved us by his death on the cross, by his blood. If we accept this in faith, we are saved. Then if our faith is genuine, it will show itself in good works. If we do not have good works, then our faith is not genuine saving faith.

Our works demonstrate that we have faith (James 2:14-26), and we will be rewarded in heaven according to our works, “for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body” (2 Cor. 5:10). Some build on the one foundation, which is Christ, with gold and silver, others with hay and stubble. At the judgment all will be tested by fire. “If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If
any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:14-15).

CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS

Thursday, 13th Week of the Year
Amos 7:10-17; Ps. 18; Matt. 9:1-8

“And behold, they brought to him a paralytic, lying on his bed; and when Jesus saw their faith he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven’” (Matt. 9:2).

Today Jesus forgives the sins of a paralytic. For this, Jesus Christ came into the world. He came to bring the kingdom of God into the world, which means: he came to renew us, forgiving our sins by his vicarious death on the cross and giving us a new life in him, a life full of divine love and the light of Christ. This kingdom of peace on earth began with his coming into the world. It will be fulfilled when he returns to reign in glory over all who believe in him. But this is a kingdom which begins now for those who have faith. This is the peace that Christ brings to the world. He has inaugurated a new age—inherited eschatology—in which we can now live through our faith in him.

This should be the center of our preaching. Nothing destroys our peace more than sin and the imperfections we fall into. God alone is the remedy for this worst illness of our spirits. And God heals us of this sickness of the spirit through the death of his Son on the cross, for in his death Christ made satisfaction and reparation for all the sins of the world. This then is applied to each individual when he believes. This personal application is especially successful when received in the sacrament of reconciliation, which Christ gave to his Church for this purpose (John 20:21-23; Matt. 18:18).

Christ’s victory over sin through his death on the cross should be the center of our preaching—our central message—as it was the centerpiece of the apostolic preaching. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). In his first recorded sermon, St. Paul said, “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39 KJV). And in his first sermon, St. Peter said, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). On Easter evening, Jesus appeared to all his disciples and said, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46-48).

Christ’s death on the cross saved us from our sins, and his resurrection proved that his death was successful and that it was accepted by the Father for the remission of our sins. We are to be witnesses of this to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). It is our mission to preach forgiveness of sins in Christ’s death on the cross and to administer it
sacramentally. Through this preaching, the kingdom comes; and by it, we are prepared for the kingdom’s consummation in glory.

LEAVING EVERYTHING, HE FOLLOWED HIM

Homily of Friday, 13th Week of the Year
Amos 8:4-6, 9-12; Ps. 118; Matt. 9:9-13

“‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord God, ‘when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it’” (Amos 8:11-12).

The prophet says that for the infidelity of Israel, God will no longer call people to be prophets. He will no longer send them his word to preach, so days of famine are coming, a famine of hearing the word of God preached to us. We normally think that God will always send us his word to nourish and sustain us. But here we see that if we do not respond to his word, he will stop sending it until we feel hungry for it. Thus he will teach us in a new way, and we will learn the importance of his word by experiencing the emptiness of its absence. Without the nourishment of his word, our life is empty and without meaning or interest. Life becomes boring without the word of God.

Days are coming when even those that preach will preach only human words, only their own ideas, only about worldly things until we wake up and realize that this is not the word of God that we are listening to but only the words of men, and the message is only the wisdom of the world. We already see that the number of preachers has been drastically reduced today. Is this not God’s punishment for our infidelity? God is withdrawing his word. And where can one hear today the word of God authentically preached?

Today Jesus calls Matthew, saying, “‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him” (Matt. 9:9). St. Luke says, “And he left everything, and rose and followed him” (Luke 5:28). This is the true word and the kind of response Jesus is looking for—that we follow him completely, leaving everything for him to live for Christ alone with all the love of our hearts. He wants us to make every sacrifice necessary in every aspect of our life to follow him in this way with an undivided heart. One that responds in this way cannot continue living as he formerly did. He has to make an abrupt break in his life. He cannot continue living a worldly lifestyle. Only one that makes this radical break with his past will be able to continue hearing the word that nourishes and sustains him, giving him ever new life.

But those that never get to this point, whose life continues on as it did before, will experience this famine of hearing the word of the Lord. The word will be withdrawn from them. “They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it’” (Amos 8:12). We do not want this, but if we do not do our part, living radically for God alone, leaving all else, we will experience this famine of hearing the true word of God. Our response is important.
God is patient. But his patience will come to an end. We are to follow the example of St. Matthew: leave everything and follow Jesus alone.

THE NEW WORLD OF FAITH

Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, July 3
Eph. 2:19-22; Ps. 116; John 20:24-29

“Thomas answered him, ‘my Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe’” (John 20:28-29).

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Thomas. He refused to believe that Jesus rose from the dead when the other apostles told him that he had appeared to them. But one week later, Jesus again appeared to his apostles; and this time Thomas was with them. Upon actually seeing him, he acknowledged not only that he had risen from the dead, but also that he was his Lord and God. He should have believed the word of those that saw him. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe,” Jesus said.

That is our situation. We have not seen the risen Christ with our own eyes, but we believe in him; and through our faith, we have salvation and new life. We must believe the testimony of the apostles that saw him risen from the dead. This faith then opens up a whole new world for us. By faith, Christ makes us a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), new creatures, new men (Eph. 4:22-24), born again in Christ (John 3:3). Through faith, the death of Christ is counted as our death in full punishment for our sins, so we are set free from our sins and our guilt. Through faith, we rise with Christ to walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4).

Through faith, we live now in the kingdom of heaven on earth with Jesus Christ reigning over us and over his kingdom on the throne of David. This is a universal kingdom of righteousness and peace over the whole earth forever. We live in this kingdom by faith not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7).

By faith, we live in the new world of the love of God. Christ is in the Father. He is one being with him. The Father loves Christ, and Christ loves us. Christ transmits the love of the Father to us; and by faith, we live in the splendor of this divine love that flows between the Father and the Son. We can invite Christ to live in our hearts (John 14:23) as our Savior and Lord and be our constant companion and guide.

Christ feeds us with his body and blood that we might remain in him (John 15:9), and he in us (John 14:23), renewing us, rejoicing our hearts, and sanctifying us. We are to remain in his love through faith and obedience to his will. If we live like this in faith, we will have the happiness of God within us (John 15:9-11). By faith we also live in hope for Christ’s second coming in glory and eternal life with him in the new Jerusalem. When we die we will be with him and will see him as he is—as God (1 John 3:2).

If we have faith, we will rejoice in Christ without having seen him. And blessed will we be, for “without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8-9).
Let us not be doubting Thomases.  Let us live by faith without seeing, “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

THE MISSIONARY VOCATION

14th Sunday of the Year
Isa. 66:10-14; Ps. 65; Gal. 6:14-18; Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

“The Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come” (Luke 10:1).

Today Jesus sends out seventy disciples on mission. They are to precede him. They will often be in hostile territory, like sheep in the midst of wolves (Luke 10:3). They are to travel light. When they enter a house to stay there, they are to greet it, saying, “Peace be to this house” (Luke 10:5), and they should remain there until they leave that city. The people should feed them, and the missionaries should eat what is placed before them (Luke 10:7-8). They should heal the sick in the town and say to everyone, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:9). If a town does not receive them, they are to leave and go to another town, but before they leave, say, “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off against you; nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near” (Luke 10:11).

A missionary goes with a message of salvation. He lives in a relationship of love with Christ. Christ gives him new life and light, and brings him into the love of the Father, where he now lives. He has the forgiveness of his sins through the death of Christ on the cross, which mercifully paid his debt of punishment for him so that God could justly forgive him, and he is daily fed on the body and blood of Christ, which fills him with divine life. He also lives in hope for the future that he will live forever with God in the new Jerusalem. With this spiritual wealth, the missionary goes to a non-Christian country, lives among the people, and preaches to them this salvation that he himself is experiencing. He wants to bring to them what Christ brings to those that believe in him. He goes to share with them this salvation, this new life, and this relationship of love with Christ so that they too might walk in his light and have his life in them. He preaches the cross of Christ to them, which justifies them if they believe in him, he feeds them with the body and blood of Christ, and he sacramentally absolves their sins.

The missionary must travel light and adapt himself to his new country. He eats what the people give him, and he shares in their life. In sharing life with his new people, he also wants to share his faith with them, so that they too may enjoy the same spiritual wealth that he enjoys—the revelation that Jesus Christ brings to the world.

He should preach the kingdom of God, saying that the kingdom of God has come near to them. Christ brings his kingdom to them through the word of God, which the missionary preaches to them, and through his sacraments, which the missionary celebrates among them. This is the missionary vocation. Not everyone is called to go to a non-Christian country and spend his life in this way, but some are called to this important and glorious vocation.
The essence of the missionary vocation is God’s revelation in Israel and in Jesus Christ his only Son sent into the world to save it. Countries that have not had contact with this revelation need to receive it in order to have the opportunity to accept it and experience this love of God, this divine life in themselves, and this new relationship with God through his Son. Thus they will have the opportunity to be saved from their sins through Christ’s vicarious death on the cross. The missionary is called by God to go to these countries, live with the people, share their life, and bring them this revelation and this power—this new life in Christ.

When the seventy returned to Jesus, they said, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!” And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:17-18). This indicates the meaning of their mission. They are destroying Satan. They are promoting the kingdom of God and destroying Satan’s kingdom by their mission.

But Jesus also says today, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2). We see the truth of this saying today when there are so few laborers in such a great harvest. But I believe that if we were exercising our mission correctly, we would have plenty of vocations. If we live worldly lives, how can we possibly expect to attract vocations to follow us in this kind of work? If our message of salvation in Christ is not correct and clear, who will join us in this work? If we have forgotten the essence of the message, how can we possibly expect many to follow us? The lack of missionary vocations today should therefore be the occasion for us to reflect and renew ourselves in our missionary vocation.

A NUPTIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST

Monday, 14th Week of the Year
Hosea 2:16, 17-18, 21-22; Ps. 144; Matt. 9:18-26

“And in that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal.’” (Hosea 2:16).

God has a nuptial relationship with Israel and wants her to remain faithful to her only spouse, Yahweh, her Lord. But she chased after her many lovers and forgot the Lord. She divided her heart among the Baals and foreign gods. The Lord therefore punished her so that she would leave these other gods and return to him and only to him with all her heart.

Hosea prophesies that in the future Israel will be renewed and will serve the Lord alone. God will betroth her to himself anew. He says, “Behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her … And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord” (Hosea 2:14, 19-20). “In that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal.’” (Hosea 2:16).
All of this is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, our spouse. We have an exclusive nuptial relationship with him that excludes other gods and idols so that we might love him alone with an undivided heart. St. Paul says, “I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband” (2 Cor. 11:2). “He who as the bride is the bridegroom,” said John the Baptist about Jesus and the Church (John 3:29). Christ is our only spouse. We are the Church, his bride. Jesus called himself the bridegroom of his Church when he said, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?” (Mark 2:19). St. Paul said, “The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (Eph. 5:23). In the Apocalypse, we see the consummation of the wedding of the Lamb with his bride, the church (Rev. 19:7).

We must therefore live faithfully in an exclusive nuptial relationship with our only spouse Jesus Christ. Renunciation is essential to this. To remain faithful, we must renounce all that would divide our hearts. He alone is to be our Lord and spouse. We can serve but one master only (Matt. 6:24). We must therefore renounce everything else (Luke 14:33). We have to choose this straight and narrow way of life (Matt. 7:13-14). We must renounce and sell all that we have to obtain the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:44-46), which is a faithful, exclusive nuptial relationship with Christ. This means that we are to be crucified to the world (Gal. 6:14) and to its pleasures which divide our heart. We are rather to love Christ with all our heart (Mark 12:30). We are to live in simplicity, detachment, renunciation, divestment, and evangelical poverty. All are called to this. The highest way of living this is in the celibate monastic life, renouncing even a human spouse and physically leaving the world to serve but one master only with all our heart.

**THEY FOLLOWED THEIR OWN COUNSELS**

Thursday, 14th Week of the Year
Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9; Ps. 79; Matt. 10:7-15

“And the sword shall abide on his cities, and shall consume his branches, and devour them, because of their own counsels” (Hosea 11:6 KJV).

God is for Israel like a father full of compassion and love, but the more God called them, the more they went away from him (Hosea 11:2). Yet even though he loved them, they would nonetheless be punished by Assyria (Hosea 11:5) “because of their own counsels” (Hosea 11:6 KJV). Their own counsels caused their destruction, not God’s counsels, which they refused to follow. If they had followed God’s counsels, they would have been blessed.

This is our problem too. How often do we follow our own counsels rather than those of God? When we do this, we follow the so-called wisdom of the world rather than the will of God. And for doing so, we are punished by God. The sword consumes us because of our own counsels.

And what are our own counsels? How do they differ from God’s counsels? God’s counsels are about true love, above all they are about a perfect undivided love of him together with a self-sacrificing love of our neighbor for the sake of the love of God. Our
own counsels, on the other hand, are for our own pleasure in this world. Our own counsels have nothing to do either with God or with a sacrificial love of our neighbor. Our own counsels are concerned with our own pleasure. A person who follows his own counsels in someone dedicated to pursuing his own pleasure in this world. He is someone that loves his life in this world, and who will therefore lose it as far as God is concerned (John 12:25). He is someone who tries to save his life in this world, and who therefore will lose it (Mark 8:35).

God’s counsels, on the other hand, direct us to hate our life in this world (John 12:25) and live instead a life of renunciation of the pleasures of the world in order to love God with all our heart and dedicate ourselves to the service of our neighbor for God’s sake (Matt. 13:44-46; 19:29; 6:24).

The Lord said, “My people did not listen to my voice; Israel would have none of me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes” (Ps. 80:11-14). He also said, “O that you had hearkened to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea; your offspring would have been like the sand, and your descendants like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me” (Isa. 48:18-19).

Imagine what our lives would look like now if we had learned this lesson earlier in life. How richly we would have been blessed by now. It is not too late to change and be converted. There is still time to renounce our own counsels and follow those of God.

HOPE AFTER DESTRUCTION

Friday, 14th Week of the Year
Hosea 14:2-10; Ps. 50; Matt. 10:16-23

“I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon” (Hosea 14:5 KJV).

Today we once again see the mercy of God toward his people after he has warned, threatened, and punished them for their infidelity. We see that there is still hope. After destroying them for their sins, God promises them salvation if they repent and return to him with all their heart. The prophet tells the people, “Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the Lord; say to him, Take away all iniquity” (Hosea 14:1-2).

We also have been punished for our infidelity. Our Societies of Apostolic Life, for example, are a mere shadow of what they once were. Like Israel, we have imitated the world and its lifestyle instead of being witnesses of a life of faith for the world around us to imitate. We have imitated them instead of them imitating us. Christ has sent us out as his witnesses, and what have we done? Therefore God has punished us, and we are dying.

But there is still hope if we recognize our errors and repent and change before we are completely destroyed. “Take with you words,” says the prophet, “and return to the Lord;
say to him, ‘Take away all iniquity’” (Hosea 14:2). We must change our lifestyle and stop imitating the world, and we must preach the authentic message of salvation in Jesus Christ—and believe it ourselves. Then Christ’s sacrifice on the cross will heal us. His suffering will be counted as our suffering, freeing us from this suffering and punishment for our sins. Then God will absolve us by the merits of the death of his Son on the cross, and we shall be freed from God’s present wrath and punishment to enjoy the freedom of the sons of God (Rom. 8:21).

Then will this glorious prophecy be fulfilled in us, the new Israel. In Christ, God will be as the dew for us, and we will blossom like the lily. We will strike root like the cedars of Lebanon. We will spread out our branches, and our beauty shall be like the olive tree, and our scent like cedars and cypresses of Lebanon. We shall grow like the vine, and our fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon (Hosea 14:5-7).

On that day, “Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols?” (Hosea 14:8 KJV). She will see the great difference in her life once she has repented, changed her way of living, and believed in the Lord. If we similarly repent and change, we too will note a great difference, and we will ask ourselves, “What have I to do any more with idols?” Our idols are the fashions and ways of the world that we are imitating in our ignorance. With our idols, we have been unfaithful like Israel, who “mingled with the nations and learned to do as they did. They served their idols, which became a snare to them” (Ps. 105:35-36).

DO NOT BE ASHAMED OF CHRIST

Saturday, 14th Week of the Year
Isa. 6:1-8; Ps. 92; Matt. 10:24-33

“Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32).

This is our mission—to acknowledge Christ in this world. “What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops,” Jesus said (Matt. 10:27). Jesus taught in parables in a hidden way (Matt. 13:11, 13) because his doctrine could not be understood before his death and resurrection. But since Pentecost, it is to be proclaimed from the housetops (Matt. 10:27). We will be persecuted for our preaching, but no one can destroy our soul. So “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28).

We should not deny Christ before others, for “whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:33). We can deny Christ by the way we live as well as by our words. If we live a worldly life, we are denying Christ before others. We are refusing to give the witness God wants us to give in this world.

We can live a worldly life for the sake of the pleasures it gives us, but many also live worldly lives for fear of being different. They are ashamed of Christ. They fear the looks, thoughts, words, and actions of others if they are different from them. So they imitate those around them without distinguishing whether what they are imitating is good or bad. Their only concern is not be different from others. They fear to hear what the
wicked said about the just man in the book of Wisdom, “He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange” (Wis. 2:14-15).

Many live in a worldly way in order not to be judged like this. So they deny Christ out of shame, out of cowardly conformism. They prefer to go along with the crowd than to do what is right. Of them Jesus said, “Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). God said, “Those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Sam. 2:30). And St. Paul said, “If we deny him, he also will deny us” (2 Tim. 2:12). Priests and religious, for example, acknowledge Christ before others by the way they dress, while others are ashamed to give this witness.

We are not to fear the looks and judgments of others, but rather to give witness to our faith for their good. We will be persecuted if we do this, but this is part of being a disciple, for “a disciple is not above his teacher … If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (Matt. 10:24-25). “If they persecuted me,” said Jesus, “they will persecute you” (John 15:20). We are not to fear persecution but to give witness before others by acknowledging our faith in Christ before them.

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT AND THE MONASTIC LIFE

15th Sunday of the Year
Deut. 30:10-14; Ps. 68; Col. 1:15-20; Luke 10:25-37

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

This is the first and greatest commandment of Jesus. The parable of the good Samaritan illustrates who our neighbor is and how we should love him. Our neighbor is anyone who needs our help. He is not just someone of our own religion or race or someone who lives nearby. In other words, to love our neighbor means to love everyone and try to help everyone, including our enemies.

But the first commandment to love God with all our being, mind, strength, soul, and heart is the foundation of everything. This commandment defines the Christian. It is in effect the renunciation of ourselves. Instead of living for ourselves, we are to live completely for God. This does not mean that we are to harm ourselves, but yes, it does mean that we are not to live for worldly pleasures. We should live for God, not for ourselves. In regard to ourselves, we should sacrifice ourselves for the love of God. We should pour our life out in a sacrifice of love to God, making him our only happiness and joy, not dividing the love of our hearts with other things and delights. If we want to love God with all our heart, we should love him with an undivided heart, not divided among unnecessary pleasures. This is where renunciation comes in. We are to renounce everything else: diversions, movies, delicacies, pleasure trips, etc.
So have monks lived in every age. They live within a monastic enclosure, behind walls, far from the world and its pleasures. They eat simply, without meat, and wear habits, renouncing secular dress as an expression of their renunciation of a secular lifestyle, which is an endless quest after pleasure. The monk renounces a secular lifestyle to live only for God in every aspect of his life. It is good to reflect on monasticism today, the eleventh of July, for it is the feast of St. Benedict, the father of Western monasticism.

But how can we live for God alone like this in all things, leaving everything else, which is the monastic ideal? We do it through renunciation of ourselves and of everything else for the love of God. Jesus taught us this, saying, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). One denies himself in order to love God and God alone with all his heart. He does not want to place a creature in the place of God in his heart. He wants to find his happiness only in God and in the things of God, not in the delights of the table and of this world. He will thus have an undivided heart in his love for God, and thus will love God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength. This is the first and most important commandment of Jesus.

The cross of Jesus is our model for how we should live in this world—not as lovers of the world, but as lovers of God. We are to sacrifice ourselves on the cross as Christ did. This is the only way to be happy. Only by losing our lives in this world can we be happy, for this is how God created us to live. By losing our life in this world, we find it. This is what Jesus taught us, saying, “Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35). Living this way means even hating our life in this world, hating worldly delights, diversions, and unnecessary added-on pleasures, for they divide, dissipate, and destroy our life as far as God is concerned. Jesus even taught us this too, saying, “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25).

Truly he who loves his life in this world, living in a worldly way, loses his life as far as God is concerned. But he who practices renunciation, denying himself, modeling his life in this world according to the pattern of the cross, shall save his life in regard to God. He will save his life because he lives only for God with all the love of his heart, without any division among the delights of this world. This is the life of the cross. It is a life crucified to the world, a life of renunciation.

So lived St. Paul, crucified to the world, dead to the world and its diversions. He said, “Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). St. Paul lived the mystery of the cross. He modeled his life according to the pattern of the cross. His was a life sacrificed to God in love, dead to the world, crucified to the world, and the world to him. He lost and hated his life in this world out of love for God. He lived only for God in everything. His life is a good model for us.

We will be able to live like this by renouncing the pleasures of the world, which is the ideal of monasticism. But we will also live like this by dedicating ourselves to the service of our neighbor for the love of God. We can, for example, pour out our life in a sacrifice of love for our neighbor by dedicating ourselves to preaching the gospel to him. This is a way of losing our life in this world. Our motive is the love of God—we do it out of love for God. We want to love him with all our heart and we do it by loving and serving our neighbor in this way.
A VERSE THAT HAS MADE MANY SAINTS

Monday, 15th Week of the Year
Isa. 1:10-17; Ps. 49; Matt. 10:34-11:1

“He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39).

This is a verse that has made many saints. It expresses the essence of the radical call of Christ, who wants all our love and that we love him with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength (Mark 12:30). It is the call to follow him alone and to leave all else for his sake. Thus will we have an undivided heart in our love for him. This radical call of Jesus includes even the renunciation of our family. “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,” he said (Matt. 10:37). In fact, whoever leaves his family for love of him will received a hundred times more (Matt. 19:29). “And he said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life’” (Luke 18:29-30). This is why his call will “set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother” (Matt. 10:35).

Jesus calls us to leave the dead to bury their own dead” (Luke 9:60). Such was Jesus’ response to the man who wanted to bury his father before following him. And to him who only wanted to say goodbye to his family before following him, Jesus said, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). These last two sayings show how clear a break from the world Jesus’ call to perfection requires. It is a call to renounce the world and all its unnecessary, added-on pleasures to live only for Jesus Christ with all our heart without any division whatsoever. Therefore he said, “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). This is the sword Jesus came to bring to the earth (Matt. 10:34). But this is the sword that will bring us true peace, not a peace of this world (John 14:27), for only in losing our life like this for Christ will we find it. Only he who hates his life in this world by leaving all—especially all the extra, unnecessary pleasures of life—only he will save his life for God. So did Jesus teach us, saying, “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25).

The monastic, celibate, and religious life has always been considered by the Church to be the best way to follow this radical call to perfection (Matt. 19:21). This is the life that leaves all to obtain the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:44-46). This is the call to perfection that Jesus extended to the rich young man, saying, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21). One who lives like this for the sake of Christ will find his life and can then preach this way of life to others. We are saved by the death of Christ, but we perfect ourselves in his love by living in this way.
"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

It was for this that Jesus came into the world—for our salvation and peace, to liberate us from the suffering of our spirits. He frees us from the sadness of life, gives us new direction, and restores us to peace with God. Of all of this, the most difficult for us to achieve is peace with God, for we are always falling into new sins or imperfections and losing or wounding our peace. How difficult it is to live perfectly even though we try! We cannot avoid falling into imperfections, and these often rob us of our peace, and our spirit cannot find rest.

But God sent us his Son to rescue us from this situation and enable us to find rest. He made reparation for us, carrying our sins himself and atoning for them by suffering for us their just and necessary punishment. This gives us peace. This is the remedy that we need to recover our peace and find rest for our souls. There is no other religion that offers this kind of rest and peace to the human spirit. Only Christ addresses the problem of sin and guilt, which darkens the human spirit, and only he has the remedy for this gravest of human sicknesses. Only he repairs the soul in its relationship with God. This is why his salvation must be preached unto the ends of the earth and in a way that all may clearly understand it.

Once our peace has been restored, Christ then shows us how to live so that we can grow more in our relationship of love with God. He gives us his yoke and his burden, saying, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30). What is his yoke and his burden? It is his cross that we too are to carry every day (Luke 9:23). The cross is denying ourselves (Luke 9:23).

Up to this point most people will agree with us. Most want to receive the salvation that Christ gave us on the cross, dying for us, freeing us from guilt and from our sins through our faith—especially in the sacrament of reconciliation (John 20:21-23). But many refuse to carry the cross and deny themselves even though Jesus said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

Yet this is the way of perfection (Matt. 19:21)—namely the way of the renunciation of the world to live only for God with all our heart. By taking this radical path, we find the liberation from sadness that we seek. This way of the cross and of sacrifice, in which we lose and hate our life in this world for Christ’s sake (Mark 8:35; John 12:25), liberates us, for we were made to live for God with all our heart.

Thus the cross is our salvation, atoning for our sins and teaching us how to live a life of perfection.
THE LAW OF PERFECTION

Friday, 15th Week of the Year
Isa. 38:1-6, 21-22, 7-8; Isa. 38; Matt. 12:1-8

“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck ears of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to them, ‘Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath’” (Matt. 12:1-2).

Here we see Jesus using his authority as Messiah to change the traditions and laws created by the Pharisees and rabbis. The Bible only says that one is not to work on the sabbath (Deut. 5:14). It does not say that walking through a grainfield and plucking and eating ears of grain is work prohibited on the Sabbath. In fact, such activity is allowed by the Bible, which says, “When you go into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor’s standing grain” (Deut. 23:25). The Pharisees, however, interpreted this activity as work and prohibited it on the Sabbath. Jesus acting as Messiah today gives his interpretation of this activity—it is not prohibited on the sabbath. Jesus rather puts his emphasis on the law of love of God and neighbor, which is simpler but much more radical and demanding.

The moral law revealed in the Old Testament is eternally valid, but Jesus discontinued the laws which were added on by the Pharisees and rabbis. Even the ceremonial and dietary laws of the Old Testament he discontinued with his authority as Messiah (Mark 7:19; Matt. 12:8).

Jesus’ new emphasis on the two great commandments is far more radical than all the Old Testament ceremonial laws that he suppressed for his followers. He extends to them a radical invitation to perfection to love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30). He calls and invites his disciples to renounce all for his sake (Matt. 19:21), in order to love and follow him with an undivided heart. The more one can do this, the better (Luke 14:33; Matt. 13:44-46). To those born again in him through faith and baptism, he extends his call to leave all for him, to serve him alone (Matt. 6:24), to sell all to attain the great treasure (Matt. 13:44), to have him alone as their treasure (Matt. 6:19-21), to leave family and even renounce marriage (Luke 18:29; Matt. 19:12) and all things (Luke 14:33) for his sake. Those who do so will truly be his disciples (Luke 14:33), new men, new creatures, redeemed by his death and raised with him in his resurrection to a new life in his light (John 8:12).

How much more radical is Jesus’ call to perfection than all the ceremonial and dietary laws of the rabbis and even of the Old Testament that he suppressed for his followers! By renouncing the pleasures of this world to love God with an undivided heart, one who is reborn in Jesus, saved by his redeeming death, and illumined by the light of his resurrection will have a new life and be a new creation. He will be a new man. He will have answered the call to perfection.
"Behold my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles" (Matt. 12:18; Isa. 42:1).

St. Matthew tells us today that Jesus is the Suffering Servant of the Lord about whom Isaiah prophesied. This servant will be persecuted, but will bring salvation to the world. Precisely in his sufferings, he will save the world. “The chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5 KJV).

We see today that Jesus was persecuted. St. Matthew says that “the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him. Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all, and ordered them not to make him known” (Matt. 12:14-15). Jesus had to flee from the Pharisees. Yet although persecuted, he healed everyone and in doing so fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah about the Servant who would suffer and through his suffering would save the world.

The Servant was God’s chosen one, his beloved, in whom the Father is well pleased. The Father put his Spirit upon him, the Holy Spirit, and he will bring righteousness to the Gentiles—not only to Israel. He will be the Savior of the world. He will do all this in a humble and lowly way. “He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets” (Matt. 12:19; Isa. 42:2). He will do this “till he brings justice to victory; and in his name will the Gentiles hope” (Matt. 12:20-21; Isa. 42:4). His goal is to bring righteousness to the world.

Truly, Christ brought righteousness to the earth for Gentiles as well as Jews. By his suffering, he brought righteousness to the earth and justifies all who believe in him. Christ did not want to be made fully known until the proper time—“and he ordered them not to make him known”—for he had to instruct his disciples first. But after his death and resurrection, they were to preach salvation in Christ unto the ends of the earth.

This is the Christ whom we preach. It is the Church’s mission to bring the salvation of God in Christ unto the ends of the earth. In preaching him and in the administration of his sacraments, this salvation becomes present for all who believe. The death of Christ satisfies divine justice and forgives the sins of all who believe in him. They thus obtain a whole new life in Christ.

This new life makes all the difference in the world—the difference between light and darkness (Eph. 5:8). The merits of the death of Christ, preached and administered in his sacraments, change the life of a person and give him a participation in the glory of Christ’s resurrection.

This is the mission of the Church: preaching Christ where he is not yet known for the salvation and new life of all who will believe in him.
“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42).

