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The cover feature for this July 2005 issue on church leadership, while planned months ago, takes on special significance in the transition to new leadership after the death of Pope John Paul II.

I am writing this in April during the interregnum. The conclave will meet next week to select the new pope. The eyes of the world will be focused on the Sistine Chapel, even as they were focused on the moving events surrounding the late pope’s funeral. Catholics, whatever their views on the internal state of their church, have a greater sense of just how important the church is, can be, ought to be, as a moral force and advocate for good in a fractious and violent global community.

The first words of the new pope, his appearance — even the name he chooses — will send an important signal to both church and world about what to expect in the years ahead.

Yet as important as what happens “at the top” may be, the life of the church is what happens locally, diocese by diocese, parish by parish. The ecclesiology of Vatican II emphasized this broad awakening of the entire church, especially the laity, as the body of Christ in the world. All leadership is empowered with real authority and credibility only when it first recognizes and empowers everyone to full participation.

In his feature and in his new book, Who Shall Lead Them? Larry Witham describes the dynamic tension between different styles of leadership that are influencing the American church today, not only from one denomination to another but also within each group. Catholic ministry, in particular, will emerge from this dynamism, driven by demographic change, cultural shifts and global crises. Another name for this dynamism is the Holy Spirit. How blessed we are to live in such interesting, Spirit-filled times.

Patrick Marrin

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**EDITOR’S CORNER**

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Data shows a complex dynamic at work in the American church.

By LARRY WITHAM

Every pastor probably has prayed at a civic event. But as for being in the spotlight, nothing compares with a presidential inauguration. When these inaugural prayers stir controversy, they speak volumes about ministry in America.

At the first Bush inaugural in 2001, for example, evangelist Franklin Graham closed by declaring the name of Jesus Christ. Four years later at President Bush’s second inaugural, Episcopal priest Luis Leon offered prayers from a “nation under God” and concluded in “your most holy name.”

Both prayers got tongues wagging.

For some, the first seemed too doctrinal for a pluralistic America. Others deemed the second too tepid for a “Christian” nation. Whatever the view, the prayers illustrate two important points in the debate over Christian ministry today. First, ministers clearly conceive of their ministry either in more exclusive or more inclusive ways. And second, ministers still have central duties in our society.

Both of these points, in fact, are reassuring when placed against the more pessimistic news about modern American ministry: how it is aging, losing prestige and fraught with struggle between “ordained” and “lay” workers in both Catholic and Protestant circles.

Still, it is reassuring to see a vital tension between the more exclusive approach (teaching “the only way”) and the more inclusive approach (offering “a good way”). It also is reassuring to know that ministers still offer many gifts and services that nobody else provides, and this goes far beyond delivering civic prayers, even prayers for U.S. presidents.

The debate about the future of ministry has countless aspects to consider. But the exclusive-inclusive dynamic and the public role of ministry is one place to begin.

Us and them

The exclusive-inclusive debate starts on a very practical issue: how to grow churches and recruit new blood into ministerial ranks. Among Protestants, the church growth movement argues that the more exclusive the claim of a church — “We are ‘the saved,’ so please join us” — the better it is at drawing and keeping members. More inclusive churches, meanwhile, seem to be declining.

The same exclusive-inclusive dynamic has shaped the Catholic priesthood, according to new studies. The new generation of American priests, for example, is far more conservative than priests longer in service. At a time when vocations to the priesthood have dropped precipitously, a more exclusive image of the priest seems to have greater drawing power.

Yet while the “exclusive” dynamic seems to be winning the day, it has little chance of serving all of America without its twin, the “inclusive” idea of ministry. In the Protestant example, studies also show that hard-edged exclusivity bordering on fundamentalism finally can backfire, especially as a church proceeds through its generations. It is turning out that doctrinal or leadership rigidity alone does not always make a growing congregation. Most essential to growth is a high standard of belief or commitment, whether that belief is conservative or liberal. Both an exclusive and inclusive ministry can achieve this goal.

With apparent success, a more exclusive view of the Catholic priest as alter Christus, another Christ, has indeed increased vocations in the past decade. Yet this alone cannot keep American Catholicism vital for a simple demographic reason: These priests still are few, lay teachers are many and an older generation of more progressive priests still abounds.

According to studies, new priests tend to favor a “sacramental” role, much as priests did in the 1950s. Priests trained in the Vatican II era, however, tend to favor a “servant-leadership” role, with its emphasis on social justice, collaboration and ecumenism.

More laity

The Vatican II era also invited lay workers into church ministry, from married deacons to lay ecclesial ministers. By augmenting the priesthood with lay ministry, Vatican II
was apparently hoping that an exclusive-inclusive kind of ministry could flourish.

Indeed, it is demographically necessary today. The number of priests still is shrinking while the number of lay ministers — about 30,000 in U.S. parishes — is expected to double in the next decade. Fewer younger priests (51 percent) welcome this “lay” expansion than older priests (91 percent), according to one survey. Hence, a young generation of priests must find ways to reconcile themselves to this new picture of ministry, a picture that shows lay ministers sitting at the table with their priests and taking up administrative and teaching roles in more parishes.

When the U.S. bishops surveyed American parishioners around 2000, most respondents favored “an increasing use of deacons and lay ministers” in response to the priest shortage (as compared to closing or merging parishes).

One message the Holy See does not like to hear, meanwhile, is that by far most Catholics would accept married priests. Already, nearly all of today’s permanent deacons are married.

The role of women in Catholic ministry also has gained a higher profile. Among lay ecclesiastical ministers, women make the strongest showing (perhaps 80 percent). In 2004, moreover, the U.S. bishops reported that half of all diocesan administrators are women, comparing favorably with the secular workplace.

**Set apart**

In some ways, this new diversity has demanded that the priest be “set apart” even more, a strengthening of priestly identity encouraged by John Paul II and the new seminary manuals. Yet the generational divide remains among priests. Older priests mostly welcome a broader variation in ministry and sharing of authority. Newer priests are more opposed to such leveling; they are far more likely to reject such radical ideas as welcoming back priests who left parish ministry to marry.

Despite the new tensions, both exclusive and inclusive outlooks in ministry have obvious roles to play. “There are things only a priest can do,” said Sr. Katarina Schuth of St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity in Minneapolis. Yet lay leaders are making more decisions in the absence of priests, said sociology professor James D. Davidson. “De facto, this is happening whether everybody in the church agrees with it or not.” What is more, he said, “The expansion of lay ministers and declining number of priests and sisters has led to a more decentralized church.”

**Bonding or bridging**

This leads to another important aspect of the exclusive-inclusive qualities of ministry, and that is “social capital” — the ability for people to store up Christian character and virtue like money in a savings account. The more exclusive church produces “bonding” social capital. Individuals and families are bonded to a close-knit community, with all the moral benefits. The more inclusive church, however, produces “bridging” social capital, the ability to connect many sects and interest groups in a wider social cooperation. Obviously, both kinds of social capital are essential to a good society and healthy religious life in America.

Ministry typically chooses one or the other as a focus, however. One example is how these different groups tithe.

Protestant evangelical and fundamentalist churches give more exclusively to their church, but mainline Protestants and many Catholics give more to other social causes in addition to their parish; they are equally generous, but give more widely.

Politics illustrate the two approaches as well. Evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics focus on a few single issues and are more likely to ask whether a candidate is “one of us.” Mainline Protestants and many Catholics see political “values” more broadly, which can dilute their focus.

Yet, again, both exclusive and inclusive approaches are essential to forming healthy ways that ministry touches civic life. What is often overlooked, in other words, is the impact beyond the national political headlines. Local ministry, for example, remains crucial in bolstering social services and fair political policy, especially in poorer neighborhoods, according to studies.

Whether ministers take the exclusive or inclusive approach, their efforts would come to nothing without having status in churches or society. Here we return to that second reassurance: There are still some things ministers can do that nobody else can do in society.

**A needed role in society**

Just fewer than 600,000 ordained ministers serve America today (11 percent Catholic priests). About 60 percent of these ministers (both Catholic and Protestant) are “active” in parish leadership, while the rest have other duties or are retired.

American clergy are an older group compared to U.S. citizens in general, averaging above age 50, with

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**When the U.S. bishops surveyed American parishioners around 2000, most respondents favored “an increasing use of deacons and lay ministers” in response to the priest shortage (as compared to closing or merging parishes).**
WHO SHALL LEAD THEM? 
The Future of Ministry in America 
by Larry A. Witham 
Oxford University Press 
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CELEBRATION FEATURE

more experience and education. New recruits, in fact, are older than ever before, with ordinations in some mainline Protestant sectors averaging in the 40s. Twenty years ago, most Protestant and Catholic ordinations took place when people were in their mid-20s. The challenge now is to recruit the best and brightest young people into ministry. Both Protestants and Catholics are doing their part. The old feeder systems have evaporated. For Protestants, it was youth ministry and the church college; for Catholics, the ethnic enclave, the large family and the devoted mother who urged a son into ministry.

Now, evangelical Protestants are raising up apprenticeship ministers in megachurches, while mainline Protestants are reaching out with financial incentives to spiritual-minded college-age students. Catholics, who are educating lay ministers in record numbers, have also re-emphasized asking young men to consider the priesthood. “It is imperative that an invitation be verbalized,” said Fr. Edward J. Burns, who assists dioceses in vocation work. Or, as one Chicago billboard said, “If you’re looking for a sign from God, this is it. Consider the priesthood.”

Why they leave

Once ministers heed the call, it is no small task to keep them in lifelong ministry. Studies of young Catholic priests find that their most common reason for leaving is disillusionment, usually with superiors, fellow priests, the parish or church bureaucracy.

The next largest segment leaves for not having the “gift” of celibacy; in most such cases they want to marry.

The older the Catholic priest, however, the less likely he is thinking about leaving. About a third of Protestant clergy consider departure, finally doubting their call. Among Southern Baptists, where the friction between pastors and lay leaders has been legendary, about 1,000 pastors every year are fired.

When considering the ministry ranks of the future, funding has become no small matter either. In new studies of clergy pay, the Catholic system is given high marks for being more equitable, if slightly lower-paying (with the median priest’s salary and housing allowance being $25,000 a year). The median for Protestant pastors is $40,000, but the differences vary wildly. Some Protestant ministers make six times more than others.

Wisdom counsels, however, that clergy are not in their work for financial benefits, though their focus on ministry can often be crippled by a lack of resources or financial security. Across the board, a more generous church may boost the lifelong call to ministerial work. What should that standard of living be? In one Protestant assessment, clergy pay should be sufficient for pastoral “hospitality and a well-lived life.”

While Catholic clergy are spread thin across geographical parishes, the picture of Protestant ministry is more one of feast and famine. For example, just 10 percent of clergy (those with large congregations) preach to half of American churchgoers. Another 40 percent of clergy, however, serve just 10 percent of churchgoing Americans in countless congregations of fewer than 100 members. Well before the excitement over megachurches (those with more than 2,000 in weekend attendance), many a Catholic priest knew parishes of that size and more. Yet in all, the big church is a major trend in modern America. It is requiring new levels of leadership ability and new frontiers of clergy-lay cooperation. Unfortunately, many small churches on the U.S. landscape are doomed for closure.

Getting it done

Dedicated ministers retain a unique role in church and society, yet that status is always in need of new buttressing. An esprit de corps sometimes helps. Actor Robert Duvall, who portrayed a Pentecostal minister in “The Apostle,” put it nicely when he saw a Catholic bishop blessing fishing boats in New Orleans. “You do it your way, I do it mine,” he said. “But we get it done, don’t we?”

Ministers get it done everywhere, including Washington, where a Catholic chaplain for the first time graces the House of Representatives and presidential inaugurals still lean heavily on Protestant clergy. In any case, ministry gets yet another spotlight and the prayers do the job of both bonding and bridging in America.

In the closing benediction of Bush’s second inauguration ceremony, the black Methodist minister Kirbyjon Caldwell of Texas tried to do a little of both. “Respecting persons of all faiths,” he prayed, “I humbly submit this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Larry A. Witham is a veteran Washington journalist who has won national awards for his coverage of religion and society. A former reporter for The Washington Times, he is a three-time winner of the Religion Communicators Council’s Wilbur Award and a recipient of the Religion Newswriters Association’s Cornell Award. He is the author of numerous books, including Where Darwin Meets the Bible: Creationists and Evolutionists in America. His most recent book is Who Shall Lead Them?: The Future of Ministry in America. He lives in Burtonsville, Md.
Invitaciones

El culto y la vida para el mes de julio 2005

PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ y RAFAEL SÁNCHEZ ALONSO

“Tenemos el gusto de invitarles a celebrar...” “Nos complacemos en invitarles a la fiesta de...” Invitaciones como éstas nos llenan de gozo porque sabemos que vamos a compartir un acontecimiento muy especial con amigos y familiares. Una invitación expresa una bienvenida cariñosa, un llamado a estrechar ese vínculo especial entre los que invitan y los invitados.

Con esto en mente, reflexionemos sobre las Sagradas Escrituras de julio por las que recibimos varias invitaciones, algunas muy directas, otras más sutiles, y todas provenientes de Dios. Entre las invitaciones más acogedoras tenemos la de Isaías (31 y 10 de julio). Por él Dios invita a quienes tienen hambre y sed para que vengan y participen en la gran fiesta de la palabra de Dios: Vengan y coman, vengan y beban, vengan y escúchenme, vengan sin dinero y haré con ustedes un pacto eterno de amor. Para responder a esta invitación, necesitamos tener hambre y necesidad de Dios. Aceptar la invitación de Dios es acoger su palabra en lo más íntimo de nuestro ser, permitiendo que su voluntad se cumpla en nuestras vidas.

Jesucristo es la palabra y la voluntad de Dios encarnada. No sólo personificó esa palabra sino que la hizo asequible a todos mediante sus invitaciones: Vengan a mí, todos ustedes que están cansados y agobiados por el peso de la vida (3 de julio)... por el trabajo que les toma tanto tiempo pero les paga tan poco... Vengan ustedes, las víctimas de esos grandes compañías que despiden a muchos para incrementar las ganancias de pocos... vengan los que se quedan sin trabajo, sin beneficios y viven en la ansiedad de la incertidumbre... Vengan a mí cuando la violencia, las armas y las guerras se multiplican... Vengan a mí los pobres, que tanto sufren en donde la injusticia reina... Vengan a mí las personas mayores, quienes sienten ser una carga para los hijos... Vengan a mí los alcohólicos, los adictos al juego y a las apuestas, los fumadores y drogadictos, y dejen sus adicciones en mis manos acogedoras... Vengan a mí los indeseables, los abortados, los abusados, los abandonados... Vengan a mí los que tienen problemas en sus relaciones... los esposos infieles... los padres que sufren... los niños rebeldes... Vengan a mí todos. Vengan y aprendan; vengan y descansen en mí.

Algunos evangelios de este mes también nos sugieren varias maneras de responder a las invitaciones cordiales de Jesús. El 10 y el 17 de julio, las parábolas del sembrador y de la semilla nos animan a recibir, a abrirnos, a escuchar y aceptar la palabra de Cristo para que crezca en nosotros y nos transforme. Para ser tierra buena hay que recibir y aceptar su palabra con humildad, fuerza y sinceridad para cambiar lo que se resiste en nosotros a la palabra de Dios.

El 17 de julio, Jesús nos dice en la parábola de la levadura y la harina que debemos no sólo aceptar la invitación de Dios sino asimilarla; así su gracia, como la levadura en la masa de harina, transformará nuestro corazón y creceremos hasta alturas espirituales que están más allá de nuestras fuerzas.

El 24 de julio las parábolas gemelas del tesoro escondido y de la perla de gran precio nos recuerdan que las invitaciones de Dios exigen que paguemos un precio muy costoso. La parábola de la red cuenta que arrastra y recoge en sus mallas todo lo que hay en el mar... Así nos enseña que Dios llama a todos y da su gracia tanto a los buenos como a los malos. A Dios y no a nosotros pertenece decidir quién es bueno o malo. Nuestro papel es estar alerta y dispuesto a responder a las invitaciones de Dios, sabiendo que tales invitaciones quizá lleguen de una forma inesperada, mediante personas a quienes juzgamos no ser las más adeptas.

El 31 de julio, Jesucristo nos hace una de sus invitaciones más importantes. En la primera lectura, Isaías nos invita a que participemos en el banquete. En el evangelio, Jesucristo pide a sus discípulos que tomen seriamente sus responsabilidades en el banquete: “Denle ustedes mismos de comer...” Y los discípulos, obedientes a Jesús, tomaron sus cinco panes y dos peces y dieron de comer a toda multitud que les seguía. Las acciones de Cristo –lo bendijo, lo partió, y lo dio a la cumbre de sus invitaciones: “Denle ustedes mismos de comer...” y su invitación sirven de preludio a la ofrenda de sí mismo en la cruz, a quien conmemoramos cada vez que reunidos bendecimos, rompemos, damos y compartimos el Pan de su Cuerpo. En la Eucaristía, Jesucristo renueva su invitación. Y junto con el alimento del Pan de la Palabra y el Pan de su Cuerpo, recibimos el reto de hacer de toda nuestra vida un R.S.V.P., una respuesta sincera a las invitaciones de Dios.
Invitations

Lectionary themes for July 2005

PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ
AND RAFAEL SÁNCHEZ ALONSO

“You are cordially invited” ... “The honor of your presence is kindly requested” ... these familiar words have the potential to strike a happy chord in the human heart for they carry with them the promise of a pleasurable time spent in the company of family or friends. With these words, a gift is given, and with it we receive an opportunity for celebrating another of the many moments that constitute our lives and punctuate them with joy and companionship. Invitations speak warmth and welcome and form bonds between those who extend them and those who respond to them.

With these thoughts in mind, we turn to the scripture selections for July and find that they include a series of invitations, some quite direct, others more subtle, but all of them issued with the gentle, warm welcome of God.

One of the most appealing invitations this month is mediated by Isaiah, who on July 10 and July 31 speaks for God and bids all who are hungry and thirsty to come and, without money, to feast on the rich fare of God’s word. Come and eat, come and listen, God implores. Come, that you may have life and rest your weariness in me. Refresh you. Come and learn, come when parents nag. Come, and I will make you to understand. Come to me when relationships become a struggle, when spouses are unfaithful, when children rebel, when parents nag. Come, and I will refresh you. Come and learn, come and rest your weariness in me.

Some of July’s Sunday Gospels suggest how best to respond to Jesus’ cordial and promising invitations. On July 10 and 17, the parables of the sower and the seed encourage a willingness to hear Jesus’ words and offer them a welcome in which to grow and transform our lives. Good soil means being humble enough to hear, strong enough to listen and honest enough to change in ourselves whatever might resist or reject God’s word.

Through the image of the yeast and the three measures of flour (July 17), believers learn that the word of God must be invited in and fully assimilated so that like leavened dough, it becomes the better part of who we are, it rises up in us like redemptive grace, giving us warmth of heart we could never hope to achieve on our own. On July 24, through the twin parables of the treasure hidden in a field and the really valuable pearl, we are reminded that God’s invitations to grace and goodness command a great price. Indeed, these cost not less than everything we are and all we ever hope to become. That same Gospel includes a third parable, that of the great dragnet that gathers in all things from the sea. From this we learn that God’s grace falls on the good as well as the bad, and only God decides the difference. For now, rather than judge the value of others or even ourselves, we are to remain alert and responsive to God’s invitations, aware that these may be extended in a manner and through people and events we may least expect.

