

# A THOUGHT FOR LIVING COLUMN

BY FATHER PAUL KEENAN

## Credited with Righteousness

June 6, 2008

The second reading for the [Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) is from the Letter of Paul to the Romans. It speaks about the faith of Abraham. There were many reasons why Abraham might have doubted God's promise. Abraham and Sarah were old, well past the age of leading a people and of having children. Yet Abraham kept faith. As Paul says, "He did not doubt God's promise in unbelief; rather, he was strengthened by faith and gave glory to God and was fully convinced that what he had promised he was also able to do."

But Paul has a surprise for us. He notes that Abraham's faith was "credited to him as righteousness," but he does not leave it there. We, too, he says, are credited with righteousness. The words written about Abraham are not just for him, they are for us as well who, as St. Paul says, will believe in Jesus Christ.

This means that because of our faith in Christ, we receive a wonderful gift. Like Abraham, there are times when we see the reasons for doubting what God has promised us. His promises may seem too good to be true. We may feel at times that he has let us down. But if, like Abraham, we hold firm in our faith, we are credited with righteousness. We bask in the grace of God.

## Solid Ground

**May 30, 2008**

The readings for the [Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) speak of the importance of taking the Word of God to heart. In the First Reading, Moses tells the people to take the words he has received from the Lord and take them so to heart that they might be like a sign or, as we would say today, a logo, that they would wear as though it were an article of clothing.

In the Gospel, Jesus says that his Word is like the solid foundation of a house. Building our lives on his Word is like building a house on a solid foundation. Building our lives on anything else is like building a house upon sand.

In a conversation this week about a certain aspect of Church teaching someone (in a very respectful way) asked me whether a lot of the matter of these teachings was not just a little too abstract for people to understand and so as to have any real meaning. My response was that, yes, a lot of Church teaching is abstract, but that it is important for us to try to show how those abstractions have real meaning in our everyday lives. And they do. For example, what seems to be an abstract philosophical discussion of how the human soul gets to experience eternal life when it is created in time by God at the moment of conception, ends up being a wonderful statement of appreciation for the marvelous gift of getting to have a supernatural knowledge of God and intimate relationship with him. Ideas have consequences and what often appear to be academic and relatively unimportant concepts really make a tremendous difference in the way we are called to live our lives.

The point of this week's readings is that the Word of God is bedrock. With it as our foundation, we have the right anchoring we need to guide our lives in the right way.

# Corpus Christi

**May 23, 2008**

On the [Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ](#), often referred to as Corpus Christi, the readings remind us of the spiritual nourishment that can be found in Christ alone. In the Gospel, he describes himself as the Bread of Life, and when we receive him – Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity – in the Eucharist, we receive spiritual nourishment of the highest order. We are taking Christ Himself into our souls.

In the First Reading, Moses recalls the goodness of God to his people during their time in the desert. We remember how, in the desert, the people grumbled because they did not have any food. God sent them manna to nourish and comfort them. Instead of being grateful, they grumbled and complained about the quality of the food.

We can often be like those people in the desert. We pray, asking help from God for the difficulties in which we find ourselves. God sends us help, but it comes in a form we do not like or do not recognize as help. We grumble and complain.

At the heart of our celebration of the presence of God in our midst, especially in the Eucharist, is the importance of gratitude. When Jesus goes to multiply the loaves and the fishes to feed the multitudes, he first gives thanks for them. Others have been complaining that they don't have enough money for feed the crowds. Still others have scoffed at the paltriness of the loaves and the fishes – how can these feed so many? Instead, Jesus gives thanks and the rest is history.

# Trinity Sunday

**May 16, 2008**

At first glance, the peruser of the readings for [Trinity Sunday](#) might wonder whether there has been some mistake. Only one of the readings, the Second Reading from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, even mentions the trinity, and that in the form of a traditional blessing. The First Reading is a dialogue between God and Moses in which Moses and God on Mount Sinai, in which God pronounces his name, "Lord" and Moses invites him to accompany the people.

It is when we look at the Gospel, however, that we see the profound meaning of the Trinity. In Gospel times, of course, there was no formal understanding of the Trinity, but looking back, we see that the seeds of the triune God are there. In this passage, John does not portray Jesus as speaking of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit *per se*. But a close look at the passage reveals the work of the Trinity nonetheless. God (the Father) sent his Son into the world. There is a third part to this formulation, and that is that the reason God sent his Son into the world was not to condemn the world but to *save* it.

Therein lies the work of the Holy Spirit – completing the work of the Father and the Son by saving the world, not condemning it. Theologians have told us that the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son, and here St. John is telling us that this love is extended into the world to which the Son was sent, specifically so that we who believe might not perish but might have eternal life. The Father loved the world. He sent his Son into that world. The Holy Spirit – the love with which the Father loved the Son and the world – is that love made present to us so that we might share it as well.

The magnificent message here is that God loved us and continues to love us through the Holy Spirit. As John says elsewhere, it is not that we loved God first, but that he loved us first. The result of that love is that we might not perish but might have eternal life. The story of the Trinity in other words, is a magnificent story of love, a story too big for us to comprehend but not too big for us to experience.