This scene has traditionally been interpreted in reference to the contemplative life, as distinct from the active life. Jesus’ rebuke of Martha does not mean that contemplatives renounce work—they are hard workers—but it does mean that the contemplative life is a tranquil, peaceful, quiet life. To succeed in living a peaceful and tranquil life, the contemplative leaves the world with its normal social obligations. He no longer visits his family or friends in their homes. He no longer travels. He rather lives always within his monastic enclosure in stability. He no longer speaks much but spends much time in silence, working quietly, recollected in prayer and meditation. The contemplative simplifies his life. He dresses religiously, renouncing secular dress, as a symbol of his renunciation of a secular lifestyle. A secular lifestyle is a worldly life, a quest for pleasure, which is a constant distraction of the heart, dividing and dissipating it, pulling it in many different directions at the same time.

The contemplative wants to live only for God, and therefore he renounces the pleasures of life. He wants to reduce the stimuli coming at him from the world. He therefore lives much of his time in solitude and silence. In his prayer as well, he greatly appreciates and holds in the highest esteem silent prayer without words or ideas. This is the prayer in which he sits silently in God’s presence in love. He is relaxed and rests comfortably in God’s loving presence. He finds refreshment in this.

Prayer which uses words is also of great importance for the contemplative, for it is continually forming his spirit and orienting his mind and heart toward God. Therefore he sings or recites the divine office with great care, repeating and ever meditating anew on its psalms, antiphons, scriptural citations, and hymns throughout the day, and always at the same hours. Thus he regulates and punctuates his day; and this rhythm—always the same—creates an atmosphere of peace, harmony, and recollection within which he lives.

He eats simply, renouncing meat and delicacies so as not to divide his heart with food, which is one of the greatest sources of pleasure. He sacrifices this pleasure for the sake of God, trying to make God his only happiness. The life of a contemplative is centered in God and in Jesus Christ, not in himself. He tries to lose his life in this world to find it with God (Mark 8:35).

Simple things can help him in the beginning—such as the beauty of nature—but even this he has to renounce, at least in the sense of going on vacations to national parks and to places of special beauty. He rather always remains within his monastic enclosure and contents himself with what it has to offer, sacrificing all the rest. This is because a contemplative is always trying to reduce the stimuli that come to him from the exterior world, so that his own world can become ever more tranquil, allowing his mind, heart, and spirit to come to rest. Even his prayer has to be reduced to silence in its deepest moments, finally even leaving off singing or reciting psalms (once he has finished the office). And so he arrives at his end, the purpose of his life and vocation—the passive
contemplation of God. Now at last his mind as well as his voice fall silent, as he sits in peace and love with God. At such times, God often refreshes him with his light and love.

These experiences of contemplation kill within him the desire to seek pleasure in the world outside of God, for now he knows God and knows that the happiness of spirit that he now finds in God far surpasses any other happiness that he could find in the world. Moreover he knows that the quest for pleasure in the world outside of God only reduces the refined, sublime happiness he finds in God. Therefore he regards worldly pleasure as the enemy of his soul. Things and activities that formerly helped him to know the goodness of God now no longer help him but are rather a distraction, dividing and dissipating the love of his heart and reducing the happiness and peace that he now finds in God.

Hence to the degree that a contemplative is growing spiritually, he makes an ever more complete break with the world in order to live a more silent and solitary life, spending his time in quiet work and setting aside time for silent prayer in which his spirit rests in peace with God.

This type of life is most useful to the world, elevating, as it does, the general spiritual condition of all, giving good example, showing the way to the lost, and providing oases of spiritual refreshment in the desert.

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM

Monday, 16th Week of the Year
Mic. 6:1-4, 6-8; Ps. 49; Matt. 12:38-42

‘Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’ But he answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah’” (Matt. 12:38-39).

We are in the same situation as those who sought a sign from Jesus. Many today want to see an unmistakable sign from God that Jesus really was his only Son and our Savior before they will believe in him and completely commit their lives to him. But Jesus says today that the only sign he will give us is his resurrection. That is the sign of Jonah that he promises us, “for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40).

This great sign should be enough for us. If we want to believe, this sign is sufficient proof upon which we can base our faith. Even though we have not seen the risen Christ with our own eyes, we have the impressive testimony of the apostles and the other eye witnesses of the early Church who saw him risen from the dead. The entire New Testament is based on this testimony.

In addition when we begin to believe, there are many other signs which, if we interpret them correctly, will lead us to conclude that Jesus is indeed the Messiah who has brought the kingdom of God into the world. These signs will indicate to us that we are now living, by means of faith, in the blessings of the kingdom. It is important to be able to correctly interpret these signs. Jesus said, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair
weather; for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (Matt. 16:2-3).

It is important to be able to interpret the signs of the kingdom of God among us, in our midst, and within us (Luke 17:20-21). He who knows how to correctly interpret the important signs that are all around us will believe that we are now living in the messianic age, in the age to come, dropped back into the middle of history by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah and only Son of God. He will believe that the new age has indeed already begun and that it is the kingdom of heaven on earth, the kingdom of righteousness and peace longed for in the Old Testament. Now “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” in Jesus Christ (Mark 1:15). He has brought it to us. We should therefore be able to read and interpret these signs.

The signs today are God’s peace in our hearts, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. He satisfied divine justice by his death, suffered on the cross in punishment for our sins, to reconcile us with God. We can therefore now live in peace with God and all mankind and become the agents of his kingdom in the world for the salvation of all.

AN EVANGELIST OF LOVE—ST. MARY MAGDALENE

Memorial of St. Mary Magdalene, July 22
Song of Sol. 3:1-4; Ps. 62; John 20:1-2, 11-18

“They said to her, ‘Woman why are you weeping?’ She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him’” (John 20:13).

Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Mary Magdalene. She loved Jesus, was faithful in watching below his cross, and visited his tomb on Easter morning. She was the first to discover that his tomb was empty, and she is the one that reported this to the apostles. Then returning to the tomb, she was the first to see the risen Lord. She became the first evangelist of the Easter gospel that Christ has risen from the dead—and she proclaimed it to the apostles themselves. She was also the one “from whom he had cast out seven demons” (Mark 16:9). Truly, she loved much, for she was forgiven much (Luke 7:42-43).

In all of this, she is a model for us: in her love, in that Jesus forgave her sins, and in her role as an evangelist. Jesus frees us from our sins and from the guilt that cripples our spirits and depresses us. He pours the love of God into our hearts by giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). As a result, we are to be his witnesses, announcing his salvation and love to the world. We need to examine ourselves on this today. How much do we love Christ? And do we proclaim the gospel of his salvation in a clear way so that our listeners can understand it?

To love Jesus like Mary Magdalene, we have to spend time with him. We do this in prayer and contemplation. She is like the bride of the Song of Songs. “Who is that,” we say about her, “coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?” (Song of Sol. 8:5). The wilderness, the desert, is the place of prayer. When God wanted to renew his
covenant of love with Israel, he said, “Behold, I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her” (Hosea 2:14). Jesus made his retreat in the desert.

We need time alone in the desert with God in prayer and contemplation. Then we can come up from the desert perfumed with divine love. “What is that coming up from the wilderness,” says the Song of Songs, “like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of the merchant?” (Song of Sol. 3:6). So does God beautify us with the fragrance of contemplation, for our lover is “like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices” (Song of Sol. 8:14).

Then we must proclaim this love and salvation in a clear way, saying that Christ frees us from evil, sin, and guilt by his death on the cross, on which he suffers for us our just punishment for our sins. By faith in him, all can be thus freed and live in his love.

THE THORNS THAT CHOKE US

Friday, 16th Week of the Year
Jer. 3:14-17; Jer. 31; Matt. 13:18-23

“As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Matt. 13:22).

This is Jesus’ message for us today. St. Luke’s version is, I believe, even more striking. It reads, “As for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” (Luke 8:14).

Jesus says that when they hear the word of God, those who live among thorns are choked and do not bear fruit. The thorns, he says, are the worries, cares, riches, and “pleasures of life” (Luke 8:14).

An example of this is the monastic life compared to a secular lifestyle. The monk flees from the world in order to avoid these thorns so that he may grow and yield much fruit for the Lord. He wants to guard his soul in God. How different is a secular lifestyle from the monastic way of life! The monk rises at three in the morning for the divine office, lectio divina, contemplative prayer, and the celebration of the Eucharist—all in silence. Cistercians eat for the first time at noon—they never eat breakfast or drink coffee. Cistercians, if they wish, may eat something very simple in the morning, but in total silence. Thus do monks spend these most important hours of the day for prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, and contemplation.

How different is a secular lifestyle. They get up whenever they like, perhaps at six in the morning. Then many turn on the television to hear and see the news and all the worldly advertisements and messages that go with it, something that distracts, dissipates, and darkens the spirit at this most sacred time of the day. There is very little time for prayer. Then comes breakfast, often of fried foods and sugar, during which they converse, still further distracting their spirits. This lifestyle seems to specialize in thorns.

One does not have to live in a monastery to live a contemplative life. Priests and religious can readily live this kind of life—they are celibate and live alone and can arrange their own life if they know the basic principles of the spiritual life. Thus they can
avoid many of these thorns and yield much fruit for the Lord. They can observe silence early in the morning. They can rise early to have sufficient time for silent prayer, the divine office, and the Eucharist. They can avoid a worldly and noisy breakfast and refuse to turn on the television or radio during these most sacred hours of the day. Thus the priestly and religious life, if properly lived, can avoid the thorns that would otherwise choke them and so bear much fruit. Their life will thus be in accord with the basic principles of spirituality; and in this, it will resemble monastic life.

Every Christian can learn something by comparing his life to monastic life, and he can try to move himself a bit more in that direction in order to avoid thorns. All should serve but one master only (Matt. 6:24) and not be dissipated by the pleasures of life (Luke 21:34; 8:14).

GOD’S PEACE IS FOR THOSE WHO PRAY

17th Sunday of the Year
Gen. 18:20-32; Ps. 137; Col. 2:12-14; Luke 11:1-13

“He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples’” (Luke 11:1).

Today Jesus teaches us how to pray. Perhaps we think that since God knows everything, there is no need to pray or make our needs known to him. But today we see that this is not the case. A follower of Jesus should pray—even as Jesus himself prayed—and not just once, or once in a while, but always. Later “he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1). This was the parable about the widow and the unjust judge. He concludes, saying, “And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily” (Luke 18:7-8). St. Paul sums it all up, saying, “Pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17). “And I tell you,” Jesus says today, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Luke 11:9-10). We are to pray with importunity like the man who asked for three loaves of bread at midnight from a friend who was already in bed. He did not want to get up and give them to him, but “because of his importunity,” he got up and gave him all that he needed (Luke 11:8).

It is clear then that God wants us to pray always and ask for what we need. This includes our daily bread (Luke 11:3) and the other things that we need, but we should also pray in order to praise God. The psalms are filled with praise of God. So should we pray. And we should pray to ask forgiveness for our sins and for God’s grace. The Jesus prayer asks for God’s mercy upon us sinners: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God; have mercy on me a sinner.” We should pray, “Father, hallowed by thy name … forgive us our sins” (Luke 11:2, 4).

We should also ask for peace with God, peace in our hearts, peace and harmony with all mankind, and with every creature. This peace is the gift of God in Jesus Christ. He was sent into the world to give us this peace that the world cannot give. “Peace I leave
with you,” he says; “my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27). We should ask for this peace, which Jesus wants to give us. St. Paul says, “Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7).

If we pray with faith and thanksgiving, the peace of God will come upon us, and this peace is so great that it passes all understanding. It is a peace that the world can neither give nor understand. It is the peace of the Holy Spirit given to us through the merits of the death of Christ on the cross. Through faith and prayer, this peace is poured into our hearts. It is a peace which comes as a result of the forgiveness of all our sins and imperfections, for Christ on the cross suffered the wrath of God against them for us and in place of us, shielding us from this wrath and absorbing it into himself, and this is applied to us when we invoke him with faith. It is also a peace that results from the resurrection of Christ from the dead, for he illuminates us if we believe in him. We grow in this light when we pray. This peace and illumination becomes our dwelling place when we pray always. Micah prophesied about our days of fulfillment when he said, “He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19). This he did in sending his Son into the world to die and rise for us.

If we are people of faith and prayer, we will live a risen life. We have already risen with Christ. This is what St. Paul tells us today, saying, “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12). And not only this, but St. Paul also tells us today that God has forgiven all our sins, which rob us of our peace. “And you,” he says, “who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses” (Col. 2:13). He nailed to the cross the bond which stood against us with its legal demands (Col. 2:14). His suffering on the cross paid our debt of suffering for us and served our death sentence for our sins in place of us so that we could go free when we believe in him. And the peace of this salvation comes to us through his sacraments and in prayer.

Living like this, saved and at peace with God, with ourselves, and with all the world, we greatly help the world, for the saints have always had a redemptive role in the world. If God had found ten of them in Sodom, he would not have destroyed it, the scriptures tell us today (Gen. 18:32).

THE SPOILED WAISTCLOTH

Monday, 17th Week of the Year
Jer. 13:1-11; Deut. 32; Matt. 13:31-35

“Take the waistcloth which you have bought, which is upon your loins, and arise, go to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a cleft of the rock” (Jer. 13:4).
Jeremiah did this, and after many days the Lord told him, “Arise, go to the Euphrates, and take from there the waistcloth which I commanded you to hide there” (Jer. 13:6). When he did so, he saw that the waistcloth was spoiled (Jer. 13:7).

The waistcloth is a symbol of Israel that instead of clinging to the Lord as a waistcloth clings to the loins, went far from him, worshiping other gods, stubbornly following her own heart (Jer. 13:10). Therefore Israel “shall be like this waistcloth, which is good for nothing” (Jer. 13:10).

This event is a warning for every age. How often are we tempted to do something contrary to the will of God? We are even tempted to think things that he does not want us to think. And when we transgress his will, he wounds us in our consciences to warn us for the future not to do this again. If we continue to disobey him, we will end up like this spoiled waistcloth.

This is how God treats us, teaching and disciplining us (Heb. 12:5-11). Normally if we are progressing and growing spiritually, we learn by means of this divine discipline, and our sins or imperfections become smaller and smaller. Yet God continues disciplining us (Heb. 12:5-11), wounding us in our consciences even for very small imperfections so that we will continue to sanctify ourselves and to walk exactly as he wishes. Thus we will not rot like this waistcloth.

But those who pay no attention to the Lord’s discipline and go after other gods, losing themselves in the pleasures of the world, living according to their own desires and will, against God’s will—such people will end up like this spoiled waistcloth, “which is good for nothing” (Jer. 13:10).

The call to perfection (Matt. 19:21) is the highest call, for in leaving all things of this world, we can live for God alone. Those who follow this call cease living for the delights of this world, and live lives of renunciation and self-sacrifice, denying themselves for the love of God in order to be able to love him with all their heart. They no longer go after other gods, which are the pleasures of life, but rather live a sacrificial life to be able to love God with an undivided heart. They will not end up rotten but precious in God’s eyes. They lose and hate their lives in this world for the sake of Christ (Mark 8:35; John 12:25), living in simplicity and austerity, detached from all things. They respect and value silence and contemplation, guarding their hearts from the noise of the world and from its worldly messages. They have given up following after the noise of this world and try always to follow their consciences and do the will of God.

THE LOVE AND SERVICE OF OUR NEIGHBOR

Memorial of St. Martha, July 29
1 John 4:7-16; Ps. 33; Luke 10:38-42

“Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

Today we honor St. Martha of Bethany, the sister of Mary and Lazarus. She was the head of the house and welcomed Jesus as a guest and served him. Although Jesus rebuked her for being “anxious and troubled about many things,” while only “one thing is
needful,” namely that which Mary has chosen, even so she is a saint and had a good spirit of service and served Jesus, the Son of God. Service is important although not as important as Martha thought, for she wanted Jesus to tell her sister to stop listening to him and to help her with the serving. Martha needed to learn that not all have the same vocation, not all have to wait on tables, and that, in fact, contemplation is more important, than service. It is the better part chosen by Mary.

Service is nonetheless important. The first commandment is to love God with all our heart, but the second commandment is to love our neighbor. Even a hermit in the desert serves his neighbor through his prayer and the good example of his life, and normally also by his handiwork, making baskets, ropes, or mats; or copying manuscripts or writing books for the benefit of others.

We express our love for God in our prayer and contemplation but also in our work which serves the needs of others. We love our neighbor as one way of expressing our love for God. We cannot see God, but we can see and serve our neighbor out of love for God (1 John 4:12, 20), and Jesus tells us that whatever we do for our neighbor is counted as done for himself. “Truly, I say to you,” he said, “as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40).

So should our life be, poured out in love for God and for our neighbor for the love of God as the way that we can express our love for God. In prayer and contemplation, we love God directly. Then during the rest of the day, we can continue loving God by serving him in our neighbor through the work that we do. If our work is to cook, to wait on tables, or to take care of the sick, we love God by serving people in this way. If our work is writing and preaching sermons, we love God by pouring out our life in love, serving our neighbor and helping him to grow spiritually by means of our sermons. We love God by loving and serving our neighbor in this way.

If we love our neighbor like this, we will know God, for “he who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). “No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12). “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16). Martha is our model for this way of life.

THE WARNING OF THE PROPHETS

Friday, 17th Week of the Year
Jer. 26:1-9; Ps. 68; Matt. 13:54-58

“Thus says the Lord: Stand in the court of the Lord’s house, and speak to all the cities of Judah which come to worship in the house of the Lord all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word” (Jer. 26:2).

God did not want to punish his people. He did not want to destroy the temple and the city of Jerusalem. He did not want to exile his people to Babylon. Therefore he sent them prophets to warn them of their danger and remind them of his law so that they might hear, remember, and repent of their evil ways and idolatry. Then he could bless
them instead of punishing them. But the people did not heed the warnings of their prophets and continued on in their evil ways, worshiping other gods.

The people believed that the city and temple were indestructible, for in the time of Isaiah, in the previous century, the Assyrian army was miraculously destroyed when it tried to conquer Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:35). Since then, there arose a popular belief that God would always protect his city and temple. Therefore the people did not heed the warnings of their prophets, whom God sent them, thinking that they were in no danger, and so they continued on in their idolatrous ways.

Today as well God sends ministers of the word to his people to warn them of their danger, for he does not want to punish us either. If we hear their voice and repent, we will be saved and blessed; but if we do not heed our prophets, we will see the same punishment the Jews saw in the days of Jeremiah. They saw the destruction of their temple and of their city, and were exiled to Babylon.

We have already seen the signs—and more than just signs; we have seen the beginning of God’s punishment for our infidelity. We have seen priestly and religious vocations all but dry up in Western Europe and North America, the places where the Church has become the most secularized. It is only a matter of time before this alone will destroy our religious orders and Societies of Apostolic Life—that is, when those who entered before this secularization, die. We are now, therefore, in the middle of God’s punishment. Let us not make the same mistake as the Jews, thinking that our institutions are indestructible, that God will inevitably protect them.

Yet God still sends us his prophets and ministers of the word to warn us so that he can stop punishing us. If we heed their warnings and read the signs of the times that are all around us and if we wake up and repent, perhaps God will also repent and stop punishing us.

The people became very angry with Jeremiah for this sermon and wanted to kill him, but the princes defended him against the priests and the prophets (Jer. 26:16-17), for they realized that he was speaking the truth and had prophesied correctly in the name of the Lord. But the people did not repent, and so both Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and the people were exiled to Babylon.

What will we do? What will happen to us? That is for us to decide.

THE ROLE OF THE PROPHET

Saturday, 17th Week of the Year
Jer. 26:11-16, 24; Ps. 68; Matt. 14:1-12

“Then the priests and the prophets said to the princes and to all the people, ‘This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears’” (Jer. 26:11).

Today we see the results of Jeremiah’s discourse in the temple, where he said that if the people do not hear and heed God’s law, God would destroy the temple as Shiloh was destroyed (Jer. 26:6). Shiloh was a ruin where the ark of the covenant formerly dwelt. When he finished speaking, the priests and prophets wanted to put him to death.
Jeremiah defended himself, saying, “Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will repent of the evil which he has pronounced against you” (Jer. 26:13).

What the people should do is repent of their evil conduct and change their way of living. Then God would not carry out the evil he had threatened to do to them. They should not kill their prophet who spoke to them in the name of the Lord, for “if you put me to death,” he said, “you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the Lord sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears” (Jer. 26:15). In the end, the princes defended Jeremiah against the priests and the prophets, saying, “This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God” (Jer. 26:16).

We need prophets to wake us up and make us aware of our errors so that we can correct them before it is too late, and thus avoid becoming a ruin, punished by God. This is why God continues to send ministers of the word to his people in every age. Without them, we could be blind, like a frog in a pan of water slowly heating up on a stove. The water heats up so gradually that the frog does not feel that he is in any danger, and so does not jump out and save himself. He freely remains in the pan until he dies of the heat. May we not be like frogs, failing to jump out to save ourselves, refusing to repent and change our lives, because God’s punishment has come upon us so gradually that we do not realize the danger of our situation and are lulled to sleep.

This is where the prophet comes in. He warns us of the dangerous situation that we are in so that we can jump out of the pan before we are cooked, so that we can amend our ways before we are ruined. We should not attack the ministers of the word that warn us of our danger and point our errors out to us. They have been sent by God to help us so that we can change and be saved before it is too late.

Our main error is the same one Jeremiah condemned—idolatry, for like the Jews, we continue to put other things in the place that should be reserved for God in our hearts, thus dividing our hearts so that we no longer love God with all our heart (Mark 12:30), with an undivided heart. Of this error, we must repent.

THE CALL TO PERFECTION, WHICH WE HAVE FORGOTTEN

18th Sunday of the Year
Eccles. 1:2; 2:21-23; Ps. 89; Col. 3:1-5, 9-11; Luke 12:13-21

“One of the multitude said to him, ‘Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?’” (Luke 12:13-14).

Jesus did not want to have anything to do with inheritances and how they ought to be divided. All of that was outside of his interest and seemed to him like avarice. St. Paul tells us today that we should put to death “covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). And Qohelet says today that all this is vanity. “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2). Indeed all our work under the sun to pile up riches and pleasures is nothing but
vanity. The Hebrew word for vanity (habel) means breath, vapor, transitory, unsubstantial, passing. It is not something that we should build our lives on.

St. Paul says today, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1-2). The goal of our life is not to pile up riches and pleasures but to live for God with all our heart (Mark 12:30). Only in this way can a person be happy and enlightened. Only by renouncing the world and its pleasures to live only for God can a person completely realize himself. This is the call to perfection, which Jesus addressed to the rich young man, saying, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21).

The world today has all but forgotten this. Lives are filled with luxuries and pleasures, movies on television, cinemas, banquets, sumptuous desserts, pleasure trips, tours, and cruises. How many take part in all of this, consider it normal and natural, that such is life, and that this is the way to be happy? But Qohelet speaks the truth about all this, saying, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2). All this divides the heart.

Rather, we should have our treasure in heaven, not on the earth. “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth …” Jesus said, “but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven … For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:19-21). Modern life, filled with pleasures, is not the life of perfection, is not the way of life. The way of life is hard and narrow, not wide and easy. The wide and easy way of the world is the way to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14). This way of luxury will not bring us to God but rather to perdition.

But nowadays not only is the world like this, lost in its own worldliness, but the Church too, in many of its branches, has fallen into the same pit. Today, for example, in our Societies of Apostolic Life there is a television in practically every room. Instead of silence in the early morning for prayer, contemplation, the divine office, lectio divina, and the celebration of the Eucharist, many turn on the television during these most sacred hours of the day and receive whatever comes in: worldly images and messages, a whole philosophy of life—the so-called “modern life,” the life of pleasure, la dolce vita. All this divides the heart and fills it with “covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). It fills the heart with vanity, with what is unsubstantial, passing, and transitory. All this makes one forget that we have risen with Christ and should seek the things that are above, where Christ is, and should set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth (Col. 3:1-2).

Silence is another example. Fifty years ago, silence was observed in religious houses, in seminaries, and in the houses of Societies of Apostolic Life. Early morning was a time of great silence (Magnum Silencium) for the divine office, meditation, and the Mass. How different these same houses are today where one hears loud and boisterous greetings at all hours and in all places. Formerly silence was kept above the ground floor. All this has been forgotten, abandoned. We are imitating the world around us in all this.

The result is that vocations have all but dried up. Is this not the punishment of God? As God punished Israel for her sins, so is he punishing us now. But unlike Israel, instead of repenting and changing, we continue along on the same path, like blind men. We continue with our luxuries, movies, sumptuous daily meals, noisy greetings at all hours and places, and in general with a life full of entertainments. We even look like the world,
dressing nowadays like secular people, having abandoned our religious garb that greatly helped us in the past to remember who we were and what our vocation was.

What should we then do? We should put off the old man and put on the new man, as St. Paul says today (Col. 3:9-10). We should cease piling up treasures on earth, and be rich with God, as Jesus says today (Luke 12:21). We should set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, as St. Paul says today (Col. 3:1-2). And we should choose the hard and narrow way of life, not the wide and easy way that leads to destruction, as Jesus says (Matt. 7:13-14). If we do this, perhaps God will have mercy on us and stop punishing us.

TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS

Monday, 18th Week of the Year
Jer. 28:1-17; Ps. 118; Matt. 14:13-21

“The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet” (Jer. 28:8-9).

The days of King Zedekiah were a time of disaster for Jerusalem. He reigned between the two deportations of the people to Babylon. Jeremiah was sent by God to prepare them for this, so that they might accept their punishment from God and serve the king of Babylon (Jer. 27:12). He also preached the need for repentance so that they might avoid the final destruction of the temple and city and the second deportation of the remaining population to Babylon (Jer. 26:13). If they repent and change their ways, then God will also repent of the punishment he has pronounced against them.

In the midst of this situation came the false prophet Hananiah prophesying peace and happiness, saying falsely, “Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord’s house” together with Jeconiah, the king of Judah, “and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon” (Jer. 28:3-4). Hananiah was an expert in listening to the people and then telling them what he knew they wanted to hear—a happy message of peace and prosperity. He was surely very popular, but his “prophecies” were only his own ideas and the desires of the people, not the truth. He was not sent by God. He sent himself, and his work was to deceive the people and lead them astray, giving them a false sense of security so that they would not repent.

Do we have false prophets today—people who only speak smooth things, who never prophesy hard and difficult things, who never challenge the people, never call them to repentance and conversion, who never point out their errors, their infidelity, their sins, who never warn the people of the danger they are in, of the disaster that is in front of them, and of what they need to do to avoid this disaster? Instead of this, they only speak of peace and happiness and go from one celebration to another, promising a bright future. They are experts in listening to the people and repeating back to them what they hear, that is, what the people want to hear, not what God wants to tell them, not the truth that would help them.
What the people need to hear is the word of God, the call to conversion and perfection. They need to hear of the reward that they will receive if they repent, and of the punishment that will come to them from God if they refuse to repent. They need to hear that they are called to love God with all their hearts (Mark 12:30), to leave the pleasures of the world, and to live for God alone with an undivided heart.

THE NEW COVENANT AND THE NATION OF ISRAEL

Thursday, 18th Week of the Year
Jer. 31:31-34; Ps. 50; Matt. 16:13-23

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer. 31:31).

God will not forget his people Israel. He will punish her for her infidelities, but he will not abandon her (Jer. 30:11). As the sun, moon, and stars always obey God’s laws and never disobey them, so surely also shall Israel always be a nation before the Lord (Jer. 31:35-36). “If this fixed order departs from before me, says the Lord, then shall the descendants of Israel cease from being a nation before me for ever.’ Thus says the Lord: ‘If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the descendants of Israel for all that they have done, says the Lord’” (Jer. 31:36-37).

This is a solemn divine promise not only that one day there will be a new covenant—namely the New Testament—but also that Israel will always have a place in the divine plan. God did not reject his people when they handed their Messiah over to the Romans to crucify him. Israel will always be God’s people.

“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!” says St. Paul emphatically (Rom. 11:1). “Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob’; ‘and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins’” (Rom. 11:25-27). God will remain faithful to Israel until her final conversion, “for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29).

Even though we now live in the new covenant, which is the New Testament, we still await the fulfillment of these promises to Israel. This will be at the Parousia when Christ will come again to establish his kingdom of righteousness on earth (Rev. 20:1-7). Then Israel too will be saved. “And it shall come to pass in that day, says the Lord of hosts, that I will break the yoke from off their neck, and I will burst their bonds, and strangers shall no more make servants of them. But they shall serve the Lord their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them” (Jer. 30:8-9).

As we await this, we are already in the new covenant. It has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He expiates and forgives our sins by his death on the cross, thus reconciling us with God so that we might live before him in happiness and light. We can now live in
intimacy with God through Christ and spread this peace in the world by proclaiming the gospel.

WALKING IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

The Transfiguration, August 6

“And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29).

Today we celebrate the transfiguration of the Lord when Jesus appeared to his apostles in his glory, giving them a glimpse of the future glory of his Parousia. “The appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white,” says St. Luke. St. Matthew says, “He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light” (Matt. 17:2). So will we also be in the fullness of the kingdom, for “then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43). Then the Lord Jesus Christ “will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21), and we will resemble him in the glory of his transfiguration. Indeed “it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3). Therefore we should now live a holy life in the light in preparation for this. When St. John saw a vision of the Son of Man in his future glory, this is what he was like, for “his face was like the sun shining in full strength” (Rev. 1:16).

Even now we can see something of this glory in contemplation, for Jesus has given us his glory. He said, “The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them” (John 17:22). And when we contemplate it, we are transformed into the same glory, for “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). Indeed Christ already shines in our hearts with the light of his glory, “for it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Only unbelievers do not see this light, for “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God” (2 Cor. 4:4).

If we believe in Christ, we should walk in his light, for he is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel” (Luke 2:32). He is the light of the world, and he wants us to walk in his light. “I am the light of the world,” he said; “he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). We should walk in this light, “because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining” (1 John 2:8). Now is the time of the true light of Christ, shining in the world. Let us therefore walk in his illumination, longing for its full manifestation at his Parousia. The transfiguration is the foretaste and pledge of all of this for us.
THE LORD WILL COME AND WILL NOT DELAY

Saturday, 18th Week of the Year
Hab. 1:12-2:4; Ps. 9; Matt. 17:14-20

“And the Lord answered me: ‘Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it. For the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay’” (Hab. 2:2-3).