One of the most important of those invitations is offered by Jesus in the Gospel for July 31. Making good on the banquet invitation extended by Isaiah (first reading) and urging his disciples to recognize their responsibility for similarly extending the invitation (“give them something to eat yourselves”), Jesus, with five loaves and two fish, fed the crowds who had gathered to hear him. Jesus’ invitation and his actions of blessing, breaking and giving served as a prelude to another far more important invitation: the offer of himself, broken in death on the cross and forever remembered and celebrated in the blessing, breaking, giving and sharing of the bread of his body. Each time we gather for Eucharist, the invitation of Jesus is renewed. We, who are fed with the bread of the word and the bread of his body, are thereby challenged to make the rest of our lives a sincere and fitting R.S.V.P. to God.

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez and Rafael Sánchez Alonso have been collaborating to provide Lectionary commentaries and homilies for Celebration since 1979.
Creating a Missing Persons Bureau

By CAROL LUEBERING

With four other people, I have been assigned to take Communion to an elderly couple for some time now. Each of us has a regular date; the last of us covers the fifth Sunday of the month. I look forward to the first Sunday every month because I really enjoy visiting and praying with these two. When I left them at the end of my first visit, they thanked me profusely — and added that they hadn’t received the Eucharist for several years.

I was appalled! How, in a community as caring as I believe mine to be, could such a thing have happened? The answer is pretty simple: No one knew they were no longer able to get to church.

I’ve written before about spreading the bad news. But passing on what we know sometimes isn’t enough. We may have to do a little digging, as well. People are confined to their homes not just by catastrophic illness but also, like this couple, simply by advancing infirmity. Furthermore, privacy laws now prevent hospitals from notifying churches about someone’s admission. Most of all, elderly folks, unwilling to “bother” anybody, often don’t ask for help. Whatever family members there may be don’t always know (or care) about church connections, or they may assume that the community knows.

It isn’t that the absence of these people isn’t noticed. When I first began appearing regularly at a liturgy I don’t usually attend, my neighbors in the pews began to ask what I was doing there. When I told them, their response was usually, “Oh, I wondered what happened to them. I just assumed they had moved.” People do move. They go into smaller quarters, into assisted living or a nursing home; they settle into family member’s home.

This couple remained in their own home with a recently divorced son in residence. There was no reason for anyone to look for them anywhere other than where they had always been. But what a difference it would have made had someone just picked up the phone and given them a call! It seems a natural enough gesture to ask about them: “I haven’t seen you in church and I just wanted to make sure you are all right.”

A crucial part of our ministry, therefore, is to turn the whole community into a detective force. In bulletin notices and announcements, ask the community to be sure to take notice when a neighbor is absent from his or her usual pew for a few weeks.

Urge people to see if they can find out what’s going on by making a phone call to the missing person’s home or to a neighbor or family member. That’s not being nosy; it’s an expression of care — and we all yearn to have someone care about us.

Alerting folks to help uncover hidden needs is not something we can do once and then sit back and relax. Constant communication is called for here lest people forget that they are indeed their brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, and that someone has to report on the need before the rest of Christ’s body can take any action.

Even when a need has been discovered and met, communication remains a key ingredient of our ministry. One time when I called the couple to whom I take Communion to arrange a time, their son answered the phone. How fortunate that I caught him there! His dad was in the hospital having bypass surgery; his mom was temporarily in assisted living. My next call, of course, went to the church office.

I had asked the son to call me when his parents returned home, and he graciously did. I passed that word on to the second-Sunday person and asked her to see that the message got on down the line. That month, unfortunately, did not have a fifth Sunday. Neither did the next. The couple didn’t get a visit on the fifth Sunday of the month until someone remembered this in casual conversation about them.

Love, someone once said, is a lot of hard work. Feeling love isn’t hard; intending to act lovingly is pretty easy too. But living it out requires a lot of attention to detail. That is the kind of job I resist myself. I like projects I can finish much better than those that turn into never-ending chores.

But keeping up on the needs of seniors is like cleaning house for the whole community. The dust keeps on settling even while we sleep. Good housekeepers not only notice that the table needs to be dusted; they also run a finger across the top of the doorframe.

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Adorning the Altar

The altar of the living God has become the dining table

By DAVID PHILIPPART

At the center of our life as church stands the altar. On the day of its dedication, the bishop came, washed the altar with water and anointed it with sacred chrism. Then others robed the altar in fine linen and placed lit candles around it. Does this sound familiar? This in fact is precisely what was done to us, what is done to all those whom God calls to gather around this altar: the baptized. Dedication transforms this lovely table into a consecrated sign of Christ among us. Baptism makes us members of Christ’s body and gives us a seat with Christ at the table with God.

The word “altar” comes from a Latin word that originally meant “to burn up.” Before Christ, altars were fearful places where blood was spilled, flesh seared, incense, grain and oil sacrificed in smoke and fire. Our ancestors sensed that in sacrificing life and that which sustains life, God would be near. Jesus’ self-sacrificing love made the cross the ultimate altar. Because Christ offered his own body to be broken, his own blood to be poured out on the altar of the cross, we no longer have to spill blood or break bodies in violence or in war; in inner city alleys or on “death row;” in the streets of Iraq, the mountains of Afghanistan or the fields of Darfur. Were not Christ’s sacred body and precious blood enough?

So the Christian altar is no longer the blazing pit or the executioner’s weapon. Rising from the dead, Christ has changed the cross into the tree of life, shading beneath its boughs a table. Before suffering and after rising, Christ gathered people together and to God with food and drink. The altar of the living God has become the dining table, our sacrifice the lifting up of our hearts and the sharing of the Easter banquet. At this holy table, we are fed and made whole. From this holy table, we are sent to set a table for the homeless and the hungry.

We bow slowly to the altar, deeply from the waist. The priest and deacon kiss the altar at the beginning of liturgy. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) states that “only what is required for the celebration of Mass may be placed on the mensa (top) of the altar.”

From the beginning of Mass until the Gospel: the Book of the Gospels, if used.

From the preparation of the gifts until after Communion: the cup, plate and additional Communion vessels, the linens (corporal, purificators, and if used, the pall), the Sacramentary. Microphones “that may be needed … should be arranged discreetly” (see paragraph 306).

Candles and the cross “are to be appropriately placed either on or near the altar in a way suited to the design of the altar … so that the whole may be well balanced and not interfere with the faithful’s clear view of what takes place at the altar or what is placed on it,” namely, our gifts of bread and wine (see paragraph 307).

It’s become a good custom to use the processional cross as the altar cross. Carried in, it’s set up near the altar, suggesting the tree of life that shades the Lord’s table.

The altar is covered with “at least one white cloth, its shape, size and decoration in keeping with the altar’s design” (GIRM #304). Additional cloths of “other colors possessing Christian honorific or festive significance according to longstanding local usage” (think of kente cloth in an African American parish, for example) may also be used, “provided that the uppermost cloth covering the mensa is always white in color” (GIRM #304). Think of the altar cloth as the altar’s baptismal garment.

The General Instruction gives this sound principle: “Moderation should be observed in the decoration of the altar” (#305). Don’t use the altar as a backdrop for anything—a children’s banner or the crèche, for example. Leaving space around the altar is a way of indicating its holiness. Try placing candles, the cross and any plants or flowers near, but not up against it. Stand back and make sure that the altar still appears as a holy table, that its shape and purpose are not obscured by plants or flowers. Again, the General Instruction has great advice: “Floral decorations should always be done with moderation and placed around the altar rather than on its mensa” (#305).

Outside of liturgy, even when we are cleaning or setting up or decorating, let’s not use the altar as a workstation. By showing profound respect for the altar, we love Christ (for whom it stands) and we learn to make of all the world’s tables altars for our God.

David Philippart lives in Chicago. Contact him with your comments and questions at davidphilippart@hotmail.com.
Sparking the Conversation
Homilists engage us all in dialogue between the Word and the world

By GABE HUCK

Over the past two months we have begun an effort to “unfold the mystery” of the Mass, to talk about what we baptized people do when we gather and when we attend to the Word. We did this in the context of specific Sundays of May and June. What follows is directed toward Sunday, July 3, 2005, the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A. It is of course also the Fourth of July weekend. That can’t be ignored. So here we tackle the whole context: the Ordinary Time scripture proclaimed in the eucharistic liturgy on a Sunday that is already loaded with content — and also subtly continuing to talk about the liturgy expected of all of us every Sunday. For that last, we are still talking about elements of the Liturgy of the Word. Note also that the homilist should be seeing the flow of scriptures and should be able to look back at recent weeks or forward to what is coming (in this case, next Sunday’s first reading, Isaiah 55:10-11).

Sunday by Sunday, the church gathers here, and when we are ready to engage ourselves in hard listening and pondering, we sit and we open the book of scriptures and we give attention. When we have read briefly or at length from the Hebrew scriptures, the letters of the New Testament and finally the Gospels, we have this time called the homily, or the sermon, or the preaching. This homily is to ponder the holy scriptures we have heard, and it is to draw on anything else that is done here this morning, and with this, to engage this flesh-and-blood church of ours in a conversation. That is not a conversation among ourselves only, but a conversation with God, to whose word we have given our full attention.

As the homilist, I have the responsibility to spark this conversation. I prepare to do that when I listen through the previous week many times to those readings, when I seek what others have said about them, when I let them come to my heart and mind fresh and strong and with power. I ponder these scriptures always within the place where they live, this Sunday gathering where we, the church, have met to hear God’s word to us and to do our best to gather our intercessions and our thanks and praise and so come to share holy Communion. The words of the scriptures are of a piece with all we do here.

I don’t do this preparation work alone. I do it with eyes and ears open to the church, all of us here, and to the world where this church is living, struggling. That “world,” of course, is not something other than ourselves. We are ourselves that world, some bit of it. So it is our business here to note that we meet today just before a national holiday, the Fourth of July, and that this comes in a troubled time when life-and-death matters are being debated in relation to wars, occupations, trade, jobs, health care, the environment, the use of economic and military power. All of this and more is on our minds, in our hearts, when we attend to the scriptures and figure out how to enter into this homily. The homilist does not speak only as a teacher here, but as a member of the church responsible for engaging the church and its scriptures. I may do this well or badly, but in any case I, along with all homilists, need your attention here and your conversation — not just your criticism — all through the week.

So today, though I am speaking, enter with me into a conversation. Begin with the words of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel that are read today, for these are words cherished by many people. In some Christian churches, especially in eastern and southern Europe, they are seen again and again in the image of Christ holding a book or scroll. Written on that book or scroll is today’s Gospel: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” Here are words held dear especially by those with little power over their own lives: by people whose daily work is hard and long and little rewarded, by people who have no work at all, by people bearing the burdens of debt for life’s necessities, by people addicted, people who are developmentally disabled, people weakened by sickness or by AIDS or by old age. Come to me and I will give you rest. How prisoners and women and harshly treated minorities have clung to those words!

They are words that have somehow seemed to many to sum up the whole of the Gospel of Jesus. They seem true to the one who could say: “Blessed are you who are poor now, blessed are you who are hungry now, blessed are you who weep now.” They seem true to the one who by word and touch would heal the sick. They seem true to the one whose mother sang the praise of God bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. But above all,
these words "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened" seem true to the Gospel of that Jesus who did not back off when the people of power came for him — the religious leaders, the military, the bullies, the civil authorities. He became the burdened one.

The words of Jesus that begin today’s reading are a prelude to this “come to me” summons. These opening words are a prayer, a praise of God spoken by Jesus. Jesus began this prayer with words that all his listeners would know well for they were part of everyone’s daily prayer: “I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth.” They are still part of Jewish daily prayer and in fact are the way we pray when we come together to the table and begin our eucharistic prayer. For what is Jesus giving thanks and praise to God, to the Father? “You have hidden these things from the wise and the learned and have revealed them to little ones.”

Don’t we seem to know at once exactly what Jesus is talking about? Who can the “little ones” be? Children, yes. But also all those others who have no say, those whose faces are not seen in places where power is exercised, whose voices are not heard when decisions are being made or when the loot is being divided. Those, we say today, with no access. Those who don’t even know who the “gatekeepers” are. Jesus is saying: Praised are you, God, that you have been hiding from those with plenty of money and power and education, and have been showing yourself to those at the other end, those at the short end of the stick. Today the short end is shorter than ever and there are more people trying to cling for dear life.

These Gospel words call to mind that old summons to the preacher: Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable. They may have a sharper edge because of the weekend when we hear this Gospel. In 1776, a group of wealthy white males signed a document that put their lives and fortunes at risk. This was an assertion that when any government abuses the very reasons for there being a government, then the people (and yes, by “people” they meant only the wealthy white male people) have the right to change that government. Such ideas had been talked about, but here were people putting it in a Declaration of Independence, signing their names. That is what we remember this weekend: that governments are given power by the people, and when a government begins to do more harm than good, the people not only can but must take its power away. Of course there are questions: Whose harm? Whose good? What power? Jefferson and the other signers tried to answer those questions — for their place and time — very concretely. The heritage would best be honored not just with fireworks and parades but with soul searching and boldness.

Many today confuse their Christianity with their citizenship, always a mistake. But it is no mistake to say that as citizens who listen to the word of God in our church, we come to our citizenship with our eyes — and often our mouths, too — wide open. From our Gospel and our communion here we learn where to look and where to pay attention. And if we try to do that, we are always, always, always going to confront those powers in this world — political powers, economic powers, military powers, even institutional church powers — that trample the earth and the poor. We who were baptized are either those little ones, the burdened of the world, or we are their faithful advocates, their voices, their servants somehow.

What is asked of us as Christians who happen to be citizens of the United States? Where should our eyes and thoughts and voices be this weekend especially? We could listen harder to those few words from the prophet Zechariah in this morning’s first reading. This prophet too lived in troubled times when economic and military power were rampaging. The temptation then, as now, was to get on board the strongest chariot, the most expensive tank; to back the brutality and torture as long as it was happening to somebody else; to tighten the borders and draw clear lines between us and them. If we don’t do it to them, they might do it to us, right? Later Jesus would challenge how there could be a “them” and an “us.” But Zechariah took another sort of stance, a lot like prophets before him who spoke of beating swords into plows and studying war no more. Zechariah said: “‘The messiah/king will banish the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem; the warrior’s bow shall be banished.”

Is it pie in the sky or is it our Gospel duty to speak of banishing the instruments of war and oppression — chariots and horses, bows and arrows? How have we as a church let our prophetic voice be shushed even in a society that is founded on the need for prophetic voices? Standing as we do in the tradition of Zechariah and Jesus, how engaged are we here — we who this weekend remember a time when some people said power comes from the people and the people must stay very clear about that? How uncomfortable are we that it takes so many horses and chariots and bows and arrows to keep our gasoline supply flowing and our shopping centers full? How uncomfortable are we that those horses and chariots and bows and arrows cost so much money that the schools and veterans and so many others are left with the scraps?

This is the conversation to which we are summoned today. God’s word has challenged us. When we gather here next week and open our book, we are going to hear this: “Thus says the Lord, ‘Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth … so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will.’ ”

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Finding God in the World

The language of religion is the language of mysticism

By RICH HEFFERN

A memory: I was 21, in Vietnam-era military police school, with 40 others in the hill country of central Texas. We were all exhausted, dirty and dispirited on a long march back from the rifle range. Suddenly one of our squad leaders started loudly singing “Monday, Monday,” a then current hit from the folk rock group The Mamas and the Papas.

To a man, we all took up the lyrics. Our drudgery shape-shifted into a make-it-up-as-you-go bugaloo down the gravel road. In a moment, fatigue-clad automatons were transformed into a spunky, badly harmonizing ragtag of uniquely peppy spirits with a whole new lease on life.

Another memory: While living on the West Coast, I was driving home from a concert in my battered little convertible across the Golden Gate Bridge. Below, the siren blast of a freighter outward bound for Cape-town or Singapore duetted with the foghorns on the bridge towers. Past the glittery, bay-reflected lights of Sausalito, I saw ahead the pastel tiers of fog-stalked San Francisco looking ever so bedazzling, like the Emerald City of Oz. Off to the right, the titanic, heaving mystery of the Pacific Ocean brooded in darkness.

My mind and heart were swept off their feet and knocked out by how mysteriously, ravishingly beautiful our world can be. The only drugs involved were the salty night air and music pulsing from the radio — the sensual, sawdust charm of Bob Dylan’s voice singing with the organ and his own harmonica backupon “Lay, Lady, Lay” one of his best country fantasies: “Oh moment, stay! Thou art so fair!”

Here’s poet and Christian mystic Thomas Traherne writing in the 17th century:

Peace, melody, my sight.
My ears and heart did fill
And freely move
All that I saw did me delight.
The Universe was then a world of treasure,
To me a universal world of pleasure.

Theologian Dorothy Soelle points out that the language of religion is the language of mysticism. But because religion has been experienced in authoritarian and patriarchal forms, frequently colluding with the market economy and with consumerism, perhaps this potential has never been realized for ordinary people.

Soelle writes: “The language of religion, by which I do not mean the stolen language in which a male God commands and radiates imperial power, the language of religion is the language of mysticism: I am entirely and wholly in God. I cannot fall out of God at all, I am indestructible. ‘Who can separate us from the love of Christ?’ we can ask with the mystic Paul. ‘Neither death nor life, neither height nor depth, neither what is, nor what is to come’ (Romans 8:35, 38).”

As an antidote to the addiction of consumerism and materialism, the mystical way is being reclaimed in world religions. A hunger for mystery is evidenced by the increasing attention to Tarot cards, crystals, Wicca, wind chimes, sweat lodges, Centering prayer, lectio divina, gurus, meditation, yoga, crystals, Tibetan religious paintings, the mindfulness disciplines of Buddhism, the ancient Catholic devotions to the Eucharist … the list goes on and on.

British theologian Mary C. Grey warns us that “privatized mysticism is easy for the competitive individualism characteristic of contemporary culture,” but what is really being sought at a societal level is “the recovery of heart, the deepest source of human desire, as an alternative to what is offered by the consumerist banquet of the global market.”

What we seek to recover, according to Grey, is “a community experience both of God’s energy — the Spirit’s greenness, or viriditas as Hildegard of Bingen calls it — and the mystery of intertwined joy and suffering, delight and darkness, the participation in both.”

The memories I listed above are examples from my own life of the Spirit’s greenness. Each of us can make up his or her own list from his or her own life experiences. Traherne was doing it 400 years ago. Hildegard of Bingen wrote this description of herself toward the end of the 12th century:

“Listen: There was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honor. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground, and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God.”

Hildegard wrote explicitly about the natural world as God’s creation, charged through and through with God’s beauty and energy, entrusted to our care, to be used by us for our benefit, but not to be mangled or destroyed.

How will the salvation of the world be accomplished? Perhaps partly at least by our wholeheartedly savoring its joys and embracing its sorrows. How can we ensure that our children’s children will have a viable future? By reconnecting to the mystical dimension of religion, by recovering our very hearts.