This is God’s answer to Habakkuk’s complaint. The Chaldeans are conquering one country after another. Where is God? Why is he not helping his people? Here then is God’s answer: Have faith and hope, and in the end you will see the salvation of your God. Do not become discouraged if God’s help seems to be delayed. The vision of salvation will come about. It is not a lie. “The vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay” (Hab. 2:3). The letter to the Hebrews quotes this verse in a messianic sense: “For yet a little while, and the coming one shall come and shall not tarry” (Heb. 10:37). The sense in Hebrews is that Jesus, the Messiah, will come at his Parousia, and will not delay. The Advent liturgy also uses this verse, in the form quoted by Hebrews, as the entrance antiphon for Wednesdays: “Veniet Dominus et not tardabit” (The Lord is coming and will not delay).

As Habakkuk and Hebrews, we live by faith and in hope for God’s future salvation at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, at his Parousia. It may seem that he delays his coming or that this oracle is a lie. But this is not the case. Truly, “the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay” (Hab. 2:3). God saves his people, and the fulfillment of his salvation will be the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with power and glory on the clouds of heaven to consummate all things.

This is the vision of salvation that we hope for now, and this hope motivates us to live a holy life, faithful to our vocation and particular way of living. Jesus gave us this living hope to help us to live correctly and behave properly. Hoping for these things, we should purify ourselves now, for “every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:3).

We want to be always prepared, lest God catch us off guard and in disorder. Rather, may he find us living a holy and watchful life, observing his laws and his will, living in purity and simplicity, in prayer and fasting, and detached from the pleasures of the world in order to be able to love him with an undivided and undistracted heart. We must also give good example to others by our behavior, living in the way God wants us to live. So has he taught us “to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Tit. 2:12-13). So should we live in the light of this great hope—soberly, always watching, in a way that is faithful to our way of life and that gives a good and inspiring witness to the world.
“Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks” (Luke 12:35-36).

This is how we are to live in this world, as aliens and exiles (1 Pet. 2:11; Heb. 11:13), as Abraham lived in tents in the promised land as an alien in a foreign country (Heb. 11:9). So should be the life of a Christian in this world. “A man draws nearer to God in so far as he can withdraw himself from the world and from all worldly comfort” says *The Imitation of Christ* (3.42.1).

We are here on our way to our heavenly homeland. Our permanent dwelling is not here. Here we are only aliens and exiles, “for here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (Heb. 13:14). This is the homeland that Abraham was looking for, living in tents, says Hebrews, “for he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10). Hebrews says that they were not looking for an earthly homeland, but “they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:16).

We can see in this example of Abraham how we as Christians should live, as aliens and exiles in this world. “Beloved,” St. Peter says, “I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). “Conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile” (1 Pet. 1:17). “Our citizenship is in heaven,” says St. Paul (Phil 3:20 NKJV).

Therefore we should have our loins girded and our lamps burning and live like servants awaiting the arrival of their master (Luke 12:35-36). “Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes … You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Luke 12:37, 40). This is how we are to live, in hope, vigilance, sobriety, and prayer. Here we have no permanent dwelling, no lasting city. We must therefore guard our minds and hearts so that they do not become filled with idols. We should live in simplicity, not in craving, earthly desires, and greed, not in worldly and impure passions. “Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13).

We should live for this day of glory and guard our hearts to live in the enchantment of this hope. Those who are lost in the delights and pleasures of the world are not spiritually sensitive enough to perceive this hope, this enchantment in which we are to live. Only one who lives simply, without attachments, detached from the world and its pleasures, only such a one can perceive this interior happiness of the Spirit shining in his heart. Only he can live in the enchanted hope of the coming of the Lord. Only he is able to live as Jesus wants us to live, with our lamps burning, watching and prepared. We should watch at all times. “Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep” (Mark 13:35-36). This is how we are supposed to live as Christians—in constant vigilance and watchfulness.
We should live in hope of the Lord’s return at any moment. If we live like this, we will be living in accordance with the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament. St. Peter says, “The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers” (1 Pet. 4:7). “So then,” says St. Paul, “let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and sober” (1 Thess. 5:6).

We live for Christ. He is our Lord, our only master (Matt. 6:24). For him we are called to leave all else (Luke 5:11, 28; 14:33) in order to live for him alone. This is the life of perfection (Matt. 19:21). Those who have been called to such a life should live like this, only for him. He has absolved our sins by his death on the cross through our faith and has given us a participation in the splendor of his resurrection. Then he called us to leave all for him. If we respond, we will be on the path of perfection (Matt. 19:21), the difficult way of life (Matt. 7:13-14), the way of the hundredfold reward (Matt. 19:29).

This is the priestly and religious life, the consecrated life, the monastic life, the celibate life. In this life, leaving all, one finds all. One finds a hundred times more than he gave up for Christ. Thus does Christ literally come to be the only spouse of our hearts (2 Cor. 11:2). We try to love him with an exclusive nuptial love, without dividing our hearts with any other love (1 Cor. 7:32-34). This is the life of perfection, to which we should invite all we can reach.

JESUS’ VICARIOUS DEATH

Monday, 19th Week of the Year
Ezek. 1:2-5, 24-28; Ps. 148; Matt. 17:22-27

“Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day’” (Matt. 17:22-23).

Jesus’ death is the center of Christianity. It is this that saves us, forgiving our sins and removing from us the burden of guilt that depresses and saddens us. It gives us a new life and puts us at peace with God and with our own consciences, for we know that our debt of punishment has been justly paid for us, our death sentence been duly served for us, and therefore our forgiveness is fully just, and we have been justly set free. We experience this above all in the sacrament of reconciliation, which channels to us in a personal and experiential way the merits of the saving death of Christ on the cross.

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). God put our sins on Jesus, making him to be sin, and punished them in him so that we might be made just. “The chastisement of our peace was upon him” (Isa. 53:5 KJV), he is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29) by being sacrificed on the cross. Thus “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Pet. 1:18-19). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24). Only by the death of Jesus are we justified. “If justification were through the law, then Christ
died to no purpose” (Gal. 2:21), for “a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16).

Jesus is the one “whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:25-26 NKJV). That is, God passed over former sins without expiating them because he knew that his Son would do that on the cross, thereby showing that God is truly just in demanding such a just punishment for sins. At the same time, God justifies us through our faith in Jesus. Thus God “loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10 KJV). “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree’—” (Gal. 3:13). We are under the curse of the law because “it is written, ‘Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them’” (Gal. 3:10). Jesus bore the curse of God for us and instead of us, suffering it himself to free us from it. “Sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom. 8:13-14). That is, God condemned and punished our sins in the flesh of his Son on the cross, thus fulfilling for us the just requirement of the law that sins be punished.

FORGIVE TO BE FORGIVEN

Thursday, 19th Week of the Year
Ezek. 12:1-12; Ps. 77; Matt. 18:21-19:1

“And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:34-35).

This is what happened to the servant that was forgiven a huge debt of ten thousand talents but who refused to pardon the small debt of a hundred denarii of his fellow servant. He therefore had to pay back his whole debt, which the king had previously pardoned. The point is that so will God do to us if we do not forgive those who have offended us. God forgave all our sins because we asked with faith. But if we do not forgive those who offend us, we will lose our own forgiveness.

If we want to be forgiven by God and freed from the burden of guilt, we have to forgive others. Therefore we pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). Who does not want to be forgiven? This then is what we have to do to be forgiven—we have to forgive those who bother and disturb us, those who do not respect us and who insult us. So it is, “for if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you” (Matt. 6:14). But the opposite is also true; that is, “If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:15).

If we hope to find mercy before God, we have to show mercy to others. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt. 5:7).
How much mercy God has shown us! Practically every day we fall into some imperfection that robs or diminishes our peace, and we cry out to God begging his mercy and forgiveness so that we might feel good again; and God, through the death of his Son on the cross, gives us this forgiveness—especially in the sacrament of reconciliation. How merciful God is to us! But he is also just. His mercy does not violate his justice. He himself suffered the just punishment for our sins. Therefore he can justly show us mercy. Our debt of punishment for our sins was fully and justly paid by his Son, who is one being with the Father.

In the same way, all those who offend us, if they ask God for forgiveness with faith, they too will be justly and mercifully forgiven, for Christ died for their sins too. If they do not repent, they will be punished by God. In either case, justice will be done. So we can leave the matter of justice up to God. Our part is only to forgive. If we refuse to forgive, we only harm ourselves, for then God will not forgive us when we ask him every day to forgive our sins and imperfections.

The state has a responsibility to punish criminals (Rom. 13:1-4), but our duty as individuals is always to forgive in order to be forgiven.

HOW TO RENEW CELIBATE LIFE

Friday, 19th Week of the Year
Ezek. 16:1-15, 60, 62; Isa. 12; Matt. 19:3-12

“For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it” (Matt. 19:12).

Here Jesus teaches that there is a vocation that renounces marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. And he adds, “He who is able to receive this, let him receive it” (Matt. 19:12). This is the vocation of celibacy. The celibate renounces marriage to be able to love God with an undivided heart, not even divided by the love of a human spouse. Thus one can fulfill Jesus’ first and most important commandment in a literal way, loving God with all one’s heart, all one’s mind, all one’s soul, and all one’s strength (Mark 12:30). The celibate wants to renounce the division of heart that occurs even in Christian matrimony. He also wants to avoid every other kind of division of heart as well, for example, that which occurs in an inappropriate friendship between persons of the opposite sex. The celibate does not want to fall in love with a woman, because this would divide his heart, and then he would no longer love God alone with all his heart. The celibate tries to guard his heart and reserve it for God alone.

Therefore the celibate should also renounce the other pleasures of the world as well. A celibate who does not have a wife, but who is in love with the pleasures of the world loses the benefit of his celibacy. The benefit of celibacy is a great love of God. If his heart is divided among worldly pleasures, he no longer has an undivided heart in his love for God. The Desert Fathers fled the world and went to live in the desert. They not only left women, but renounced all that could divide their hearts in order to live for God alone.
This is the ideal of celibate, monastic, religious, apostolic, and priestly life. It is a life totally dedicated to God alone with an undivided heart, with all one’s heart.

He who lives like this will reap the fruits of celibacy. He who avoids women but fills his heart with the pleasures of the world will not reap the fruits of celibacy, for he will not have an undivided heart in his love for God. He who tries to save his life in this way will lose it; but he who also renounces the pleasures of the world and in doing so appears to lose his life in this world, he will save it (Mark 8:35). “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). We must lose our lives in this world and live only for God if we want to live celibacy as it should be lived and reap its fruits. In our day, we need to renew this ideal of the celibate, monastic, religious, apostolic, and priestly life.

DOING THE WILL OF GOD

Saturday, 19th Week of the Year
Ezek. 18:1-10, 13, 30-32; Ps. 50; Matt. 19:13-15

“The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the Father, nor the Father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Ezek. 18:20).

Our past does not determine our status before God, nor do our ancestors determine it. Only we ourselves—that is, how we are and live now—determine whether we will live or die. Our present behavior is what is important before God. St. Paul says the same thing—that is, what we sow, that also shall we reap. “He who sows sparingly,” he says, “will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Cor. 9:6). If we are generous with our lives and use them to do good, we will reap a rich reward. If we are not generous and do not work for the good of others, we will be punished and will reap sparingly. “He who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:8). The way we spend our lives will determine whether we live or die and how we will be rewarded. A life given over to the flesh will not be rewarded. A life given over to the pleasures of this world and to entertaining ourselves, dividing our hearts, will reap a fitting reward, and we will die.

It is important how we live in this world. Our faith saves us, then the way in which we live shows whether we really have saving faith or not. If we do not live well, we will reap what we have sown, and we will die. Nor can we trust in our past good deeds if we are not now living as we should. “When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity and does the same abominable things that the wicked man does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds which he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, he shall die” (Ezek. 18:24). We must live well now in the present. It is the present that God looks at.

We are called to conversion, to leave our past false and worldly ways, and now live a life dedicated to the Lord with all our heart (Mark 12:30), without dividing our heart
among the pleasures of the world. If up until now we have not done this, we can convert and change. Then we will live. “If a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness which he has done he shall live” (Ezek. 18:21-22).

God wants our conversion, not our perversion. He wants us to change from evil to good, not from good to evil. We have to do more than only say, “Lord, Lord.” We have to also do the will of God. Only this proves that our faith is genuine. “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus said, “but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE
AMID DENS OF LIONS AND MOUNTAINS OF LEOPARDS

The Assumption, August 15
Rev. 11:19; 12:1-6, 10; Ps. 44; 1 Cor. 15:20-27; Luke 1:39-56

“I have grown tall as a cedar on Lebanon, as a cypress on Mount Hermon; I have grown tall as a palm in En-Gedi, as the rose bushes of Jericho … Like cinnamon and acanthus, I have yielded a perfume, like choice myrrh, have breathed out a scent” (Sir. 24:13-14 JB).

Today we honor the Blessed Virgin Mary. The liturgy—especially the monastic liturgy—has always found Mary in the images of the Song of Songs and in chapter twenty-four of Sirach. For the monastic liturgy, she is the bride par excellence of the Song of Songs, the bride of God. If Israel is the spouse of Yahweh (Isa. 62:5), if the Church is the spouse of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23-24), and if a Christian can have an exclusive nuptial relationship with God or with Christ (1 Cor. 7:32-34), and if all these can see themselves in the bride of the Song of Songs, then who is more worthy of this imagery than the Virgin Mary, the spouse of God, the Mother of God, the one who bore the Son of the eternal Father? So does the monastic liturgy—concerned as it is about our loving bridal relationship with God—view Mary, namely as the model for our own nuptial relationship with God. Therefore we can use the imagery of the Songs of Songs for Mary as an inspiration for ourselves in our relationship with God.

Mary’s love for God beautifies her, affecting even the fragrance of her breath and the scent of her clothing. Her breath has the fragrance of cinnamon. “Like cinnamon and acanthus, I have yielded a perfume,” she says, “like choice myrrh, have breathed out a scent” (Sir. 24:15 JB).

How often do we speak of the odor of sanctity? Perhaps it is the smell of the mixture of burning candle wax, incense, and altar wine that fills our churches and clings to those who spend much time in them. Perhaps it is the smell of the forest, of its pines, cedars, and cypresses, where hermits often go to be alone with God, or perhaps it is the fragrance of the open field or desert that lingers about holy people that frequent these places in quest of solitude. The bride of the Song of Songs has this aspect about her. Her breath is sweet as cinnamon, her clothes have the scent of the forest, of the mountains of God.
“The scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon,” says her divine spouse (Song 4:11). Indeed, it is there too that the bride of the Song of Songs goes to meet her divine lover.

If it is true that love beautifies a person, how much more will divine love do so to the Mother of God, even affecting her smell! “The scent of your breath like apples,” says her lover (Song 7:8), and indeed she eats naturally sweet things, apples and raisins, for she lovesick. “Sustain me with raisins,” she says, “refresh me with apples; for I am sick with love” (Song 2:5).

If we follow the imagery of the Song of Songs, we see the bride going to many different places to be alone with her lover. While not all of this is literally true of Mary, there is a deeper sense in which it is indeed true. In the silence of her heart, wherever she is, she can be alone with God, the great lover of her heart; and in this, she is a model for us all. So we see her, as the liturgy loves to see her, in all these images.

She lives with her beloved in a cottage in the midst of a garden filled with fruit. “Over our doors are all choice fruits,” she says, “new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved” (Song 7:13). These are the sweet things she eats with him, making even her breath sweet. And the aroma of her lover clings to her as well, for he comes to her “like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices” (Song 8:14), the mountains of aromas.

Her lover goes to visit her in a house made of cedar and cypress trees, built upon a mountain of aromatic myrrh. “Until the day breathes and the shadows flee,” he says, “I will hie me to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense” (Song 4:6). “Our couch is green,” she says (Song 1:16), indicating the freshness of its wood; and “the beams of our house are cedar trees, its paneling the cypress,” she adds (Song 1:17 JB).

The imagery of aromas continues: “My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh,” she says, “that lies between my breasts,” (Song 1:13) as she reclines on her green couch, in her house of cedar and cypress, on the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense. Her beloved is as sweet as flowers to her. “My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi,” she says (Song 1:13-14). With all of this, how could she not have the odor of sanctity?

The bride of the Song of Songs wants to live in solitude and silence, far from the world with its noise and distractions, to be alone with her beloved. She therefore goes to the remotest places, where only wild animals live—leopards and lions—and he follows her there, seeks her out, and says to her, “Come with me from Lebanon, my bride; come with me from Lebanon. Depart from the peak of Amana, from the peak of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountains of leopards” (Song 4:8).

While the Virgin Mary lived in Nazareth and Bethlehem, in spirit she lived on the heights of Lebanon and Mount Hermon. Her companions are leopards and lions, who make their dens in places far from human habitation. The Carthusian night office sings about these mountains of leopards and dens of lions on feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is one of the most beautiful responsaries of their night office, hauntingly expressing the monastic longing to live remote from the world, alone with God, in solitude and silence. Surely Mary, in her home in Nazareth and Bethlehem, lived like this much of her time. May the bride of the Song of Songs be our model as well in this longing of the human spirit to be alone with God.
Beautified by her loving relationship with God, Mary is a locked garden of the choicest flowers, and she wants the gentle breezes to waft her aromas abroad for her lover. “A garden locked is my sister, my bride …” he says. “Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all chief spices—” (Song 4:12-15). Therefore she invokes the winds. “Awake, O north wind,” she says, “and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its fragrance be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits” (Song 4:16). So does God delight in Mary. So does he delight in us if, like her, we give our hearts totally to him.

At times, the bride also goes to the desert to be alone with her beloved in contemplation, and she returns all perfumed by her encounter. “Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?” (Song 8:5). “What is that coming up from the wilderness, like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of the merchant?” (Song 3:6). Again the Carthusian night office sings this verse on feasts of Mary. It sees her filled with the aromas and fragrances of her divine lover. But this is also the soul of every contemplative that wants to be transformed, beautified, and filled with the odor of sanctity by its loving encounter with God.

Indeed, we want to grow “like a cedar in Lebanon, and like a cypress on the heights of Hermon … like a palm tree in Engedi and like rose plants in Jericho; like a beautiful olive tree in the field” (Sir. 24:13-14). We want to exhale perfume like cinnamon and give forth a pleasant odor like choice myrrh (Sir. 24:15 JB). We want the gentle breezes to waft our aromas abroad, for the odor of sanctity can travel even against the wind.

We can grow like this in solitude and silence, in remote places, in a life of prayer and fasting, in a life alone with God. Mary is our model in all this even though she lived at home. In spirit, she dwelt upon the heights. She is the great model of the monastic life, and monks have always seen her through the lens of the beautiful and haunting images and scenes of the Song of Songs. Indeed, these images can apply to us too.

RENUNCIATION OF THE WORLD AND THE LIFE OF PERFECTION

Monday, 20th Week of the Year
Ezek. 24:15-24; Deut. 32; Matt. 19:16-22

“Jesus said to him, ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’” (Matt. 19:21).

This rich young man was looking for something more. He asked Jesus, “Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?” (Matt. 19:16). Then Jesus showed him the way of perfection, which is something more than just keeping the ten commandments—which he was already doing. This is a special way. The majority will never follow this way. Only a few are called to this greater perfection of leaving all, including marriage, to live in evangelical poverty and celibacy for the kingdom of God.

But in another sense, all are called to perfection. Jesus said to all, “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). He said to all, “If any
one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). And to all he said, “So, therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33).

The call to evangelical poverty is directed to all. Only by selling all we possess can we obtain the buried treasure, which is the kingdom of God (Matt. 13:44). Only in this way will we acquire the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:45-46). Evangelical poverty is something positive, a great value and virtue that we should all honor and live. St. Francis and St. Clare discovered this virtue in their day. It helps us to love God, for it cleanses our hearts of other attachments so that we can live only for God, detached from the pleasures of this world.

The rich, however, have already had their reward in the pleasures of this life. “Woe to you that are rich,” Jesus said, “for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24). Therefore “it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you,” said Jesus, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:23-24). To the rich glutton in hell Abraham said, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things” (Luke 16:25).

Rather, “blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). They are the anawim, the poor of the Lord, who have left everything of this world to live only for God. All are called to try to live like this, especially celibates, monks, religious, priests, and those living the apostolic life. They should live only for God and renounce the entertainments of this world. They need silence and solitude, simple and austere food, and a life of prayer and fasting, not pleasure trips and worldly delights, which only divide the heart so that they do not live a life of perfection. If we have left the world, how can we return to it again? If we have accepted Jesus’ invitation to a life of perfection, how can we go back and take up again what we have renounced for the love of God?

**LET US BE PREPARED**

Thursday, 20th Week of the Year  
Ezek. 36:23-28; Ps. 50; Matt. 22:1-14

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son” (Matt. 22:2).

This parable is about the Parousia, the great eschatological messianic banquet (Isa. 25:6-10). God sent out his prophets to call Israel. But they ignored them or killed them (Matt. 23:37). God then punished them by burning their city, Jerusalem, at the hands of the Babylonians and later again at the hands of the Romans. Then God sent his apostles (other servants) to invite the Gentiles and sinners Therefore “those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests” (Matt. 22:10). Finally, God himself will enter the wedding hall to see all his guests happily enjoying his great feast. This will be the Parousia. But he sees there “a man who had no wedding garment, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did
you get in here without a wedding garment?’” (Matt. 22:11-12). And he had him thrown out. This man should have entered the fullness of the kingdom after having repented and converted, but instead he entered unconverted and without good works. He is an example for us so that we not be like him. Nor are we to be like those who ignored the invitation, chasing after mammon instead.

We now await the second coming of Jesus Christ in all his glory on the clouds of heaven with all his saints in great light. Then he will consummate all things. He is inviting us now to his messianic banquet by means of his prophets and apostles. Now, then, is the time to prepare ourselves for this great day. The great enemy of all this is mammon—the pleasures, delights, and riches of this world—for “no one can serve two masters … You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24). The Jews served other gods and so they rejected their prophets. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!” (Matt. 23:37). Even in the time of Jesus, they were still rejecting God’s ministers. They rejected Jesus. “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” he says (Matt. 23:37).

Even with all that, God still did not give up. He continued inviting people, this time Gentiles and sinners. “Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you can find,” he says to his apostles (Matt. 22:9). But we for our part must also respond correctly, not like the man that came in without a wedding garment, not like those who ignored the invitation. Now, then, is the time to straighten our lives out and live as we should, not dividing our hearts with mammon, but rather responding to God’s invitation with all our hearts, trying to live a life of perfection in accord with our vocation and state in life.

ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Friday, 20th Week of the Year
Ezek. 37:1-14; Ps. 106; Matt. 22:34-40

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment’” (Matt. 22:36-38).

Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the second founder of the Cistercian Order. He was a great lover of the monastic life and built many monasteries. Today’s gospel gives us the key to understanding him. He wanted to love God with all his heart, all his soul, and all his mind; and he understood that this is the most important thing in the world, being the first and greatest commandment of Jesus. He wanted to live this commandment, not just believe in it, and he wanted to live it in the most literal and radical way possible. He did not want to divide his heart in any way, not even with the love of a human spouse, nor did he want to divide it among the riches and pleasures of the world. Therefore he left everything and entered the new monastery in Citeaux with more than thirty companions, including his brothers, to live the monastic life of prayer and work in silence and austerity, far from the world.
It was a life in which they chanted all the hours of the divine office in choir, including vigils in the middle of the night. The food was very austere, for they wanted to find all their joy only in God, not in the unnecessary delights of the world and of the table. In his monasteries, even white bread was prohibited as a delicacy, inappropriate for monks who want to find all their joy only in God. Today’s invitatory is perfect for St. Bernard, “Come, let us praise the Lord; in him is all our delight.” All our delight is only in the Lord. This is how St. Bernard wanted to live. Therefore he entered the new monastery in Citeaux, the strictest, poorest, and most ascetic of all the monasteries. This was the beginning of the Cistercian reform, which has continued until the present day. Today most Cistercian monks in the West are also called Trappists.

To love God with all one’s heart is the reason for the asceticism that we find in the life of St. Bernard and his monks. They are ascetics because they want all the love of their hearts to go directly to God. They do not want to divide their hearts among other human loves and pleasures. Therefore they did not eat delicacies but only plain, simple, and austere food, as we can see from St. Bernard’s first letter, in which he describes their diet, seasoned only with salt. They wanted only God to be their delight. Therefore they renounced all the other delights and entertainments of the world. Thus they could have a heart completely and radically undivided in their love for God.

Living like this, chanting the praises of the Lord in choir and working in silence and recollection, they contributed much to the world. They illuminated the world, raised its spiritual level, and gave good example. They lived in fraternal love for one another and provided spiritual refuges for many. In this way, they also followed Jesus’ second commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH

Saturday, 20th Week of the Year
Ezek. 43:1-7; Ps. 84; Matt. 23:1-12

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice” (Matt. 23:2-3).

How important it is to live and practice what we preach! This is the point that Jesus is making today. One can preach good orthodox doctrine, but this alone is not enough. The scribes and Pharisees sat on Moses’ seat and taught his doctrine. What is good in their teaching we are to honor and follow, but we are not to imitate their lives. How important it then is to live a virtuous life that will back up our preaching and inspire and help others. That is what the saints did. We read their lives in order to be inspired by the way they lived and to imitate them. This is how we should live. Our lives should be lives of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, as Jesus taught us (Matt. 6:1-18). But we are not to do these things as the Pharisees did them—to be praised by others. The solution is not to abandon these practices, but to do them correctly, as a means of purifying ourselves and drawing closer to God with all our heart.

To pray, fast, and give alms in order to be praised by others is to pervert these practices and use them in a worldly way. It is to use them to try to save our lives in this
world instead of using them to lose and hate our lives in this world for the love of God (Mark 8:35; John 12:25). We should pray, fast, and help others in order to lose and hate our lives in this world for the love of God. To live a life of prayer and fasting is to renounce the pleasures of this world in order to love God with all our hearts. It is to lose our lives in this world for the love of God. This is the proper use of these practices.

Thus we will not only preach in an orthodox manner, but we will also be people of prayer. We should spend many hours in prayer every day—something that we will mostly do in secret. We will pray because we love God and want to spend time with him in love. We will also fast—not to be praised by others, but because we want to love God alone with all our heart, without dividing it among the delights and delicacies of the world. We can, for example, eat only once a day to be light for prayer and contemplation in the small hours of the morning and during the rest of the morning as well. So will it be if we eat only at midday, for example—and there is a long monastic tradition of this. In this way, our food will be completely digested when we rise at three in the morning, and we will not drop ourselves spiritually at the highest spiritual time of our day by eating breakfast. If we do this, we will not only preach well, but we will also live well, and we will not do so to be praised by others but to pray and contemplate better, to be more intimately united to God, and to love him with a less divided heart.

When we practice charity, we will not do so to be praised by others but to share our love with them and to help them. We will practice charity in order to love our neighbor as ourselves, giving him not only good doctrine but also good example.

WILL THOSE WHO ARE SAVED BE FEW?

21st Sunday of the Year

“And some one said to him, ‘Lord, will those who are saved be few?’ And he said to them, ‘Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able’” (Luke 13:23-24).

It is necessary to “bear fruits that befit repentance” (Luke 3:8) and not just say, “Lord, Lord” (Matt. 7:21) and believe that that alone will save us. If we do not bear good fruit, we will be cut down. “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9). It is not enough just to be a member of the Church. Not all the members will be saved unless they bear good fruit. Your faith is not true faith if it does not produce good fruit. We must repent and “bear fruits that befit repentance” (Luke 3:8).

We have to “enter by the narrow door” (Luke 13:24). By this door, we can enter into life. Those who despise the narrow door and instead choose the wide and easy door, which most people choose, will not enter into the kingdom of God. In fact, many will try to enter through the wide and easy door and will not be saved. Only the few that enter by the narrow door will be saved. The rest will go to destruction, according to Jesus. He said, “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to
destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt. 7:13-14).

Therefore we see that the answer to the question, whether those who are saved will be few, is yes, they will be few. They will be few because those that find the narrow door that leads to life are few. But if everyone has a New Testament and knows this teaching, why do they not choose the narrow door of salvation? Why—knowing all this—do they choose the wide and easy door that leads to destruction? The majority choose the wide door, because the door of salvation seems too narrow and requires too much sacrifice, and they do not want to make this sacrifice. They prefer to do what everyone else in their environment or community is doing and not be different from the rest. In addition, they like the pleasures of the world and of life, which they would have to give up if they were to choose the narrow door of salvation. Therefore they live like everyone else and enjoy the pleasures of this world and are happy to be able to go through such a wide and easy door that is used by so many people. So they joyfully continue along with their friends—that is, until they see with their own eyes where this door is leading them. But then it will be too late. Then the householder will rise up and shut the door, and standing outside, they will knock at the door, saying, “Lord, open to us.” But he will say, “I do not know where you come from; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity!” (Luke 13:25, 27).

They will be excluded because “not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). It will be as it was with the five foolish virgins who did not bring oil with their lamps, and who were out buying oil when the bridegroom arrived and shut the door. When they arrived and said, “Lord, lord, open to us,” he replied, “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you” (Matt. 24:12).

To be saved, we have to do the will of God. Those that choose the easy, wide, and comfortable way of the many do not do the will of God. They prefer instead the wisdom and ways of the world. They prefer conformism. They do not like to be different from others, nor do they like to make sacrifices. The word “asceticism” is not part of their vocabulary or lifestyle. They completely reject this word and everything it stands for. That is, they reject spirituality and the basic principles of the spiritual life. They reject the way of the saints, and they reject their example, which they in no way want to imitate. Instead they have their own ideas about a modern kind of spirituality—a type of mysticism without asceticism, which is nothing but an illusion. Or perhaps they simply prefer the visible pleasures of this world instead of the way of sacrifice and renunciation of the saints.

There are two ways—the narrow way and the wide way. Those that choose the wide way have chosen the way of destruction. Those that choose the narrow way have chosen the way of life. Many choose the wide way. Few choose the narrow way.