Rich Heffern writes monthly on spirituality for Celebration and is a frequent contributor to the National Catholic Reporter. Contact him at heffern@diocesekcsj.org.
By MELISSA NUSSBAUM

I have reached the age when my friends are beginning to die and I am left to mourn. At most of these liturgies the wake is collapsed into the funeral. I call it the mall approach: “All your needs under one rite!”

This approach isn’t working, which is perhaps less a failure of the rites than a failure of the spaces in which the rites are celebrated. The Order of Christian Funerals explains:

“The vigil may be celebrated in the home of the deceased, (or) in the funeral home … (55.)”

When did you last attend a vigil in someone’s home? I say “vigil”; you think “funeral home.” Bodies go directly from the deathbed to the embalming table to the “viewing room” to the church to the cemetery. Most mourners believe this is the law. But 42 states have no laws requiring the services of a funeral home, and organizations like the Funeral and Memorial Societies of America exist to help us reclaim the rites of death and burial.

Mortuaries marry styles — non-denominational chapels meet Grandma’s parlor. It is a space for sitting quietly. It may be a space for a vigil, but not for a wake. And as long as the vigil is held at the mortuary, the wake will continue to lose its hold on us.

For the wake, that hinge linking vigil and funeral, needs room: room for talking and weeping, room for drinking beer and smoking cigars to muffle, not encourage, speech and song, mournful wails and wild laughter?

Where’s room for the keg in the funeral parlor? The salami and cheese? The community, gathered to weep and wander among the wedding photos — she so beautiful, he so young?

When these human needs are unmet, they do not disappear: They surface in the funeral liturgy. At most non-Catholic funerals I attend there is no homily. There are eulogies. Words about God are kept to the beginning and end of the liturgy, when the presider/emcee comes out to introduce and conclude the reflections on Joe’s love of golf with a few words about God’s love for Joe.

Catholic funerals more often stick to the rite. Still, the practice of “reflections” (eulogies) from family and friends after Communion takes over the liturgy, because we’re waiting to hear what hasn’t yet been said. We want more.

We want hear the old story, “So, he got his ladder and a chainsaw…” and we’re not leaving until we do, even if the personal story has to be tacked on to the universal story of the God who defeated death on the cross.

They are distinct, though complementary, stories, serving distinct, though complementary needs. They require distinct, though complementary, liturgies in distinct, though complementary, places.

The rite for vigil instructs that after the concluding prayer, “A member or a friend may speak in remembrance of the deceased.” This doesn’t allow for many stories, nor do funeral homes make us want to linger and listen. We feel cheated. So we insert “wake moments” wherever we can, and get a funeraler where verbal cues and gestures are all about God, but visual cues are all about Jane. (Is that a cross behind the photos? Is there an altar behind the awards and keepsakes?)

The same principle applies to weddings. One comes to mind in which the bride planned a liturgy that was part recital, part exchange of vows and part therapy session.

Guests at a recital need to listen and watch. Patients in therapy need to listen and talk. But witnesses at a wedding come to confirm and affirm the public promises made between a man and a woman. They do this by speaking and keeping silence, all of it governed not by personal emotion or need but by the rhythm of the rite. They do not speak for themselves; they speak for the baptized.

During the wedding, the rings were passed throughout the assembly so that each one might bless them, then pass the rings to others for their blessing touch, and so on back to the couple. Meant to be therapeutic, it was finally only sad. The rings were passed between relatives speaking to one another only through their attorneys. My daughter whispered, “Someone should take those rings and throw them into the fires of Mount Doom.”

We ask too much of any single liturgy — or any single liturgical space — when we ask it to satisfy every human need. Put “All your needs under one rite!” and neither one’s needs nor the rite will have their due.

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July 2005

14TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 3, 2005
Psalm of the Day: Ps (144) 145
I Will Praise Your Name (Abtott) RA p. 104/MI-BB p. 109
I Will Praise Your Name (Carroll/Gelineau) GC 501
I Will Praise Your Name (Guimont) GC2 1007/LP/MG 100
I Will Praise Your Name (Haas) PCY1 80/RS 194/GC2 502/JS 795/GC 637/GC2 630/MI-BB 342/JS 795/GC 647/RM 100/RS 756/GC 659/GC2 636/CBW 522/MI-BB 925/WS 607/SS 651
Bring Peace to Earth Again (1,G) PMB 503/MI-BB 921
Christ Is Alive (2) WOR 466/RS 710/GC 502/GC2 502/JS 770/RS 912/LMGM 41/MI-BB 508/WS 606/SS 649
Comfort, Comfort, O My People (1) WOR 756/RS 954
Comfort, Comfort, O My People (1) WOR 370/BB 68/RS 488/GC2 331/WC 823/JS 327/SS 461
Eye Has Not Seen (G) GP 769/GC2 815/GC2 816/JS 803/RS 912/PMB 300/WS 446/SS 795
Gift of Finest Wheat, v 1 (G) WOR 736/CBW 603/MI-BB 136/GC2 527/GC2 520/CBW 815/GC2 816/JS 803/RS 912/PMB 300/WS 446/SS 795
God Is Love! the Heavens Are Telling (1,G) CBW 560
He Came Down (1,G) GC 370/GC2 364/RS 519
He Knows Just How Much You Can Bear (G) LGM 254
Here I Am -- Booth (G) GP 625/JS 717/MI-BB 453
How Blessed Is This Place, v 3 (G) WOR 710/RS 893
I Will Not Die (1,G) GC 657/JS 771/JS 658/MI-BB 606/PS 76
In Christ There Is a Table Set for All (G) RS 916/GC 749
It Is Well With My Soul (G) LGM 256
Jesus Is Our King (1) LGM 91
Jesus, My Confidence (G) GP 624
Jesus, Shepherd of Our Souls (1) WOR 649/GC 725
Journeyongs (2) JS 759/GP 581
Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You (1) WOR 525/GP 693/MI-BB 536/GC2 520/CBW 511/WS 890/JS 617/SS 669/PM 497/WS 649/SS 614
Just a Closer Walk with Thee (G) LGM 196/WC 835/JS 775/PMB 450/WS 601
Let the Hungry Come to Me (G) GC 619

*Like a Shepherd, v 3 (G) GP 708/CBW 490/MI-BB 624/GC 325/GC2 332/JS 648
Lord of All Hopefulness (G) WOR 588/RS 652/GC 515/GC2 517/CBW 442/JS 674/GP 662
Lord, You Are Good and Forgiving (Alstott) RA p. 108/MI-BB p. 111
Lord, You Are Good and Forgiving (Buldac) WS 477
Lord, You Are Good and Forgiving (Engler) PMB 687/PRM A77/MI-BB 624
Lord, You Are Good and Forgiving (Hughes)

15TH SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME

July 10, 2005
Psalm of the Day: Ps (64) 65

IN ORDINARY TIME

July 17, 2005
Psalm of the Day: Ps (85) 86
Lord, You Are Good and Forgiving (Alstott) RA p. 108/MI-BB p. 111
Lord, You Are Good and Forgiving (Buldac) WS 477
Lord, You Are Good and Forgiving (Engler) PMB 687/PRM A77/MI-BB 624
Lord, You Are Good and Forgiving (Hughes)
PREPARATION: MUSIC

17TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 24, 2005
Psalm of the Day: Ps (118) 119

Happy Are They (Milletton)  SO 61
Lord, I Love Your Commands (Alstott)  RA p.
110/Mi-BB p. 112
Lord, I Love Your Commands (Batastini/Gi- lineau)  WOR 910/RS 163/LPGG 915

Ps 19: Lord, You Have the Words (1,G)  GC 702/
GC2 637,639/HG 2/PMB 511/WC 926

Lord, I Love Your Commands (Hutmacher)  GC
656

Lord, I Love Your Commands (Hughes)  PMB 117/
GC2 991/LPMG 109

Lord, I Love Your Commands (Booth)  GP 666/
JS 996/LP 141

Lord, I Love Your Commands (Schiavone)  SS 356

Suggested Common Psalm: Ps (18) 19

July 31, 2005
Psalm of the Day: Ps (144) 145

The Hand of the Lord Feeds Us (Guimont)  G-2755
The Hand of the Lord Feeds Us (Currie)  GIA
PMB 693/PRM A79/WC 919/WS 162,595

Your Word Went Forth (Ps)  RS 655

You Are the Way (1)  CBW 441/PMB 365/
GC 656

You Are Child (2)  GP 666

Wisdom, My Road (1)  CBW 440/PMB 365/

Wisdom, My Road (2)  GP 666

When Jesus Came Preaching the Kingdom of God (G)  WOR 614/RS 773

Wisdom's Feast (1)  PMB 298/WC 606/WS 438

Wisdom, My Road (1)  GC 500

You Are Child (2)  GP 666

You Are the Way (1)  CBW 441/PMB 365/

Your Words Are Spirit and Life (1,Ps)  JS 680/Mi-BB 592

18TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 31, 2005
Psalm of the Day: Ps (144) 145

The Hand of the Lord Feeds Us (Alstott)  RA p.
112/Mi-BB p. 113

The Hand of the Lord Feeds Us (Boudou)  PMB 693/PRM A79/WC 919/WS 162,595

The Hand of the Lord Feeds Us (Currie)  GIA
G 2755

The Hand of the Lord Feeds Us (Guimont)
PREPARATION: MUSIC

Father, We Thank Thee (1,G) WOR 558/CBW 528/RS 705/GC 568/GC2 547/WC 607/ PMB 316/WS 440/SS 627
Gift of Finest Wheat (G) WOR 736/WC 620/CBW 603/MI-BB 342/LMGM 136/RS 912/ GC 815/GC2 816/JS 803/GP 525/PMB 300/WS 446/SS 759
God Is Our Fortress and Our Rock (2) WOR 575,576
*God, Whose Glory Reigns Eternal, v 2 (G) CBW 475/JS 655
God Will Take Care of You (1,G) LMGM 183
Here at This Table (G) JS 807/MI-BB 305
*I Am the Bread of Life — Englert (G) PMB 321/WC 617/JS 736
*I Am the Bread of Life — Tolan (G) WOR 738/WC 610/MI-BB 350/WS 379/LMGM 133/GC 828/GC2 822/RS 931/WS 445/SS 742
*I Am the Living Bread (C) MI-BB 344/CBW 605/JS 822/GP 519
*I Have Loved You (1) GP 710/MI-BB 617/ RS 641/GC 504/GC2 504/SS 649
*If God is for Us (2) JS 647/GP 712,714/MI-BB 619
In Christ There Is a Table Set for All (G) RS 916/GC 749
Jesus, Shepherd of Our Souls (G) WOR 649/GC 725
Jesus, Wine of Peace (1,G) GC 817/GC2 804
*Let the Hungry Come to Me (1,G) WC 619
Like a Shepherd (1,G) GP 708/CBW 490/ MI-BB 624/GC 325/GC2 332/JS 648
*Litany for the Holy Eucharist (Ps,G) WC 643
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling (G) WOR 588/MI-BB 430/RS 743/GC2 622/CBW 625/WC 808/JS 746/GP 640/PMB 431/ WS 756/SS 638
Lover of Us All (1,G) GC 633/JS 643
My Shepherd, Lord (1,G) MI-BB 512
My Shepherd Will Supply My Need (1,G) WOR 606/RCS 833/RS 761/JS 736
*Neither Death Nor Life (2,G) GC 605
Now in This Banquet (G) GC 833/GC2 825/ RS 933/CBW 608
Now Thank We All Our God (2) WOR 560/ WC 938/BB 208/LMGM 208/RS 700/GC 565/GC2 545/CBW 535/JS 636/GP 700/ PMB 520/WS 677/SS 622
*O Blessed Savior, v 4 (G) WC 623
*O Living Bread from Heaven (G) PMB 546/ WC 974/979
O Taste and See (1,G) LMGM 541/RS 923/ GC 835/PMB 146
On This Day of Sharing (G) SS 758
Our Daily Bread (G) CBW 600
*Our God Provides (2) JS 652
*Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness, v 1 (G) CBW 582
Ps 34, Taste and See (1,Ps,G)
Shepherd Me, O God (1,G) RS 756/GC 31/ GC2 23/WC 371/MI-BB 510/WS 280/SS 381
Shepherd of Souls, in Love Come, Feed Us (G) PMB 307/WC 631
*Sweet Refreshment (1,G) GC2 802/SS 548
Table of Plenty (G) JS 793/MI-BB 301/GP 530
*Take and Eat This Bread, v 4 (1,G) GC 842/ GC2 839/SS 748
Take the Bread, Children (G) RS 925
*The Hand of God (Ps,G) GC 828
*The Hand of the Lord (Ps,G) WC 644/SS 448,595
The King of Love My Shepherd Is (1,G) WOR 609/MI-BB 513/RS 766/GC2 631/WC 798/JS 733/GP 632/PMB 427/WS 581/SS 645
The Lord’s My Shepherd (1,G) CBW 488
There’s a Widenss in God’s Mercy (2) WOR 595,596/MI-BB 422/RS 742/GC 626/GC2 603/CBW 443/JS 748/WC 650/JS 432/GP 639/PMB 322/WS 433/SS 639
*They Came, a Milling Crowd (G) HG 146
To Be Your Bread (G) GP 506/JS 816/MI-BB 341
We Come to Your Feast (1,G) GC 850/GC2 814
We Shall Rise Again (1,G) RS 872/GC 772/ GC2 762
*We Will Extol Your Praise (Ps,G) CBW 574
We Will Rise Again (1,G) JS 714/MI-BB 440/ GP 603
You Are All We Have (1,Ps,G) RS 643/GC 505/GC2 508/SS 600
You Are Mine (1,G) GC2 649/GC2 627/RS 762/ MI-BB 504/WC 839/WS 605/SS 643

J. Michael McMahon is music editor for Celebration and the current president of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians. Contact him at npmpres@npm.org.

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In today’s second reading, St. Paul contrasts life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. The flesh leads to death but the Spirit of God brings life. A similar contrast has often been made between living by the letter of the law or by the spirit of the law, or even more basically between living by law or living in the Spirit (see Romans 7:6, Galatians 5:18).

This contrast received much attention in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council because the preconciliar church placed such high value on the virtue of obedience. For many people, being a good Catholic was seen largely as a matter of following the rules and being obedient. Sin was seen as breaking the rules, and confessions in the sacrament of penance usually involved a long list of such violations. Fear of God’s anger and the punishment of hell (or at least purgatory) was a dominant force in keeping people on the straight and narrow.

The council sparked a rethinking of the way we understood faith and religion. Rather than primarily a religion of rules and laws, we began to see our faith as a response to God’s love and God’s action in our lives. We began to pay more attention to the spirit of the Gospel than to the letter of the laws that had governed church life.

In all of this, there was a basic recognition that simply obeying laws was not enough. Though some people surely interpreted this as license to do whatever they wanted, serious Catholics tried to respond in ways that went further than the law required. In liturgy, for example, the council had insisted that pastors must realize that “when the liturgy is celebrated something more is required than the mere observance of the laws governing valid and lawful celebration; it is also their duty to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects” (“Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” #11).

This fundamental principle seems in danger of being forgotten today. More and more bishops and pastors seem to respond to every document from Rome simply in terms of obedience. Privately calling some new rules ridiculous, they still insist that parishes must follow them because they are “the law.” Self-appointed “liturgical police” monitor parish Masses and report every deviation from the rubrics as an act of disobedience to the pope.

This new legalism is not a valid basis for liturgical decisions and planning. Laws, rules and rubrics are important and should not be blithely ignored, but they are not absolute. Observed with a scrupulous servility, they are more likely to deaden our worship than to give it life.

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**PREPARATION: PLANNING AND PRAYERS**

**July 3, 2005**

**Living by the Spirit**

*Fr. Lawrence Mick*

In today’s second reading, St. Paul contrasts life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. The flesh leads to death but the Spirit of God brings life. A similar contrast has often been made between living by the letter of the law or by the spirit of the law, or even more basically between living by law or living in the Spirit (see Romans 7:6, Galatians 5:18).

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The council sparked a rethinking of the way we understood faith and religion. Rather than primarily a religion of rules and laws, we began to see our faith as a response to God’s love and God’s action in our lives. We began to pay more attention to the spirit of the Gospel than to the letter of the laws that had governed church life.

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**14th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

*Paige Byrne Shortal*

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we hear of God’s kingdom, where the weary find rest and peace reigns. As we celebrate Independence Day, let us recall our founders’ dreams of creating a haven for the oppressed and ask for mercy when we have failed to be peacemakers.

**PENITENTIAL RITE**

Lord Jesus, you proclaim peace to the nations:

**Lord, have mercy.**

**Lord Jesus, you offer rest to the weary: Christ, have mercy.**

**Lord Jesus, in you we find our rest and our peace: Lord, have mercy.**

**SCRIPTURE READINGS**

Zech 9:9-10 Here comes the peacemaking king.

Rom 8:9,11-13 If the Spirit of Jesus lives within you, then you will live.

Matt 11:25-30 My burden is light …

**PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL**

**Presider**

My friends, God created us to live in harmony with one another, to care for and pray for one another. Confident that God hears our prayers, let us pray.

**Minister**

♦ Let us pray for our country … for all who call the United States their home … for citizens … and for immigrants and refugees seeking asylum … we pray.

♦ For an end to all that divides us … poverty and discrimination of every kind … violence in our cities and the fear of violence among our children … we pray.

♦ For the beneficial use of our taxes … for education and medical care for everyone … for the care of the environment and of our cities … for public transportation, free libraries and support of the arts … we pray.

♦ For all the poor of our nation and those around the world who are dependent on the wealthier nations for their survival … we pray.

♦ For the sick … (names or “for those listed in our parish bulletin”) … for those who have been sick for a long time and are weary of their illness … we pray.

♦ We remember those who have died … (names) … for those who have died in war and for all those who mourn the loss of a loved one … we pray.

**Presider**

Good and gracious God, watch over and protect us and all the people of our land. Strengthen us with justice and peace for everyone. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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**PREPARATION: PLANNING AND PRAYERS**

**July 10, 2005**

**Local Liturgical Tradition**

Fr. Lawrence Mick

Going beyond legalism as a basis for liturgical decisions requires a solid sense of both the universal and the local tradition of worship. The Gospel today speaks of the growth of the seed sown by the farmer. Liturgical tradition can be understood in a similar way. It does not spring full-grown from the hand of a legislator but develops over time primarily from the local level. That’s why there has long been an understanding in church law that local custom sometimes trumps a particular universal rule.

A good example of respect for local custom can be found in the decisions of Roger Cardinal Mahony of Los Angeles in implementing the recent document from the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments titled *Redemptionis Sacramentum*. The cardinal begins by recalling the efforts of his predecessor and himself to implement the liturgical vision of the Second Vatican Council. He then notes that this new document should not be read in isolation but in connection with the pope’s Holy Thursday letter of 2004, *Ecclesia de Eucharistica*. He thus encourages a broad view of the Eucharist rather than a focus only on specific rules. He also notes the role of the bishop in guiding the liturgical life of the diocese, a role affirmed in *Redemptionis Sacramentum*.