“See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil” (Deut. 30:15). “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:19).
“God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire … when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed” (2 Thess. 1:6-7, 10).

St. Paul speaks to us today about the Parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory with all his saints. On that day, there will be a great light, for he will be “revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire” (2 Thess. 1:7). He will come “inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God” (2 Thess. 1:8) and will grant rest and a happy reward to those who suffer persecution for their faith. So it shall be, “for the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done” (Matt. 16:27). We should prepare ourselves for that day now. “Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13).

Our lives should be vigilant, not indulgent. We should live only for the Lord, always guarding ourselves from sin and trying to do the will of God in everything. Those who, like St. Paul, have renounced all for the kingdom of God should give up a normal life in this world together with its pleasures in order to live simply and austerely, completely focused on God and his service, reserving their hearts uniquely for him in everything. Not everyone is called to live like this in the same way, although all should try to live by these principles. Yet there are those that are called to live like this in a literal and radical way. These are the celibates, the monks, the religious, the priests, and those living the apostolic life. To be faithful to their vocation, they should live austerely and ascetically, without dividing their hearts in any way, not even with a human spouse. They have renounced the householder’s life, the married and family life, to live alone or in communities of solitaries, only for the Lord, renouncing the other pleasures of the world as well.

These latter gird up their loins and their minds and live soberly, setting their hope fully upon the grace that is coming to them at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:13). But every Christian should also live this way, as much as he can, in accord with his state in life and his responsibilities. All should have their hearts established “unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess. 3:13).

Those who have been called to the religious, apostolic, and celibate life should live it consistently and integrally as a true life of renunciation of the pleasures of the world in general if they want to reap the blessings and advantages of this radical kind of life. The Parousia of the Lord motivates them to live this way.
AN INTEGRATED LIFE OF HOPE

Thursday, 21st Week of the Year
1 Cor. 1:1-9; Ps. 144; Matt. 24:42-51

“You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7-8).

This is the great hope of the Christian. Because we hope for the glorious coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, we live in a racially different way from the world around us. We abandon its lifestyle in order to live a new life of vigilance and sobriety. “The end of all things is at hand,” says St. Peter; “therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers” (1 Pet. 4:7). Our life is different because we are Christians and because we hope for the Parousia of Jesus Christ in glory. This hope helps us in the present to live as we should, as servants with our loins girded and our lamps burning, awaiting the coming of our Lord (Luke 12:35). A servant awaiting his lord behaves well and does not sleep. We are servants of Jesus Christ, and he wants us to live in vigil for his coming. We should not therefore fall into gluttony and lose ourselves in the noise, cares, and pleasures of life, for he could come at any time (Luke 21:34).

The Parousia affects our way of life now. We do not want to fall out of the enchantment of his coming, but rather to live in eager and joyful expectation and preparation, avoiding the distractions of the world. In this way, we will live as the Lord wants us to live, and we will help the world with our example, prayer, words, and deeds. “Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming,” Jesus says today (Matt. 24:42). “Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:44).

And how are we to live in order to be prepared for his coming? We should be “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8). To be guiltless on that day, we should be guiltless now, for we do not know the day of his coming. See how this hope helps us to live well in the present? It is difficult to live well, therefore Christ has given us this help—the hope for the Parousia. This inspires and motivates us to live as we should, vigilantly, not indulgently.

We are creatures of body and soul, and the body should cooperate with the soul in living in hope for the Parousia. Both body and soul should together to renounce the pleasures of the world and of the flesh in order to live only for God with all our body, energy, love, desire, will, spirit, soul, and intelligence. One who is indulgent with himself is divided between God on the one hand and false gods and worldly things on the other hand, and so is not completely dedicated to God alone with all his heart, body, and mind. But if we live in hope for the Parousia, our body will cooperate with our soul in loving God alone without any division of intention or heart. We will be united and integrated as human persons in our love for God, living in hope, preparation, and joy, awaiting the glorious coming of the Lord.
BE READY AT ALL TIMES

Friday, 21st Week of the Year
1 Cor. 1:17-25; Ps. 32; Matt. 25:1-13

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matt. 25:13).

This is an important verse. But many think that since the Parousia has already delayed two thousand years, there is no need to prepare ourselves for it now. But this misses the whole point of Jesus’ teaching. The point is not about knowing the date of his coming but rather about our attitude and way of living regardless of when we live. This verse is therefore as important for someone in antiquity as it is for someone in the middle ages or today. Jesus teaches that his followers in every age should live in constant vigilance, always ready and prepared for his coming, always preparing and sanctifying themselves more for it. If we do this, we will be living as we should as Christians. Hence it does not matter if the Parousia delays another thousand years. The only thing that is important is that Christians live in a constant state of preparation, always confessing their sins and trying to avoid them and living in eager and joyful expectation for the coming of the Lord in glory on the clouds of heaven to consummate all things. If we are prepared, we will see this glory when he comes, whether we are alive or dead.

The wonderful thing is that if we are prepared, we will get a glimpse of this glory even now. We will live in the love of God. The merits of Christ’s death will forgive our sins and take away our guilt, and he will give us the gift of his Spirit to rejoice our hearts and fill them with his light and peace. Thus we will live already in the splendor of the Parousia, seeing its light and basking in its glory, for he comes in a spiritual way to those who are prepared.

Five of the virgins of today’s gospel are foolish. They did not bring oil in their flasks. They were not properly prepared; and when the groom came at midnight, their lamps went out. They were therefore excluded from the wedding feast, and when they came later, after buying oil, they found the door locked, and the groom said to them, “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you” (Matt. 25:12). Therefore Jesus says to us, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matt. 25:13).

How should we then live to be able to enter into the wedding feast with the five wise virgins when the groom comes? We should live in constant watchfulness, always guarding ourselves from the dissipation of the world and from its lifestyle, which is a secular and worldly lifestyle that seeks its happiness here below in earthly things, and forgets God. This lifestyle will destroy us. It is the wide and easy way of the many that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14). To be prepared, we have to completely renounce this lifestyle and rather seek our joy only in God, renouncing worldly pleasures (Col. 3:1-2). Thus we will be wise and well disposed for the coming of the Lord at any time.
“For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property” (Matt. 25:14).

This is a parable about the Parousia. The man who gave various talents to his servants, “to each one according to his ability” and “then went away” (Matt. 25:15) is Jesus Christ. In calling us to be his disciples, Jesus gave us various talents which he wants us to use to promote the kingdom of God in the world until he returns. Then “after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them” (Matt. 25:19). This is the Parousia when “the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done” (Matt. 16:27).

Everyone who has used his talents well to gain more for the Lord will be rewarded when Christ returns, just as these servants were rewarded for their work. On the last day, Christ will say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21). But if we do not use our talents well for Christ and his kingdom, we will be punished when he returns. The wicked servant did not misuse his talent. On the contrary, he “went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money” (Matt. 25:18). He did not use it at all. Therefore when his master returned, his talent was taken from him, and he was ordered cast “into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth” (Matt. 25:30). So will it be at the Parousia. Not only do we have to avoid misusing our talents, but we must also use them well for the kingdom of God.

Are we using our talents and our money well for the kingdom? Or are we just letting them lie unused or sitting in a bank? Or are we part of the problem, destroying the kingdom of God by misusing our talents? There are those who use their talents for their own pleasures. They “live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:18-19).

God rather gave us our talents to use for his kingdom, to preach Christ and the salvation of God that is in him. It is by preaching (by word of mouth or by writing) that we save those who are lost. We are sent to preach. Christ gave us this ministry. But what do we preach? Our own ideas? Or do we truly preach the cross of Christ that saves us? Can we honestly say with St. Paul, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2)? It is the cross of Christ that saves us from our sins and removes our remorse and guilt, for “the chastisement of our peace was upon him” (Isa. 53:5 KJV). He suffered the punishment due to us for our sins. What we have to do is invoke the merits of his death on the cross with faith, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation, to be saved and freed. If we preach like this, we will be using our talents well, and we will be rewarded at the Parousia.
“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

There is a great truth hidden in this verse. It is the secret of a life of perfection, the secret that leads to enlightenment and a reborn life. In order to discover this secret, we have to humble ourselves by renouncing the world and serving but one master only, the Lord, not the world, not mammon—the riches, honors, and pleasures of this world—but the Lord alone. “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24). Nor should we have treasures in this world if we want to discover the great secret of this verse. We should have but one treasure only, the Lord. “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth … but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven … For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:19-21).

All this means that we are to humiliate ourselves in this world. A humble person does not have treasures in this world. He does not serve wealth, riches and the pleasures of the world. He does not serve mammon. He has renounced all of this. He has humbled himself in this world for the sake of God, and now serves him alone with all his energy, time, and love. Such a person has renounced his life in this world, and he will be exalted by God. He has died to the world and is now reborn to live a new life in God and for God alone. His life is now a life in God.

He who humbles himself like this loses his life in this world for the love of God, “for whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35). He, on the other hand, who wants to save his life in this world is the one who exalts himself, and before God, he will be humbled. He who loses his life in this world for the sake of Christ is the one who humbles himself to love God alone and live only for him. He will be exalted by God. He will begin to live a life of perfection. He renounces the pleasures of the world and instead follows the path of enlightenment. He will be born again in Christ and will live for God. He has buried his old life and now lives the new life of one who has been reborn. He is now a new man. He has put off his old man and put on the new man in God (Eph. 4:22-24).

“Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you,” says St. James (James 4:10). We humble ourselves by hating our life in this world for the love of God, by renouncing it. Only by hating and renouncing our life in this world can we live a life of perfection, for “he who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25).

Although all are called to live in this way and follow these gospel principles, there are some—like the rich young man—who are called to live like this in a radical and literal way. This is the celibate, monastic, religious, priestly, and apostolic life. If we have been called in this way, we should renounce even the appearances of the world: its clothing, its lifestyle, its food, its entertainment, etc. One who fully responds to the call to perfection (Matt. 19:21) dresses differently (religious dress), eats differently—simply and austerely, perhaps only once a day—and renounces the other delights and delicacies
of the world in order to live only for God with all his energy, time, interest, and love. He has died to his former way of life and now lives a new life in a new way. He lives a reborn life, hidden in God. He has completely humbled and humiliated himself in this world. He has renounced his former life and way of life, has lost it, hates it—and thus he has been born anew in God for a completely new way of living. It is the life of the new man that he now lives. And because he has humiliated himself in this way, God now exalts him.

He is like a sadhu in India who has died to the householder’s life, to marriage and family life. He completely renounces it and now takes up a new celibate life in the forest or in a cave with God, in poverty, thenceforth to serve God alone. The sadhu now dresses differently, eats differently, and lives in a completely different way. He has died to his former life and to the world. He has been born anew to a new life.

How can we live like this? If one begins to take up this path of radical renunciation of the world, this path of perfection and enlightenment for the love of God, God will little by little reveal to him the rest of the path, and he will gradually discover how he is to live, abandoning the lifestyle of the world around him. We who have responded positively to this radical call to the priestly, apostolic, celibate, and religious life, instead of trying to imitate the lifestyle of the world, should rather renounce the householder’s life, and instead be witnesses to the life of perfection and enlightenment for the good of the world. In this way, we will bless and help the world as we should with our particular way of life.

THE SIMPLE AND DIRECT PROCLAMATION OF SALVATION

Monday, 22nd Week of the Year
1 Cor. 2:1-5; Ps. 118; Luke 4:16-30

“And he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:21).

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God’s salvation. Today Jesus clearly says this in the synagogue in Nazareth. The scripture which he says he is fulfilling today is: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18; Isa. 61:1). This salvation is now present in Jesus Christ. He came to save his people, the poor, the oppressed, and the captives. In him is the salvation and liberation which we so need. He is God’s answer to man’s need. Man seeks salvation and liberation. He wants to be freed from the burden of his sins, guilt, and remorse, to live with peace in his heart. He wants to go to heaven after death where he will be happy forever. People are searching everywhere for a way of salvation. Today Jesus proclaims that he is this salvation.

Today also St. Paul says that he announces God’s salvation by preaching Christ crucified in a simple and direct way without words of human eloquence. It is not beautiful discourses that St. Paul writes and preaches but rather a simple announcement of the truth that Christ died for our sins and that by faith in him we can attain the
salvation we long for. He says, “My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4-5). And “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). We should not be ashamed to preach the cross of Christ even though “the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,” for “to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

The conclusion is that we should preach Christ and him crucified, and do so in a simple and direct way. This is what saves man. This is the message that we as missionaries are sent to preach. It seems that many preach everything but this. It should be the other way around. This is the essential message that we are sent to preach, “and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Cor. 1:17). For the world, this message is foolishness; but for those who believe, it is the salvation and power of God (1 Cor. 1:23-24). Christ was sent by God to die for us, thus suffering our punishment for our sins instead of us so that we could be justly and mercifully forgiven when we believe. This forgiveness is above all communicated to us through the sacrament of reconciliation. This should be our proclamation in all simplicity—it is the salvation which man seeks and longs for. Where are those that preach it?

FISHERS OF MEN

Thursday, 22nd Week of the Year
1 Cor. 3:18-23; Ps. 23; Luke 5:1-11

“And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men’” (Luke 5:10).

Peter knows himself—that he is a sinner, especially after witnessing the miraculous catch of so many fish at the mere word of Jesus when they had worked all night without catching anything. “He was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken” (Luke 5:9), and “he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’” (Luke 5:8). Jesus’ answer to him is important for us too. He says, in effect, that he knows Peter better than Peter knows himself, and yet he still wants him as his apostle to work in the kingdom of God. He would even give him a better job than he had. “Do not be afraid,” he says to him; “henceforth you will be catching men” (Luke 5:10).

Like Peter, we also know that we are sinners. We fail in so many things so often during the day. We are always falling into new imperfections, or into the same old ones again, making so many mistakes. One day we eat too much, another day we make mistakes in the celebration of the Mass, and we can become discouraged and think that we’ll never be any good to God or usefully in his work. And when we pray, we so often feel profoundly unworthy, guilty, and full of remorse. We want to say to Jesus, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). When we feel like this, we hear Jesus’ answer, the same answer that he gave to Peter: “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men” (Luke 5:10).
Jesus wants us to be fishers of men, apostles in his Church, missionaries in the world, workers in his vineyard. Even though we are unworthy sinners, he calls us anyway. He forgives us and saves us by the merits of his death on the cross, and he removes all our guilt and remorse, making us new. He then wants us to share this call and this salvation with others. He wants us to be fishers of men.

Without the call of Jesus, we are unworthy fools. There are many who think they are “wise in this age” (1 Cor. 3:18), but in reality they are fools before God, “for the wisdom of this world is folly with God” (1 Cor. 3:19). The world knows nothing of the cross, which saves us. Nor does it know how to live. It thinks that life is a quest for pleasure, but the truth is just the opposite. One who is truly wise denies himself (Luke 9:23) and renounces worldly pleasures, as the apostles did today when “they left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:11). The true wise man is one who does not “glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,” by which the world has been crucified to us, and we to the world (Gal. 6:14). He who thinks he is wise in a worldly sense is a fool. If he wants to become wise, he must become a fool in the world (1 Cor. 3:18), “for the wisdom of this world is folly with God” (1 Cor. 3:19).

FASTING AND ASCETICISM

Friday, 22nd Week of the Year
1 Cor. 4:1-5; Ps. 36; Luke 5:33-39

“The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days” (Luke 5:35).

Fasting and asceticism are important in all the great religions of the world, including Christianity. Christians fast to have an undivided heart in their love for God—not divided by the pleasures of the world and of the table—and in order to be light for prayer and contemplation. The main form of Christian fasting is to renounce all delicacies and seasoning, except salt, which is necessary for life. One only eats plain, simple, natural, and healthy foods to sustain life, not to maximize pleasure. Those who eat this way also renounce meat, for it requires much energy to digest, is among the most succulent of foods, and the most expensive. They also renounce fried foods, because this greatly increases their tastiness and is bad for health. They avoid sugar, white flour, and white rice (as unhealthy delicacies) and foods containing artificial sweeteners, colors, and flavors, so they avoid pies, cakes, ice-cream, Jell-O, etc., and eat rather fruit for desert, for it contains important nutrients.

This is commonly combined with eating only once or twice a day, breakfast being the first meal to be eliminated, for it drops one spiritually when one is at his highest spiritual point of the day. Eating only once a day—well known in the monastic tradition—is best, for then one will be light for contemplation and the spiritual exercises of the morning. A heavy supper can still weigh one down in the early hours of the morning when one rises for contemplation and prayer.

Such a life is spiritual and contemplative and also healthy. One lives for God alone, not for the pleasures of the table. One’s motive in eating this way is to love God with all
his heart, all his mind, all his soul, all his strength, and all his body—Jesus’ first and most important commandment (Mark 12:30). One’s life thus follows today’s Invitatory, “Come, let us praise the Lord; in him is all our delight.” Such a person can say, “Thou art my Lord; I have no good apart from thee” (Ps. 15:2).

One eats like this because he wants to serve but one master only, the Lord, knowing that it is impossible to serve two masters: God and worldly pleasures (mammon) (Matt. 6:24). He does not want to hear Abraham say to him, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things,” as he said to the rich glutton in hell (Luke 16:25). Nor does he want to hear Jesus say to him, “Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24). He wants all the love of his heart to go directly to the Lord without being dissipated off to the side among other delights. He does not want to be like a hose with holes in it that cannot properly run a sprinkler for lack of pressure. He does not want his love to escape through holes on the side. He knows that to obtain the kingdom of God, he must renounce all else, for this is how the buried treasure and the pearl of great price are obtained (Matt. 13:44-46). He wants the perfection that the rich young man turned down, so he is willing to renounce all (Matt. 19:21). He wants to lose his life in this world to save it with God, not to save his life in this world to lose it with God (Mark 8:35). He wants to hate his life in this world to keep it, not love it in this world to lose it with God (John 12:25). He wants the hard path of the few of life, not the easy path of the many that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14). He does not want to be choked by thorns, which are the pleasures of the world (Luke 8:14). He seeks the things that are above, not those on earth (Col. 3:1-2), and so he only glories in the cross of Christ, by which the world is crucified to him, and he to the world (Gal. 6:14). In short, he wants to renounce all to be a disciple of Christ, for “whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33).

THE ASCETICISM OF ST. PAUL

Saturday, 22nd Week of the Year
1 Cor. 4:6-15; Ps. 144; Luke 6:1-5

“I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men” (1 Cor. 4:9).

Today we see the asceticism and renunciation of St. Paul. For him, it took the form of a homeless life. He renounced marriage and the householder’s life for a wandering life for the love of Christ. He says today that he is “homeless” (1 Cor. 4:11). In this way, he renounced all things for Christ and travels about preaching the gospel. In this, he imitates the life of Jesus, who said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20). St. Paul describes his own life, saying, “To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless” (1 Cor. 4:11). His life is spent in “beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger” (2 Cor. 6:5)—sacrificing himself like this for the love of Christ. He lives the cross, denying himself (Luke 9:23). For the sake of Christ, he says, “five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been
beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a
day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from
robbers … danger in the wilderness, danger at sea … in hunger and thirst, often without
food, in cold and exposure” (2 Cor. 11:24-27). In short, “We have become, and are now,
as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things” (1 Cor. 4:13). St. Paul has indeed
“become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men” (1 Cor. 4:9).

St. Paul’s renunciation of the householder’s life for the homeless wandering life for
the love of Christ is a form of the life of perfection (Matt. 19:21). To devote himself
totally to Christ with all his heart and life, he renounces marriage, family, and a fixed
dwelling. This is his way of renouncing all for Christ. He wants to live only for God in
everything, so he becomes a fool in this world for Christ in order to be truly wise.
Indeed, “if any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool
that he may become wise” (1 Cor. 3:18). He lost his life in this world to save it with God
(Mark 8:35). In the eyes of the world, he destroyed his life, but in the eyes of God he is
wise. The world considers the apostles “as unknown,” and yet in reality they are “well
known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet
always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing
everything” (2 Cor. 6:9-10).

This is the asceticism of St. Paul, his renunciation of the world to live only for Christ
with all his heart and life, with an undivided heart in his love for God.

St. Paul knew that if he lives the mystery of the cross of Christ, divesting himself of
everything of this world, he will have a new life in Christ. Therefore he says that he is
“always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be also
manifested in our bodies” (2 Cor. 4:10).

RENUNCIATION AND THE CALL TO PERFECTION

23rd Sunday of the Year
Wis. 9:13-19; Ps. 89; Film. 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33

“Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, ‘If anyone
comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and
brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple’” (Luke 14:25-
26).

Today we hear Jesus’ great teaching about renunciation and detachment for the love
of God. We note that this teaching is for everyone, for it was directed to the “great
multitudes” that accompanied him (Luke 14:25). We have to hate our families and even
our own lives for the love of God. We have to sacrifice everything to God if we want to
be Jesus’ disciples. If one does not do this, “he cannot be my disciple,” Jesus says (Luke
14:26). Indeed, “he who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will
keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). Hating our lives in this world includes our families.
Those who hate their own lives in this world, sacrificing them for Christ, also hate their
families, their wives and their children, in the sense that one who renounces his own life
in this world at the same time also renounces his family. Nothing and no one is to come
before Christ in the life of a disciple. And if one seeks perfection in this, he will also renounce marriage and will leave the home of his parents as well as that of his brothers and sisters and other relatives, who are living a family life, and will live a celibate life. That is, he will leave all to respond to the call to perfection. “If you would be perfect,” Jesus said to the rich young man, “go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21).

Although this teaching about hating one’s life in this world and one’s family is directed to everyone, not everyone will follow it in the same way. Not everyone will be celibate. But yes, there are those who are called to follow this teaching in a literal and radical way. Yes, these renounce even marriage. These live without a wife and without children. They no longer live with their parents or with their brothers or sisters or other relatives who are living a family life. They have altogether left and renounced the householder’s lifestyle in order to live in a new way, a life of perfection, a higher type of life. Jesus is especially speaking of this type of life today. It is a life that not only hates the family and that lifestyle, but also hates itself in this world. It is a life in which one does not live for oneself but only for God. Such a person renounces his former householder lifestyle and does not want to return to it. It is something that he has definitively left behind. He now even hates himself in the sense that he renounces the pleasures of this world and of the table for a simple, plain, austere, and ascetical life.

*The Imitation of Christ* says, “Unless a man is clearly delivered from all love of creatures, he cannot fully attend to his Creator; this is the chief reason why there are so few contemplatives—that is to say, because there are so few who will willingly set themselves apart from the love of created things” (3.31.1).

There are those who want to be contemplatives or to reach spiritual enlightenment through meditation and contemplation. This is a good thing, but they will not succeed unless they also devote themselves to asceticism. That is, unless they also renounce the world and its pleasures—unless they also hate their lives in this world.

The renunciation of family is especially important for those who want to live well their new life of perfection. They cannot faithfully live their new way of life in the homes of their families. They have to make a clear break with their former householder and family lifestyle and not fall back into it again. There are religious or apostolic communities where the members can’t get out of their community houses fast enough at Christmas time and at all the most important times of the year in order to be with their blood families, thinking that these are more important. What would you think if you saw a regular family doing that, each member going his own way at Christmas time? You would probably think that it wasn’t much of a family, that it lacked family spirit. So also for the sake of our religious or apostolic families, we have to renounce our blood families if we want to live our new life of perfection properly.

All of the above is pure folly to the unspiritual person. He understands nothing of it. “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God,” says St. Paul, “for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14 KJV). The natural man does not understand why he has to leave everything if he wants to be a disciple. He can’t understand why Jesus says, “So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). But Jesus teaches us, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). And he teaches us the way of
perfection, saying, “Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29-30). All this renunciation is to be able to love God alone with all our heart and energy.

EMMANUEL, GOD WITH US

Feast of the Birth of the Virgin Mary, September 8
Mic. 5:1-4; Ps. 12; Matt. 1:1-17, 18-23

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel’ (which means, God with us)” (Matt. 1:22-23).

The greatness of the Virgin Mary is that she gave birth to the Savior, who is Emmanuel, God with us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, she conceived the only Son of God, who was born as a man and lived among us. He is the Messiah promised by God, the Savior of the world, he who unites man with God, for he is both God and man. In him, we are united to God. He is one with God and one with us. In being united with him, we are united with God. We unite ourselves to him through faith and through the Eucharist, which is his body and blood sacramentalized in the form of bread and wine. By eating and drinking him, he enters into us to unite himself to us and to transform us into himself. He thus divinizes us and fills us with the splendor of his divinity. The Eucharist is thus the extension of his incarnation.

Through his incarnation, he divinized human flesh in his own body. Then he sacramentalized his body, now full of divinity, in the form of bread and wine. By eating and drinking his sacramentalized body and blood, the divinity in his body enters into us to divinize us, filling us with the splendor of his divinity. Thus we are little by little transformed and grow in holiness. We live with the Son of God, with Emmanuel. He is God with us. He is with us now ever uniting us with God. With him, we have God with us. He is Emmanuel, our God who is with us. He lives in our hearts as our Savior and Lord.

He was born in Bethlehem Ephrathah, but he always existed, from all eternity. His “origin is from of old, from ancient days” (Mic. 5:2). “And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God” (Mic. 5:4). Emmanuel pastures us in succulent pastures and “beside still waters” (Ps. 22:2). He nourishes our souls, uniting them to God. Those whom he pastures “shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth” (Mic. 5:4). There is no place where he is not. Our Emmanuel is always with us, for he is our God. He lives in our hearts. He does not leave us alone. He always accompanies us. He fills us with his peace.

He is the only source of our joy if we devote ourselves fully to him, renouncing all other joys, if we take up a life of asceticism. Especially if we are celibate will all our joy be in him, for we love him with all our hearts. Thus can we live with Emmanuel in an exclusive nuptial relationship. All the love of our hearts thus goes straight to him without
any division, without dividing our hearts by being in love with a woman. God with us—Emmanuel—fills us with God’s splendor.

DO NOT SEEK REVENGE

Thursday, 23rd Week of the Year
1 Cor. 8:1-13; Ps. 138; Luke 6:37-38


Today Jesus gives us good advice about what we should do when we are unjustly attacked. This is something that happens in the life of a Christian, for he does not live as others live. His life is different from the world. He has rejected the lifestyle of the world around him. He does not want to live like the world, for he has heard Christ say, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20) and “Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24). So he now lives simply—not like a rich man. He renounces the life of a rich man, who lives for his worldly pleasures. What then will these worldly wealthy people say about him? They will often insult, malign, and calumniate him. What then should he do in response? Jesus tells us today. We should love those who treat us this way. “Love your enemies,” he says, “do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28). St. Peter says the same thing: “Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless” (1 Pet. 3:9).

“To him who strikes you on the cheek,” Jesus says today, “offer the other also” (Luke 6:29). We should not take revenge on those who calumniate us. It is better to ignore them and pray for them. We are to do good to others, not take revenge on those who do us harm. In this way, we can help them. There are many ways, in fact, in which we can help them and the world around us. We can teach them good doctrine in our sermons and conversations and give them good example by our way of living.

Indeed, “A liberal man will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered” (Prov. 11:25). If we use our lives to help others, we will be blessed, “for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38), “for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). If we give good things to others—good sermons, good example by our way of life—God will give good things to us. Therefore “give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap” (Luke 6:38).

Instead of taking revenge on those who wrongly attack us, we should continue giving them good example and teaching them by our words and sermons. “Beloved, never avenge yourselves,” says St. Paul, “but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head’” (Rom. 12:19-20).
“Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?” (Luke 6:39).

As disciples of Jesus, we are always in danger of being blind guides. What is a blind guide? It is a disciple of Jesus who tries to preach and guide others in the Christian way, but who does not follow these teachings himself. He will not be able to guide others properly if he himself does not understand well and follow the teachings of Jesus. A blind guide will furthermore try to excuse himself while blaming others of many faults. He either doesn’t recognize his own faults or doesn’t think them to be serious and only looks at the faults of others. Jesus tells us today that we are not to ignore the log in our own eye while trying to take the speck out of our brother’s eye (Luke 6:42), for in doing this, we only blind ourselves the more.

St. Paul says the same thing today: “I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27). In order to preach well to others, we have to know and understand the truth, believe it, and live in accord with it. Our way of living has to be in conformity with the truth that we preach to others. Otherwise we will be blind guides and will fall into a pit along with those we are trying to guide.

What is the teaching of Jesus that we have to understand well, believe, and live in accordance with in order to be good guides? We have to believe in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross. That is, that he died to save us from our sins, suffering our punishment for us on the cross, to free us from the death of sin and give us new life.

Then we have to live only for Jesus Christ, leaving everything of this world for him, that is, we have to love him with all our hearts (Mark 12:30) and lives, without any division of heart, for “Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). This is the teaching of the parable of the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:44-46): To obtain the kingdom of God, we have to renounce everything else in this world for him. We have to seek the things that are above, not those on earth (Col. 3:1-2). Our hearts should be in heaven, where our treasure is, and we should not have treasures on earth (Matt. 6:19-21). We should not serve mammon—the riches and pleasures of this world—but only God with all our hearts, with undivided hearts, for it is impossible to serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). We should walk the narrow and difficult way of life, of the few; not the easy way of the many that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14).

If we do not do this, if we do not renounce the pleasures of the world and a worldly lifestyle, and if we try to guide others, we will be blind guides. We will not be able to guide them well, and we will fall into a pit along them. But if we follow this teaching, even our way of living will be an instruction and an inspiration to those whom we are guiding.
BAD TREES CAN’T BEAR GOOD FRUIT

Saturday, 23rd Week of the Year
1 Cor. 10:14-22; Ps. 115; Luke 6:43-49

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit” (Luke 6:43-44).

If a tree does not bear good fruit, it is not a good tree. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 7:19). But we aren’t trees. We can change. We can convert. But conversion means changing our way of living. We must do more than simply say, “Lord, Lord” (Matt. 7:21). A true conversion of life is necessary, and this means an effective implementation of the teaching of Jesus in our lives. Less than this is insufficient and will not save us, for “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). If we do not do his will, we are like the man who built his house on sand, and when the storm came, it collapsed (Matt. 7:26-27). Our house will collapse if we do not do the will of God, if we do not renounce everything of this world for him, and if we do not live in accordance with his will.