The cardinal recalls the efforts over the past decade in the archdiocese aimed at improving parish worship, and he affirms the positive results of those efforts. He then addresses one of the more controversial elements of the recent Vatican document, the rule against pouring the precious blood into cups for distribution. His words are worth quoting:

“Some have inquired about the continued use of specially designed carafes in which the wine is presented at the Preparation of the Gifts, placed upon the altar, consecrated during the Eucharistic Prayer and then distributed into smaller chalices for holy Communion. Our overwhelming experience with this practice over the years has been most positive. "Because our practice has become an archdiocesan custom of over seven years, with both the Catholic faithful and the ministers accustomed to this practice, I am willing to grant exceptions to no. 106 of *Redemptionis Sacramentum* for legitimate reasons, such as the following: where the altar table is too small to accommodate many chalices, thus creating a greater danger for spillage; and where the number of chalices is so large that they would visibly detract from the important sign of one bread and one cup, as well as increase the danger of tipping over the chalices” (*The Tidings*, Friday, Sept. 10, 2004).

**15th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Paige Byrne Shortal

INTRODUCTION

Today we are challenged to make ourselves into fertile ground for the Word of God. Let us call on God’s mercy for those times when we harden our hearts and do not listen to God speaking to us.

**PENITENTIAL RITE**

Lord Jesus, you are the true Word of the Father: Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you are the Word that lives in our hearts: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, by your Word we are created anew and we are saved: Lord, have mercy.

**SCRIPTURE READINGS**

Isa 55:10-11 God speaks and the Word creates what God desires.

Rom 8:18-23 We believe that our present suffering is the seed of future glory.

Matt 13:1-23 The seed is the Word. Are we fertile ground?

**PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL**

Presider

My friends, God created us to live in harmony with one another, to nurture and help one another. Confident that God hears our prayers, let us pray.

**Minister**

✝ Let us pray for the church … for the mission of the church in the world … for all those who work as catechists and missionaries … we pray,

✝ For peace everywhere … for peace among nations … between neighbors … within families and religious communities and parishes … for peace within our hearts … we pray,

✝ For those who lack the basic necessities … for those without means to care for their loved ones … for those who live with violence and the fear of violence … for the homeless … the unemployed … those without hope for a better life … we pray,

✝ For fruitful gardens and fertile fields … for those who grow food for others … we pray,

✝ For those who are sick … *(names or “for those listed in the parish bulletin”)* … for doctors and nurses and all caregivers who share in the healing ministry of Jesus … we pray,

✝ We remember those who have died … *(names)* … for those who are grieving the loss of someone they love … we pray.

**Presider**

Good and gracious God, watch over and protect us. Strengthen our communities in peace and joy, that we may know the unity in love that is a sign of your presence among us. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
The Gospel today offers wise cautionary words for all those involved in liturgical ministries. The parable of the weeds among the wheat speaks to our desire for perfection, reminding us that we cannot always place crops — or people — into neat categories. We might see such messiness as the result of the work of the evil one in the parable, but the main point of the parable is that we have to live with the messiness. It is up to God to sort out the good from the evil at the end of time. If we attempt to clean things up, we will likely destroy the good with the bad.

We might also recognize that such messiness is simply the result of the human condition. Human beings seldom agree with even one other person on everything, much less with all the people who form any of our worshipping assemblies.

Moreover, humans are not robots, so there is always the likelihood that the best planned liturgies will go off in a direction we had not expected.

Difficulty dealing with the messiness of life may also be the root problem with those who want the church’s liturgy to be rigidly controlled by laws and rubrics.

Such people, some of whom have appointed themselves as agents of the bishop or the Vatican, expect every liturgy to be carried out with strict adherence to every detail in the official books. This was a view commonly accepted before the Second Vatican Council, but that approach can never produce vibrant worship.

Good worship will always reflect the character of the local assembly engaged in the communal action. Liturgical laws and rubrics provide guidance, but they cannot be applied rigidly, with no room for pastoral discretion. The impulse toward rigidity really reflects a quasi-magical understanding of the liturgy. For magic to work, the exact words must be spoken with the exact gestures specified by the spell.

But liturgy is not magic. Sacraments are human activities chosen by Christ to be the means of his presence and action among us. Such human activities cannot be scripted in every detail. They depend on the people who engage them, and thus they properly vary somewhat from one assembly to the next.

The challenge, of course, is to maintain a proper balance. The liturgy expresses our identity, so it must be significantly the same from one local church to the next if we are to be one church.

Yet it must also reflect the character of the local assembly, even varying somewhat from one Mass to the next in the same parish. Keeping such a balance is an art, which takes more than following rules.
Knowledge and Wisdom  

Fr. Lawrence Mick

Oh, that we were all as wise as Solomon! This successor to King David is legendary for his wisdom, and today’s first reading explains how he became so wise. When God offered him anything he wanted, Solomon requested an understanding heart. God then promised to give him a heart “so wise and understanding that there has never been anyone like you up to now, and after you there will come no one equal to you.”

Well, that leaves us little hope of being as wise as Solomon, yet the reading is proclaimed to urge us to seek wisdom and to recognize that true wisdom comes from God.

Wisdom and knowledge are not the same thing, but they work well together. Those responsible for preparing and leading worship in the church certainly need a good deal of each.

Liturgical leaders need considerable knowledge about the liturgy itself and about current liturgical laws and rubrics for various liturgies. Acquiring this knowledge is not a minor task, and it may be difficult for most volunteers to find the time for such learning. Yet there is no substitute for solid knowledge when making decisions about the community’s worship life.

Too often, people make decisions on the basis of what seems meaningful or feels right, and that sometimes leads to real distortions in the liturgy of the church.

Solid knowledge is a prerequisite for being able to discern properly how the universal law is to be applied to each situation. Some degree of adaptation is necessary in almost every liturgy. The design of the church building, the ability of the various ministers, the character of the assembly, the nature of the day and what’s happening outside the church walls all impact the way we carry out the church’s rituals. But we cannot make proper decisions about such adaptation without being clear about the nature of the rite, the flow of the ritual, the purpose of a given element in the ritual and the reasons behind the rubrics given.

Such decisions also require enough wisdom to be able to judge what will work best, to evaluate honestly afterward and to recognize when we’ve made mistakes. Nobody gets it right all the time, and wisdom includes enough humility to admit that. Wise pastoral decisions always require humility.

When we are dealing with the liturgy of the church and the spiritual lives of the people who form our assemblies, we are always treading on holy ground. We need to avoid the hubris that assumes we really know what we are doing and have nothing more to learn.

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time  

Paige Byrne Shortal

INTRODUCTION

Today we hear the prayer of Solomon to be a wise ruler. In the Gospel, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a treasure. Let us call on God’s mercy for those times when we are not wise and what we treasure is not of God.

PENITENTIAL RITE

Lord Jesus, you came to show us the Kingdom of God: Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you reveal to us the hidden treasure of our hearts: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, give us the desire for a wise and understanding heart: Lord, have mercy.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

1 Kgs 3:5, 7-12 King Solomon prays for Wisdom.  
Rom 8:28-30 All things work for good for those who love God.

Matt 13:44-52 The Kingdom is like a treasure.

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider

My friends, God created us to live in harmony with one another, to care for one another and to pray for one another. Confident that God hears our prayers, let us pray.

Minister

❖ Let us pray for all who are called to special service within the church ... for bishops and pastors and teachers ... for counselors and confessors and spiritual directors ... for ministers of worship and ministers to the poor ... we pray.

❖ For the leaders of nations ... for men and women powerful in business and in the church ... for members of the media and all people of influence ... for those whose decisions affect the lives of many people ... we pray.

❖ For those who most need our prayers ... for all whose lives are threatened ... we pray.

❖ For beneficial weather for our gardens and our fields ... for farmers and all whose livelihood depends on favorable weather ... we pray.

❖ For the sick ... (names or “for those listed in our parish bulletin”) ... for those who care for the sick and those who lack health care ... we pray.

❖ We remember those who have died ... (names) ... for all our loved ones who have gone before us and for all those who mourn ... we pray.

Presider

Good and gracious God, strengthen the love that unites communities in peace and joy. Grant that our community may know the unity that is a sign of your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.
The challenge of good liturgical planning and ministry is that we must constantly navigate a course between a legalism that makes law and rubrics into gods that must never be transgressed and an assumption that we know better than those who wrote the official books and can make the liturgy into any shape we desire.

As usual, virtue lies in the middle. Solid knowledge of liturgical history and ritual principles can help us discern whether a rubric is essential or whether it needs adaptation.

Consider again Cardinal Mahony’s dispensations from the rubric about pouring the cups at the Preparation of the Gifts (see July 10). The cardinal expresses his respect for the overall document. At the same time, he relies on his understanding of the church’s tradition of Communion under both species, the meaning of the fraction rite and the power of sacramental symbols to discern the need for local adaptation. His concern is both practical (small altars, increased danger of spilling) and sacramental (the sign value of one bread and one cup).

He also, I assume, recognized the trivial nature of this new rubric in contrast to more essential liturgical law. The non-essential nature of this rule is indicated by the fact that the Vatican had approved, only a year before, the U.S. bishops’ guidelines for Communion under both species, which included the use of carafes and pouring the cups at the same time as the breaking of the bread. This is clearly not a matter of doctrine or an abuse of the liturgy.

A further principle can be discerned in the cardinal’s words. The only reason given in the Vatican document for this rule is “lest anything should happen that would be to the detriment of so great a mystery.”

It is not clear what this means, but most commentators suggest it refers to the danger of spilling the precious blood. Yet the use of multiple cups on the altar throughout the Eucharistic Prayer and preparation for Communion may actually increase that danger. So the cardinal is willing to dispense from the letter of the law in order to achieve the purpose of the law.

Such decisions require both knowledge and wisdom. There is no simple rule that will eliminate the need for prudent decisions. But one rule does apply across the board. Those who make decisions and those whose worship is affected by those decisions must always keep the rule of love.

Today’s second reading reminds us that nothing can separate us from God’s love for us, and we must not let our differing views of worship separate us from those God calls us to love.

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**Finding Our Way**

*Fr. Lawrence Mick*

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**18th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

*Paige Byrne Shortal*

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we are challenged to trust in the abundance of God. Let us call on God’s mercy for those times when we fear to share our blessings and fail to trust that God will provide what we need.

**PENITENTIAL RITE**

Lord Jesus, you nourish us with your Word: Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you feed us with your own Body: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you call us to proclaim your Word and share our bread with others: Lord, have mercy.

**SCRIPTURE READINGS**

Isa 55:1-3 All who thirst, come to the water.

Rom 8:35,37-39 Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Matt 14:13-21 Jesus feeds the five thousand, and there are baskets left over.

**PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL**

*Presider*

My friends, God created us to live in harmony with one another; to nourish and pray for each other. 

Confident that God hears our prayers, let us pray.

*Minister*

❖ Let us pray for the church … for all the works and projects of the church throughout the world … we pray.

❖ For those who hunger for the Eucharist … for those faithful members of our community who are not Catholic, but who accompany their families to worship … for those who are waiting for the completion of the annulment process … for all those who long for Communion … we pray.

❖ For communities of people all over the world … for leaders who are seeking solutions to the problems of society … for those who enforce our laws and those responsible for informing the public … we pray.

❖ For those who most need our prayers … for the poor … for those who live with violence … for the lonely, the neglected, the forgotten … for those who have no one else to pray for them … we pray.

❖ For the sick … *(names or “for those listed in our parish bulletin”) …* for those with heart disease, emphysema, allergies and all who are especially burdened by the summer heat … we pray.

❖ We remember those who have died … *(names)* … for those who mourn for them … we pray.

*Presider*

Good and gracious God, watch over and protect us. Strengthen the love that unites us in peace and joy. May we know the unity that is a sign of your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.
Loose Change from Church and World

What is a grandparent?

Grandparents are a lady and a man who don’t have no children of their own. They like other people’s.

Grandparents don’t have anything to do except be there when we come to see them. They are so old they shouldn’t play hard or run. It is good if they drive us to the store and have lots of quarters for us.

Usually grandmothers are fat, but not too fat to tie your shoes. They wear glasses and funny underwear. They can take their teeth and gums out.

Grandparents don’t have to be smart. They have to answer questions like “Why isn’t God married?” and “How come dogs chase cats?”

When they read to us, they don’t skip, and they don’t mind if we ask for the same story over again.

They know we should have a snack before bedtime, and they say prayers with us, and they kiss us even when we’ve acted bad.

Everyone should try to have a grandmother, especially if you don’t like television, because they are the only grownups who like to spend time with us.

Taken from papers written by a class of 8-year-olds.

Cartoons

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**ABOUT THE ARTIST**

Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened ...  
Matt 11: 25-30

The sower went out to sow...  
Matt 13:1-23

Let the wheat and weeds grow together until harvest.  
Matt 13:24-43

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure ...  
Matt 13:44

Five loaves and two fish are all we have.  
Matt 14:13-21

The Spirit of the Lord dwells in you.  
Rom 8:9 ff

Just as the rain and snow come down ... to make the earth fertile and fruitful ... so shall my word be ...  
Isaiah 55:10

What can separate us from the love of Christ?  
Rom 8:35-39

24 | JULY 2005
Do you recall the scene from the 1939 movie “The Wizard of Oz” in which Dorothy (Judy Garland), the Tin Man (Jack Haley), the Cowardly Lion (Bert Lahr) and the Scarecrow (Ray Bolger) finally arrived at the end of the yellow brick road and were about to meet the Wizard (Frank Morgan)? All had come with a request that they believed could be granted only by the Wizard. Dorothy wanted to go home to Kansas; the Scarecrow wanted a brain. Courage was the Lion’s desire and the Tin Man wanted a heart. Yet, when they were within inches of meeting the one whom they believed could change their lives forever, they balked. The fear and trepidation inspired by the very thought of the Wizard made him almost unapproachable.

Experiences like this, however, do not exist solely in movies. Public figures, rulers of nations and even some religious figures are often surrounded by a certain persona that distances them from others. For example, no one may touch the royal person of Great Britain’s queen, not even to shake hands, unless the queen initiates the action. In some royal households, no one may turn their back on the sovereign, hence the need to shuffle backward out of the room. Papal protocol is so demanding that an appointed committee oversees all papal audiences and suggests proper attire, demeanor, etc. Political protocol, even in our proudly democratic country, requires that staff members thank the president each time they take their leave of him. Gaining admission to the president is also subject to strict protocol controlled by the White House Chief of Staff.

Although human beings may desire and even require that certain protocols be carefully observed, there are no such protocols with God … and whereas human leaders might cloak themselves in an aura of un-approachableness, God, as is revealed in today’s liturgy, remains utterly approachable. In today’s first reading, the prophet Zechariah celebrates the approachableness of God, who does not remain aloof and pompously distant from the people but comes among them in all meekness. No Mount Olympus or mist-shrouded Avalon to hide and house the God of Israel. On the contrary, Israel’s God repeatedly assures believers, “I am with you”; “I have seen your plight”; “I hear your cries”; “You are mine and I am yours.” Israel’s God made the divine presence as patently obvious as a pillar of fire illuminating the darkened desert sky or the cloud that signalled nearness by day. By describing the divine love for Israel as that of a mother who never forgets her child (Isa 49:15) or as a loving parent who teaches a son to walk, raises the infant to his cheeks and stoops to feed him and enfold the child in love (Hos 11:3, 4), the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures affirmed the divine desire to be near, to be approached.

That desire took on human form and features in the person of Jesus, whose very incarnation signalled the ultimate gesture of divine approachability. In Jesus, God came so near as to become one of us. This mystery is dramatically and clearly expressed in today’s Matthean...
Gospel, wherein Jesus first insists that those who know him can also know God who is revealed in him. “Then,” Jesus invites, “Come to me and find rest. Learn from me and be refreshed.” There is no mention of protocol here; no appointment is needed; no political correctness or special attire is specified. There is no blustering wizard to appease, no finicky sovereign to placate, no dignitary to whom to kowtow. There is simply Jesus, made accessible in flesh and blood, made forever present in bread and wine.

“Come to me, take my yoke upon you,” Jesus asks, and then specifies that his is an easy yoke and a light burden. In a comment on this invitation by the utterly approachable Jesus, T.W. Manson (The Teaching of Jesus, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK: 1931) has explained that the yoke is not one that Jesus imposes but one that he himself wears. In Jesus’ day, a yoke was a common wooden device that paired two oxen and made them a team. The ever-approachable Jesus invites each of us to become his yoke mate and, with him and in him, to find our burdens lessened and our sorrows shared. Our weariness and the weighty worries of life will not drag us down or overwhelm us because the One who has called us into being has shouldered our troubles as his own.

ZECHARIAH 9:9-10

According to historians with expertise in ancient empire, when the legions of Rome had annexed yet another territory of the then known world and renamed it as a Roman province, the conquering soldiers, in one final display of power, would march proudly through the defeated towns and villages. Their victory march left no doubt in any onlooker’s mind that Roman might had no match. How different a display of power is described in today’s first reading by the prophet Zechariah! Whereas Rome’s power was expressed militarily and with ruthlessness, the power of the king described here is manifested in meekness, peace and justice.

Recall that the expected king or “anointed one” (messiah) was invariably envisioned by Zechariah’s contemporaries as a warrior like David who could lead a revolt against Rome. It was also expected that his advent would restore to Israel and Judah the prestige and prosperity that were enjoyed on David’s watch. But the king described here seems to eschew all forms of violence, and despite the best expectations of his people, Jesus chose to do the same. Moreover, he demonstrated his intent to correct those expectations by symbolically associating with Zechariah’s meek king. As illustrated in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus arranged to ride on a donkey (“the foal of an ass”) when entering Jerusalem for the final time. Matthew took care to tell his readers that this gesture (Matt 21:4-5) was meant to affirm Jesus’ role as the leader who would banish all instruments of war and proclaim peace to all the world. Unlike their current reputation for stubborn unruliness, donkeys, in the ancient world, were symbols of peace, as opposed to the horse, which was utilized for war. Riders of donkeys, as featured in the

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flesh, the Spirit is powerful, salvific, redemptive. For Paul, the words “flesh” and “spirit” did not designate two distinct aspects of human nature but two modes of living. Life pursued according to the flesh, explains Paul Achtemeier (Romans, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1985), is a way of life characterized by rebellion and idolatry such that the entire perspective of the flesh-oriented person is turned in on self, and self becomes the center of all values. Life in the flesh is essentially a life lived under the thumb of the sinful self. I am reminded of Sir Walter Scott’s poem “Breathes There the Man” (from Canto 6 of “The Lay of the Last Minstrel,” 1805), which mourned the poem “Breathes There the Man” (from Canto 6 of “The Lay of the Last Minstrel,” 1805), which mourned the Minstrel,” 1805), which mourned the life of a “man with soul so dead”:

If such there breathe, go, mark him well; For him no minstrel raptures swell; High though his titles, proud his name, Boundless his wealth as wish can claim; Despite those titles, power and pelf, The wretch, concentrated all in self; Living, shall forfeit fair renown And, doubly dying, shall go down To the vile dust from whence he sprung, Unwept, unhonored and unsung.

Life lived according to the Spirit, on the other hand, is life set free from bondage to self and sin and the law. It is, as Achtemeier (op. cit.) has further explained, life lived in willing and loving bondage to God. This bondage breaks the enslaving power of self-centeredness and sin and sets the person free to enjoy a new relationship with God, not as a rebel but as a loved child.