Why do many groups in the Church today have almost no vocations? Why are they not bearing good fruit? Is it not because the tree itself is no longer good? It changed and has become bad. This is why it does not bear good fruit. It has changed and become bad because it is no longer doing the will of God, as it once did. And if it continues like this, not giving fruit, it will be cut down (Matt. 7:19). It is not enough just to say, “Lord, Lord.” These groups also have to do God’s will. They have to live according to Jesus’ teachings. They have to renounce a secular and worldly lifestyle, which is a life of pleasure in the things here below, a life in which the heart is divided between the pleasures of the world and God, instead of serving only one master (Matt. 6:24). In fact, they now even look like the world, since nowadays they practically all dress like secular people. Perhaps the reason for this is that since they’re living like the world, why not also dress like the world?

But who does not know that only groups that don’t behave like this are flourishing today? Nonetheless, knowing this and seeing this, they still don’t change. Why don’t they change? It would seem that they don’t change because they do not really want to bear good fruit. They are not really serious about bearing good fruit. That would be too difficult. It would require renouncing too much. It would cramp their comfortable new lifestyle. So they prefer to be bad trees bearing bad fruit. It’s easier and more fun that way. So the truth is that they don’t really want to bear good fruit because they don’t want to do what they know is necessary to bear good fruit. It seems then that they are not really serious when they say they want to bear good fruit. If they were serious, they would do what they know is necessary to bear good fruit, which is to live a life of renunciation of the world, living only for God with an undivided heart, renouncing a worldly lifestyle, and dressing appropriately, as persons distinct from the world around them.
“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

This parable of the Prodigal Son teaches us the great mercy that God has toward sinners. We experience this above all in the sacrament of reconciliation, where the merits of the passion and death of Jesus Christ are personally applied to us. There we experience God’s forgiveness, our guilt is lifted from us, and God’s peace is restored to us. How important this is, for we are all sinners! Even the saints considered themselves as sinners before God. They were very sensitive, and even the smallest imperfections troubled them. So will we also be if we grow in holiness. Ever smaller imperfections will more and more trouble us, for we want to love God with all our heart, offend him in nothing, and live in his peace.

It is to restore us to peace with God that Christ was sent into the world. He came “to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15) “and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). “The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). God knows that sin and our need for forgiveness is our greatest problem. It is what causes us to suffer guilt, out greatest suffering. Therefore he sent his Son into the world precisely for this, “to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). “For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). St. Paul says, “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3). Jesus said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). Sin is man’s greatest problem, and Christ is God’s solution. The Father sent his Son to die for our sins so that he could justly and mercifully forgive them. “And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh,” said St. Paul, “God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all or trespasses” (Col. 2:13).

In the first reading, Moses interceded with God for the people after they gravely sinned making a golden calf in the desert. Moses said to God, “Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people” (Exod. 32:12). Because Moses interceded with God for the people, “the Lord repented of the evil which he had thought to do to his people” (Exod. 32:14).

Jesus Christ is our great intercessor before God. It is he “who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:34). He intercedes for us by means of his sacrificial death on the cross, which absorbed all the divine wrath against our sins, in that Christ suffered this wrath for us and instead of us, for this wrath was the just punishment that we should have suffered for our sins. He suffered it for us, thus gaining for us salvation and the forgiveness of our sins, which is then personally applied to us through our faith, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation, which is a great instrument of peace. Hebrews says that Christ “is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). “For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb. 9:24). By his vicarious death on the cross, Christ is our great intercessor before God.
God is the one who initiated all of this. He is merciful and wants to forgive us and welcome us back home when we stray. He is the one who sent his Son to do this for us, and so do we see God in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The father in the parable is God, who “had compassion on him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). When the prodigal son repented, his father had the fatted calf killed and gave a feast for him, saying, “This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:24).

So is God with us sinners. How important this is for us, for we are always falling into new imperfections, and we are always weighed down with new guilt! What good news is this parable! In Christ, and through the intercession of his cross, we have salvation, the forgiveness of our sins, and peace with God—peace in our hearts. Indeed, Christ is our Savior, the one who saves us from our sins.

THE CROSS, SOURCE OF OUR LIGHT AND LIFE

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14
Num. 21:4-9; Ps. 77; John 3:13-17

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).

With the beginning of autumn, as darkness more and more overtakes the light, we celebrate the beautiful feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Through the cross, we receive eternal life and light. Our life comes through Christ’s death. As all of nature begins to die, we celebrate this feast of life from death. From the darkness of the cross comes the light of life.

Christ’s death paid our debt before God, gaining us eternal life. The cross, therefore, is the source of our happiness and joy. It is like the bronze serpent in the desert—an image of death from which comes salvation and life. As all who looked upon the serpent were healed, so all who look with faith upon Christ lifted up on the cross are saved and have eternal life, for he suffered our punishment of death to save us from death and give us eternal life.

“This is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life” (John 6:40). “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life” (John 6:47). “I came to they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). In the darkness of the cross is light. In his death is life. We therefore rejoice in the cross. On it, Christ suffered our punishment, setting us free from sin and guilt. The cross is the source of our happiness and peace.

The cross also teaches us how to live. We are to be crucified to the world and its heart-dividing pleasures. We are to live according to the pattern of the cross and find life through death, as life comes out of the death of autumn and winter. We live the mystery of the cross by losing our lives in this world to find them in Christ. Christ invites us to carry our cross and lose our lives to find them, to be crucified with him to the world, to serve him alone with all our hearts, with undivided hearts, renouncing all that divides
them. “If any man would come after me,” he says, “let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:24-25). What good would it do to gain the whole world but miss this (Matt. 16:26)? It is far better to lose our lives in this world, renouncing its pleasures in order to love God alone with all our hearts. Jesus invites us to carry the cross and live a life of self-denial—“let him deny himself” (Matt. 16:24). St. Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20), and “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Rom. 6:8). “Far be it from me,” we should be able to say with St. Paul, “to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).

THE HAPPINESS OF BEING FORGIVEN FOR OUR SINS

Thursday, 24th Week of the Year
1 Cor. 15:1-11; Ps. 117; Luke 7:36-50

“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47).

This difficult and confusing verse teaches us two important truths: 1) If we are forgiven much, we will love much; and 2) If we love much, we will be forgiven much. In other words, great love is the result of being forgiven much, and also great love causes us to be forgiven much.

Let us begin with the first truth: much forgiveness causes much love. A debtor who is forgiven more will love more (Luke 7:41-42). This clearly applies to us who have been forgiven so much and so often. Being forgiven for our sins fills us with joy. Nothing saddens and depresses our spirits more than sin. It robs us of our peace. It causes us to suffer guilt and remorse. We are sad for having dirtied our spirits and alienated ourselves from God. There is no greater sadness and suffering than this. We can endure physical sickness with happiness, but the suffering and depression of our spirits who can endure? “A man’s spirit will endure sickness; but a broken spirit who can bear?” (Prov. 18:14). Sin attacks our very self; and that is unbearable. “A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones” (Prov. 17:22). “A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken” (Prov. 15:13).

It is precisely this anguish of spirit, this sadness, depression, and pain in our hearts that Christ cures. This is why he came into the world, as St. Paul tells us today, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). In his death on the cross, he himself suffered all this sadness and alienation from his Father, this being cursed by God for us and instead of us (Gal. 3:13). He absorbed the divine wrath against our sins into himself to shield us from it. He forgives us through our faith, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation. Therefore we greatly rejoice for being forgiven so much and so often. Christ’s forgiveness rejoices our hearts and gives us jubilation of spirit.

The second truth is that loving much causes us to be forgiven much. Loving much is the means we should use to be forgiven. This woman greatly humiliated herself before
Jesus in her great love, and so he forgave her many sins. We have to do the same, particularly in the sacrament of reconciliation. There we profoundly humble ourselves before Christ in a very real and human way, and the result is the joyful forgiveness of our sins, the cure of the anguish and sadness of our spirits. Only by humbling ourselves in this way in love will we be forgiven and will Jesus channel the merits of his death on the cross to us in an individual and personal way.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE RESURRECTION

Friday, 24th Week of the Year
1 Cor. 15:12-20; Ps. 16; Luke 8:1-3

“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor. 15:14).

There were people in Corinth who denied that we will rise from the dead on the last day. But if they deny our resurrection, St. Paul argues, then they must also deny Christ’s resurrection, for if the dead will not rise, then neither was Christ able to rise. But if we deny Christ’s resurrection, then our faith is destroyed, for his resurrection is central to our faith. The Christian proclamation is that Christ died and rose for our salvation, to redeem us from sin and give us a new and risen life in him. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is fundamental to our faith.

Jesus died on the cross to suffer for us the punishment due to us for our sins to free us from this suffering. Thus by his death, he freed us from death. God then raised him from the dead in his human body to show that the sacrifice of his death was successful for our salvation, that God had accepted it. Redeemed, then, from our sins by his death, we now rise with him to live a new and risen life in the risen Christ. We die and rise with him now.

“You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God” (Col. 2:12). “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above” (Col. 3:1). God, “even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:5-6). “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Rom. 6:8).

But there is still more. We live a risen life with Christ now, but we also hope to be raised bodily from the dead on the last day to live with Christ forever in our risen bodies in the new Jerusalem, for “if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men the most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). On that day, all the defects of this present life will be erased—sin, sadness, guilt, remorse, depression—and we be happy forever in risen bodies like the glorious body of the risen Christ.

On the last day, if we are still alive, we will be transformed and given risen bodies without having to die. If we are already dead, we will rise from the dead with risen
 bodies. “Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:51-52). “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them” (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

THE CORRECT USE OF MATERIAL RESOURCES

25th Sunday of the Year
Amos 8:4-7; Ps. 112; 1 Tim. 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13

“And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations” (Luke 16:9).

Today’s gospel is about the correct use of our material resources and money. Jesus calls them “unrighteous mammon” (Luke 16:9, 11, 13), because they can seduce us away from God and divide our hearts. He tells us today that we cannot serve two masters, “God and mammon” (Luke 16:13). One who tries to serve both will divide his heart and forget God. He will no longer live for God alone with all his heart, as he should (Mark 12:30).

What should we then do with our money and material resources? We should use them for the good of the world, to gain friends by helping people with them. The steward in today’s parable helped his master’s debtors by reducing their debt. Instead of charging one debtor a hundred measures of oil, he charged him only fifty, and instead of charging another a hundred measures of wheat, he charged him only eighty. Thus he made many friends for himself among his master’s debtors, who would receive him into their homes when he was put out of the stewardship (Luke 16:4). His master praised him for his prudence. The sons of light should imitate this prudence and should also use worldly wealth to gain friends for themselves, who will receive them “into the eternal habitations” (Luke 16:9).

If we do this, we will be “faithful in a very little,” and therefore also “in much” (Luke 16:10). But if we are not faithful “in a very little,” neither will we be faithful “in much” (Luke 16:10). If we do not use our money and material resources well, we will not know how to behave in more important spiritual matters. If we are not faithful with “unrighteous mammon,” who will give us “true riches” (Luke 16:11)?

Hence we see that the way we use our money and other material goods is very important. It is a test to see whether we are worthy to receive true interior riches, that which is not alien and external but truly ours. If we use unrighteous mammon for our own pleasure and entertainment, then we have not passed the test, and we will not receive true riches.

We should dedicate ourselves completely to God with all our hearts (Mark 12:30). If we do this, then we cannot use our material resources for our own pleasure. Those who do not follow this principle do not follow Jesus’ first commandment to love God with all their heart and soul (Mark 12:30). They do not know how to live. They have not yet
begun to live a Christian life. They have not been born again. They have not put off the old man. They are still living a worldly life, a life according to the desires of the flesh, not a life in the Spirit. They have not yet put on the new man. They live rather in unrighteous mammon. They have been seduced by it instead of using it to make friends for themselves, who will welcome them into heaven. They are like the rich glutton who “feasted sumptuously every day” (Luke 16:19). In hell, where he went after death, he was told, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things” (Luke 16:25). Those who use their material resources for their own pleasures, as did the rich glutton, will hear Jesus say to them, “Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24).

We should rather live a simple and austere life, detached and divested of the pleasures of the world, dedicated only and completely to God. Those who live like this use their material resources well, their unrighteous mammon, the little, alien, and external things that they now have; and so will receive true riches which are very great, and which will truly belong to them. They serve only one master, not God and unrighteous mammon. They have converted and now live differently.

So what should we do with our money? We should use it to make friends for ourselves. That is, we should use it for the good of the world, to help the world. We should use it for our apostolic projects, for our pastoral work, to extend our ministry of preaching the word. If we are preachers, we can use our personal money to publish our sermons on a website or in books and to publicize them in order to extend our preaching ministry.

St. Maximilian Kolbe is a good example of this. He lived in striking simplicity and evangelical poverty—the simplest food and clothing (a Franciscan habit), a plain, unfinished, unpainted wooden table for his meals, and tin plates—but he spent a great deal of money on his publications, in which he preached to the world a word of life. When he was in Japan, people who saw how he lived were shocked at the poverty and the utter simplicity of his life, for they knew that he had considerable resources, which he used for translating and publishing his writings.

On the contrary, one who lives la dolce vita but does not want to use his own personal money for his apostolic ministry does not rightly use unrighteous mammon. He has rather been seduced by it. He is trying to serve two masters, and he divides his heart. He has not been faithful in very little, nor is he faithful in much. He has not been faithful in what is alien and external, and no one will give him what is truly his. He has not been faithful in unrighteous mammon, and so who will give him true riches?

Surely this is not what we want for ourselves. Our lives must therefore be transformed so that we live henceforth for God alone.
“No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a vessel, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, that those who enter may see the light” (Luke 8:16).

Jesus Christ gives us our mission with these words. He is the light of the world (John 8:12), and his gospel illuminates the world. He himself spoke in a veiled way, in parables, because his listeners were not yet able to understand his message, since he had not yet died and risen to accomplish our salvation. His disciples, on the other hand, should openly proclaim the full and clear message of salvation in Jesus Christ from the housetops and to the ends of the earth. They should put his light not under a bed but on a stand (Luke 8:16). “What I tell you in the dark,” he said, “utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops” (Matt. 10:27). We ourselves, in fact, should be a light illuminating the world that sits in darkness and ignorance, for we have been enlightened by Christ and his gospel. It is our obligation to live this gospel in its fullness, in its many dimensions, and proclaim it to the world. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus tells us (Matt. 5:14). So “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

We should not be afraid to live and proclaim the gospel. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). We are not to be cowered by those who mock or criticize us for living and proclaiming our faith. They can only kill our bodies; they cannot destroy our souls. “Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). The one who can do this is the one who seduces us to stop living the gospel. This is what we are to fear. Never are we to stop living the gospel out of fear of the eyes, words, or deeds of others.

There are various aspects of the gospel which we are to live and openly proclaim without fear. First of all, we are to clearly proclaim salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ. We should proclaim that in his death we are saved from our sins and freed from our burden of guilt. He died for this, to suffer our just punishment for us, freeing us from death and this darkness and suffering. He then rose from the dead to illuminate us, so that we might rise with him to walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4). Then, renewed and born again in his paschal mystery, we should henceforth love God with all our hearts and lives (Mark 12:30). To do this properly and effectively, we are to renounce the world and all its pleasures, lest our hearts be divided in their love for him (Luke 14:33; Matt. 13:44-46; 19:21; 6:24, 19-21; Mark 8:35; John 12:25; Luke 8:14). There is more than one way of doing this, but the call to do so is general—it is for all.

If we live like this, saved by Christ and completely dedicated to him, our life will be illuminated, we will be the light of the world (Matt. 5:14), lights in the darkness for others (Phil. 2:15), and our light will be on a stand to illuminate the whole house (Luke 8:16). Then we will be doing the good that we should be doing (Prov. 3:27).
“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (Eccles. 1:2-3).

It is true that all man’s work in this world to make something of himself by increasing his wealth, pleasures, and honors, and by making himself wise in the wisdom and knowledge of this world is nothing but vanity—an empty pursuit. It is tiresome and a waste of time and energy. “What does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” asks Jesus (Mark 8:36). The devil took Jesus “to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them” and promised to give them all to him; but Jesus refused the offer (Matt. 4:8).

All this effort, all this craving and work is deceitful. It is illusory, a deception, it is passing, lacking in substance, in lasting reality, in truth, and in meaning. It is avarice and greed. It is desire and endless craving for gain, pleasure, and the honors and prestige of the world. And the Bible says, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). All this craving cannot satisfy the human heart. It is an illusion that wears him out and tires his spirit.

There is only one solution to this endless circle of vanity. It is renunciation, the renunciation of the ascetic, the renunciation of Christians who leave and renounce the world with its riches, pleasures, and honors, in order to serve only God with all their hearts, with undivided hearts. Only he who does this can be a true disciple of Jesus, for “Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). We have risen with Christ. We should therefore leave this quest for the riches, pleasures, and honors of the world, and instead seek true and lasting things. “If then you have been raised with Christ,” says St. Paul, “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1-2).

The solution to the preacher’s problem is to leave and renounce this endless craving and questing after pleasure in created things and in human satisfactions. We have to renounce the luxurious life and the work and desire to have a life of pleasures. Losing our life in this way is the only way to find it (Mark 8:35). The first step in this direction is to come to the realization that all this is vanity. “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2). The solution then is to live ascetically, austerely, and simply—a life of renunciation of the pleasures of the world—living detached and divested lives in this world, living from now on only for God, without division of heart. We should live for the love of him in everything, serving one master only (Matt. 6:24). Only in this way can we escape the sadness and vanity of life in this world of illusion and deception. “If there is to be success in judging the things of God,” said St. John of the Cross, “the appetites and satisfactions must be totally rejected” (Living Flame of Love 73).
“The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Luke 9:22).

When we study Hinduism and Buddhism, we can be greatly impressed by their admirable asceticism and renunciation of the world, by their hermits, forest dwellers, renouncers, and holy men, but today’s gospel about Jesus’ saving death and resurrection is a striking reminder of the importance of the Christian mission to the East and of the blessings God has in store for them in Christ. In Christianity, there is a clear distinction between God and man, usually denied in Eastern religions, but a distinction which is of fundamental importance for a loving relationship to exist between God and man. Christians furthermore teach the real existence of the soul, of the person, and of the exterior world, which are usually denied in Eastern religions. Christians do not teach reincarnation, which it is the hope of both Hindus and Buddhists to escape by means of asceticism and enlightenment. Jesus Christ is, moreover, God incarnate in an actual historical person, as opposed to the mythological gods of Hinduism. But it is Christ’s death and resurrection that is his crowning gift to us. His death gains for us the removal and just forgiveness of all our sins, and we rise in him to a new life illuminated by the light of his resurrection. Here is God’s answer to man’s great craving that our sins be forgiven and our guilt removed, so that we might live in peace with ourselves and with God.

Having said this, we can continue studying and appreciating the great beauty and piety that we find in Hinduism and Buddhism. Our faith and preaching of Christ will only be enriched by this study and will become more universally intelligible and more globally relevant—important today when sermons in English on websites are read in all parts of the world. Truly we have much to learn from the striking asceticism of the East, particularly today when so many Christians in the West have given up on asceticism and renunciation of the world and its pleasures for the sake of completely dedicating ourselves to God with an undivided heart in a relationship of love.

The foundation upon which all this admirable piety and devotion is built is the forgiveness of sins, which we have in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. If we are not at peace with ourselves and with God in our hearts—being weighed down with guilt and remorse—we will not be happy or able to grow in our devotion to God. Jesus gives us the solution to this problem in his vicarious death on the cross, in which he carried our sins and guilt and was punished for them by God instead of us. The result is an actual and real experience of being forgiven and made new. Then we can live ascetically, devoted to God alone with all our hearts.
‘Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men.’ But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, that they should not perceive it’ (Luke 9:44-45).

The disciples did not understand the message of the cross, even though Jesus explained it on various occasions. But after his death and resurrection, they understood the centrality of this teaching. In fact, they came to understand that the cross is not only central to the life of Jesus and to our salvation, but that it is also central to the way of life of a disciple. They would remember that Jesus “said to all, ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me’” (Luke 9:23). The cross is something we all have to take up every day if we want to follow Jesus. St. Paul tells us that through the cross of Christ he is crucified to the world, and the world to him (Gal. 6:14). That is, he has left the world, has renounced the world and its ways. He has lost and destroyed his life in this world for the love of Christ (Mark 8:35). He has hated his life in this world for love of him (John 12:25). Hating his life in the world is renouncing its pleasures, entertainments, and diversions. The result is that in doing so, he has found his life. He now lives for Christ, and only for him, in everything. And he is our model—we are to do the same.

The cross is persecution. The Jews persecuted Jesus unto death on a cross. St. Paul experienced this same persecution for his preaching. This will also be the life of a true disciple of Jesus. Many will not be able to understand him and his way of life. A person who has renounced the world and its pleasures to live only for God in everything is very different from the rest, who have not made such a renunciation, and they will not understand him. They will think he is crazy because he is not like them, does not live like them, and does not participate in the pleasures of others. Therefore they will judge, criticize, and reject him. This too is part of the life of a disciple.

The very way of life of a true disciple is a participation in the cross. His renunciation of the world, his asceticism, the simplicity of his life—all this is the cross. It is a life modeled on the pattern of the cross. It is a sacrifice of love offered to God. In such a life, one wants to divest oneself of all that can divide his heart. One does this to love God with an undivided heart, with all his heart, which is Jesus’ first and most important commandment (Mark 12:30).

This is for everyone. But there are also those who live even more radically. These are the celibates, the religious, the monks, the priests, and those living an apostolic life. The cross is their very life, their way of life. They no longer want to return to the life of their youth. They have died to that. They now live only for God, and the cross is their guide as to how to live. They understand that “youth and the dawn of life are vanity,” as the Preacher says today (Eccles. 11:10). In fact, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity” (Eccles. 12:8). Only the life of the cross is not vanity.
THE TRUE AND FALSE USE OF RICHES

26th Sunday of the Year
Amos 6:1, 4-7; Ps. 145; 1 Tim. 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day” (Luke 16:19).

Today we see a man who is completely wrongly oriented. He is rich and uses his riches for his own pleasure, living an excessively luxurious life, “feasting sumptuously every day” (Luke 16:19). Later we see him after his death in hell, tormented in its flames. This is his punishment for having lived a life of pleasure. When he cried out to Abraham for some relief from his torment, Abraham said, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things” (Luke 16:25). He has already had his consolation, his reward, his recompense, his good things, during his lifetime here on earth in the pleasures in which he lived. And he has forgotten God. He lived only for his own pleasure, especially the pleasures of eating, and it seems that he has not helped other people, such as the poor beggar Lazarus, with his money. That is why he is now being tormented in hell.

Indeed, “it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven,” said Jesus (Matt. 19:23). This is because he is surrounded by worldly pleasures and the delights of the table and of the flesh, and it is very difficult for him to renounce them and live only for God with all his heart, without dividing it among the pleasures that he has on all sides. In fact, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” Jesus warns us (Matt. 19:24).

Yet it is possible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God if he renounces the pleasures of this world (Luke 14:33) and lives a simple, plain, detached, and divested life dedicated only to God. There are examples of this, like the wealthy patrician matron St. Paula, the disciple of St. Jerome, who lived in great simplicity and evangelical poverty, using her fortune to help the monks, the monasteries, and the poor. She did not use her great wealth for her own pleasure, but lived a life of renunciation. St. Maximilian Kolbe is another example of someone who lived in radical poverty, but spent great quantities of money on his spiritual publications to help others with a word of life.

But, as Jesus says, it is very difficult, and apparently rare, for a rich person to live like this and use his money correctly. There are too many temptations to do otherwise. Therefore we find the numerous warnings in the scriptures about the danger of riches—“unrighteous mammon,” as Jesus calls them (Luke 16:9, 11, 13). We cannot serve both God and mammon, he says (Matt. 6:24).

The rich glutton in today’s gospel is a good example of this danger into which rich people fall—using their riches for their own pleasures, which divide their hearts so that they do not love God with undivided hearts, with all their hearts. Jesus therefore says, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20), and “Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24). They have already had their recompense in the pleasures and delicacies of this world. What more can they then expect in the next life? They did not live as they should have in this world, and do they now expect still more recompense after their death? “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you,” says St. James. “You have lived on
the earth in luxury and in pleasures; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter’” (James 5:1, 5).

Today’s first reading also speaks about this, warning us of the danger of a life of pleasure: “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion … Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory … and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall … who drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils … Therefore they shall now be the first of those to go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves shall pass away” (Amos 6:1, 4, 6, 7). It is a life of luxury and pleasure that is condemned. About those who live like this, Hosea says, “When they had fed to the full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore they forgot me” (Hos. 13:6). And Moses says, “Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked; you waxed fat, you grew thick, you became sleek; then he forsook God who made him, and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation” (Deut. 32:15).

We do not want to be like the seeds that fell among thorns, for “as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” (Luke 8:14). Nor do we want to be like those who want to save their lives in this world by worldly means, for they will lose their lives. It is far better to lose our lives in this world for the love of God, and so save them (Mark 8:35).

This is the life of perfection, to which Jesus invites everyone. There are also those who are called to live this life of perfection in a still more radical way, renouncing even marriage to live a celibate life so that all the love of their hearts go only and directly to God without any division whatsoever. In order to live such a radical life in an integral way, they should also renounce the other pleasures of life as well, which divide the heart. Thus Jesus invites the rich young man to leave everything of this world and follow him (Matt. 19:21), and he blesses those who have “left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:29). As a reward, they “will receive a hundredfold” (Matt. 19:29).

The rich man in today’s parable should have changed his way of living and used his wealth to help others instead of for his own pleasure. He might have begun with the poor man Lazarus lying at his gate.

THE GLORY THAT AWAITS US

The Holy Archangels, September 29
Dan. 7:9-10, 13-14; Ps. 137; John 1:47-51

“As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was ancient of days took his seat; his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” (Dan. 7:9-10).

Today we celebrate the archangels and angels who surround the throne of God in heaven. They are pure spirits, without bodies, who glorify God and live in his splendor. They receive the first rays of God’s glory and bask in his splendor. They live in the new
Jerusalem, where we will go on the last day if we are saved. We have even now approached this city of light, for “You a have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering” (Heb. 12:22). It is a solemn reunion filled with glory. This is our final goal. We live for this great day when we will enter into the glory of the angels to live forever in God’s splendor.

On the last day, Jesus Christ will appear in his majesty on the clouds of heaven and “will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers … Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:41, 43). We are preparing ourselves for that day now, “For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done” (Matt. 16:27). On that day, all “will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt. 24:30-31).

Now, then, is the time of preparation so that when he comes, we will be ready and purified to be able to receive him as we ought and enter with him into his glory. We live now, therefore, in the light of that great day. “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16-17). The angels with their trumpets will be very much a part of that great day, when “we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:51-52).

This is our hope. For this we live. Each day we draw nearer to our blessed hope. Because of this hope, we are different from the rest who have no faith, and we live in a completely different way, renouncing the pleasures of the world, which divide our hearts, to be pure and empty for God. For this glory, we live in vigilance; and its splendor illuminates us even now.

THE HOPE OF THE RESURRECTION

Thursday, 26th Week of the Year
Job 19:21-27; Ps. 26; Luke 10:1-12

“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold him, and not another” (Job 19:25-27).

Here for the first time in the Old Testament, we see hope for the resurrection of the dead. After all his suffering, Job hopes to be vindicated after his death, not in this life. He expects to die without recovering his health, but to nonetheless see God in his flesh after his death: “Then after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:26). He now lives for this hope. We also get a glimpse of this same

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hope in Isaiah: “Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For thy dew is a dew of light, and on the land of the shades thou wilt let it fall” (Isa. 26:19). In the book of Daniel, this hope becomes perfectly clear: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (Dan. 12:2-3). This hope is also very clear in the time of the Maccabees. The seven brothers who were martyred for not eating pork said as they died, “You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws,” and “One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!” (2 Macc. 7:9, 14). Resurrection to life will only be for the righteous. Judas Maccabeus sent money to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice for the sins of his dead soldiers: “In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought” (2 Macc. 12:43-45).

This is our hope too, for “if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). We are made for much more than only this life. When we reflect on this, we live in a different and new way. We are preparing ourselves now for something new and better. We seek union with God in this life and the fulfillment of this union in the world of the resurrection on the last day. When we die, we hope to be much more with Christ than we are now (Phil. 1:23). We live for this glory, therefore we love silence and solitude to be with Christ even now. We do not want to forget this hope by involving ourselves in the noise and pleasures of the world, which divide our hearts. It is much better to live with Christ, even now, and grow daily in his love, moving toward the resurrection.

HOW WILL WE BE JUDGED?

Friday, 26th Week of the Year
Job 38:1, 12-21; 40:3-5; Ps. 138; Luke 10:13-16

“Woe to you, Chorazin! woe to you, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes” (Luke 10:13).

Today Jesus curses the cities where he taught and worked so many miracles—Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. They should not think that they will be blessed just because Jesus taught and worked miracles in them. Their response to his miracles and teachings is what is important, and he found it inadequate. Therefore “it shall be more tolerable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you,” he tells them (Luke 10:14). Tyre and Sidon were pagan cities. And even more strikingly Jesus says to
Capernaum, “I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you” (Matt. 11:24, 23). Sodom was notoriously evil, but because they had less revelation, their judgment will be less severe.

And what will Jesus say of us who have had his full revelation? And we who are priests or religious have, in addition, received the call to a radical life of perfection, to live only and exclusively for him, renouncing even marriage and a human family for the sake of the kingdom of God, that we might love him completely, without any division of heart. Therefore the judgment will be all the more severe for us who have received, seen, heard, and experienced so much. Our response is to be proportionately more generous and complete, in accord with what we have received.

Do we therefore live in a way that is faithful to our call and vocation, or do we simply imitate those around us? Do we follow our ideals, or do we rather imitate the lifestyle of the world? Do we live lives of sacrifice or lives of indulgence in the pleasures of the world, which divide our hearts? Do we provide an example for the world, or is the world the example that we follow? Do we do what we know is right, or do we follow the deviations and worldliness of those around us? Do we have the courage to live by our convictions, or do we only do what everybody else does? Do we follow what we know to be the will of God, or do we just swim with the current? Do we go against the current when it is necessary to do the will of God, or do we just go along with it even though we know it is wrong? Do we bear witness to Christ and to his call before others, or are we ashamed of him and of his call before others? Are our lives filled with the pleasures, entertainments, diversions, delicacies, and styles of the world, or do we live true lives of renunciation of the world and its pleasures, fashions, and styles in order to love God with all our hearts?

How will we be judged on the last day? Have we really responded as we should, or have we just followed the styles and ways of everyone else? Are we aware of what is going on, or are we blind to it, thereby being ourselves part of the problem instead of working toward the solution? Will we be exalted to the heavens or cast into Hades on judgment day?

THE HOLY GUARDIAN ANGELS

Memorial of the Holy Guardian Angels, October 2
Exod. 23:20-23; Ps. 90; Matt. 18:1-5, 10

“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3).

Today we honor the guardian angels. We live in the midst of angels, and today we have the opportunity to remember this and reflect on it. We live in a holy atmosphere of hushed silence, awe, and adoration, surrounded by our guardian angels, who always behold the face of God. “See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 18:10). We live amid the heavenly host. They sanctify our lives, and we can join them in their adoration of God, as did the shepherds in the field, watching over their flock
by night, when they saw a multitude of the heavenly host praising God. Angels give splendor to our lives. “And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid” (Luke 2:9 KJV). We live in their holy presence and fall silent with them in adoration.

To live with the angels, we must humble ourselves as children. Those who want to be first in the kingdom of God will make themselves last in this world. “Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:4). “He who is least among you all is the one who is great” (Luke 9:48). “If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

Truly, if we want to be first in the kingdom of God, we will make ourselves last in this world. God himself will lead us to live in such a way that this is what will happen. He will lead us to renounce a worldly lifestyle and worldly values and pleasures and to live a completely different kind of life in this world, a simple, humble, and poor life. To be first in the kingdom of God, we have to live the mystery of the cross and be crucified to the world, and the world to us (Gal. 6:14). We have to be dead to the world and to its pleasures. We have to live for God alone with all our hearts, without dividing them among worldly delights. In this way, we will lose our lives in this world in order to save them. But if we save our lives in this world—by living in a worldly way—we will lose them with God (Mark 8:35). In this way, “Many that are first will be last, and the last first” (Matt 19:30). Many who are first in this world are living in such a way that they will be last in the kingdom of God. Indeed, “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25).

We have to become children in this world for the love of God, children in simplicity, children in smallness, children in poverty. Thus shall we live for God with all our hearts (Mark 12:30), thus will we live the mystery of the cross, and thus will we live in the company of our holy guardian angels, who always contemplate the face of the Father in heaven (Matt. 18:10).

SIMPLE SERVANTS WHO LIVE FAITHFULLY

27th Sunday of the Year
Hab. 1:2-3; 2:2-4; Ps. 94: 2 Tim. 1, 6-8, 13-14; Luke 17:5-10

“So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Luke 17:10).

This is our vocation, to be “unworthy servants,” only doing our duty. But to live like this in the world as it is, we need faith. Faith has great power and can work miracles. It can even uproot trees and plant them in the sea (Luke 17:6). Indeed we need powerful faith like this to live in this world so full of contradictions, where things so often are not as they should be, and where so many values have been cast aside by so many.

In many ways, we are in the same position as Habakkuk in the first reading. We see injustice and erroneous behavior on all sides, and it seems like even God does nothing to rectify the situation. With Habakkuk, we say, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and thou wilt not hear? Or cry to thee, ‘Violence!’ and thou wilt not save? Why doest thou
make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is slacked and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted” (Hab. 1:2-4).

How well this describes our own situation. And in the midst of it all, we are to live as faithful servants, suffering these injustices, seeing them every day, without being able to correct them. And when we pray and ask God for his help and justice, even God seems to be deaf to our pleas; and so everything stays the same. O God, “Why dost thou look on faithless men, and art silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?” (Hab. 1:13).

But the prophet tells us that it is God himself who raised up these unjust people as his scourge to chastise us for our sins, until we have been purified. “Look among the nations, and see …,” he says, “for I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For lo, I am rousing the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize habitations not their own” (Hab. 1:5-6).

Yet there is hope. The Lord’s help will come. The prophet is in his watchtower, waiting for the Lord’s answer (Hab. 2:1). “And the Lord answered me: ‘Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith’” (Hab. 2:2-4).

The message is this: the crooked will be made straight, and injustice will be made right. “He whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4). Although for now we have to look upon injustice, days are coming when this shall be changed. God’s justice will prevail and rule. All the injustice that we now see will be changed. This is the vision that “hastens to its end—it will not lie” (Hab. 2:3). What we have to do is hope with faith. We have to be people of faith, faithful servants, “unworthy servants,” who only do our duty without hoping for any reward in this world. But God will reward us. Therefore “If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay” (Hab. 2:3).

Such is our life in this world so full of injustice and confusion, where things that are wrong so often reign, and where it seems that no one can set them right, and that even God just lets them be. But God nonetheless has his plan in all this. He is scourging us for our sins, and he will bless his faithful servants who do what is correct, who do his will. God himself will set things right in due time. The faithful will live. The unfaithful will fail. So do your work faithfully and live correctly, even though everyone around you is doing otherwise. “Fret not yourself because of the wicked, be not envious of wrongdoers. For they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will dwell in the land, and enjoy security” (Ps. 36:1-3).

We have to live by faith, be faithful servants, live properly and correctly, and according to God’s will in the midst of a perverse and malignant generation, among whom we are to shine as lights in the darkness (Phil. 2:15). This is our vocation, to be lights in the world, lights for the rest (Matt. 5:14), and to let our light shine and illuminate others (Matt. 5:15-16). Thus will we live by faith that “What the wicked dreads will come upon him, but the desire of the righteous will be granted” (Prov. 10:24). It is our faith that “When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever” (Prov. 10:25). It is our faith that “The fear of the Lord prolongs life,
but the years of the wicked will be short” (Prov. 10:27), and that “The hope of the righteous ends in gladness, but the expectation of the wicked comes to naught” (Prov. 10:28).

EVANGELICAL POVERTY AND THE BLESSED POOR OF THE LORD

Monday, 27th Week of the Year
Gal. 1, 6-12; Ps. 110; Luke 10:25-37

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

This is the first and second commandment of Jesus (Mark 12:30), and he tells us that “There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31).

To actually live this way is to live radically. It means that we are to use all our strength and energy to love God. Today we celebrate the memorial of St. Francis of Assisi, who followed this first commandment in a radical way, even to the point of literally taking off all his clothes in a public place in front of the bishop, his father, and the people of the town. He gave his clothes back to his father and walked away stark naked, resolved henceforth to serve but God alone with all his heart and soul, time and energy.

Jesus said, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21). St. Francis did this in a literal and radical way, embracing evangelical poverty, wedding Lady Poverty. He wanted all the love of his heart to focus from then on directly on God without any deviation.

How easily the human heart is divided among the delights, delicacies, and pleasures of the world. Francis knew this and wanted henceforth to avoid this division of the love of his heart. He knew that seeds sown in the midst of thorns “are chocked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” (Luke 8:14). He wanted to avoid this and serve but one master only, not both God and mammon, which is impossible (Matt. 6:24). He wanted to have but one treasure only, not many (Matt. 6:19-21). He wanted to be one of the blessed poor of the Lord, to whom belongs the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:3).

Those who leave all, as St. Francis did, are the true blessed of the Lord, the anawim, the poor of Yahweh, those leading a life of perfection. They are dead to the world, crucified to the world. For them, the world with its pleasures, delights, and delicacies is dead. They have been crucified to it, as was St. Paul and can say with him, “Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).

This is the life of perfection, the way of St. Francis, the way of the saints. This is the way of heroic virtue, as we find it in the lives of the saints. Not everyone who follows Jesus takes this way of the saints, but yes, there are some who do take this path with all their hearts. All are called to perfection (Matt. 5:48; Luke 14:26, 33), and the saints are those who respond to this call in a radical and literal way. It is not enough just to be a
monk or a religious or a priest. Jesus calls us to perfection, to live our vocation in a radical and literal way. He wants us to live from now on only for him, leaving all else behind to live in evangelical poverty, like the anawim, the blessed poor of the Lord.

HOW WE ARE SAVED

Thursday, 27th Week of the Year

“Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?” (Gal. 3:2).

Here St. Paul proclaims the essence of the Christian gospel, that it is through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross that we are saved and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, not through our own works in accord with the law of God. Yes, we sanctify ourselves by our good life and by our works, but we are saved and forgiven for our sins only by the grace of God through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. When the Galatians began to believe in Christ, they received the gift of the Spirit that transformed their lives, forgave their sins, and gave them jubilation of spirit and hope of eternal life. All this came to them only through their faith in the gospel that St. Paul preached to them, not through their works according to the law, because at that time those former pagan Galatians had not yet been instructed in the law of Moses. They only heard about it later through other preachers, and St. Paul wants to clarify that for a Christian the law of Moses and circumcision are not necessary.

This message is important for us too. Our good works and a good life are necessary for our sanctification—to become saints—but the forgiveness of our sins and salvation is not something we can merit by our works. Justification—being made righteous—does not come from our works but from God through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. And this great gift we receive through faith. Hence it is “our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins” (Gal. 1:3-4). Truly, “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). “Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39).

This is good news, it is the gospel, for it is our liberation from the burden of guilt and remorse for our sins and imperfections. We know that we do not have the power to free ourselves from this suffering of our spirit that depresses us. But God himself has given us the remedy for this our greatest suffering—guilt. The Son of God himself suffered for us our just punishment that we should have suffered. He suffered it instead of us, in our place, thus satisfying divine justice and letting us go free, acquitted and absolved. “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed … The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” ( Isa. 53:5, 6 KJV).

Through faith, we receive this justification, particularly through the sacrament of reconciliation, which channels to us individually and personally the saving merits of the
death of Christ on the cross. So then we “who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law” (Gal. 2:16).

THE VICARIOUS DEATH OF JESUS CHRIST

Friday, 27th Week of the Year
Gal. 3:7-14; Ps. 110; Luke 11:14-26

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree’”—(Gal. 3:13).

This verse is a key to the theology of St. Paul. Christ became a curse for us. That is, Christ was accursed by God for us, who should have been cursed by him for our sins. He was accursed in our place, instead of us, assuming and absorbing in himself our curse to free us from God’s curse. According to the law, Christ was accursed by God because he was hanged on a tree, for the law says, “A hanged man is accursed by God” (Deut. 21:23).

If the Jews depend for their justification on their fulfillment of the law, then they are accursed, because no one has always fulfilled all of the laws, and the law says, “Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them” (Deut 27:26; see Gal. 3:10). St. James says the same: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10). St. Paul therefore concludes, “Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law” (Gal. 3:11). Justification comes only through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, accepted by faith. We are only made righteous by his absorbing our curse, by his being vicariously accursed and punished by God in our place. “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6 KJV). “The chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5 KJV). “For if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose” (Gal. 2:21). St. Paul clearly sees justification coming only through the death of Christ, not through our works according to the law (although our sanctification does come through our good works). Our sins were laid on him and justly punished in him, rather than in us. “For our sake he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

According to the law, we are guilty, but God justly condemned and punished our sin in the flesh of his Son on the cross, “in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom. 8:4). “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom. 8:3-4). Christ suffered in his flesh on the cross our just penalty, according to the law, on our behalf. He served our sentence for us. He thus fulfilled the law’s just requirement on our behalf, and so we can go free, forgiven and justified. He satisfied divine justice.

Abraham was also justified by faith in God’s promise: “He believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6; see Gal. 3:6). Abraham is our model, for as “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Rom. 4:3),
DOING THE WILL OF GOD

Saturday, 27th Week of the Year
Gal. 3:21-29; Ps. 104; Luke 11:27-28

“A woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’” (Luke 11:27-28).

We see today the importance, in the teaching of Jesus, of doing the will of God. It is even more important than being the mother of God, the one who bore Christ in her womb and nursed him at her breasts. When they told Jesus, “Your mother and your brethren are standing outside, desiring to see you,” he answered, “My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:20-21). Doing the word of God—that is, doing the will of God—makes us like the mother of God herself and like Jesus’ brethren.

And what is the will of God for us? “This is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3), that we become saints, and this will only come about when we live as God wants us to live, when we live lives of heroic virtue. Our sins are forgiven and we are saved only through the merits of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, and this is applied to us through our faith, but our sanctification depends on our good works, on our virtuous lives, and on our obedience to the will of God.

Truly, “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). We have to do more than just believe. In effect, our good works demonstrate that our faith is genuine, for “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). “Every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them,” Jesus said, “will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it” (Matt. 7:26-27). Such will be the life that does not do the will of God. Truly, “He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father” (John 14:21).

What, again, is the will of God for us? It is that we love him with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength (Mark 12:30). He wants us to love him with an undivided heart, without dividing it among the delights of this world, serving but one master only (Matt. 6:24) not both God and mammon—the pleasures, riches, and honors of this world (Matt. 6:24)—and having only one treasure (Matt. 6:19-21). Only by living in this way will we grow in holiness. He wants us to lose our lives in this world for love of him (Mark 8:35). He wants us to even hate our lives in this world because of him. “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). He even wants us to leave everything of this world to obtain
the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:44-46), which is the kingdom of God in our hearts. He wants us to live radically for him alone, renouncing the pleasures of this world (Matt. 19:21).

THANKSGIVING FOR GOD'S BLESSINGS

28th Sunday of the Year
2 Kings 5:14-17; Ps. 97; 2 Tim. 2:8-13; Luke 17:11-19

“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks” (Luke 17:15-16).

The liturgy today teaches us the importance of glorifying God and giving him thanks for all he has given us. The first thing for which we should be thankful is God’s salvation, which has extended to the ends of the earth. Truly, in Christ, “the Lord hath made known his salvation: his righteousness hath he openly shewed in the sight of the heathen. He hath remembered his mercy and his truth toward the house of Israel: all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (Ps. 97:2-3 KJV). We now live in this salvation. Through the death of Jesus on the cross, our sins are forgiven and our burden of guilt is removed, especially through the sacrament of reconciliation, which personally and individually communicates to us the merits of Christ’s vicarious death on the cross. Christ bore our sins and suffered our punishment for them on the cross, freeing us from this punishment. For this salvation, which gives joy to our hearts, we should glorify God and give him thanks.

When Naaman, the Syrian general, saw that he had been cured of his leprosy, he returned to the prophet Elisha to thank him, but Elisha refused to accept his gifts because he knew that it was God, not he, who had cured him. Naaman then promised him, “Henceforth your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any God but the Lord” (2 Kings 5:17).

God wants us to thank him for his blessings. Jesus wished that all ten lepers that he had cured had returned to give him thanks. “Were not ten cleansed?” he asked. “Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (Luke 17:17-18). As Jesus cleansed the lepers, he cleanses us from the leprosy of sin and guilt. For this, we should glorify God, giving him thanks from the depths of our hearts.

There are many examples of thanksgiving in the Bible. Zechariah gave thanks for the birth of John the Baptist, saying, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:68-79). Mary, in the house of Elizabeth, glorified God, saying, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden” (Luke 1:46-48). The angels glorified God for the birth of the Savior, singing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14 KJV). The shepherds too gave praise and thanks to God. “And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger … And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them” (Luke 2:16, 20 KJV). The paralytic who
was lowered through the roof, when he had been cured “went home, glorifying God. And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe” (Luke 5:25-26). Upon seeing Jesus raise the son of the widow of Nain, “fear seized them all, and they glorified God” (Luke 7:16). When the blind man of Jericho was cured by Jesus, he “followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God” (Luke 18:43). And finally, at Jesus’ death, “when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God” (Luke 23:47).

We should also give thanks to God for our country, for our land, and for the fruits of the earth and not think that we have become wealthy through our own power. We should not forget God in our prosperity. Let it not come about that “when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your gold and silver is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God … Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth” (Deut. 8:12-14, 17-18). If we rejoice in God’s gifts but forget the giver, we will perish. If our hearts become divided by the riches God has given us, we will perish. “If you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you this day that you shall surely perish” (Deut. 8:19).

This is a great danger for us. It is far better to live simply, giving thanks to God for all his gifts—life, the sun, our daily food—guarding our hearts all the while lest they become divided. We should give thanks to God for everything, for he has given us “a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you” (Deut. 8:7-10).

SOMETHING GREATER THAN JONAH IS HERE

Monday, 28th Week of the Year
Gal. 4:22-24, 26-27, 31-5:1; Ps. 112; Luke 11:29-32

“The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Luke 11:32).

In Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has arrived and is now present in our midst. He is the only Son of God, living incarnate among us as a man on earth. In him, “Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21). Hence “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!!!’” for with Jesus Christ in our midst, “Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:20-21). Truly, “Something greater than Jonah is here” (Luke 11:32).
“The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” (Luke 16:16). The time of the kingdom begins after John the Baptist and is present in the preaching, exorcisms, and miracles of Jesus. So although “among those born of woman there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist,” the kingdom of God is so much greater than the previous era that “he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11). Therefore Jesus began his preaching by saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Now, then, is the time of fulfillment, the messianic times, the time of the kingdom of God. We should enter it by believing in Jesus Christ. He saves us and reconciles us with God. Through his death and resurrection, this power has reached unto the ends of the earth (Ps. 97:3) and is now available for all who believe in him.

In Christ is the renewal of the world and new life. He makes us a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), new men (Eph. 4:22-24), born anew (John 3:3), walking in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4), in the newness of the Spirit (Rom. 7:6), illuminated from within by him, and shown on from without by him, for in him a great light has come into the world (Isa. 9:2).

In Christ, Satan is defeated. In the ministry of his disciples, Jesus said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). In him, we conquer the world, “for whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith” (1 John 5:4). We conquer sin in him.

Jesus’ exorcisms prove that in him the kingdom of God has arrived, for “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). Therefore “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Matt. 13:16-17).

In Christ, we live in peace with God, with our sins justly expiated and forgiven through his death, and with our hearts illuminated by his resurrection. In him, the times of peace and fulfillment, the messianic times, have come. Truly, “Something greater than Jonah is here” (Luke 11:32).

THE HEAVENLY LIFE

Thursday, 28th Week of the Year
Eph. 1:1-10; Ps. 97; Luke 11:47-54

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ, with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3).

In Christ, through our faith in him, we have new life, our sins are forgiven through his blood poured out for us in sacrifice on the cross, and we now live a risen and even ascended life with him in the heavenly places. God “blessed us in Christ … in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). God, “even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:5-6). As a result, we now have a new life in him. Not only did Christ suffer our punishment for our sins in his death on the cross, thus satisfying divine justice, but God also raised us up
together with him to live a new and risen life in him, even an ascended life, for he “made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). We should therefore begin living a heavenly life even now—as much as we can—with Christ shining in our hearts, having freed us from all our sins and from the burden of our guilt by his blood. Indeed, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

What is this heavenly life like, this new life which is, in a sense, already in heaven with Christ? It is a life of love. It is like a marriage with Christ, like a nuptial bond, which makes all the difference in the world in the quality of our lives. And it is even better if we can live out this nuptial bond in a radically exclusive way, excluding from our lives all other deep and intimate loves in order to love him alone in this world. Thus we will have a truly exclusive marriage relationship with Jesus Christ, excluding even a human spouse. This is the most radical form of this new life.

Nowadays there are far fewer people than previously who want to live this way—exclusively for Jesus Christ with all the love of their hearts, with hearts undivided in their love for him. This is the celibate life, and for lack of celibate vocations, our religious orders, congregations, and societies of apostolic life are dying today in many countries. We therefore need to put new emphasis on this type of life today and revive our appreciation of it.

St. Paul says, “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20 NKJV), and “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1-2). If we are going to live in an exclusive nuptial bond with Christ, we should love him alone in every aspect of our lives, no longer seeking our pleasures here below, but only in him, in the things that are above, where he is. This is a radically new way of living in this world. It is an ascetical life, which can lead us even to a mystical life of great personal experience of God in our whole being.

CLEARLY PREACHING SALVATION IN CHRIST

Friday, 28th Week of the Year
Eph. 1:11-14; Ps. 32; Luke 12:1-7

“Whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops” (Luke 12:3).

We believe in Jesus Christ for our salvation, but often we do not spread our faith as much as we could for the enrichment of others. Faith in Christ is the renewal of the world. God has but one Son, who became incarnate but once for the salvation of people of every tribe and nation, culture and religion. Christ—God’s only Son—died but once on the cross for all. He suffered our punishment in his death on the cross to pay our debt of suffering due for our sins to free our consciences from their depressing burden of guilt, and he rose from the dead to shine on those he redeemed by his death. Faith in this, the key event of history, transforms human lives. This needs to be preached in an unmistakably clear way unto the ends of the earth in all the languages of man and to
every person to give him the chance to believe and be saved and enlightened. Too often our preaching is not clear enough.

What we have heard in the dark, we must preach from the housetops, on the internet, on websites, in every human language. We must overcome our fear of negative reactions. If we deny Christ by our bad example and silence, he will deny us. “He who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God” (Luke 12:9). But if we preach Christ in an unmistakably clear way, we will be rewarded. “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of man will acknowledge before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8).

We are not to fear men but rather God, who can send us to hell. Human beings can only harm our bodies. So “Do not fear those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do” (Luke 12:4). Rather fear offending God—“I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him!” (Luke 12:5). Fear offending God by not fulfilling his will.

Often we fear to point out faults in our sermons, even in a generic way, for the good of others. We fear that they in turn will attack us. And so we are silent when we should speak, like useless watchdogs that are afraid to bark.

The time between Christ’s resurrection and Parousia is the time to preach Christ unto the ends of the earth. Everyone needs the salvation that God has sent the world in Christ. Christ saves us from the guilt for our sins and imperfections that depresses us, and he gives us the freedom of the children of God. By believing in him, all can receive this freedom. But “how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?” (Rom. 10:14).

Too often, I think, we depend on the mass to do everything and fail to clearly preach salvation in Jesus Christ. We fail to preach the central core of the gospel about Christ’s saving death, which vicariously atones for our sins. This, above all else, is what we are to preach in an unmistakably clear way unto the ends of the earth.

CONFESSING OR DENYING CHRIST BEFORE MEN

Saturday, 28th Week of the Year
Eph. 1:15-23; Ps. 8; Luke 12:8-12

“I tell you, every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8-9).

As Christians, we are called to confess, not deny, Christ before men. We confess Christ before men by our way of living and by our preaching. We can also deny him by our way of living and by our way of preaching. We deny him because of fear, love for worldly pleasures, and ignorance of basic Christian doctrine. St. Paul says, “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds” (Titus 1:16).

If we live a life of perfection, loving God with all our hearts, without dividing them among the pleasures of the world, we are confessing Christ before men, for they will see our good works and glorify God (Matt. 5:16). In living this way, we not only purify our
souls to be united ever more intimately with God, but we also help others with the witness of our lives, confessing Christ before men.

Many, however, fail to give this testimony because of love of worldly pleasures instead of living only for God in every aspect of their lives. They live for the pleasures and entertainments of the world and divide their hearts among them. They serve more than one master (Mat. 6:24) and have more than one treasure (Mat. 6:19-21). They are like seeds sown among thorns that choke them, and they do not bear fruit (Luke 8:14). They have not renounced all for God to get the buried treasure and the pearl of great price (Mat. 13:44-46). They have already had their consolation in the delights of this world—“Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24). They have not lost their lives in this world for the love of Christ, but have saved them in a worldly way, and so lose them with God (Mark 8:35). They have not hated their lives in this world to keep them for eternal life, but have loved them, and so lose them with God (John 12:25). They are not crucified to the world, and the world to them (Gal. 6:14). They have not chosen the narrow and hard way of the few of life, but the comfortable way of the many that leads to destruction (Mat. 7:13-14).

But those who renounce the world for the love of God will be blessed. If they are priests or religious, they can confess Christ before men even by the way they dress—in clerical or religious dress—that reminds everyone who sees them of God.

In our preaching too, we should confess Christ before men. But many, through ignorance, do not know the doctrine of salvation through the vicarious death of Jesus Christ on the cross and therefore do not give a clear witness to the Christian faith and to Jesus Christ in their preaching. In a sense, they deny Christ before men by their way of preaching, hiding the doctrine that saves. But if we proclaim that Christ saved us by his death on the cross, suffering our punishment for our sins to free us from this punishment, we truly confess Christ before men, and he will acknowledge us before the angels of God.

A LIFE OF PRAYER AND CONTEMPLATION

29th Sunday of the Year
Exod. 17:8-13; Ps. 120; 2 Tim. 3:14-4:2; Luke 18:1-8

“But will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily” (Luke 18:7-8).

Prayer is central to the Christian life. A Christian is a person who prays, who is in constant communication with God, and who organizes his day to have specific times for prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, lectio divina, spiritual study, the divine office, mass, silent prayer, and contemplation. But in addition to these special times of prayer and spiritual exercises, a Christian should pray at all times (1 Thess. 5:17) and offer many short prayers during the day. Today’s parable of the widow and the unjust judge teaches us the importance of always praying for what we need without losing heart. The widow in this parable, who continually goes to an unjust judge to plead her case, is at last vindicated by him because of her impertinence and insistence. Jesus uses her as an
example of how we are to pray always. If we pray in this way, we will be heard and vindicated. “Will not God vindicate his elect, who cry out to him day and night?” (Luke 18:7).

Saint Paul tells us, “Pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17). We should therefore always try to be in communion and communication with God. To do this, our lives must be always oriented toward God in our way of living, and we should love him with all our hearts.

God even invites some to live a radical life of loving only him, and of having no other loves in this world. This is the life of perfection (Matt. 19:21), the highest form of human life. It is a religious and consecrated life, a celibate, monastic, and apostolic life. It is a life of prayer par excellence. In such a life, one has neither human spouse nor family. He has renounced marriage and family life, the householder’s life, for a life with God. One makes this renunciation in order to respond to the call of God to live only for him without any division of heart. One who lives this way lives a life of prayer. Such a life is in itself a contemplative life. There are also those who even renounce all exterior apostolate to live in silence and solitude, to live more intimately with God, more contemplatively, occupying themselves in silent and solitary work, which they can do recollected in God, such as silent manual or intellectual work; for example, spiritual study and the writing of sermons and other spiritual writings for the good of the Church.

One who is called to live this kind of contemplative and monastic life tries to live in silence and solitude with God in constant prayer in addition to his specific times of prayer, spiritual reading, spiritual study, and contemplation. Is important that the whole of his life be oriented in this way—contemplatively. He thereof lives austerely in every aspect of his life. He observes great simplicity in his food. Monks should give us a good example of this, renouncing meat, and many of them also renouncing unnecessary pleasure in food, renouncing such things as seasoning, fried foods, and things made of sugar or artificial sweeteners and white flour, thus eliminating all delicacies, such as pies, cakes, cookies, ice-cream, etc.

In other aspects of contemplative living as well, monks should give us a good example, living as they do within a monastic enclosure without going out, always dressing religiously in their monastic habits, which express their renunciation of secular values and a worldly lifestyle, renouncing even secular dress. Their habits also symbolize their complete dedication to God alone, to love only him in this deep way in this world, renouncing all other loves. Who cannot but learn from such love and such a radical way of life? Monks also renounce movies, television, radio, worldly entertainments, and sports in order to live in silence and recollection with undivided hearts in their love for God. Even active religious and those living an apostolic life can learn from this to guard their hearts more rigorously, renouncing a secular lifestyle and worldly living to dedicate themselves totally to God with undivided hearts, loving only him in this world and occupying themselves with their apostolate.

There are many forms of prayer. There is prayer that uses words, such as the divine office; and there is prayer without words. To practice silent prayer without words, we may begin with a short prayer constantly repeated, such as the Jesus prayer, which focuses us on God and reduces distractions. This prepares us to enter into silent prayer, apophatic prayer (“without words”), and contemplation, in which we can enter into profound communion with God.
It is important to have a life full of interior prayer. This greatly helps the world. It raises its spiritual level. It unites us to God, transforms and sanctifies us, illuminates and divinizes us.

The Bible teaches us that we are to live a life of prayer. We are to be “constant in prayer” (Rom. 12:12). “Have no anxiety about anything,” says St. Paul, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7). “Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Eph. 6:18). “The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers” (1 Pet. 4:7). “Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:33).

EVANGELISTS FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD

The Feast of St. Luke, October 18
2 Tim. 4:9-17; Ps. 144; Luke 10:1-9

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2).

St. Luke was an evangelist, the author of a gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles. Unto this day the work of an evangelist is of the greatest importance. Jesus says that the harvest is plentiful, but unfortunately there are not enough workers—evangelists and preachers of the gospel. We need more people who truly preach Jesus Christ and the salvation of God that is in him.

Not all, though, will receive our proclamation of salvation. Many will reject it either because they think they know better and so don’t need it, or because they prefer worldly pleasures, and the gospel cramps their style. That is why Jesus tells us, “Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3). St. Paul today also tells us to be constant in our preaching, “Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). But he too warns us that not all will receive our preaching. “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Therefore he tells us, “Endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5). “Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season” (2 Tim. 4:2). Some will even abandon us, as Demas abandoned St. Paul. “For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me” (2 Tim. 4:10).

We go with a message of peace and reconciliation with God, which some will accept and benefit from, and others will reject. “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house!’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you” (Luke 10:5-6). We are to be ready for both reactions.