As William Barclay (“The Letter to the Romans,” The Daily Study Bible, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK: 1975) has explained, Paul exudes the joy of one who has chosen to live as God’s adopted son in the Spirit. His was a Spirit-filled life, a Christ-centered life that anticipated eternity in the here and now. Because life in the Spirit is so bound to God, death, which Paul would eventually face in Rome, becomes only a transition. All human beings die, but those who are Spirit-led and whose hearts are Christ-occupied, insisted Barclay, die only to rise again. Paul lived and died and now lives again on the strength of that conviction; today he invites his readers to do likewise.

**MATTHEW 11:25-30**

“My door, my heart is always open.” With these words, Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Olinda and Recife (Brazil), declared his approachability to those whom he was proud to serve. Urging his fellow priests and bishops to adopt a similar attitude toward all people, and particularly the poor, Dom Helder Camara struggled to implement his vision of the “church of the poor.” In his obituary by Francis McDonagh (The Tablet, Sept. 4, 1999), the great archbishop was described as a champion of oppressed and inglorious persons not only in his native Brazil but throughout the world. He avoided wearing the archbishop’s purple sash and abandoned the pretentious suburbs for the aptly named “church of the frontiers” tucked away behind the city’s inner ring road. He ate his suppers with the taxi drivers at their stall across the road and hitched rides rather than running an official car. Camara eagerly gave away church land to provide a settlement for the landless and set up a credit union as well as a theological institute in which future priests and laity would study together and even receive lectures from women. All these large and small gestures made Dom Helder Camara an approachable servant of God, not unlike Jesus, who voices his desire to be approached in today’s Gospel. “Come to me and I will refresh you ... come to me and rest.” Like Jesus, Camara took upon himself the yoke of the poor and lightened their burdens with his attentive, caring love. If only his example would become the rule rather than the exception.

Also included in today’s Gospel is a statement that sounds for all the world like a quote from the Fourth Gospel: “No one knows the Father but the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal ...” (v. 27). Indeed, scholars have often called this verse “the thunderbolt from the Johannine heaven.” As Douglas Hare (op. cit.) has explained, this statement affirms that Jesus alone knows God fully, but those who know Jesus are on the way to knowing the God who sent him.

How fitting, then, that this statement is followed by an invitation issued by Jesus to come and learn from him. Learning from Jesus will require the willingness to be as he is, “gentle and humble of heart.” This description affirms the sharp contrast between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day who, rather than take on the yoke and share the burden of the people, opted instead to “tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders, but not lift a finger to move them” (23:4). The choice is clear, as are the consequences. Shall we be disciples who, like Jesus and Dom Helder Camara, make the yoke of the poor their own, or shall we opt for the way of the Pharisees and the scribes? My door, my heart is always open; come to me.

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**Sermon Starters**

**Dick Folger**

At the Olympics in Athens last year, “Iranian Hercules” Hossein Rezazadeh won a gold medal and extended his reign as the world’s strongest man by snatch-lifting 462 lbs. and, in the clean and jerk, hoisting 580 lbs. Paul Anderson, the African-American gold medalist at the 1956 Olympic games in Melbourne, Australia, lifted the greatest weight ever recorded. He did a 6,270 lb. backlift off trestles to enter the Guinness Book of World Records.

In today’s Gospel Jesus tells us we don’t have to have set a world record in order to follow him. He assures us that his “yoke is easy and his burden is light.”
Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

KEY VERSE(S) or MAIN IDEA [Gospel] “Come to me all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you.”

HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIALLY APPROACH THE READINGS/MAIN IDEA Somewhat akin to “The Lord is my shepherd”—a cozy verse that sounds so comforting, yet when things get really crazy, it doesn’t bring the desired comfort. But Jesus doesn’t lie, so there must be something defective in me, or it would “work better.”

STARTER As children, we begged for toys that often weren’t as exciting as they appeared on TV. We’ve all bought clothes and grooming products that didn’t deliver what the advertisements promised. Usually we conclude that either the product is hyped or there’s something wrong with us that keeps it from working.

LEADING QUESTIONS Is the “Come to me ...” promise similar to those situations? Does it promise more than it usually delivers? Are we defective when it doesn’t “work better?” Or do we need to examine our expectations of what Jesus promises?

POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE * Unrealistic expectations: Upon our asking, Jesus will quickly remove our burdens and solve our problems. * Our culture-conditioned preoccupation with feeling good or even euphoric. * The nature of the refreshment Jesus promises: e.g., strength to endure, hope for the future. * The need to keep coming to Jesus and spend some time with him; this kind of refreshment is not usually instant.

MEDIA LINKS The film “Because of Winn-Dixie” is about a young girl named Opal who finds life burdensome for quite valid reasons. A stray dog she adopts and names Winn-Dixie brings genuine refreshment to all of them. We need to look for Jesus’ refreshment in unlikely places.

QUOTATIONS * “Only they who have borne burdens understand sympathy.” New York State proverb.

HOMILY

Fr. James Smith

Let the Children Come

Jesus seems to have liked children. But then, don’t we all? Every morning, the schoolchildren gather in the gym by grades before going to their classes. So, I visit them most mornings. It’s a joy to visit the kids because the gym is filled with life. There is a buzz of excitement; there is the chatter of earth-shaking news; there is the vibrant expectation of different experiences in the air; there is the warmth of new relationships being formed. Above all, there is the atmosphere that anything is possible, that life is good and will get even better as the days and years move on.

A world without children would be grim. An ex-convict spoke to a class about his prison experience. He told them about the boredom and loneliness. They understood that; what they could not quite experience was his description of prison as “a world without children.” The joy of being around children must have been even more compelling in the time of Jesus. A large percentage of them died at birth, more within the first five years; many were malnourished and sickly. And for all of them, carefree childhood ended abruptly as they assumed adult responsibilities at a very early age. No wonder children were a fleeting, priceless pleasure.

But Jesus saw something more in them. He saw them as people worthy of God’s Kingdom, as people who possessed the very virtues that made the Kingdom possible. Liveliness, for example. Kids are above all alive; they fairly burst with energy. That is why a sick child is such a sad sight — she lacks the very spirit that personifies childhood. Now, Jesus was the life of the world personified. He recognized life, he inspired life, he rejoiced in life. Maybe that is why he made eternal life the first principle of the Kingdom.

From his own experience, Jesus knew that children have an intuitive sense of wonder and awe. They are naturally curious, and even as they grow in wisdom, they know that there is no end to what they can know. Therefore, they naturally have a sense of God. We dilute that divine presence with well-meaning substitutes such as Santa Claus and Easter Bunnies and ghosts. But these quickly lose their power. So, before we die, every world-weary adult must regain some childlike appetite for God. Otherwise, why would we even want to enter the Kingdom of God?

Children are naturally humble, since they depend on others for everything, including life itself. But that is precisely what makes them good candidates for the Kingdom. They are not impressed by our degrees and awards and titles and accomplishments. All they want to know is: “Do you love me?”

Which is why children are such indiscriminate lovers. They love things without reason, beyond their worth, for no purpose at all. Adults learn to parcel out their love, use it wisely, sparingly, to attain some goal. It is childish wisdom to know that the purpose of love is not to become better or to make others better — the goal of love is simply union with others.

Aside from our love for them, the practical truth about children is that they are basically useless and often bothersome. They are valuable only to those who love them. Which makes them perfect models for adults who want to enter God’s Kingdom. Because we are finally useless servants who are valuable only to the God who loves us and the people who love us and the people whom we love.
Trust that many of us have had a similar experience, I share my own first encounter with a seed and the inimitable power of the growth that comes from within. In first grade, our much-loved teacher gave everyone in our class a lima bean along with an explanation that each of us would be solely responsible for what became of it. With the bean and the explanation, we were also given a paper towel and a small Dixie cup and were instructed to moisten the towel, wrap it around the bean, put it in the cup and place the cup near a window or other light source. Incredibly, at least to us, the bean soon germinated and began to grow at a pace that was most astounding to our inquiring, though often impatient, minds.

After a week or so, our teacher invited us to bring our sprouting beans to school. Some of us were ashamed to say that we’d lost the bean or “the dog ate it.” Others had forgotten to keep the bean moist and its growth was stunted. Some forgot about a light source and the bean sprouted but withered. Still others among us were proud to show off a relatively tall and healthy sprout with the hint of a leaf here and there.

Because all of us can, in some small or large way, relate to seeds and beans and growing things, the scripture texts for today, especially from Isaiah and the Matthean Jesus, can be particularly significant. Both the prophet and the evangelist prompt us to compare the Word of God that we have gathered to hear to a seed, planted anew in us each week. Like a much-loved teacher, the church provides, through the liturgy, both the seed and the wherewithal to allow the seed to germinate, to grow and thereby to transform our lives. But in order for growth to occur, we must accept the seed, take it home with us and carefully, lovingly tend to it while allowing it also to tend to and care for us.

While he lived and walked and worked among us, Jesus planted the seed of the Word in the form of parables. But whether those who listened to him took away with them a seed that they might nourish or just another interesting but forgettable story depended upon the manner in which they listened to Jesus. “Anyone who has ears should listen!” challenged Jesus then, and so does Jesus continue to challenge his listeners today.

Listening to Jesus means understanding and accepting that the seed of the Word is portable, that is to say, it may not be left hanging in the air, intermingled with the smell of candles, flowers and incense. But in order to be portable as well as translatable into every aspect of the human experience, the Word must germinate within the good soil of the human heart and mind and, ultimately, the human will. If the Word we hear does not germinate in us and then travel with us across the threshold of the church and on into the rest of the week, it cannot accomplish its God-intended purpose — to achieve the end for which God spoke it into the world and into each of our lives (Isa 55:11).

As David N. Power (The Word of the Lord, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, July 10, 2005 — Fifteenth Sunday

Ordinary Time

Beans and Seeds and Sonorous Echoes

This scriptural commentary was prepared exclusively for the Celebration members by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez, who earned a master’s degree in literature and religion of the Bible in a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.
July 12, 2005

Ordinary Time
Fifteenth Sunday
Beans and Seeds and Sonorous Echoes

Sophia Petrillo, the oldest of the four “girls,” used those words to introduce the many stories she told about her homeland, Sicily. With clever embellishments, Sophia would create verbal images so vivid that one could readily imagine her quaint village and its cast of colorful characters. In a sense, the sixth-century prophet known to us as Deutero-Isaiah is doing something similar today. “Picture it!” he seems to be saying. Imagine a parched and lifeless vista, a desert unrelieved except for a few rough-hewn stones and the scorpions that hide beneath them. Then, onto all that barrenness, soft rains begin to fall, and almost immediately (and miraculously) life begins to be remembered. Leaves sprout, flowers bloom, birds sing and the desert is transformed. “Just as the rain, so shall my word be . . .”

Biblical scholar James Mulemburg ("The Book of Isaiah," The Interpreter’s Bible, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn.: 1956) has called these two beautiful verses aparable that connects the inscrutable ways and thoughts of God with the fulfillment of God’s salvific purpose for humankind. Isaiah of Jerusalem pictured that Word going forth into history to call into action a whole series of events (9:8-21). In Deutero-Isaiah, the power and range of God’s Word is even greater; it is cosmic and universal. It is the revelatory power that effects salvation for all and brings forth the reign of God on earth.

This text is part of a longer passage with which the prophet has concluded his “Book of Comfort” (Chapters 40-55). Never failing in his posture as consoler, Deutero-Isaiah reprises in this poem (vv. 1-13) all his earlier themes. He extends God’s own banquet invitation to the hungry and thirsty poor; he reminds them of God’s fidelity to the covenant and pledges that all who would bend their ear to listen (v. 3) will receive not only bread and water (sustenance food) but also wine and milk (celebratory fare). Seven times in 13 verses, the divine invitation begs: “Come,” “Seek,” “Turn to me and live.” Then, in a dramatic climax, lest anyone still harbor a doubt as to the veracity of all these divine promises, the prophet portrays God as saying in verses 10 and 11, “See, I give you my word!”

Besides offering a fitting prelude to today’s Gospel parable of the sower (as the seed, so my word), these verses also prepare the people for the ultimate self-disclosure of God in Jesus, the Word of God made flesh. “Picture it!” the prophet says. Just as the rains can bring forth life in the desert, so also will God’s Word spoken into the human condition in Jesus bring healing and new life to those who were once dead in sin. Picture it! Believe it! Be saved!

ROMANS 8:18-23

Near the end of his lengthy correspondence with the Christians of Corinth, Paul shared a veritable litany of what he refers to here in Romans as “the sufferings of the present” (v. 18). “Five times,” he wrote, “I received 40 lashes minus one. Three time I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day on the deep; on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers,
dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fasting, through cold and exposure.” These sufferings were no doubt exacerbated by what Paul called “anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor 11:24-28) and “a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan to beat me” (2 Cor 12:7). Nevertheless, Paul insisted that all these considerable sufferings paled into insignificance when compared to the glory yet to be revealed. If anyone had just cause to gripe to God about his lot in life, Paul certainly did, and yet his refusal to do so and his unabashed hope command our attention as well as our admiration and emulation.

Until the time for groaning yields to rejoicing, Paul urges his readers to “eagerly await” God’s action. “Eagerly await” (v. 19) is the English rendering for the wonderful Greek word apokaradokia. As William Barclay (“The Letter to the Romans,” The Daily Study Bible, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK: 1975) has explained, apokaradokia describes the attitude of the person who scans the horizon with head thrust forward, eagerly searching the distance for the first signs of dawn. This describes Paul perfectly. To him, life was not a weary, resigned, defeated waiting; it was a throbbing vivid expectation. Clearly, he wished for his attitude to be contagious — in his letters he continually reminds his readers that the keynote of the Christian life is hope and never despair. Scanning the horizon, we look beyond sin and suffering, straining beyond the pain and the groaning to welcome the power of God’s mercy and love.

MATTHEW 13:1-23

Responses to the Word of God proclaimed in our assemblies are as varied as are those who hear it. The Matthean Jesus ably illustrates this fact in the parable of the sower (vv. 1-4) and in its allegorical interpretation (vv. 18-23). But why, asks Charles Cousar (Texts For Preaching, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1995), do some people hear and eagerly respond and others hear but remain unmoved or openly hostile? What explains the different responses? Does God choose, as Jesus seems to imply, for some to be open and receptive and others to be deaf? Or are we human beings solely responsible for our own hearing? This mystery puzzled Jesus’ disciples then and continues to puzzle us now.

Perhaps the resolution to this mystery will seem more attainable if this Gospel is appreciated in conjunction with that of last Sunday, wherein Jesus declared: “No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal the Father” (11:27). This statement stressed that knowledge of God is a gift of grace. Today’s Gospel, however, focuses more pointedly on the people to whom the Gospel is revealed and the varying degrees of their acceptance or rejection. Taken together, these two Gospels, insists Cousar (op. cit.), present the paradox of divine election and personal responsibility and the unrelieved tension between God’s gift of revelation and the appropriate human response.

When the disciples questioned Jesus about his method of revealing God in parables, his answer (vv. 11-15) seemed to obscure his purpose even further. However, two points should be noted in this regard. What may seem a puzzle to the crowds regarding Jesus’ teaching is clearer to his disciples because they have already accepted the invitation to follow Jesus. With that acceptance comes the gift of grace that enables them to explore and understand the deeper significance of Jesus’ words. In Semitic fashion, both the disciples’ growing understanding and the crowd’s continued obtuseness are attributed to God. The issue of human accountability for that obtuseness is not dealt with, except for the quote from Isaiah that anticipated humankind’s hardness of heart and therefore the failure to hear and heed the message of God as spoken through the prophet and through Jesus.

A second point has to do with the nature of the parable as a teaching genre. Parables reveal the reign of God, but these reveal it as mystery. Parables invite those who hear them to realize that the mysteries of God are not to be explained in prose that renders them commonplace or in esoteric language that hobbles understanding. Rather, as Lamar Williamson Jr. (Mark, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1983) has pointed out, parables invite us to see and hear God in the familiar rounds of daily life, as in the sowing of seeds, and to contemplate quietly until the commonplace awakens our minds and hearts to wonder and deeper understanding.

Oh, great Sower of seeds, sow your Word in me; allow me the gift of understanding and the courage to heed what I hear … Amen.

Sermon Starters

Dick Folger

On October 5, 2002, during the pumpkin weigh-off at the Topsfield Fair in Massachusetts, the world’s largest pumpkin weighed a little over 1,337 pounds. From one seed, that was a good harvest.

But pumpkins only get one chance to yield. Grapes can yield year after year. A vine planted in 1842 at Carpinteria, Calif., was, by 1900, yielding nearly 10 tons of grapes in peak years. By the time it died in 1920 at the age of 78 years, that one vine had produced over 600 tons of grapes. That’s really a rich harvest.

If you are the one seed that Farmer God has sown, what kind of ground are you in and how much will your life yield for the kingdom?
Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

KEY VERSE(S) and/or MAIN IDEA
“What kind of soil am I in terms of this parable?”

BACKGROUND NOTE
It would be helpful to use the long form of the Gospel, or at least add Jesus’ interpretation from the long form.

HOW YOUTH MIGHT APPROACH THE READINGS/MAIN IDEA
I wish I were the good soil, but there’s some evidence against it. But then again, sometimes I think I really am the good soil. Am I deceiving myself? I wonder what God thinks.

STARTER
If you follow professional sports teams, or the TV or film work of many actors and actresses, you know that a simple question such as, “What kind of ___ are they?” is not really a simple question. The San Francisco 49ers at one time were a “dynasty.” Recently, they are, well … not. Film stars who win Oscars™ often follow their award-winning performance with a mediocre or even a dismal one. The vice-versa pattern also happens. Likewise, the “What kind of soil am I?” question is not always so simple, either.

LEADING QUESTIONS
[After a quick review of the different kinds of soil] What kind of soil are you? How would you honestly classify yourself?

POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE
* The sowing of God’s message is not a one-time act; God is constantly sowing, and we are continually responding and growing … or not. * Concrete, contemporary examples of “the evil one”; the “patches of rock” and “setbacks”; the “briars” of worldly anxiety. * Rephrasing the question: “What kind of soil am I today — now? What kind do I want to be?

MEDIA LINKS
The character Bright Abbott in the TV series “Everwood” is an example of changing soil. A superficial playboy for most of his teenage years, he realized his shallowness, apologized to all the girls he had used and discovered a satisfaction he had not felt before.

HOMILY

God Suffers With Us

Fr. James Smith

God said that “power is made perfect in weakness.” But is God weak; does God suffer? The relationship between God and suffering has a long history. So we need to know where our present question fits in the human story.

When humans first started thinking about God, they were new at it, with no precedent to follow. They naturally fumbled a bit, like kindergartners trying to spell G-O-D with the wrong blocks. They sensed that there was something above and beyond them. But since they could not imagine anything beyond their own experience, they imagined many gods to reflect their different experiences: a god of love, a god of hate, a mothering god, a fathering god — a whole pantheon of immortal mortals.

Then came Moses, who experienced God in a burning bush that did not burn up. That told him that although God seemed like us, God was not to be mistaken for appearances. Moses knew that God was totally different from humans. When God cryptically said: “I am who I am and that’s that,” Moses called God “Holy,” which means precisely “set apart, distant, totally other.”

But Moses experienced this distant God as also close to him, personal, loving, caring, fearsome, powerful, compassionate. Later biblical writers spoke of God. They knew they took a great risk in reducing God to human terms; they were no more able to describe God than an elephant is able to describe a ballet. But they had little choice. God, like high school Shakespeare, is worth doing badly rather than not at all.

Time passed. People wanted to know more about God. They created a special language with words such as “First Cause, Unmoved Mover, Ground of Being, Absolute Being.” They thought of God as the Perfect Being. This God was omnipotent, omnipresent, all good, all mighty, timeless, weightless, senseless. A distant watchmaker watching his world unwind.

At about the same time in history, the individual human became more important than humanity. Each person felt that their pain was worthy of God’s attention. As wars became worldwide, suffering increased exponentially. People felt the need for God to suffer with them. Thus, God became our “Fellow-Sufferer.”

It feels good, but is it true? Suffering is a lack of something: But God lacks nothing: perfect cholesterol, good pulse, great bone density. If God lacks nothing, there is nothing in God that can possibly suffer. Which doesn’t mean God doesn’t care; it means that God just can’t hurt. But that is a good thing, for us as well as God. Because if God were stuck in our pain, how could God help us? If we are sinking in quicksand, we don’t want someone to jump in with us — we want them on solid ground from which they can pull us out. So it is good that God is outside our pain so we can reach beyond it and touch a healthy God on the other side.

But Jesus is on our side as the Ultimate Fellow-Sufferer: In him, God suffered the way we do.

More important, when we suffer in union with him, our pain helps him save the world. It is even more comforting to know that our suffering somehow completes the ongoing suffering of Jesus. Not only do I suffer with Christ, but Christ suffers with me. Better yet, Christ is today suffering in me.
On a public radio program called “The Gestalt Gardener,” three experts in their field—Felder Rushing, Oliver Stoutner and Leon Goldsberry, aka “Dr. Dirt”—pool their considerable knowledge to answer questions put to them by Southern gardeners. When asked their opinion as to how to handle the perennial problem of weeds, the three experts are of the same mind. Nip them in the bud or, better yet, prevent them from taking root in the first place. A variety of methods of extermination, both organic and chemical, are recommended, but all have essentially the same herbicidal purpose. How unlike the method recommended by the Matthean Jesus in today’s Gospel. Rather than root out the unwanted garden guests and be done with them once and for all, the farmer in Jesus’ parable advises, “Let them grow together until harvest.”

Did we, asks Baptist pastor Timothy Owings, hear Jesus correctly? Obviously yes, but hearing correctly does not lessen the surprise prompted by Jesus’ words. Probing deeper into the parable’s message, we are led to understand that this story represents Jesus’ radical approach not merely to weed control but to us human beings and the evil of which we are capable. Just as the farmer said of the weeds and wheat, so Jesus says to human beings both good and evil, “Let them grow together until harvest.” It seems, suggests Owings, that this radical approach is at the heart of Jesus’ teaching from the outset. Isn’t this what Jesus meant when, in his great sermon, he instructed his own to “offer no resistance to one who is evil; when someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other …” (Matt 5:39)? More Gospel, insists Owings, grows on a turned cheek than a clenched fist. Wheat and weeds growing together: This is risky farming, risky living, risky discipleship. Nevertheless, it is the way of the Lord, who allows time and space and second, third and fourth chances for conversion, for growth, for transformation. Weed control of this variety will also require a more thoughtful and caring engagement of the “enemy” as well as more focused attention on the reality of evil, rather than on cruel attacks on those who are caught in its grip. Weed control or the radical approach to evil, as Jesus taught, challenges those who would risk such discipleship to spend time and energies nurturing the Gospel wheat, nurturing its growth, cultivating its crop, believing in the Gospel harvest. Jesus’ radical approach to evil does not condone it but rather prefers catechesis to condemnation and supportive help to shunning.

Since many of us will probably assume that we are more wheat than weed, the challenge of risky discipleship becomes our own. If we are truly to follow Jesus’ lead, then we must withhold our harsh judgment of others, leaving that prerogative solely to God, whose mercy and kindness create an atmosphere where change for the better becomes practicable. Also withheld should be the all-too-prevalent tendency to...
concentrate on and therefore wallow in our own “weediness.” If God can and does forgive our large failures and small shortcomings, can we not be similarly patient and forbearing, realizing that we are indeed a work in progress and that harvest time has not yet come?

In today’s first reading, the Wisdom author celebrates those virtues of God that give even the most “weedy” and sinful among us hope and confidence that good growth is possible. Rather than use the divine might to punish the sinful, God, who has the care of us all, exercises that might as leniency and clemency, urging the guilty toward repentance. Moreover, as the ancient sage intimates, God expects those whose sins are forgiven and who are blessed repeatedly with the divine mercies to allow that forgiveness and those blessed mercies to pass to others through them.

When this challenge of keeping God’s mercies contagious seems impossible or at least improbable, we can be heartened by the great apostle Paul. In today’s second reading, he assures us that the Spirit helps us in our weakness to pray well, intercedes with God and the saints for us and helps us make our own the radical trust that we have known in God and in Jesus. Let them grow together until harvest; give the weediness within each of us the opportunity to change, to be forgiven, to be transformed, to grow. Harvest will come soon enough in God’s good time ... for now, let us grow together.

WISDOM 12:13, 16-19

William Thomson, who later became Lord Kelvin, was one of the greatest physicists of 19th-century England. While he was at college, his father wrote to him: “You are young; take care that you are not led to what is wrong. A false step now or the acquiring of an improper habit might ruin you for life. Frequently, look back over your conduct and thereby learn wisdom for the future” (from Faraday, Maxwell and Kelvin, by G.K.C. MacDonald, Anchor Books, Garden City, N.Y.: 1964). This is precisely the principle that guided the ancient sage and author of Wisdom, and one he invited his readers to live by as well. To that end, the pseudonymous sapiential writer devoted a lengthy section (Chapters 11:2-19:4) of Wisdom to a recapitulation of the major events of Israel’s history. Looking back over these events and drawing out the lessons therein, the ancient author hoped to impart wisdom by which future generations of Israelites might live and prosper. The resulting literary form, called midrash (from the verb darash, to search), became a popular teaching technique and was a favorite of the rabbis.

While the entire midrash in the book of Wisdom (11:2-19:4) centers on the lessons to be learned from the Exodus event, today’s first reading is an excerpt from a subsection (11:17-12:22) wherein the author digressed in order to speak of God’s merciful care and compassion for sinners. As Addison G. Wright (“Wisdom,” The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1990) has pointed out, God governs with justice and leniency because God is completely in control of the divine might. Unlike the wicked, whose weakness and insecurity prompt them to use unjustly the strength that is theirs, God, being all-powerful and unchallenged, experiences no disturbed moral equilibrium and is therefore just, and even merciful. These are the qualities of God that Jesus will describe in the form of a parable in today’s Gospel: “Let them grow together until harvest.” These are the qualities that Jesus incarnated among us, and they are the qualities that Jesus calls forth in his disciples — the quality of a mercy that is not strained, but as the great Bard of Avon once noted, “it [mercy] dropeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed — it blesseth him that gives and him that takes” (from William Shakespeare’s “Merchant of Venice,” 1596-1597). Almost two centuries after Shakespeare, another William (and another Brit) affirmed, “Where mercy, love and pity dwell, there God is dwelling too” (from Blake’s “The Divine Image,” 1789). Our challenge today, and each day, is to truly hear these words, to take them to heart and mind and soul and make them ring true in our lives.

ROMANS 8:26-27

When the mercies of God seem too challenging to emulate or too impractical for our complex world, and when the radical approach to evil that Jesus recommends in today’s Gospel seems to smack too much of first-century idealism, Paul, in today’s short but potent second reading, reminds us that we are not without resources: We have the Spirit! This awareness filled Paul’s every conscious thought, and nowhere does his conviction ring truer than in his letter to the Christians of Rome.

Confident of the Spirit’s help in all things, Paul leaned upon the Holy Spirit in prayer, and he encourages his readers to do the same, i.e., to allow the searching Spirit to well up from within our weakness and speak to God of who we are. That same Spirit also wells up from within to speak...
MATTHEW 13:24-43

Three parables and three levels of interpretation and development intertwine in today’s Gospel to teach three basic truths about the kingdom or reign of God. Through the parable of the sower (vv. 24-30), the Matthean Jesus declares that all types of people, both the “weedy” and the “wheaty” have been issued invitations to welcome God’s reign in their lives. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees whose ideas of kingdom-membership did not include sinners who therefore refused to associate with them, Jesus made it clear that all were on an equal footing. Incarnating the tender mercies and forgiveness of God, Jesus reached out to sinners (weeds), sought them out for healing and for table fellowship and, in the end, gave his life for them, for us, so that at harvest time, sinners and saints, weeds and wheat would be gathered in together — and then, and only then, would their place in the kingdom be decided by God.

In the allegorical interpretation of this parable that Jesus offered the disciples (vv. 30-43), the early church’s emerging understanding of itself and its role is affirmed. Like Jesus, those who organized as church after his death and resurrection were to be solicitous toward all, rejecting none and welcoming and supporting all in their efforts to prepare for God’s harvest by transforming their weedy-ness into wheat. Today, the parable continues to challenge the church toward a policy of inclusion and toward a patient forbearance that allows others to change for the better, even when, in our rather rigidly held opinion, this seems to be “most unlikely.” Such opinions can stunt growth and stifle hope and run contrary to the way Jesus approached and ministered among the “weeds” of his day. Jesus believed in the capacity of sinners to be transformed by grace, and that belief proved to be a catalyst for growth. Can Jesus’ church do any less?

Rounding out this Gospel are the twin parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (vv. 31-33). Both encourage believers with the realization that something as small as a mustard seed or as seemingly insignificant as a measure of yeast can result in remarkable consequences. For Jesus’ disciples, these parables promised that a great community of believers could grow from those Twelve and their families who first followed Jesus. For the Matthean church of the 80s, which was struggling to identify itself as rooted in but now separate (by force of edict) from Judaism, these parables said, “Stay the course; despite the struggles, the church will survive and thrive.” What message do these parables speak to the church of the 21st Christian century? Perhaps they assure us that despite human frailty or even because of it, the seed still grows and the leaven continues to do its thing because ours is a graced growth. We, for our part, are to actively welcome and allow that grace to grow in us and change us, shape us, prune and prod us — all of us — until harvest.

Sermon Starters

Dick Folger

A new farmer’s parish priest stopped by to bless his fields, which were overrun with weeds. He prayed, “May you and God work together to make this the farm of your dreams!”

A few months later, the priest came by again. He was amazed at the progress. The weeds were gone. “Amazing!” the priest exclaimed. “Look what God and you have accomplished working together!”

“Yes, Father;” the proud farmer said, “but don’t forget what the farm was like when God was working it alone!”

Like the farmer’s land, our lives can get overgrown and run down. We all have lots of work to do, and we can’t do it alone.
Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

KEY VERSE(S) and/or MAIN IDEA

[Paragraph 1]

HOMILY

Fr. James Smith

Wheat and Weeds

The disciples want to pull all of the weeds out of the Kingdom. That means everyone who doesn’t agree with them, of course. Every group has to set some limits on membership in order to maintain identity, but some members just like a neat garden.

The scribes did not like Jesus letting prostitutes and tax collectors into their perfect little kingdom. But if they eliminated taxes, there would be no roads or bridges. Everyone wants to kill all the lawyers, but without law, society would plunge into chaos.

Through the centuries, different Christians have wanted to eliminate members for their heretical views. That sounds like a great way to keep the faith pure. But the word “heresy” means “choice,” and one person’s truth is another person’s error. Many heretics have later been proven correct. Differing opinions help keep the orthodox honest.

If the church world is too intertwined to weed, let’s see what weeds might be pulled out of our secular world. How about the Democrats who favor abortion and gay rights? But if we throw the rascals out, we would lose their passion for civil rights, welfare and education. So why not throw some Republicans out? Because we might lose their sense of private responsibility and common decency. Politics is blue and red only on a map; in real life it is a blend of purple.

If the public realm of church and state defies our determination to distinguish weeds from wheat, let’s turn to our home garden. We surely know those characters well enough to separate.

How about eliminating that husband who has affairs and yells at his children? Well, he deserves some kind of correction, but simply getting rid of him leaves an empty paternal space in the family. But how long do we have to put up with those ungrateful, unproductive children? Well, once in a while, a child just might end up worthwhile.

Our own modern church is unpleasantly divided between conservative and liberal factions. We could go back to Latin in order to save our linguistic heritage, but it is nice to know what we are praying for. We could make the sanctuary holy with a Communion rail, but that would separate the church between us and them.

We could fight it out in the streets, the church between us and them. But we would look silly.

Let’s ask the bishops what to do. They are our ordained leaders. Except that many people want to weed them out for lack of oversight and accountability.

So, maybe Jesus was right in letting the weeds grow along with the wheat. That doesn’t mean that he approved of weeds or preferred a messy plot. It is just that he understood the difficulty of telling a rotten person from a healthy person. He also had that idealist’s hope that even a weed might evolve into a wheat stalk, given enough time.

But there is in human nature an unquenchable passion to judge others. What if we gave in to that temptation right now? If we weeded out of this congregation all those who are morally, politically or ecclesiastically incorrect, who would be left? So I think I will go with the tax collectors and prostitutes. Not just because they are more fun, but because the King said they would enter the Kingdom first.
Do you remember the TV commercial a few years ago that asked viewers, “What would you do for a Klondike Bar?” While surfing the Internet for the correct words to the ad’s catchy jingle (“for that chocolaty-coated, ice-cream loaded, big and thick, no room for a stick”), I was surprised to discover that there are 973 Web sites on Google’s search engine all devoted to answering that question, “What would you do-o-o for a Klondike Bar?”

While the ad itself variously featured a Nascar racer cramming himself into a toddler’s toy car for a Klondike Bar or a burly football player attempting a game of hopscotch for the same reward, the examples posted on the Web ranged from the risqué to the ridiculous. Some offered to reveal their computer passwords for the icy treat; others opted to trade their time or services or talents. Although the offers were many and varied, they shared a common thread: Many of us are of the mind that a Klondike Bar merits a risk and is worth some sacrifice.

If we were to ask this same question of other more important aspects of the human experience, how might we answer? For example, “What would you do to assure the safety and security of your family?” Dozens of answers would be forthcoming regarding proper diet, health care, burglar alarms, neighborhood watches, etc., etc. Similarly, if one were asked, “What would you do to get ahead in life?” the answers would include study, hard work, conscientiousness, responsibility, accountability, etc. If the same question were asked regarding a successful career in acting or professional sports or painting or music, answers would invariably include practice, practice, practice so as to hone whatever talents and skills we may possess.

With these questions and their answers in mind, we turn our attention to this Sunday’s gift of the Word, wherein we are once again asked, “What would you do in order to share in the reign of God?”

Today, God invites each of us to ask, “What would I do to share in the reign of God?”

These parables, insists Timothy L. Owings (The Abingdon Preaching Annual, David N. Mosser, Editor, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn.: 2004) remind us of how good the good news of the kingdom is. To experience radical forgiveness, undeserved and unexpected, is like finding a chest of gold in a forgotten field. It is a gift beyond compare to realize that our “amnesiac” God chooses not even to remember our sins and never to think that our guilt and suffering are well deserved. To receive the uncommon and always revitalizing love of God is like finding one priceless pearl in an ocean of oysters. To be accepted “warts and all” into the family of God is like being treated with respect and value when others have treated us with disrespect. It is being named “good” when
Today’s second reading well illustrates that Paul understood the joy of discovering God’s love for each of us, the love that names us as good and cherished children. In Romans, Paul reminds his readers that God’s love for us makes us capable of loving God, who has called us, shared with us the salvific love of Jesus, justified us and who in the end will also glorify us.

Today, God invites each of us to first ask of ourselves, “What would you do to share in the reign of God?” Once we have decided upon an answer, God then graces our attempts to live our lives accordingly. Moreover, just as God allowed Solomon the gift of asking for whatever he desired, so God offers each of us the same opportunity. “Ask something of me and I will give it to you.” What shall you ask for? What shall I?

**1 Kings 3:5, 7-12**

Solomon, also known as Jedidiah (2 Sam 12:25), which in Hebrew means “the beloved of Yahweh,” succeeded his father David as king and reigned about 40 years in the second third of the 10th century B.C.E. A talented and charismatic ruler; Solomon was able to maintain the tribal alliance established under David and to establish trade routes that linked his nation to Africa, Asia, Arabia and Asia Minor. Fabled to have married some 700 wives in order to secure his political alliances, Solomon also incurred criticism for allowing the religious practices of some of those wives to infiltrate Israel’s cult (Neh 13:26; 1Kgs 11:9-25). Despite his shortcomings, Solomon’s behavior as it is reflected in today’s first reading secured his reputation as one of the most effective of the Israelite monarchs.

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When this same loving, caring, saving and justifying God allowed Solomon to “turn the tables,” as it were, and to ask whatever question he desired of God, Israel’s famed king chose wisely and well. He did not ask for safety and security, or to get ahead in life, or for wealth or health or even long life; on the contrary, Solomon asked for an understanding heart, and it was given him.

Today, God invites each of us to first ask of ourselves, “What would you do to share in the reign of God?” Once we have decided upon an answer, God then graces our attempts to live our lives accordingly. Moreover, just as God allowed Solomon the gift of asking for whatever he desired, so God offers each of us the same opportunity. “Ask something of me and I will give it to you.” What shall you ask for? What shall I?

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Often translated as “wisdom,” the gift that Solomon requested from God is rendered here as “an understanding heart.” However, a more correct rendering of the Hebrew leb shomea is “a listening heart.” As Roland Faley (Footprints on the Mountain, Paulist Press, New York: 1994) has explained, the heart is the seat of the intellect more than of the emotions, so Solomon’s request is for a sensitive and discerning mind. This would give the king the ability to distinguish the just cause from the unjust and to act upon the best interests of the people. Those who read beyond this passage in the first book of Kings will be able to appreciate the manner in which Solomon exercised his gift.

Besides offering a literary tribute to a king who was generally true to his gift, this excerpted text also reveals a significant development in Israel’s understanding of wisdom. Unlike the Greco-Romans, for whom wisdom was regarded as the goal of philosophical speculation, the early Hebrew thinkers equated wisdom with practical knowledge and even with certain skills, e.g., sewing, teaching, farming, construction, etc. Accordingly, much of the earliest sapiential literature reads like a Poor Richard’s Almanac of pointed and pithy proverbs based on human experience. Gradually, and not without the influence of Hellenistic philosophy, the Hebrew concept of wisdom evolved to the point of being a personification of a divine attribute. This evolution prepared the way for Christian thinkers to recognize and understand Jesus as God’s Word and Wisdom come to live among us. For his part, Solomon asked for the wisdom, or the understanding heart, he would need to govern God’s people kindly and well. That he understood this gift to be of supreme value prepares us for appreciating today’s Gospel and the reign of God as a treasure beyond measure and worth any risk or sacrifice.

**Romans 8:28-30**

What does Paul mean by “all things” in the first verse of today’s second reading? Joseph Fitzmyer (Spiritual Exercises Based on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, Paulist Press, New York: 1995) suggests that panta or “all things” probably refers to all that the great apostle has mentioned in verses 18-27: sufferings, destiny in glory, the groaning of creation, Christian hope and perhaps even the Spirit. All such factors, Paul believed, are brought into harmony for those who love God because they are all elements in the implementation and execution of the divine plan of salvation.