The message of Christ which we bring saves from their sins and the depression caused by their guilt all who accept it with faith, and Christ gives them from the Father
the gift of the Holy Spirit to renew, illuminate, and rejoice their hearts. Our mission is one of human transformation, the renewal of the human race. We are to preach Christ and salvation in him unto the ends of the earth and in every language so that all may know that Jesus Christ has borne upon himself our sins and imperfections, suffering on the cross their due punishment on our behalf, thus freeing us from guilt and the depression it causes, if only we repent and believe in him. He channels this grace particularly through the sacraments of the Eucharist and reconciliation, which he left us for this purpose. He then sends us the Holy Spirit from the Father to make us worthy dwelling places of the Trinity so that God can fill us with his love and peace. We are evangelists of this for the transformation and illumination of the world.

A LIFE OF RADICAL RENUNCIATION

Thursday, 29th Week of the Year
Eph. 3:14-21; Ps. 32; Luke 12:49-53

“Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three” (Luke 12:51-52).

Jesus came to bring peace on earth, true peace in the heart, peace with God, peace with ourselves, and peace with our neighbor. So sang the angels at his birth, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14 KJV).

Yet Jesus’ call to perfection (Matt. 19:21), especially in its literal and radical form—to leave all, including parents, wife, and children (Luke 18:29)—causes dissension and division in families. Those who make such a renunciation live in a completely new way and can no longer live with their families, for their lives are utterly different. They renounce all the normal pleasures and entertainments of the world that they once lived in with their families and that their families still live in. Their two ways of life have become mutually incompatible. They now seek to live for God alone in every aspect of their lives without any division of heart. They have renounced the householder life and a secular lifestyle for a totally new way of living in the world. They can no longer return to their former lifestyle. They have made a complete break with their past and with their former way of living. The life they now live is modeled on the cross. They deny themselves (Luke 9:23). They lose their lives in this world to find them (Matt. 10:39). They follow the radical form of Jesus’ call to perfection when he said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29-30).

Those who have made this renunciation in a thoroughgoing way no longer live as they once did. They have left their families for a completely new and different form of life. One who lives this new life in an integral way without compromise cannot go back to take up again what he has left and renounced. He cannot again take up a secular lifestyle. Only by not turning back can one remain faithful to his call to leave all for God in every aspect of his life. One who goes back and forth between his new and old way of
life has not yet matured in his vocation, or more likely has not yet truly begun to live a life of renunciation in an integral and radical way. His life has not really changed all that much, and so he sees no contradiction in returning to take up again the way of life he was supposed to have left. He never really left it.

But a radical life of perfection cannot be lived in this way. One must leave forever the delights of the world, put his hand to the plow and not look back; otherwise he is not fit for the kingdom of God (Luke 9:62). To obtain the buried treasure, which is the kingdom of God, we must sell all that we have (Matt. 13:44), live henceforth for only one master (Matt. 6:24), and be crucified to the world, and the world to us (Gal. 6:14). It is this radical call to perfection that causes division in families.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME

Friday, 29th Week of the Year
Eph. 4:1-6; Ps. 23; Luke 12:54-59

“You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Luke 12:56).

Today Jesus condemns the Jews for their ignorance about the one important thing, while they know many other things of little importance, such as predicting the weather. What they should have known was that their long-awaited Messiah was standing in their midst, and that their times were therefore the messianic times. They should have been able to interpret his exorcisms and miracles, which indicate that the kingdom of God has arrived, and that they are therefore in the messianic age, for “If it is by the spirit of God that I cast out demons,” he said, “then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28).

When John the Baptist’s disciples ask Jesus whether he is “he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” he points to these signs as indicating that he is the one who was to come. “Go and tell John what you hear and see,” he says, “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me” (Matt. 11:3-6).

Since the Messiah has come, we are living in the messianic age. Jesus’ action in our hearts proves that the kingdom of God is present. He saves us from depression caused by guilt on account of our sins and imperfections through his death on the cross, where he satisfies divine justice on our behalf, suffering himself our punishment for our sins for us, thus freeing us from this suffering and guilt.

Furthermore, he said that the kingdom of God begins after John the Baptist: “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” (Luke 16:16). So “After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15).

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of
you” (Luke 17:20-21). It is not coming with cosmic signs, but rather it is in their midst in Jesus. Therefore “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear and did not hear it” (Matt. 13:16-17).

In the synagogue in Nazareth, after reading from Isaiah about the Messiah who would open the eyes of the blind and free the oppressed, Jesus says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). He is fulfilling it.

When his disciples tell him that they cast out demons in his name, he says, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). He destroys Satan’s kingdom, for in him the kingdom of God has come.

REPENT OR YOU WILL BE CUT DOWN

Saturday, 29th Week of the Year
Eph. 4:7-16; Ps. 121; Luke 13:1-9

“Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground? (Luke 13:7).

This fig tree is Israel—it is also us. Jesus expects to find fruit in his people and in his disciples. He gives us time, but if we do not repent, we will be cut down. He also said, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3). On another occasion, “seeing a fig tree by the wayside he went to it, and found nothing on it but leaves only. And he said to it, ‘May no fruit ever come from you again!’ And the fig tree withered at once” (Matt. 21:19). The fig tree is a symbol of Israel, which will be cursed for not bearing fruit. St. John the Baptist says the same: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 3:10). So it will also be done to us if we do not bear good fruit, such as God expects of us. God planted a vineyard and expected it to yield good grapes, but in only produced wild grapes. “Now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste” (Isa. 5:5-6).

There is one message in all of this: God expects to see good fruit in us. He expects us to live according to his will. If we do not, we will be cut down. We are the salt of the earth. We are not to let our salt lose its taste. If it does, we are “no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men” (Matt. 5:13). We are also the light of the world (Matt. 5:14). So you should “be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15).

If, furthermore, we have been called to a life of radical perfection, and have committed ourselves to it by vows, oath, or ordination, how should we then live in this world?—like everyone else? If we do, then we are bearing wild grapes, and we will be devoured and trampled down, cut down and perish. Our function in the world is not to imitate the secular lifestyle of the world around us, but to give an example to the world by the witness of our lives, which should be very different from the world. If we do not
renounce a secular lifestyle, we will not bear the fruit expected of us. Our way of living should be our primary and most important sermon. Our sermons will have no effect if our life is no more than an imitation of the lifestyle of the world. Something more is expected of us—a life of radical perfection, a life in which it is obvious to all that we live only for God and his work with all our hearts, without any division of heart, having renounced all else, the pleasures of the world, a life according to the disordered desires of the flesh.

**HUMBLING OURSELVES TO BE EXALTED BY GOD**

30th Sunday of the Year
Sir. 35:15-17; Ps. 33; 2 Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

“Every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14).

Jesus Christ reverses human values. For him, the first are last; and the last first (Matt. 19:30). If we want to be first with him, we have to make ourselves last in this world. The Beatitudes are the reversal of every human value. The poor are blessed, and the rich cursed. Those who are hungry, who weep, and who are hated in this world for the sake of Christ will be greatly rewarded in heaven, and the kingdom of God shall be theirs; while those who are rich, full, who laugh, and are well-spoken of by all are cursed (Luke 6:20-26). The publican who accuses himself as a sinner is justified, while the Pharisee who exults in his righteousness is cast aside.

If we want to advance before God, we have to humble ourselves before him, as did the publican in today’s parable who stood far from the altar in the temple and “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13). God is the one who justifies man and exalts him in the kingdom of heaven. And the scriptures today teach us what we should do to be justified and exalted by God. We have to make ourselves poor before him in this world. We have to live poorly, in evangelical poverty, and not in the pleasures of the world. We should be without attachments in this world, divested and apart from its pleasures. Our lives should be simple and humble, lives of renunciation of this world’s delights. Thus we will be one of the blessed poor of the Lord, the *anawim*, who live only for God and have no other happiness in this world but him. Then the kingdom of God will be ours (Matt. 5:3), for “the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds” (Sir. 35:17).

We will furthermore be blessed if every day we do what the publican did today, humbly accusing ourselves as sinners before God. We should admit our sins and imperfections everyday, renounce them, repent, and confess them. He who does this every day, will go down to his house justified. God is pleased seeing us beating our breast repentantly, saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). He who humbles himself like this will be exalted.

Christ came to justify (make righteous) sinners who repent and humbly beg forgiveness. He serves our death sentence for our sins in his death on the cross, and if we believe in him with humility and repentance, we will be saved, forgiven, and justified.
We will have a new life with his happiness in our hearts. “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you” (James 4:10).

The scriptures teach us that this is the attitude we should have if we want to live well with God. We are to humbly seek him in our need and when we have sinned or fallen into some imperfection that depresses us with guilt. We should humbly confess our sins or imperfections and repent before him. Then he will hear and forgive us, and rejoice our hearts. Then we can say, “I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears” (Ps. 33:4). “This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles” (Ps. 33:6). “When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the broken hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all” (Ps. 33:17-19).

This experience will be ours if we humble ourselves like this, confessing our faults before God every day and begging his forgiveness through Jesus Christ. St. Paul has full confidence in God in the midst of his imprisonment. “The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:18). We should have the same confidence.

Not only do we have to humble ourselves to be forgiven for our sins, but we should live a humble life all the time. “When you give a dinner or a banquet,” Jesus said, “do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:12-14).

We should not give banquets for our friends, but rather renounce such entertainments. If we want to give a banquet, we should give it for the poor. We ourselves should live poorly and eat like the poor—all for the love of God, to be the blessed poor of the Lord, the anawim who live only for God and find all their happiness only in him and in his work, not in the banquets and entertainments of the world.

The life of a disciple should be modeled according to the pattern of the cross, which is negation of ourselves in this world for the love of God “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). We are to be crucified to the world, and the world to us (Gal. 6:14), serving only one master, not God and mammon—the riches and pleasures of the world (Matt. 6:24). This is the hard way of life of the few (Matt. 7:13-14), the way of hating and losing our lives in this world for the love of God (John 12:25; Mark 8:35), to love him with all our hearts, with undivided hearts.

NOW YOU ARE LIGHT IN THE LORD

Monday, 30th Week of the Year
Eph. 4:32-5:8; Ps. 1; Luke 13:10-17

“Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord” (Eph. 5:8).
This is the difference that Christ makes in us. He has freed us from darkness and brought us into the light (Col. 1:12-13). Before we knew Christ, that is, before we matured in our faith, we were in darkness, far from God, full of sins, walking in ignorance, in the desires of the flesh, living for the pleasures of the body and of the world. We did not know the things of the light, the things of God, of purity, of grace. We did not know the forgiveness of sins and the new life in the light that Christ brought into the world and gives us through his death on the cross. Nor did we know the new light of his resurrection or the newness of life of those who rise with him through faith (Rom. 6:4).

But now all of this has changed. Our life is different because of knowing Jesus Christ, who frees us from the depression caused by our sins, removing from us our burden of guilt and illuminating our spirits. His light rejoices our hearts, filling them with light. We now have new desires, having renounced the disordered desires of the flesh. We no longer follow the flesh, but the Spirit, seeking now the things that are above, and no longer those of the earth (Col. 3:1-2).

It is the blood of Christ, poured out in sacrifice, which made us new and put us in the light. Indeed, “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13). So it is because “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2), and “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10). His death saved us from the curse of God for our sins (Gal. 3:10), having accepted in himself this curse on the cross (Gal. 3:13), suffering it for us, instead of us, thus satisfying divine justice on our behalf and setting us free.

Through this sacrifice, we are now in the light, and he wants us to walk in his light and spread it throughout the world through our preaching and the example of our new lives in him. “I am the light of the world,” he says; “he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

And how should we then live if we are in his light? We should have renounced the endless quest after pleasure, which is the lifestyle of the world. We have been redeemed from all this by Christ, for “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers … with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). Rather we should now live for the things that are above, where Christ is (Col. 3:1-2), and walk in his light, “because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining” (1 John 2:8). In the incarnation, “the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world” (John 1:9) to make us sons of light (1 Thess. 5:5). Therefore “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (Isa. 60:1).
MISSIONARIES UNTO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Feast of Saints Simon and Jude, October 28
Eph. 2:19-22; Ps. 18; Luke 6:12-19

“And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles” (Luke 6:13).

Today we celebrate the feast of two apostles, Simon and Jude, men who left everything at the call of Jesus (Luke 5:11, 28; Mark 1:18, 20) in order to be with him and be sent out by him to preach the kingdom of God, cure the sick, and cast out demons (Mark 3:14-15). The twelve apostles were the nucleus of the new Israel, representing its twelve tribes.

Jesus told them, “Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:47), for “behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you” (Luke 24:49), “and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8), for “thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:46-47).

It is in the power of Christ’s death and resurrection that God’s salvation is now made known to all peoples everywhere. The apostles are to preach the cross, upon which God justly punished in his Son Jesus Christ all the sins of the world, satisfying divine justice and letting us go free if only we believe in him, confessing our sins and repenting of them. His death is counted as our death, as our punishment for our sins. He destroys our death by suffering it for us, so that we could be saved and live. His resurrection proves that his death was successful, and that we are indeed forgiven, and so can rise with him, freed at last from sin and depressing guilt to walk in the light of his resurrection, in the newness of life, illumined from within by the Holy Spirit. The apostles are to preach Christ and God’s salvation in him unto the ends of the earth and in all the languages of man. Behold, “Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Ps. 18:4). Because of their preaching, “all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (Ps. 97:3 KJV). They are to go to all nations “to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:18).

In answer to Jesus’ call to perfection (Matt. 19:21; 13:44-46), the apostles left everything to follow him (Luke 5:11, 28; Mark 1:18, 20) to love God with all their hearts, without any division—with undivided hearts. So they became his missionaries to the nations. If we are his missionaries, we are to do the same.

We preach the cross. An apostle—a modern missionary—preaches Christ crucified, as did St. Paul, who said, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). In him is God’s salvation for all who believe.
“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:9-10).

We now hope for the day of Jesus Christ, the day on which his glory will appear. Such hope helps us to live well now in the present. The beauty of his appearance on the last day fills us with desire to be pure and prepared, without sin, and at peace with God in our hearts even now in order to be already in that same state in which we would want him to find us when he comes again with all his saints. We do not see this glory now with our bodily eyes, but our faith in and hope for this final glory enables us to actually live now in God’s glory without physically seeing it. If we are purified and prepared now for his ultimate revelation of splendor, we know that we will live even now in his glory in an interior way. Therefore hoping for the final revelation of his magnificence greatly helps us to live in his glory now in our hearts.

Let us therefore “be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:10). We should be in a constant state of preparation for that great day of his appearance in glory when he comes to fulfill all things, filling them with his splendor. Each day we should grow more, drawing ever closer to the holiness that he wants to see in us, assured that he who began a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6). May we now be in this glorious process, living in joyful hope and eager expectation for the splendid coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Living this way, hoping for his glorious coming, we will not want to break this spell of purity and grace in which we live, tasting even now its sweetness. In order not to break this spell, we will live in a new and holy way, avoiding all worldliness, which would destroy the beauty in which we live.

Do you see, then, how this hope of glory transforms our lives in the present? It transforms our perception of the reality in which we live together with our way of life, in order to be able to remain in this beautiful spell, in this purity and grace, in this heavenly peace, in this light of God in our hearts. This hope makes us want to live even now with God in his glory in our hearts and to work to transform the world into the kingdom of his glory. Thus the hope of glory transforms the world. This is why Christ wants us to live in eager hope and expectation for his coming. “Take heed, watch and pray,” Jesus says, “for you do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:33). Therefore may the Lord “establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess. 3:13).
“I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” (Phil. 1:23-24).

St. Paul recognizes the value of death—it is the glorious portal into the fullness of life in Jesus Christ in his glory. “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Death for St. Paul is not the sad destruction of life, but the beginning of a much better and richer life with God. If he had to choose between living in the flesh and dying, he does not know which to choose. “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:23). “Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling” (2 Cor. 5:2). We will be much more present to the Lord after our death. “We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord … and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6, 8). Christ himself wants us to be much more intimately united with him after death to see him in his original glory: “Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:25).

We remember that St. Theresa of Lisieux rejoiced upon discovering that she had tuberculosis and only a short time remaining to live. She was filled with joy to know that she would soon be with Christ in glory.

St. Paul decided to remain in the flesh, working for the good of his Christians until the time established by God for his departure. “I know that I shall remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith” (Phil. 1:25). We should imitate St. Paul in this, using well our time in the flesh to serve God and devote ourselves to our neighbor, especially to his spiritual good. But when the time comes for us to depart, we should rejoice, for that is far better. It will be the beginning of a life of glory.

We should prepare ourselves now to be ready when our last days come. If we are well prepared, we can rejoice with the saints in the glory that awaits us. We will close our eyes to this world to open them in the kingdom of heaven, where we will see Jesus Christ seated at the right hand of God in the company of all his angels and saints, and we will be filled with splendor and light, living forever in heavenly peace with God. All the sufferings of this life will then be over.

To be prepared for this, we are to live in humility, taking the last place in this world, living the mystery of the cross, not living for our own pleasures, but only for God in every aspect of our lives, renouncing the entertainments of this world to love God with an undivided heart. Every Christian is called to this life of perfection, not just monks—all are called to model their lives on the cross and renounce a worldly lifestyle. Only thus will we be prepared to enter into the fullness of life in the splendor of the kingdom of heaven on the day of our death.
“And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold’ (Luke 19:8).

Today we see dramatically illustrated the mercy of God toward all his creatures, even to a tax collector like Zacchaeus. We can begin to think that God does not love us because we are not perfect all the time in everything. But today Jesus reveals that he loves and seeks out sinners, those who are lost and far from God. Jesus calls them, and if they show interest in him, he saves them and transforms them into new men, forgiving their sins. Zacchaeus showed great interest in Jesus, even to the point of climbing a tree to see him. And when Jesus saw him and called him, “he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully” into his home (Luke 19:6). And not only that, but he also said, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold” (Luke 19:8).

We see here a tremendous transformation in Zacchaeus, which came over him through the presence of Jesus in his home. The interest in Jesus that he showed was rewarded by Jesus publicly calling him by name when he was in the tree, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). This was a great honor for Zacchaeus. The famous preacher, Jesus, was going to stay at his house! Zacchaeus was filled with joy and gladly welcomed him, and was immediately converted, deciding then and there to renounce half of his goods and give them to the poor. Jesus’ staying in his home instantaneously converted him, and Zacchaeus began to be a new man, putting off the old man (Eph. 4:22-24).

We should not think that Jesus only loves the righteous. Rather, sinners can expect to receive much from him if only they show an interest in him, as did Zacchaeus. Then he will call us and stay in our homes and in our hearts, filling them with light, and inspiring us to radically change our way of living.

But we also see that God works gradually too, correcting, forming, and guiding us little by little. He allowed Zacchaeus to grow to manhood and become a chief tax collector in Jericho and become very rich. Then at last when Zacchaeus showed interest in Jesus, even to the point of climbing a tree to see him, Jesus converted him on the spot and transformed him.

What interest in Jesus should we show to be transformed like this by him? One can be a Christian for many years and still not be converted and radically transformed as Zacchaeus was by this dramatic encounter with Jesus. One can even be a priest or a religious or even a monk and still not be radically converted and transformed by Jesus, as was Zacchaeus at this moment. What we need is the touch of Jesus in our hearts, and we need to be receptive to this touch and accept it, as Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus.

Then we must make a radical decision for the future to change our lifestyle in this world—we must decide that from now on we will live completely for Jesus with all our heart and life, in everything that we do, renouncing all else. This means that we will use our money and goods in the future only for God and for the things and work of God, and for the poor, no longer for our own personal pleasures, no longer for our own...
entertainments. This means to live poorly from now on, embracing evangelical poverty, and renouncing the pleasures and the delights of this world. This is, in short, a new way of living in the world, which requires the renunciation of a secular and worldly style of living, of eating, of dressing, and of spending our time. This means that from now on, we are new men (Eph. 4:22-24), a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Rev. 21:5), and that we now live only for God in every aspect of our lives in order to love him with all our hearts, without any division, with radically undivided hearts.

This is the transformation that Jesus Christ wants to work in us. In this way, we will serve only one master, not many, which is impossible (Matt. 6:24). This way, we will lose our life in this world in order to find it (Mark 8:35). Thus we will be last in this world, but first with God (Matt. 19:30).

How merciful God is in allowing us to live to this point in our lives when we can make this decision and undergo this conversion! How good he is not to have destroyed us long ago in our sins! He gives us this new opportunity to respond to his grace and love. Such is God. “Thou art merciful to all … and thou dost overlook men’s sins, that they may repent” (Wis. 11:23).

THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS

All Saints Day, November 1
Rev. 7:2-4, 9-14; Ps. 23; 1 John 3:1-3; Matt. 5:1-12

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3).

Today, All Saints Day, we honor all those who lived holy lives here on earth and are now with God in heaven. All are called to holiness and perfection. “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). This was directed to everyone, not just to the apostles. All are called to live the cross and the beatitudes, not just monks, religious, and celibates. It is not that only monks and religious are called to a life of sacrifice, austerity, and asceticism, while everyone else is called to a life of self-indulgence, pleasure, and entertainment. All are called to deny themselves and live the cross: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). The way of holiness is one, and it is for all. It is the narrow and hard way of life, not the broad and easy way of the world (Matt. 7:13-14). Unfortunately only a few choose the way of life, but all are called to it—married householders as well as monks, celibates, and religious.

When Zacchaeus said, “‘Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor’ … Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house’” (Luke 19:8-9). When Jesus saw how Zacchaeus was transformed, renouncing half of his goods for the poor, embracing evangelical poverty, he said that Zacchaeus had experienced salvation. He chose the narrow and hard way of life, to live no more for his own pleasure but for God and the poor, renouncing a self-indulgent life for one of sacrifice of self to God for others. He made himself one of the blessed poor of the Lord, for whom God is their only happiness, having lost and renounced everything else. Indeed, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9).
We live in an ever more secularized and self-indulgent world, ever more dedicated to pleasure and to self. The Christian is called to renounce this secular lifestyle. Married householders are called to create holy homes to combat the secularism of the world and live lives of sacrifice, of the cross, and of the beatitudes, as the poor of the Lord—the *anawim*. Blessed indeed are those who renounce the pleasures of the world to live a simple, austere, ascetical, poor, and holy life, and be witnesses of holiness for all, loving God with all their hearts, undivided by the world’s pleasures. We are not to live for our stomachs or for our shame, as many do. They “live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:18-21). “And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:3). This is what we are called to do: to live the cross and the beatitudes and become saints.

**THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD THAT IS BY FAITH IN CHRIST**

Thursday, 31st Week of the Year
Phil. 3:3-8; Ps. 104; Luke 15:1-10

“Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil. 3:7).

Here St. Paul summarizes his doctrine of justification by faith not by works of the law. First he lists those things that were to his advantage for justifying himself through works of the law: circumcision, his tribe, being a Pharisee, his zeal for the law to the point of persecuting the Church, and his being blameless as to righteousness under the law (Phil. 3:5-6). But now he says that none of this has any meaning for him anymore. He has renounced it all to know Christ and receive his free gift of righteousness through faith. In comparison with the justification of Christ, all his own self-justification by good works according to the law is now to him loss and refuse (Phil. 3:7-8). What he now wants is to “be found in him [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:9).

Christ justifies us—makes us righteous, giving us the gift of his own righteousness—by his death on the cross, which expiated our sins, in that he suffered our just punishment for us and instead of us, being our substitute before God. Thus God justly expiated all human sins, showing his justice in demanding a just punishment for sin and at the same time showing his justifying justice, in that he justifies us—makes us just—through our faith in Christ. It is through faith in Christ that we receive this gift of righteousness—justification. Christ is the one “whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God passed over the sins that were previously committed” (Rom. 3:25 NKJV). God did this “to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26 NKJV).
Many Jews rejected Christ, preferring their own righteousness through their own good works according to the law. “For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (Rom. 10:3).

It is the merits of Christ’s death on the cross that justify and save us, making us righteous before God; and we receive this great gift through our faith in the saving power of Christ’s death. In comparison to this gift, all our own self-justification is loss and refuse (Phil. 3:7-8). Therefore St. Paul says that he wants to “be found in him [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:8). It is this gift that makes us resplendent before God with all our sins forgiven and with his peace reigning in our hearts.

HOW TO BE GUILTLESS ON THE DAY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

Friday, 31st Week of the Year
Phil. 3:17-4:1; Ps. 121; Luke 16:1-8

“Many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:18-19).

As Christians, we are called to more than this. We should love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). “Our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20). We have risen with Christ and therefore should “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1). So “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2). It is impossible to serve God, as we ought, and at the same time serve the pleasures and riches of the world. No one can serve two masters—God and mammon (Matt. 6:24).

Since we will be like God when Christ appears in his glory (1 John 3:2), we should purify ourselves now, for “every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:3). We should be in a process of purification, preparing ourselves for our future transformation in glory. We should conform ourselves to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29) and be transformed from glory to glory, for “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). In loving God with all our hearts and in contemplating him, we are transformed into his likeness if our way of living is congruent with our love.

God “raised us up with him [Christ], and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). We should therefore live a risen, and even an ascended, life in the sense that we now seek the things that are above, and no longer those that are on earth; serve only one master, not many masters in the pleasures of the world; have one treasure only, which is in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21); and love God with all our hearts,
without any division. This means not having our belly as our god and not glorying in our
shame, as so many do.

Having converted to this new way of living, the steward in today’s gospel is a good
example for us of the new way in which we should now use our material goods—to help
others, making friends for ourselves with our money. Instead of using it for our own
pleasure, we should use it for the good of the world and for the poor. “Make friends for
yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you
into the eternal habitations” (Luke 16:9). If we do this, we will be prepared for the
coming of the Lord, which we now await. The correct use of our material goods and the
congruency of our way of life are very important if we want to be sons of light, “guiltless
in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8).

THE CALL TO CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

Saturday, 31st Week of the Year
Phil. 4:10-19; Ps. 111; Luke 16:9-15

“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or
he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and
mammon” (Luke 16:13).

Here we hear the fundamental radical call of the gospel to perfection and holiness.
Even though some—monks, celibates, and religious—follow this call in a literal and
radical way, it is nonetheless addressed to all, to every Christian. This saying of Jesus
fulfills his first and most important commandment: to love God with all our heart, mind,
soul, and strength (Mark 12:30). If we love God with all our hearts, we cannot serve two
masters—God and mammon (the riches and pleasures of the world). By serving one of
these, we automatically reject the other. If we serve pleasure, we abandon God, for he
wants us to serve him with all our hearts, with completely undivided hearts. All must do
this according to their state in life. Married householders will do it in one way, while
ascetics, monks, and celibates will do it in a more literal and radical way, trying not to
divide their hearts with anything at all, not even with the love of a Christian spouse in
matrimony or with a female friend, and they will also embrace evangelical poverty in a
radial way for the love of God.

We must be faithful in little things (money, food, clothing, and material goods), using
our money to make friends for ourselves if we wish to also be faithful in much (Luke
16:9-10). If we are dishonest in small things, we will also be dishonest in greater things
(Luke 16:10). If we wish to receive true spiritual riches, we must be faithful with
unrighteous mammon, using our wealth properly for others, not for our own pleasures

We should not put on banquets, except for the poor (Luke 14:12-13). The rich have
already received their consolation in this world if they use their money for their own
pleasures (Luke 6:24; 16:25). In such a case, it will be very hard for them to enter the
kingdom of God. In fact, it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle
than for such people to enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:23-24). To possess the
kingdom, which is a buried treasure and a pearl of great price, we must sell all we possess and live in evangelical poverty (Matt. 13:44-46). That is, we must renounce the pleasures of the world. We have to lose (Mark 8:35) and hate (John 12:25) our lives in this world to save them. We are to be crucified to the world, and the world to us (Gal. 6:14). In order not to be choked by thorns—worldly pleasures—we should avoid them (Luke 8:14). This is the narrow path of life, of the few; even though all are called to choose it (Matt. 7:13-14). Our family should not be an obstacle in this, for we can leave our family to follow Christ more radically and consistently (Luke 14:26). We should leave all things to be a true disciple (Luke 14:33; 5:11, 28). Those who do so are blessed and will receive a hundredfold reward (Matt. 19:29). They have chosen the path of perfection in a more radical way (Matt. 19, 21).

ANTICIPATING THE LIFE OF THE RESURRECTION

32nd Sunday of the Year
2 Macc. 7:1-2, 9-14; Ps. 16; 2 Thess. 2:16-3:5; Luke 20:27-38

“The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Luke 20:34-36).

We are now approaching the end of the liturgical year, and our attention begins to be focused on the end of the world, the Parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven, and the world of the resurrection, when we will receive our risen bodies and live forever with Christ in the new Jerusalem, city of splendor and light.

Today Jesus talks about the world of the resurrection on the last day. He says that our life then will be very different than now. We will die no more, and so there will be no further need for marriage to procreate. There they do not marry, “for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels” (Luke 20:36). Marriage is only for this present world. It will end when this world ends. In the world of the resurrection, we will be like angels, no longer procreating. There will be neither sexual relations nor marriage in the new Jerusalem, the new world of the resurrection at the end of this present world. All will be celibates in the resurrection.

Celibacy now is an anticipation of the world of the resurrection. It is an eschatological sign, a sign ahead of time of the last day and of what it will be like then. Those who are celibate now are signs and reminders for all of their future state—they are like a mirror reflecting for the whole Church its future condition, when all who reach the world of the resurrection will be celibate, with radically undivided hearts in their love for God, not divided even by the love for a human spouse within the Christian sacrament of matrimony. Those who are now celibate—monks, religious, and priests—anticipate ahead of time in this present world the life of the resurrection, and so they are a mirror for the whole Church of the final goal of all.

Those who are celibate try—or should try—to live an angelic life now ahead of time in this world. They are already like angels in the sense that they “neither marry nor are
given in marriage” (Luke 20:35). They try to live in a radical and literal way the first and most important commandment of Jesus, to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). Those who live this way already in this world should live their celibacy in an integral and consistent way. That is, they should not only not divide their hearts with a human spouse or a female friend, but they should also not divide their hearts with other worldly pleasures.

If they do not guard their hearts like this in an integral and consistent way in every aspect of their lives, they will not enjoy the full advantage of celibacy. They should live an austere and ascetical life, renouncing all the delights of the world and of the table, eating simply and austerely, only what is necessary to sustain life and health, sacrificing all delicacies. Monks should give us a good example in this, living, as they do, within monastic enclosures, separated from the world, not going outside of their cloisters, eating ascetically, and without meat, renouncing television, movies, radio, and sports. Such is the monastic life, correctly, radically, consistently, and integrally lived. These people should give an example to the whole Church of a holy life, focused exclusively on God.

Celibates, by living Jesus’ first and most important commandment in a radial way, give an example to animate and inspire everyone else to also live the cross and the beatitudes, and this includes married householders and parents of families. It is not that only monks and celibates are called to a life of sacrifice, while everyone else is called to a life of self-indulgence, pleasure, and entertainment. All are called to sanctity and to a life of perfection (Matt. 5:48), to live the cross and to embrace evangelical poverty, to be the blessed poor of the Lord, the anawim, who live only for God with all their hearts. “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven” (Luke 6:20). These words were directed to everyone. All should deny themselves and carry the cross. “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). All are called to renounce the pleasures of the world to live only for God with all their hearts, with undivided hearts—the married as well as celibates—although celibates are an inspiring model for all, for they do this in a much more radical way. Thus all will be ready for the glory that awaits us in the world of the resurrection, in the new Jerusalem.

THE WITNESS OF OUR LIVES

Monday, 32nd Week of the Year
Titus 1:1-9; Ps. 23; Luke 17:1-6

“Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin” (Luke 17:1-2).

Our life and way of life are very important, either for good or for evil. A bad example is a scandal (the Greek word used here—skandala), that discourages and misleads people; while a good example is a witness, a testimony, that encourages and properly orients them. In the Church, there are many scandals. Believers look to their
leaders’ lives for an inspiring example of their preaching; and when instead they see a bad or worldly example, they are scandalized and discouraged. Such bad example weakens their faith. Today Jesus condemnns such scandals.

Believers hope for more in their leaders—in their priests and religious—for they have chosen a more literal and radical way of Christian perfection. Believers have a right to see in them something more, a more complete and total dedication to the Lord alone. They expect to see in their priests a heart more undivided in their love for God, a heart and lifestyle that is less worldly, more reserved for the Lord alone, more dedicated, not distracted by the pleasures of the world and the entertainments that are normal for a secular lifestyle. Believers expect that their priests have renounced the world and its pleasures and diversions, and that they are now living a holy life, seeking the things that are above, not worldly entertainments (Col. 3:1-2). Believers hope to see in their leaders men and women who are crucified to the world, and the world to them (Gal. 6:14).

It is true that our life and our way of life are always our best and most important sermon. If it is obvious by our life that we have renounced the world and its pleasures, then our sermons will have an effect, for actions speak louder than words; and words backed up by actions are powerful. A preacher who has a worldly lifestyle is wasting his time and his life. His ministry will have little effect. Only preachers who have renounced the world and a secular lifestyle and who dedicate themselves totally to God with all their heart, without any division among the delights and entertainments of the world, will have a word of power that changes lives. We oppose the world and its lifestyle with an opposite lifestyle, a holy and dedicated, renouncing and radical lifestyle. Then we can add our words of explanation and exhortation, and our sermons will have an effect.

We should not only avoid giving scandal but should positively give good example of a life dedicated only to God with a heart that is undivided and completely congruent with our preaching. This is what builds up the Church and converts people. If we preach radically—as we should—we also have to live radically.

**HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE?**

Thursday, 32\(^{nd}\) Week of the Year
Philem. 7-20; Ps. 145; Luke 17:20-25

“Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, “Lo, here it is!” or “There!” for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you’” (Luke 17:20-21).

The kingdom of God is already here in Jesus Christ. Therefore we should not hope for its coming as something completely new, for since Christ’s birth it has been with us. Nor should we look for cosmic signs indicating its arrival, for it “is not coming with signs to be observed … for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:20-21).
Yet we do await the second coming of Jesus Christ in his glory with all his saints on
the clouds of heaven when he will come to consummate all things. His second coming
will be preceded by many signs. “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and
upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves,
men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the
powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in a
cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:25-27).

We should look for the signs of his coming and be prepared for it now. Jesus
revealed these signs to us so that we might meditate on them and live in happy and eager
expectation of these events. Even if we die before seeing these things, we will not have
wasted our time hoping and preparing ourselves for them, for this joyful expectation
greatly helps us to live a watchful life now in this world. And so indeed should we live,
in constant watchfulness and preparation, abstaining from worldly delights and
entertainments, and looking for the glorious coming of our Lord. This is how Jesus
wants us to live—that is why he revealed these things to us—as servants awaiting the
arrival of their master so that when he comes, he may find them awake and watching
(Luke 12:35-38). We should live in hope, always prepared, so that when he comes and
knocks, we might open to him at once (Luke 12:36).

His coming will be glorious like a flash of lightning, “for as the lightning flashes and
lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of man be in his day” (Luke
17:24). Hoping for this glory, which we have already begun to experience, how should
we then live? Jesus gives us the answer: “Take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be
weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come
upon you suddenly like a snare” (Luke 21:34). We should live a simple life of the cross
and beatitudes with purified and undivided hearts in our love for God, renouncing the
pleasures of the world to live for him alone with all our hearts. Living in the spell of his
coming greatly helps us to abstain from the delights of the world and seek rather the
things that are above where Christ is (Col. 3:1-2).

THE LOVE OF MANY WILL GROW COLD BEFORE THE PAROUSIA

Saturday, 32nd Week of the Year
3 John 5-8; Ps. 111; Luke 18:1-8

“When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8).

We are now awaiting the Parousia. There will be a time of great tribulation in the
final days (Matt. 24:21), “and many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And
because wickedness is multiplied, most men’s love will grow cold. But he who endures
to the end will be saved” (Matt. 24:11-12). In fact, true and faithful Christians “will be
hated by all for my name’s sake” (Matt. 10:22). Perseverance during such time is of the
greatest importance, for many will not persevere. They will be deceived and led astray
by the many false prophets who will arise in those days, and their faith and love will
grow cold—and those days are with us now. St. John says to the Christians of Ephesus,
“I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember
then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first” (Rev. 2:4-5). What will be said to us?

It is difficult to persevere in prayer, love, and faith. Many will fall away, or behind, and abandon their first love. The faith of many will grow cold as they grow ever more worldly, ever more like the secularized culture that surrounds us. So Jesus asks us today, “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8). This is why he tells us today’s parable of the widow and the unjust judge, “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

How easy it is just to let oneself be carried along by the current—just doing what everybody else is doing without discerning whether it is good or bad. And if the current is the secular lifestyle of the world around us, how easy it is to become worldly ourselves and grow cold in our love for God. Living like everybody else, following their customs, little by little we forget God. There are so many worldly ideas and customs around us that influence us, that if we just go along with the current, our salt will lose its taste (Matt. 5:13), and our love for God will grow cold (Matt. 24:12). Rather we should resist this secular current and renounce the worldliness of the world with its styles and fashions if we want to persevere unto the end, for it is the one who perseveres faithful unto the end who will be saved (Matt. 24:13).

We are to do what the widow in today’s parable did: persevere in petition and prayer. “And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily” (Luke 18:7-8). God’s part is clear and certain. He will help us. It is our part that is in doubt and danger. “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8).

We need to be persevering and vigilant, renounce the worldliness of the world, and reject the secular lifestyle that surrounds us. Rather, we are to live in joyful and eager expectation of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in his glory. May he find us awaiting him with pure hearts devoted to him alone.

THE END OF THE WORLD AND THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS CHRIST

33rd Sunday of the Year
Mal. 4:1-2; Ps. 97; 2 Thess. 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19

“As for these things which you see, the days will come when there shall not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (Luke 21:6).

Today is a day that we spend meditating on the end of the world and the second coming of Jesus Christ in glory. Meditating on this helps us to experience something of the glory of this mystery even now. His coming on the clouds of heaven will be preceded by a time of war and great tribulation. It will be like the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. The temple will be desecrated, as it was in the days of the Maccabees, and then the end will come. “So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Matt. 24:15-16; Dan. 9:27). These will be terrible times, as when the Romans destroyed the city. As then, it will be a time
to flee to the mountains and live in the fields. “And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be” (Matt. 24:19-21). Then his actual coming will be like a flash of lightning, “for as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man” (Matt. 24:27).

We are to prepare ourselves now for this coming—this is what Jesus tells us—and live in anticipation of it, for after this great tribulation, we will see his glory, and he will take all of his elect to live with him. “Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Matt. 24:42). We are to live in anticipation of this final day of glory, as a people of hope, and it is good for us to meditate on this now. That is why Jesus revealed these things to us. Meditating on this helps us live better, more caught up in the things of the Lord, eager to live with Christ in glory in the new Jerusalem. And so we experience even now a foretaste of this glory shining in our hearts.

And so we turn our attention to that time, when “immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matt. 24:29). Then “all the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their hosts shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree” (Isa. 34:4). St. John saw this final day in a vision and said, “Behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up … Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals … hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains.” They were hiding from the Lord and the Lamb, “for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?” (Rev. 6:12-17). Indeed “who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like a fullers’ soap” (Mal. 3:2). Pray therefore “that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man” (Luke 21:36), for in those days there will be “upon the earth distress of nations and perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world” (Luke 21:25-26). Some will be condemned in this destruction, while others will be left. “I tell you, in that night there will be two men in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together; one will be taken and the other left” (Luke 17:34-35).

Let us not be like Noah’s generation, for “as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of man. They ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:26-27). Let us rather be prepared now. That day will be like a fire that burns up the wicked. “All evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch” (Mal. 4:1). But that day will be different for those who are prepared. “For you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall” (Mal. 4:2).

But at the end of this tribulation, “they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27). “And he will send out his angels with a loud
trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt. 24:31). Then all those who are saved will rejoice with all of nature at his coming. Even now we should rejoice at his coming, the glory of which we are already beginning to experience. So “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity” (Ps. 97:7-9). Meditating on these things rejoices the heart and lifts the spirit. It motivates us to change our lives, renounce a worldly lifestyle, and adopt a new way of living in the world, with all our hearts concentrated on God, awaiting his coming into the world.

THE TIME IS NEAR

Monday, 33rd Week of the Year
Rev. 1:1-4; 2:1-5; Ps. 1; Luke 18:35-43

“Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3).

St. John, the author of Revelation, has a strong sense that “the time is near.” That is, he lives in the nearness of the coming of the Lord. Nearly two thousand years have passed since he wrote these words, and we still live in the nearness of the coming of the Lord. This is how Christians of all ages should live. It does not matter how many years still remain until the Lord’s coming; a Christian should always live in the nearness his coming—especially at this time of year. Such is the Christian life. This is how Jesus wants us to live: always longing for his coming, watching and keeping vigil for it, preparing ourselves ever more, living lives of eager expectation, vigilance, and preparation.

St. Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand” (Phil. 4:4-5). He who lives in the nearness of the Lord lives in his peace, for he “has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5). There is no peace like the peace of Christ, for he removes from our hearts the pain of guilt for sin by his sacrifice on the cross, where he suffered the pain of alienation from God for us and instead of us, satisfying divine justice for us. By invoking his merits—especially in the sacrament of reconciliation—we are cured of this pain in our hearts, and his peace reigns within us. In this way, we live in his nearness, eagerly awaiting his coming in glory.

Christ is he “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev. 1:4). He is with us now. In the future, he will come in his glory to illuminate the world, and we will be with him in glory. Hope for this glory guards us now from evil and sin, for we know that by sin we will lose this glory, this peace, this sense of the nearness of the Lord in which we now live. “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him” (Rev. 1:7). We should live now in joyful and eager expectation of his glorious coming on the clouds of heaven to illuminate all things and to fill our hearts with his splendor. We want him to sustain us to the end, “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8). His
blood washes us now and makes us blameless. We want to stay in this state of purity until his coming and grow still more in it.

We should not be like the Christians of Ephesus, to whom St. John wrote, “I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first” (Rev. 2:4-5). It is easy to fall from our first love by allowing the worldly current in which we live to carry us along so that we live like everyone else, and so instead of living a life of prayer and fasting, we live a life of self-indulgence, pleasure, and entertainment. Instead of having only God for our happiness, we have worldly pleasures that divide our hearts. We should repent of this and return from where we have fallen, be cleansed by the blood of Christ, and live in the nearness of the Lord in joyful and eager expectation for his coming.

**THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB THAT WAS SLAIN**

**Thursday, 33rd Week of the Year**

Rev. 5:1-10; Ps. 149; Luke 19:41-44

“Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst redeem men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth” (Rev. 5:9-10).

God is about to reveal to St. John a vision of the end times about the great tribulation of the last days and the second coming of Christ on the clouds of heaven to set up a kingdom of righteousness on the earth for a thousand years. After that, following the destruction of the earth, there will be a new earth, upon which the new Jerusalem will come down and remain forever. But it is the Lamb who was slain who makes this great revelation possible. He alone was worthy to open the seven seals of the book of this revelation. He was worthy because he was slain and with his blood redeemed us for God and made us kings and princes capable of reigning with him upon the earth. The Lamb who was slain is the key to all the revelation of the last days. By his blood, we can reign with him on earth for a thousand years and then live with him forever in glory in the new Jerusalem on the new earth. Only those redeemed by his blood will be glorified in this way.

He is “the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He takes away our sins by being slain, sacrificed, carrying our sins, doing reparation for them by his death on the cross. He is punished by God as a sinner carrying our sins—although he knew no personal sin (2 Cor. 5:21). Our sins were justly punished in his death on the cross. Thus his poured-out blood freed us from sin and punishment. Divine justice was satisfied in him. “You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

In his torture on the cross, “he was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearsers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth” (Isa. 53:7 KJV). Thus “he hath borne our grieves, and
carried our sorrows ... He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed ... The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:4-6 KJV).

What you need to know is “the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:42) and “the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:44). These things were hidden from the eyes of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-42), and for this reason it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD (Luke 19:44). May we not follow their example! Let us rather follow Jesus Christ with faith and without doubts, accepting him as the price of our redemption, the means that God gave the world for its salvation.

HOW WE SHOULD LIVE IN HOPE OF THE THINGS TO COME

Friday, 33rd Week of the Year
Rev. 10:8-11; Ps. 118; Luke 19:45-48

“And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. And I was told, ‘You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings’” (Rev. 10:10-11).

St. John, the author of the book of Revelation, is a prophet. He has to preach the word of God about the future, about the destiny of the earth and its peoples and nations. He prophesies the future, the events of the last days, the great tribulation, and the second coming of Christ on the clouds of heaven to change all things. He prophesies the destruction of evil and of evildoers, the salvation of the just, and a kingdom of righteousness on earth for a thousand years. He prophesies the destruction of the world, the new heavens and the new earth, and the new Jerusalem, which will come down upon the new earth and in which will live all those who are saved through their faith in Christ and the saints of all ages.

To prophesy all this, St. John must feed himself on the word of God. Therefore an angel gives him a scroll to eat and fill himself with this teaching. It was as sweet as honey in his mouth, but when he had eaten it, it made his stomach bitter (Rev. 10:10). We are now awaiting the fulfillment of his prophecies. We are hoping for the final days, and are awaiting the great tribulation and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to glorify us and take us to live with him in splendor with all the saints. St. John’s prophecy should wake us up from our sleep and motivate us to prepare ourselves for Christ’s coming, purifying ourselves from the world to live a new and risen life with him even now, focusing from now on only on him and on doing his will in the world. We should live an anticipation of the life of glory that awaits us in the future when Christ will come to carry us off with himself. These final two weeks of the liturgical year are dedicated to this reality. This should be our meditation during these days.

Anticipating the glory that is to come strengthens and inspires us to live better, more worthy of our vocation, and in a more sincere and proper way in accord with our state in life, especially if we have been called to the priestly, monastic, or religious life. We should give good example to others by the witness of our new and holy way of life in
Christ and by our renunciation of worldly pleasures, which only divide our hearts. Rather, we should live completely for Christ with both body and soul—both of them working harmoniously together to live only for him without division of heart or body in other things or diversions, which only make us forget God. God should be our only happiness, and this should guide our body as well as our soul in how we are to live in hope of the glory that God has promised us. We are not to be divided, with our soul serving God, while our body serves pleasure. Rather, we are to live a unified life—body and soul together—in undivided service of God with all our heart and body in all that we do.

CELIBACY, THE MORE RADICAL WAY OF PERFECTION

Saturday, 33rd Week of the Year
Rev. 11:4-12; Ps. 143; Luke 20:27-40

“The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Luke 20:34-36).

Today Jesus tells us something about what the world of the resurrection will be like, when we are transformed and given our resurrection bodies (1 Cor. 15:51-52). We will be like angels—celibate. There will be no more procreation or sexual relations, for we shall die no more. Procreation continues the human race in this world, because here we die. But in the world of the resurrection, there will be neither death nor marriage. Therefore a man who remarries after the death of his wife, will have no problem whatsoever in the resurrection knowing which of the two will be his wife, for he will not have a wife in the resurrection.

Those who are already celibate in this present world try to live in this present life an anticipation of the life of the resurrection. They are eschatological signs—that is, signs and reminders for the whole Church of her future and final state, which will be a state in which we can love God with all the love of our heart, without any division, not even the division of heart caused by a Christian spouse in the sacrament of matrimony. Hence the state of celibacy is the highest form of human life, for in it we can most perfectly unify our life—body and soul together—focusing only on God in every aspect of our life. Thus we can, in the fullest way, make God the only happiness of our life, renouncing pleasures and entertainments, delicacies, succulent food, movies, etc., which only divide our hearts from a pure and undivided love of God.

Therefore St. Paul writes: “The unmarried man gives his mind to the Lord’s affairs and to how he can please the Lord; but the man who is married gives his mind to the affairs of this world and to how he can please his wife, and he is divided in mind. So, too, the unmarried woman, and the virgin, gives her mind to the Lord’s affairs and to being holy in body and spirit; but the married woman gives her mind to the affairs of this world and how she can please her husband” (1 Cor. 7:32-34 JB).
This is why celibacy is so important—it is the monastic, religious, priestly, apostolic life. In celibacy, we anticipate our final state in the world of the resurrection, and we try not to divide our hearts in any way, not with a spouse, nor with a female friend, nor with the delights, delicacies, and entertainments of this world. Rather, we try to love God with all our heart, with an undivided heart, and make him the only happiness of our life, living an austere and ascetical life for the love of God.

Celibacy is the most radical and literal way of perfection (Matt. 19:21; 13:44-46). Yet all are called to love God with all their heart, married householders—according to the possibilities of their state in life, as much as they are able—as well as celibates and monks. But celibacy is the more radical way of doing this.

JESUS CHRIST KING OF THE UNIVERSE

Solemnity of Christ the King, Last Sunday of the Year
2 Sam. 5:1-3; Ps. 121; Col. 1:12-20; Luke 23:35-43

“May you be strengthened with all power … giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:12-14).

Christ is the king of the universe. “He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent” (Col. 1:18). “The peaceful king, whose face the whole earth desires to see, is magnified” (Christmas antiphon, first vespers, old liturgy). “The peaceful king is exalted above all the kings of the whole earth” (Christmas antiphon, first vespers, old liturgy). He is our king. He is in all places. He is very great. “For now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And this shall be peace” (Mic. 5:4-5). He is our peace. Our peace is in him. And we honor him today as king.

He freed us from darkness. Darkness is what we experience when we do not do the will of God. Christ says, “Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten” (Rev. 3:19). His chastisement makes us walk in darkness, weighed down by the burden of our guilt, which is a pain in the heart that saddens us. Our king “has delivered us from the dominion of darkness” (Col. 1:13) and “qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col. 1:12). He has “transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). We now live in light in the kingdom of Christ, which he has given us. And all this came to us through his death, for he is the one “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:14).

God was pleased “through him to reconcile to himself all things … making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). It is his blood that redeems us and through which God forgives us, for his blood paid our debt of suffering due to us because of our sins. Once this debt has been paid, we are freed from guilt and from the darkness that depresses our spirit. And this redemption is personally applied to us through our faith when we invoke the merits of his death on the cross. This is most completely and

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profoundly experienced in the sacrament of reconciliation, which individually channels these merits to us.

We therefore rejoice in our king and give thanks to God for this great redemption and peace which we have in him. Wherever we go, he is with us, redeeming us, forgiving us, and freeing us from the dominion of darkness. He is great unto the ends of the earth; and he is our peace (Mic. 5:4-5). He is the peaceful king, whose face the whole world longs to see; and he has become great.

What is there that is more important than this interior peace with God? With this peace, we can endure anything. And how many people are there who do not have this peace and do not know how to get it or where it is to be found? God himself gave us the means to obtain it—this peace that we most need. How many believe that this peace and this great interior happiness is to be found in the pleasures of the body, in succulent food, in delicacies, desserts, and in entertainments—in movies, pleasure trips, and sex? Others believe that they will find it in their family or with friends. But everyone eventually finds out that it is not to be found in this way. It is only found in God, in believing in his Son, and in invoking the merits of his death on the cross. Only this makes us a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Rev. 21:5; Gal. 6:15).

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7). It is the blood of his cross that fills our hearts with heavenly peace and with the life and presence of Christ within us, for when we were in sin and darkness, he revealed himself to us in this great peace and joy. It is he, our great king, who frees us from all this darkness and sadness “in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him” (Col. 1:22). “While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10). “You who were once far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace” (Eph. 2:13-14). Jesus Christ is “the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth … who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5). In him, we have this great peace in which we live, and which illuminates our hearts. He is the Prince of Peace. “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom” (Isa. 9:7). “He will be great … and the Lord will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32-33). “For now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And this shall be peace” (Mic. 5:4-5).

A LIFE OF FULL-TIME DEDICATION TO GOD

Monday, Last Week of the Year
Rev. 14:1-5; Ps. 23; Luke 21:1-4

“These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These were redeemed from among men, being first fruits to God and to the Lamb” (Rev. 14:4 NKJV).
This is a special group. They are celibates, who have preserved their purity and virginity—they “were not defiled with women.” They have moreover dedicated themselves to following the Lamb (Christ) full-time wherever he goes. They have renounced forever the householder life to dedicate themselves to the full-time service of God. They have been called to an alternative path of full-time religious devotion, prayer, contemplation, and charitable service to their neighbor for the love of God. Their hearts are not divided even by the love of a Christian spouse.

They are therefore a model for religious, celibate, monastic, apostolic, and priestly life today. Those who have been called to this more radical way of perfection, to literally love God with all their hearts, should live in this way. These are the “first fruits to God and to the Lamb” (Rev. 14:4 NKJV). Those who have been called to this type of life have renounced forever the householder life to give themselves completely to God without any division of heart. They want to unify their life—body and soul working together—in dedicating themselves to God alone. They therefore live a simple, austere, and ascetical life, because they want God to be the only joy of their life.

Today we also see a poor widow, who out of her poverty put into the temple treasury “all the living that she had”—two copper coins (Luke 21:1-4). She represents the anawim, the poor of the Lord, who have lost everything of this world and now live only for God. He is their only joy in this world. She has left and renounced all else, all the pleasures of the world.

The elderly widow Ana, who saw the infant Jesus in the temple, was also one of the blessed poor of the Lord, a person dedicated full-time to God in a life of prayer, devotion, contemplation, and religious practices. “She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day” (Luke 2:37). She too was celibate since her widowhood, having left and renounced the householder life. Monks and contemplatives follow her example today.

St. Paul praises this kind of widow “who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives” (1 Tim. 5:5-6 NKJV).

Judith was this kind of widow. “Judith had lived at home as a widow for three years and four months. She set up a tent for herself on the roof of her house, and girded sackcloth about her loins and wore the garments of her widowhood. She fasted all the days of her widowhood” (Judith 8:4-6).

The celibate, religious, monastic, priestly, and apostolic life is based on these biblical examples. In our day, we very much need to be renewed in this ideal of renouncing the world, its pleasures, and the householder life, to live full-time for God alone.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE WORLD

Thursday, Last Week of the Year

“Then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27).
Today we see the second coming of Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven. We now hope for this glorious coming. It will be accompanied by cosmological signs and great destruction on earth. “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Luke 21:25-26). Today we should solemnly meditate on this day of terror and destruction, the great tribulation of the last days (Matt. 24:21), which will precede the second coming of the Son of man in his glory. St. John saw a vision of this day and said, “The sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up” (Rev. 6:12-14).

On that day, Babylon the great, the great harlot, will also fall (Rev. 18:2; 19:2). She represents the world in opposition to God, the secularized world, which lives in its pleasures, delights, delicacies, luxury, and impurity. She will finally receive her just punishment (Rev. 18:20). To the righteous, a voice from heaven said, “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues” (Rev. 18:4). We should come out of her and not participate in her decadent pleasures in order not to receive her punishment. “In the measure that she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, in the same measure give her torment and sorrow” (Rev. 18:7 NKJV). “The kings of the earth who committed fornication and lived luxuriously with her will weep and lament for her, when they see the smoke of her burning” (Rev. 18:9 NKJV). From her, the kings of the earth had bought every kind of luxury: “cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls … purple, silk and scarlet” (Rev. 18:12). But “in one hour she has been laid waste” (Rev. 18:19).

If we do not want to be judged with her, we should not take part in her luxuries, delights, pleasures, delicacies, and impurity. This worldly lifestyle will be destroyed before Jesus’ second coming, and we should live prepared for this now, renouncing “irreligion and worldly passions” and “live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12-13). We should live only for Christ and be his witnesses in a world forgetful of God and centered on itself and its own pleasures. We should go against the current of the worldly culture in which we live, and not be swept away by its decadent customs, ways, and fashions. Those who live in hope of the coming of the Lord will rather live in vigilance and joyful preparation, not in indulgence and gluttony. We should reserve our hearts—as well as our bodies—only for him, so that he be our only happiness in this life. Only in this way will we begin to taste his sweetness.

CHRIST’S THOUSAND-YEAR REIGN

Friday, Last Week of the Year
Rev. 20:1-4, 11-21:2; Ps. 83; Luke 21:29-33

“Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for
the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Rev. 20:4)

In the last days, Christ will return in triumph from heaven with the armies of heaven, “arrayed in fine linen, white and pure,” following “him on white horses” (Rev. 19:11, 14). The beast (the Antichrist) and the false prophet will be cast alive into the lake of fire (Rev. 19:20), and an angel “seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into a pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended” (Rev. 20:2-3). This is all written in the past tense because it is a vision of the future that St. John saw.

St. Augustine thought that the thousand years is the present time of the Church, but it seems that St. John intends to describe a real future thousand-year reign of peace and justice on earth with Christ and the tribulation martyrs and those who will still be alive at his second coming. Besides, Satan can hardly be said to be bound now, for “your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

St. John rather speaks of a thousand-year reign of the saints with Christ on earth, while Satan is completely bound with a chain in a pit that is sealed over him “that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended” (Rev. 20:1-3). Therefore with Satan bound, this thousand-year reign will be a time of unprecedented righteousness, justice, and peace on earth. “And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison” (Rev. 20:7). Then fire will come down from heaven (Rev. 20:9), and the devil will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10). Then the great white throne judgment will take place, when the present heavens and earth will be destroyed (Rev. 20:11). At this judgment, “if any one’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15). It seems that this judgment will only be for those destined for the lake of fire (the hell of the damned), for the saints were already resurrected (1 Thess. 4:16-17), and the tribulation martyrs were also previously resurrected for the thousand-year reign (Rev. 20:4). At the end of all this, there will be “a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (Rev. 21:1). Then “I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:2). This will mark the beginning of eternity. The saved will live in the new Jerusalem or on the new earth forever, while the damned will be tormented eternally (Rev. 14:11) in the lake of fire (the hell of the damned) (Rev. 20:15). “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:46).
CITY OF GOLD AND LIGHT

Saturday, Last Week of the Year
Rev. 22:1-7; Ps. 94; Luke 21:34-36

“And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:5).

Today, the last day of the year, we contemplate the new Jerusalem, city of gold and light, a gigantic translucent jewel, reflecting the glory of God. It is adorned with diaphanous gems, which reflect the glory of God in every color, and although made of pure gold, it is nonetheless transparent. “The city was pure gold, clear as glass … and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass” (Rev. 21:18, 21). It is a city “having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal” (Rev. 21:11). Its light comes from God and the Lamb, which shine through it, illuminating it from within. Therefore “they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light” (Rev. 22:5). And those that are there “shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:5).

What is this city? It is the final home of all the saved, where we will live forever with God and Jesus Christ in our risen bodies. This beautiful city only comes down to earth (Rev. 21:2, 10) after the second coming of Christ (Rev. 19:11). The sequence of events is as follows. First is the Parousia, Christ’s second coming (Rev. 19:11). Then he will cast the Antichrist into the lake of fire (Rev. 19:20), bind Satan for a thousand years in a sealed pit (Rev. 20:1-3), and set up his reign of righteousness on earth for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4). At the end of the thousand years, Satan will be loosed (Rev. 20:7), but soon after thrown forever into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10). Then the damned will be judged before the great white throne (Rev. 20:11) and cast forever into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15), while the present heaven and earth are destroyed (Rev. 20:11). Then a new heaven and new earth will be created (Rev. 21:1), and the new Jerusalem will come down and rest upon the new earth (Rev. 21:2). Here all the saved will live forever in their risen bodies, which they will receive when Christ comes for them (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-53) shortly before the Parousia.

The new Jerusalem is our great hope, where we will live with God forever, and “see his face” (Rev. 22:4). How should we then live to be worthy of this? Jesus tells us today. “Take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare” (Luke 21:34). A Christian cannot live like the world, for the society and culture of this world are organized around pleasure and forgetfulness of God. A Christian must go against the current of his culture and not go along with its secularized and decadent customs, ways, and fashions. He must discern what he does and not just participate in everything going on around him. He should rather live a simple and austere life, only for God, with a pure heart and body, reserving himself for God alone in everything, not dividing the love of his heart among the pleasures of the world. This is the way of perfection, to which all are called. Those who live this way and believe in Christ will live in the new Jerusalem. And even now they live in spirit with God in this city of gold and light.