To put it another way, God’s plan is behind everything that happens to us. But, while we can agree with Paul’s idea of all things as listed above, his words also challenge us to consider the question: What are all the things that have worked together for the good in my life? All things — the good, the bad, the ugly, the troubles, the joys, the sufferings, the gains, the losses, the togetherness, the separations, the ups, the downs, the fascinating and the tedious — all these things fall into place, eventually, for those who
love God. Paul was confident of this, and he hoped his confidence would prove contagious.

Paul’s words also remind us that our ability to love God begins in God. John Calvin (Cranfield, Romans 424-425) put it this way: “The love of God which is commanded in Scripture (Exod 20:6; Deut 5:10; 6:5; 7:9; 10:12) is nothing less than the response of a man in the totality of his being to the prior love of God. It thus includes the whole of true religion.”

In verses 29-30, Paul promises that those whose lives are living, loving responses to God’s prior love will receive the further gifts of being called, foreknown and predestined to share the image of the Son, through whom believers will be justified and glorified. Although Paul’s words here have been misunderstood by some and even distorted by others, Paul was not implying that only certain believers were predestined to be saved. This would serve only to contradict Paul’s conviction that God’s plan of salvation is universal and all-inclusive. This would also diminish the impact of Paul’s earlier insistence that “Christ died for us while we were still sinners,” which indicates that God did not pick and choose a predestined few but graciously embraced all of sinful humankind with salvific, forgiving love. Not only did Paul not limit the number of those who would know God’s love; his use of the word “predestined” along with “foreknown” underscores God’s intended purpose from time immemorial to unite the destiny of humankind with the very destiny of Christ. All things — all things — “work together for the good of those who love God” (8:28).

MATTHEW 13:44-53

Artists generally like to sign their work. Some do it quite obviously. Others prefer to hide or disguise their signature, blending it inconspicuously into their pieces. The evangelist known to us as Matthew chose to do the latter. Matthew offers his readers his signature appended to the twin parables of the treasure and the pearl, which attest to the supreme value of the kingdom; and following the parable of the dragnet, which insists upon the all-inclusive membership of the kingdom (until the end time, that is, when God will separate the good from the evil). In verses 51-52, which some have called a mini-parable on evangelization, he describes his ministry as that of “a scribe learned in the reign of God who brings forth from his storehouse both the new and the old.”

The word “scribe,” as Douglas A. Hare (Matthew, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1993) has explained, is used in this Gospel as the designation of one who is learned in scripture and tradition. Things “new and old” (notice the order) may refer to the evangelist’s attempts to give new applications to old traditions about Jesus (as in the parable of the lost sheep, 18:10-14). More probably, the term “new” refers to the good news of Christianity, which fulfills the “old” hopes and expectations of Israel. As scribe, Matthew engages his readers’ attention so that they might see and appreciate the sure connection between Christianity’s fulfillment (new) and Judaism’s promise (old). This Matthew did very ably by structuring his Gospel on a series of formula citations that assures his readers that all Jesus did and all that was accomplished through him was in accord with God’s foreordained plan for the salvation of sinners.

While verse 52 can certainly be accepted as a Matthean signature, scholars suggest that this description may also apply to every Christian evangelist. These people are to aid other believers in appropriating the treasure of the Hebrew scriptures so as to understand more fully their impact for Christianity and the church. To appreciate the Old Testament is to better understand the New; to ignore the Old is to truncate the New. Therefore, those who open to others the mysteries of the Word present Christianity, or the “new,” as the necessary flower and fruit of Judaism, or the “old.” Contemporary evangelists should also do as Karl Barth once advised: Hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other so as to allow scriptural truth to enlighten, guide and challenge current culture. This can happen only if each disciple and evangelist is willing to hear and answer the question Jesus asks so plainly in verse 51: “Have you understood all this?”

How, asks Charles Cousar (Texts For Preaching, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1995), are we to understand the disciples’ seemingly bold answer, “Yes”? Is this an arrogant statement that will later be proven wrong when their ignorance is exposed? Is it an honest misunderstanding for them to claim that they understand? Or do they really comprehend Jesus? Readers are left dangling, but what we do learn is that an understanding heart creates openness to God’s ways and to the grace that will enable the scribe to proclaim the reign of God.

Sermon Starters

Dick Folger

Today’s Gospel begins with the story of the pearl of great price. California writer Anne Lamott recounts a story of the great love an 8-year-old boy had for his younger sister who was dying of leukemia. The boy’s parents explained that his blood was compatible with hers and asked if he would give his sister a pint of blood. He said he would have to think about it overnight.

The next day he went to his parents and said he was willing to donate the blood. He was put on a gurney beside his 6-year-old sister. The nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy, which was then put in his sister’s IV. He waited in silence while the blood flowed into his sister. When the doctor came over to see how he was doing, the boy opened his eyes and asked, “How soon until I start to die?”
**Preaching to Youth**

*Jim Auer*

**KEY VERSE(S) and/or MAIN IDEA**

[1 Kings] “Ask something of me and I will give it to you.” “Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong.” Asking God for spiritual gifts.

**HOW YOUTH MIGHT APPROACH THE READINGS/MAIN IDEA**

It’s cool that God made Solomon wise. But then, obviously, Solomon was already a very good person, or he wouldn’t have asked for something like wisdom and an understanding heart. What about somebody who isn’t already like Solomon? Can an unspiritual person ask for a spiritual gift and receive it?

**STARTER**

Put yourself in Solomon’s position. What would you ask God for?

**LEADING QUESTIONS**

* Think of someone you know who is wise and possesses an “understanding heart.” What else describes that person?
* What spiritual gift do you possess an “understanding heart.” What else describes that person?

**POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE**

* Overview/review of the gifts of the Spirit received in Confirmation. Wisdom and understanding are prominent in today’s reading.
* Ways in which spiritual gifts in the long run are actually the most useful and practical. * Spiritual gifts are not just for the fully grown or elderly. * The process by which God gives spiritual gifts takes time and experience. We often must slow down, be silent, reflect — and ask. * Spiritual gifts are not given for the receiver alone; they are directed toward service.

**QUOTATIONS**

* "For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift, so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Rom 1:11-12). * “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.” Thoreau. * “Silence is as full of potential wisdom and wit as the unhewn marble of great sculpture.” Aldous Huxley.

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**HOMILY**

*Fr. James Smith*

**Created for Glory**

In three sweeping sentences, Paul describes the whole history of salvation. In summary form, Paul writes that God first foreknew us, then predestined us, then called us, then justified us, then glorified us. That is too much to take in all at once, so let’s give each stage of salvation its due.

God first foreknew us, knew us beforehand, knew us before we knew ourselves, knew us before we were born. This is uniquely Godlike. Everyone else can know someone only after they have been born, but God knew us in the womb. A child was disturbed to hear that her birth was planned. She would have preferred to be the result of spontaneous love rather than a scheduled X on the calendar. But she felt better when it was explained that her parents planned her birth because their world was incomplete without her. So it was with God — the Sun and Saturn and the Milky Way were not enough for God. God’s world was incomplete without us.

As soon as God knew us, God predestined us. Predestination has been ridiculed, as if every single event in life was pre-planned by God, like the old joke about a man who falls down the steps, gets up and sighs: “Now that’s over with!” Providence is not fate; it is cooperation.

We do not believe that some people are predestined for heaven and others for hell. What kind of a God would create people with the intention of damning them? No, we believe that God predestines everyone to be with God forever. Our destiny is assured.

But not everyone knows that they are predestined. Not everyone even believes that there is a God in charge of their destiny. So, in order to make the fact of salvation obvious to humankind, God actually called certain people out from the mass of humanity to witness God’s good intentions toward all of humankind. Since Jesus, salvation is not just a private hope of special individuals — it is a public fact of history.

It is obvious that not everyone is called to be Christian. We believe they are still saved by Christ whether they know it or not. We call them “anonymous Christians.” Of course, they might prefer to call us “anonymous Jews or Muslims.” Labels aside, God is free to call everyone as God chooses.

Glorification should have come next, but something happened on the way to glory. Sin happened. Original, social and personal sin interrupted the plot. An intervention called justification was needed. Our favorite image of justification is the sacrifice of the cross. That is an important image, but justification is so amazing that biblical writers used a variety of images to appreciate its enormity. In financial terms, they called it redemption from slavery. In legal terms it was called satisfaction or atonement. In worship terms it was sacrifice. In family terms it was being made a child of God.

Finally, Paul says that we are glorified. After such an adventurous journey with God, we might expect to be dramatically changed, almost divinized in heaven. And we will be. But that is not what Paul wrote. Paul wrote that we have already been glorified!

Even on earth, imperfect, even while being complicit in evil — we have already been glorified. Unless we radically undermine God’s plan, we have been foreknown, predestined, called, justified — and already glorified.
CELEBRATION:
A Comprehensive
Worship Resource
www.celebrationpubs.org

Last March, a nation stood by waiting for a special-needs woman to die. Food and water and her means of being fed were withheld from her for days. Yet this in the end was not the only cause of her death. It was application of a law without love and justice without mercy that rendered a caring nation helpless to defend one of its least ones. Although numerous interventions, both legal and political, were attempted, each time the law was invoked and the woman’s spouse’s claim that “this is not how she would have wanted to live” took precedence over her parents’ request to take legal control of her fate. With each legal decision denying the parents’ request, the world watched this woman’s slow descent toward death.

Anger mixed with helplessness moved many to pray and protest, even to face arrest on her behalf. But far many more simply gave up, tuned out and surrendered their convictions about the value and sanctity of human life. In this, the self-described “greatest country in the world,” one of our own was dying and we were helpless.

The death of Terri Schiavo on March 31, 2005, and the deaths of others like her form a sad and unspeakable commentary on the anomie of contemporary culture. Was this woman, and are the untold numbers of people like her, less than human? At what point do they cease to be created in God’s image? Where do we begin to draw the line between those who should live and those who should not? Isn’t this the same culture of death that starves the unwanted, the less than perfect, the burdensome … isn’t this the same culture that touts its freedom of choice to “terminate a pregnancy” and to pick one fertilized embryo for life while allowing a dozen others to die?

If mental, physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual health and well-being were prerequisites for being human and having value, precious few of us would qualify, nor would we merit the invitation that God extends through the prophet Isaiah in today’s first reading. Notice that the prophet does not say “All you able-bodied” or “All you lovely ones” or “All you with all your wits intact.” On the contrary, the invitation is simple and all-inclusive: “All you thirsty, you poor, come without paying and without cost. Come, eat well. Listen, that you may have life.”

In this beautiful Isaian text, God provides the banquet of bread and word for all the hungry and thirsty, and in today’s Gospel, the Matthean Jesus hosts a banquet that he provides and over which he presides. There is no question as to who should eat. Those present are simply described as a vast throng who moved Jesus’ heart and whose ills he cured. We are not told in the Gospel that the disciples were to...
pass through those gathered and select those whom they deemed worthy enough to eat. We are told only that all those present ate their fill and lots of leftovers remained. Several thousand ate that day with no question of their worthiness, or lack thereof, being raised.

We are also told that the responsibility for satisfying the hungry and thirsty of this world was, on that same day, placed on the shoulders of Jesus’ disciples. “Give them something to eat yourselves,” challenged Jesus, and immediately, feeding the hungry became part of the job description of the Christian.

When we look at these texts and others like them, it is clear, writes Larry Hollar (Hunger For the Word, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn.: 2004) that the blessing of food and the need to speak out for vulnerable people who lack food (or are deprived of it) are not some marginal afterthoughts or occasional footnotes in the Word. These issues are integral to the identity of those who worship the God of Israel and who follow Jesus Christ. This God raised up leaders in the midst of famine, offered manna to the wanderers in the wilderness, blessed the Sabbath gleanings of the hungry disciples and fed multitudes in a deserted place.

This love of God, insists Paul in today’s second reading (Romans), comes to us in Christ Jesus who blesses, breaks and gives both bread and word, body and blood at every eucharistic gathering. Just as food and God’s provident gifts to the hungry are never far from the scriptural story, neither can those who claim to believe and love this God do so without translating faith and love into the service of the needs of the hungry.

ISAIAH 55:1-3

Speaking on television following the murder in El Salvador (Nov. 16, 1989) of his six brother Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter, Jon Sobrino said, “The church and the Jesuits have made an option for the poor. This is the option Jesus made, the option the prophets like Isaiah and Micah made. That doesn’t make the church communist. That makes the church simply Christian.”

In a similar vein, Peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez (A Theology of Liberation, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.: 1972), principal theologian of the Latin American liberation school, has affirmed that “the poverty of the poor is not a summons to alleviate their plight with acts of generosity but rather a compelling obligation to fashion an entirely different social order.” In today’s first reading, Deutero-Isaiah declares God’s option for the poor and offers a vision of a social order in which the needs of hungry and thirsty poor will be fully attended.

Part of the conclusion to his Book of Comfort (Chapters 40-55), this invitation drew upon the popular theme of the banquet, a theme that readily lends itself toward our better appreciation of all those other banquets at which the relationships between God and Israel and Jesus and his disciples were celebrated and affirmed — Passover Meal, Communion sacrifice, Last Supper, Eucharist.

As Paul D. Hanson (Isaiah 40-66, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky: 1995) has pointed out, the previous chapter of Isaiah’s prophetic work has prepared us to hear this invitation as more than a gratuitous statement. The echo of the Song of Hannah, recognizable in the call to the barren, desolate and abandoned (54:1-6), and its reiteration in Luke’s Song of Mary remind us that God fills the hungry with good things while the rich are sent empty away (Luke 1:53). This is not a slight against the rich but rather a reminder that those who might disdainfully refuse to come to a banquet that is open to all and who turn instead to the more selective company of the few who enjoy special privileges are foolish for spending money for what is not bread and their wages for what fails to satisfy (v. 2).

Jesus, who warned his own against such behavior (see Matt 22:1-10), reprises the banquet theme in today’s Gospel and welcomes all to a meal that he himself provides with only five loaves and two fish. Having fed the crowds with the food of his teaching and having cured their sicknesses, he would also attend to their need for physical nourishment, thereby realizing Deutero-Isaiah’s vision and making his invitation come alive for the hungry and thirsty poor.

ROMANS 8:35, 37-39

If Philip F. Esler (Conflict and Identity in Romans, Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 2003) is correct, Romans 8 constitutes a crescendo al finale to Paul’s exploration of the new life that sinners are blessed to enjoy in Christ (Chapters 1-8), then today’s second reading represents the high point of that finale. Like Psalm 150 — which concludes the Psalter with a doxology that “pulls out all the stops” to praise God with trumpet, lyre and harp, timbrel and dance — this text pulls out all the literary stops to reveal in the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus. Esler calls Paul’s rhetoric here
exalted (even purple) as he rewards the question he earlier asked (“If God is for us, who can be against us?” v. 31) in terms of “separation” (v. 35). No power can be against us, sings Paul; nothing can separate us from God’s love.

Having established the reality and surety of God’s love for humankind, Paul strengthens his argument by naming seven possible struggles of the human condition (v. 35) as well as 10 possible obstacles that could make God’s love seem distant or even absent (vv. 38-39). None of these, assures Paul, can come between the believer and God’s love.

While the seven struggles pertain to temporal troubles from which there is no immunity, the 10 obstacles exist on another plane. Contemporary readers of Paul may be surprised at his reference to angels as having the potential to come between God and humankind. However, well-educated Jew that he was, Paul came from a tradition that held that every created being was guarded by an angel. According to the rabbis, there were three levels of angels: (1) thrones, cherubim, seraphim; (2) powers, lordships, mights; (3) angels, archangels, principalities. These, the rabbis taught, were grudgingly hostile and had become angry when God created humankind. Grudging or not, hostile or not, even angels cannot separate us from God’s love.

Nor can height or depth; these terms, explains William Barclay (“‘The Letter to the Romans.’ The Daily Study Bible, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK: 1975), are astrological terms that describe the time when a star is at its zenith or height and therefore most powerful (some thought) or at its lowest and least influential. For those who thought and those who still think their lives are shaped and influenced by the stars, Paul’s assurances insist that we forget the horoscope and all the other zodiac myths.

MATTHEW 14:13-21

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, in the United States and in the wake of the March 11, 2004, train bombing in Madrid, Spain, a sense of loss and pain held both nations in its grip. Many worked through their grief by lending a hand to help others. Volunteers came forth to feed the firefighters and law enforcement officers. Homes were opened to offer hospitality and support. All grieved and prayed and helped one another, and in their grieving and praying and helping, the citizens of these two nations moved forward together in the process of healing.

A similar experience of loss, though only briefly alluded to, lies at the heart of today’s Gospel. As mentioned parenthetically in verse 13, John the Baptist had just been put to death by Herod and Jesus had withdrawn to a deserted place to pray. As Donald Di Xon Williams (Hunger for the Word, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn.: 2004) has suggested, many things were probably weighing on Jesus’ mind after receiving such awful news. Should he stay and risk being killed himself or should he leave? Should he keep a low profile or just drop out of sight? Jesus chose to do none of these things. Instead, he allowed himself to be found by the crowds, and, moved with compassion for them, he healed their hurts and fed their hungers.

Moreover, he shared this ministry of mercy with his disciples. The fact that there is no mention of a boy who has brought barley loaves and fish with him, as in John 6:9, emphasizes all the more the role of the disciples. In Matthew’s telling of the loaves event, they are, as Charles Cousar (2005) has noted, indispensable. It is they who saw the need and informed Jesus. They found and brought the loaves and fish; they distributed the food and then collected the leftovers. Through all this, they did not question Jesus’ directives, which could certainly have seemed preposterous given the vastness of the crowd and the paucity of the food. Rather, they offered all future disciples an example of what it means to participate in the ministry of Jesus. Furthermore, says Cousar (op. cit.), the disciples learned about the divine concern for the hungry precisely by doing what they were told. They were not briefed beforehand or assured that all would be well. Rather, in the act of doing what Jesus told them to do, they discovered his compassion for the hungry poor welling up within their hearts. In doing as Jesus asked, they became more like him. In addition to being a prelude to the Eucharist (note the words took, blessed, broke, gave), the loaves event also anticipated the joys of the coming reign of God, often described in terms of a banquet (see Matthew 8:11-12; 22:1-10). Until all are gathered in to share in the eternal feast of the kingdom, it devolves upon Jesus’ disciples to take his words to heart (“Give them something to eat yourselves”) and to make his ministry of healing the hurting and feeding the hungry our own.

Sermon Starters

Dick Folger

Today’s Gospel story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes challenges us to make a similar miracle take place among the starving people of our global village.

But in the United States, the problem is too much food. We face an epidemic of obesity — especially among our children — and the health problems that this form of malnutrition advances. If this trend is not reversed, health experts predict that today’s children will be the first generation in decades not to live as long as their parents did.

At the same time, more than one in 10 U.S. households — over 36 million people, including 13 million children — experiences hunger or the risk of hunger. Miracles are needed. Our faith can empower us to make this miracle of the loaves and fishes happen every day.
**Preaching to Youth**

*Jim Auer*

**KEY VERSE(S) and/or MAIN IDEA**

‘Give them something to eat yourselves,’ ‘We have nothing here,’ they replied, ‘but five loaves and a couple of fish.’ ‘All those present ate their fill.’ In hundreds of areas of life, God’s saving power uses and multiplies our human resources.

**BACKGROUND NOTE** Traditionally, this and other miracle stories have been used principally to demonstrate the divinity of Jesus. That purpose has not lost its validity, because it is the divinity of Jesus that, when multiplying the offered meager human resources, gives the story its broader meaning of service.

**HOW YOUTH MIGHT APPROACH THE READINGS/MAIN IDEA** Cool! Way to go, Lord! Of course, that was “back in Bible times.” We live today in modern times.

**STARTER** A grandfather and his almost 2-year-old grandson were taking turns sending small cars down around a spiral plastic track. The boy would say, “I do,” and then, “You do.” After several turns, the man took the boy’s car-holding hand in his, guided it to the starting point and said, “We do.”

**LEADING QUESTIONS** Do things like the miracle of the loaves happen today? Where and how? What “small starts” have been multiplied into something much bigger and better in your life? What small services have you done that God has turned into greater benefits for others?

**POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE** *Jesus’ directive to the apostles indicates God’s call to service.* *Reasons why we, like the apostles, sometimes respond with, “Us handle that? You’ve got to be kidding!”* *The beauty of God’s choice to use our often meager means to accomplish great good.* *How many ways do people need to be fed today?*

**MEDIA LINKS** “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” is a TV example of “doing good because doing good is good to do.”

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**HOMILY**

*Fr. James Smith*

**What Do We Celebrate?**

Isaiah offers a sumptuous banquet; Jesus settles for a sparse meal. You have all seen those commercials for beer that fight over “better tasting” and “less filling.” That reminds me of the battle over the Eucharist between sacrifice and meal. Some Catholics didn’t like the old idea of the Mass being a sacrifice of God’s Son to make his Father happy, so they began to stress the meal aspect. Then some people worried that it would reduce the Eucharist to a cozy snack.

The Mass is obviously a meal, since we have bread and wine, so let’s take another look at the real meaning of sacrifice. In sacrifice, we don’t just give up something, we give ourselves; we offer ourselves by sacrificing something we love. And where does it all start? With God, as does everything. Absolutely everything begins with God.

In the beginning, God offered himself to the Son. (God really can offer himself, not just pretend, since God owns Godself.) The Son accepts this offer and responds by offering himself to the Father. This double self-offering is so complete, so real, that it generates a spirit of love, the Holy Spirit. That triple self-offering is the Blessed Trinity, the complete self-offering, the perfect sacrifice. And it could have stopped there. But God is a born giver, so God further offered self by creating a universe through the Son. This cosmos is not just any random creation. It is an image, an icon of God’s Word, God’s own Son. In response to this second self-offering of the Father, the Son renews his own self-offering to his Father.

The difference is that now, as a human, the offering is more obvious to us. Jesus offers his whole self: birth, youth, work, laughter, sweat, suffering, life and death to his Father. But since a person’s whole life is summarized, fulfilled by their death, we telescope the self-donation of Jesus to his death. And the resurrection, because that is the real fulfillment of his whole life.

When Jesus returned to the Father, they offered themselves to us through their Holy Spirit, who now empowers us to call God our Father, to offer ourselves to God individually and as his mystical body. That will continue till the end of the world, when Christ will gather all things to himself and present it all to the Father.

But we humans forget who we are and what we’re doing without reminders. We even forget that we are children of God, that God dwells inside us, that the Spirit empowers us to offer ourselves with Jesus to the Father: Knowing our faulty memory, Jesus said: “OK, here’s a reminder: Eat my body and drink my blood.”

That is what we celebrate at Mass: the self-offering of the Son to the Father through their Holy Spirit. And we include the offering of ourselves: our work and play and hopes and failures and life and death. But if we do not offer ourselves at Mass, and then continue to offer ourselves to others during the week, then our Mass is not complete.

It’s something like a wedding. If the bride and groom say “I do” but do not consummate the marriage, they do not fulfill their promise. It was a marriage ritual but not a true marriage.

If we celebrate a Eucharist ritual and not a true Eucharist, it is neither better tasting nor less filling, neither sacrifice nor meal — it’s just an empty commercial.
July 2005

Thirteenth week in Ordinary Time (continued from June)

Matthew’s Gospel prompts a question: What is the difference between the righteous and the sinners? Some days, the answer may be “nothing.” We are often both at the same time. Our false righteousness is our sin, our belief that we have it all figured out and that the other person needs to listen more closely. The Pharisees fear ritual impurity in eating among “sinners.” How often do we adopt the “us versus them” attitude? Let today be that rare day when we realize that one difference between the righteous and the sinners is the willingness to “share” Jesus, to welcome all at the table without question or judgment, to offer hospitality and community without exclusion and to reconcile our own sin without first expecting others to do the same. PR

Sat., July 2: Gen 27:1-5, 15-29; Matt 9:14-17
It is “us versus them” again in Matthew’s Gospel. John’s disciples question why Jesus’ disciples do not fast like the Pharisees and they do. As often is the case, the Pharisees and those like them suffer rather than celebrate their beliefs. Jesus offers the image of the wedding celebration. It is hard to be glum amid such joy. How can we be sad with Jesus in our midst? Yes, Jesus hints of the separation to come, but it is also clear that his disciples celebrate being in his presence. So why mourn? We tend to look down the road to that which will come — that time of separation. We lose sight of that which is directly at hand. Jesus asks us today to recognize his presence in the here and now. PR

Fourteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Mon., July 4: Mass for Independence Day
Today we may choose readings from the Mass for the Country (882ff) or the Mass for Peace and Justice (887ff). Two passages from the Sermon on the Mount are included in both ritual Masses: the Beatitudes and the command to love our enemies. The preacher may want to use the first reading for the weekday Mass describing Jacob’s dream about God’s messengers descending from heaven. On that spot Jacob created a shrine he called “Bethel” (House of God). The Middle East, the birthplace of Jesus, was the center of the universe 2,000 years ago. And this humble place seems to be the center of the universe today. What if here enemies did indeed pray for each other? PBS

Tues., July 5: Gen 32:23-33; Matt 9:32-38  St. Anthony Mary Zaccaria
Jacob continues his journey and wrestles with the angel of the Lord. Jesus heals the demoniac who is wrestling with the devil. Wrestling with the Angels of Light and Darkness is how we come to know our true selves. Jacob becomes Israel. The man who is mute now speaks. They both receive a new identity and must come to terms with a new way of living, a new purpose, a new vocation. This is the journey of every life. One example is the saint we remember today. He completed his studies to be a medical doctor and only then heard the call to priestly service. Our plans are not God’s. PBS

Jacob, who wrestled with the Angel of the Lord and was named Israel, had 12 sons. Joseph was the favorite. His brothers were jealous of him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph found favor with Pharaoh. In today’s passage, there is a famine and “all the world came to Joseph to obtain rations of grain,” including Joseph’s treacherous brothers. The story continues for the rest of this week, and the message throughout is, “God is in charge.” In today’s Gospel, the 12 apostles are named, including Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, and they are sent out by Jesus to preach. Again, God is in charge. When we allow God to be God, we can forgive, as Joseph did his brothers; as Jesus did Judas; as Maria Goretti forgave on her deathbed the man who raped and stabbed her. Twenty-
seven years after Maria died, her murderer was released from prison and came to her mother to beg her forgiveness, which she readily gave. In 1950 she was present for her daughter’s canonization. God is in charge. **PBS**

**Thurs., July 7: Gen 44:18-29; 45:1-5; Matt 10:7-15**
Joseph reveals himself to his once-treacherous brothers, but begs them not to be disturbed because “It was really for the sake of saving lives that God sent me here ahead of you.” How can ordinary human beings forgo the opportunity to get even and forgive those who wronged them? A grudge bears no fruit. It is from wounds that are forgiven that the kingdom is built. Forgiveness is possible if we ‘focus on and heed Jesus’ charge to his disciples: “Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.” **PBS**

**Fri., July 8: Gen 46:1-7, 28-30; Matt 10:16-23**
Jesus’ words should send a chill through us. Hatred and persecution, brothers handing over brother, children rising up against parents. The story of Jacob-become-Israel continues as he is sent by the Lord to Egypt and on the way encounters his long-lost son, Joseph. When we look back on harsh events in our lives, so harsh we thought at the time we might not even survive, we realize that they became the making of us. And so a man can say, “Cancer saved my life.” A woman can say, “Lost love led to my true love.” This is the mystery of death and resurrection, a mystery played out every day in big and small ways. The trick — and the measure of the disciple — is to remember the resurrection when we are on the cross. **PBS**

**Sat., July 9: Gen 49:29-32; 50:15-26; Matt 10:24-33**
Augustine Zhao Rong and Companions
Today we celebrate the memorial of 120 Chinese saints martyred from 1640 to 1930. In a speech to Chinese scholars one year after their canonization, John Paul II enumerated the positive contributions of Christianity to China, and then continued: “History, however, reminds us of the unfortunate fact that the work of members of the church in China was not always without error … I feel deep sadness for these errors and limits of the past, and I regret that in many people these failings may have given the impression of a lack of respect and esteem for the Chinese people on the part of the Catholic church … For all of this I ask the forgiveness …”

St. Henry, emperor
God called Moses, a simple shepherd, to lead the Hebrew people to freedom and bring them the Covenant. God’s custom of choosing ordinary people did not change by the time of Jesus. The childlike, not the “wise,” are more likely to receive God’s revelation with open, willing hearts. God calls shepherds like Moses, small-town teenagers like Mary, fishermen like Peter and emperors like Henry, whose feast we celebrate today. He even calls folks like you and me. It doesn’t matter whether we are placed high or low in society, whether we are well-educated or illiterate. What is important is to have a heart that is open to receive the Gospel in simple faith and to heed the prompting of the Holy Spirit to think, speak and act with justice and love for all. **MEW**

**Thurs., July 14: Exod 3:13-20; Matt 11:28-30**
Bl. Kateri Tekakwitha
Imagine if God spoke as clearly to me as he did to Moses and told me to go to the oppressed and despairing and tell them of God’s loving concern. What if I was commanded to show them I would stand up for them and do something about their plight? Scary idea, isn’t it? Yet each of us is called through Christian baptism to be prophetic witnesses to God’s love of all people and his hatred of greed, injustice and violence. Moses’ mission was to the children of Israel, and Kateri Tekakwitha’s to her Native American brothers and sisters. Ours is to our world with its many inequities. Prophets have no easy life, but Jesus has promised to be with us, supporting our work in his service and offering us rest in himself. **MEW**

**Fri., July 15: Exod 11:10-12:14; Matt 12:1-8**
St. Bonaventure, bishop
Ritual helps us to connect to our faith traditions. In the first
Ordinary Time
July 2005

Sat., July 16: Exod 12:37-42; Matt 12:14-21
Our Lady of Mount Carmel

When Jesus works healing miracles, he often commands people not to talk about what they have witnessed. Why? Wouldn’t this be good publicity, quickly winning many followers? Perhaps, but Jesus’ miracles were signs of salvation, not salvation itself. Those whom Jesus healed were healed of one particular disability and for their earthly lifetime only. Lazarus, raised from the dead, had to die again. In his perfect fulfillment of the Father’s plan, Jesus would offer all humankind healing for their spiritual blindness; extend to all people the means to loosen their tongues to praise God and to speak love to each other; and raise up each of us, locked in spiritual paralysis, to run to the aid of those in need — all for the greater glory of God. Jesus is no local wonder-worker. He is the Savior of the world. MEW

Sixteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Mon., July 18: Exod 14:5-18; Matt 12:38-42
Today the high and mighty scribes and Pharisees come to Jesus seeking a sign. He delivers not a sign, but an insult: He denounces them — the experts and guardians of the Law — as evil and unfaithful! Jesus readily calls forth witnesses from the tradition to back up his claim: the people of Nineveh and “the Queen of the South” (Sheba). These sought not signs, but forgiveness and wisdom. Therefore, they will rise up at the judgment to condemn the sign-seeking scribes and Pharisees. Where do we fit in this scenario? Are we still plagued by the pride that demands proof? How might we become more humble and vulnerable and so, perhaps, come to a new experience of “something greater” in our God? ECW

Tues., July 19: Exod 14:21-15:1; Matt 12:46-50
Jesus has been sparring with the authorities and speaking stern warnings about the Day of Judgment to the crowds. In today’s Gospel, Jesus’ mother and brothers (kinfolk, not necessarily siblings) arrive and send word through the crowd that they would like to speak to Jesus. He seems, at first, to turn a cold shoulder toward them. “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” he asks. He looks at the intentional family that has formed around him, disciples who thirst for the truth he speaks and cling to his words. He is not shunning his blood relatives, but rather remaining powerful present to these others. He stretches out his hand toward them in a gesture of affection and says, “For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother.” ECW

St. Apollinaris

To accommodate the crowds, Jesus preaches from a boat a little offshore. He begins with the parable of the sower, a man who flings precious seed about willy-nilly, dropping it on the path, in the rocky soil, among thorns and, finally, into rich soil, where it produces a bountiful yield. The parable ends with this curious admonition from Jesus: “Whoever has ears ought to hear.” The call is to listen, but not just with the ears. We are called to pray, to ponder anew and to name those hard and thorny places in our hearts that refuse to welcome goodness. We are called to take inventory. Are we producing only 30 when we might bring forth 60 or even a hundredfold? ECW

Thurs., July 21: Exod 19:1-2, 9-11, 16-20b; Matt 13:10-17
St. Lawrence of Brindisi

The people loved Jesus’ parables, delighting in their surprising twists. But the Jewish authorities frequently were enraged, for Jesus was not merely telling innocuous moral tales. He was subverting the status quo. He was subtly freeing the people to think for themselves and to act on their own behalf. His stories encouraged them to take a stand against injustice. These were dangerous teachings for which Jesus would be condemned and executed as an insurrectionist. The ultimate twist in Jesus’ teaching comes in his own story, our story, the story of salvation, and it is this: He lives on. He lives in and through us as we continue to bring the light, peace and justice of the Kingdom to a broken world. ECW

Fri., July 22: Exod 20:1-17; John 20:1-2; 11-18
St. Mary Magdalene

Today’s passage from the fourth Gospel focuses on St. Mary Magdalene, whom we remember today. The scene is the tomb, before daybreak. Despite the previous day’s gruesome truth, the grief-stricken Mary is compelled to come to this place. Weeping, consumed in her loss, she can only imagine that the removed stone means they have subjected her beloved Jesus to yet another indignity — now they have taken his body! In a sense, Mary seems slow to “get it,” to come to understand that Jesus has risen from the dead. Yet this woman is the first disciple to see and speak with the risen Lord. As we ponder her story today, let us note the very human ways in which she does, in fact, grasp well what Jesus emphasized most — the imperative to love. ECW

Sat., July 23: Exod 24:3-8; Matt 13:24-30
St. Bridget of Sweden

When she was only 7, St. Bridget of Sweden began having visions of Christ crucified. We remember her today as we turn to a parable peculiar to Matthew — the story of the weeds growing among the wheat. Matthew may be rewrit-
ing Mark’s story of the seed that grows secretly (Mk 4:26-29). In Mark’s story, the wonder of the seed’s growth is the focus — how it happens, the farmer does not know. But the wise farmer knows better than to pull up the weeds and risk complete destruction of his crop. We live and grow alongside those who actively cultivate the seeds of evil in their hearts. We live with our own hearts as well, which nurture both good and evil. Bit by bit, if we are faithful, we learn to be merciful. 

Seventeenth Week in Ordinary Time

Mon., July 25: 2 Cor 4:7-15; Matt 20:20-28
St. James, apostle
The world of St. James is evident in St. Paul’s reflection on his own life and suffering in today’s reading from Corinthians. Paul writes of Jesus’ life being manifest in the flesh of those martyred. Matthew’s Gospel speaks specifically of James and John, but not in the most flattering light. Their mother requests that her sons sit at Jesus’ right and left sides in the kingdom. They misunderstand what is to come. Jesus knows that honor is not his to bestow. He also knows that they will drink the cup of his suffering, as they are fully willing to do. James was martyred in the year 44. He was of fiery temperament and zeal for Christ; he may not have always understood what he was asking of Jesus, but he was willing to do anything. 

Tues., July 26: Sir 44:1, 10-15; Matt 13:16-17
Sts. Joachim and Anne
The reading from Sirach today is an interesting fit with the memorial of Sts. Joachim and Anne, parents of the Blessed Virgin. We read that divine wisdom is revealed in the grand history of God’s people. The virtues of great ancestors are extolled. The greatness of their progeny endures because of their covenant with God. This is certainly true of Sts. Joachim and Anne. Childless, they prayed that if blessed with a child they would dedicate her to the service of God. They were virtuous and charitable people. God answered their prayers. They raised Mary knowing that she belonged to God and was a temporary gift. Yet, theirs is a great heritage, and their progeny will be exalted forever.

Matthew’s Gospel presents two familiar images of the kingdom of heaven — the treasure buried in a field and the pearl of great price. What is not so familiar is the emotion that is directly noted in the first image and certainly implied in the second. Each find is precious, and the recipient will do anything to hold on to it. It is easy to say that the Gospel questions what value we place on the kingdom and what we are willing to sacrifice for it. But we are ignoring how we feel about what we are doing to enter the kingdom. Do we grudgingly give up things or actions to attain this treasure? We may say we are willing to give just about anything for the kingdom, but do we feel joy in the treasure we have found?

Today, a third image of the kingdom of heaven is presented in sharp contrast to the two from yesterday’s Gospel. It does not speak of the joy of attaining the kingdom and what we are willing to sacrifice for it. Instead, it focuses on the wicked who will not see the kingdom. The image is a net cast into the sea that collects various fish that are hauled to shore and separated; the bad fish that are discarded are compared to the wicked who will be thrown into the furnace at the end of the age. It is easy to get caught in the net. It is passive; do nothing and get hauled in. The trouble lies in the notion that once we have been caught, there is nothing left to do — for better or worse.

St. Martha knew it was a privilege to share the hospitality of her home with Jesus. She saw to the details, so much, in fact, that Jesus gently reminded her that listening to him is of the greatest importance. Certainly Martha longed to sit at the feet of Christ, in the spot of a disciple, and to be fed spiritually. She eventually learned to do so. Still she also knew the value of hospitality. Martha had a special relationship with Jesus; Jesus loved Martha and her family. She was both servant and friend. Her gift was in the seemingly ordinary task of welcoming and serving the Lord. Let us serve the Lord by welcoming him in both friend and stranger.

Sat., July 30: Lev 25:1, 8-17; Matt 14:1-12
Matthew recounts the beheading of John the Baptist. Herodias so fears the truth in John’s words that she has her daughter request John’s head on a platter. Herod’s own moral cowardice keeps him from listening to his doubts about ordering John’s death. The girl’s request in the presence of guests forces his hand. Yet John’s death does little to calm Herod. When Herod later hears of Jesus’ reputation, he fears that John has been raised from the dead. Certainly this alludes to the resurrection, but it also speaks to the power of God at work not only in Jesus, but also in those who act in his name. Jesus was so apparent in John’s preaching that Herod had difficulty differentiating between them. Do others see Jesus in us and our works?

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