And on Trinity Sunday, we recall that marvelous blessing, we thank God for it, and we renew our experience of being loved so wonderfully by God.

# Pentecost

**May 8, 2008**

Today is [Pentecost Sunday](#), a feast which is also known as The Birthday of the Church. This is because on that day, the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles in the form of a huge gust of wind and tongues of fire and emboldened them to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ to the entire world. Or, as John expresses it in today's Gospel, Jesus came to them and breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. Prior to this experience, the disciples were locked in a room, afraid to come out, uncertain as to what to do next. They had been thrilled and relieved to have Jesus return to them after his death and resurrection. Now he had ascended back to heaven and was gone from their sight. They were confused and afraid and they knew that there were those who would attempt to harm them or even take their lives because they had followed Jesus.

Once they receive the Holy Spirit, the apostles are completely different people, or at least they seem so. Whereas before they often misunderstood the message of Jesus or had misgivings about it, now they understand in and proclaim it confidently. Whereas before they were afraid, now they stand up to those would defeat them. When we read of the apostles in the gospels and when we read of them again in the Acts of the Apostles, it is as though we were reading about entirely different people. The Holy Spirit has transformed them.

Pentecost is also a Jewish feast, occurring fifty days after the celebration of the Passover. and was a feast of the harvest. Moses commanded his people, "Thou shalt number unto thee seven weeks from that day, wherein thou didst put the sickle to the corn. 10 And thou shalt celebrate the festival of weeks to the Lord thy God, a voluntary oblation of thy hand, which thou shalt offer according to the blessing of the Lord thy God."

(Deuteronomy 16:10.) It is also referred to in Christian circles as "Whitsunday," a reference to the white vestments worn by the priest on that day. The term "Whitsunday" is sometimes thought to be derived from the fact that the Holy Spirit brought "whit (intelligence) and wisdom" to the apostles on that day.

Pentecost is a day for celebrating the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the Church. We note and honor his guidance in our lives and in the life of the Church, bringing us the courage and the dedication to fulfill the apostolic command to "put on the mind of Christ."

# The Priestly Prayer

**May 2, 2008**

The [Gospel](#) for the Seventh Sunday of Easter is from the section of the Gospel of John that takes us back to the Last Supper. In that section, beginning with Chapter 13, we see Jesus giving the disciples their last instructions. He washes their feet, giving them a lesson in servant leadership. He tells them not to be afraid and encourages them to trust in God. He gives them the example of the vine and the branches, and urges them to have the unity with him that the branches have with the vine. He promises them the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, whom he calls The Advocate – the one who will speak for us when people disparage us for following Christ.

In today's Gospel, before going to the Passion, Jesus prays for them, and at the same time he prays for all of us. His prayer is called "The Priestly Prayer," for it is the prayer of the priests on behalf of and in the presence of those who will be his priests, his apostles. He prays that the Father will keep them safe, and he prays that they may be one, just as he and the Father are one. And he prays that they may give glory to the Father.

There is a magnificent unity to the chapters in this section of John's Gospel. In the first four chapters, Jesus teaches the disciples. In this chapter he prays that they may personally experience what he has taught them. This reminds us that the Word of God is a living thing, not just something printed in a book but a living thing, something to be experienced in our own lives. Being a disciple means being one who listens, actively looks for the appearances of Christ in daily life. We are meant not only to learn the essentials of our Faith, we are meant to experience their impact on our daily lives.

In these pages of the Gospel of John, Jesus is not a static figure – he is dynamic, on the move. And his next move is to his Passion.

## The Advocate

**April 24, 2008**

The Gospel for the [Sixth Sunday of Easter](#) is taken from the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. The setting is the Last Supper and Jesus is giving his disciples words of consolation. In preparation for our celebration of Pentecost in two weeks, the reading is about the Holy Spirit. Here, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as “the Advocate.”

Let’s think about the meaning of the word “advocate.” An advocate is one who is on your side, one who speaks up for you in times of trouble. When you do not know the words to say, the Advocate speaks up on your behalf.

The most common way in which we think about an advocate today is in terms of an attorney. If we are brought into court, we hire an attorney to represent us. The attorney knows the law and knows his way around the court system in ways that you, as a client, likely do not. Sometimes people choose to represent themselves in court, but in most cases they hire an advocate to speak for them. The attorney speaks not only in court, but outside of the court as well. Should reporters come to you demanding a statement with reference to the court case, you would refer them to your attorney. He is the one who knows what to say and what not to say.

At the Last Supper, the disciples are afraid and they need someone to help them. Jesus promises them that, after he had gone, he would send them the Holy Spirit to be their Advocate. Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus tells them that, being disciples, they will be hauled into court to testify about their activities. He tells them not to be afraid, that the Holy Spirit will teach them what to say.

That promise is not just for the disciples two thousand years ago. It is for us as well. The Holy Spirit is our Advocate. When others confront us because we stand up for what is right, we do not need to be afraid of not knowing what to say. The Holy Spirit will give us the information and the courage that we need to withstand any opposition.

Our opposition may not be from adversaries, however, It may come from life events and situations that frustrate us, puzzle us and put our backs against the wall. Here, too, the Holy Spirit is our Advocate, giving us the guidance and the wisdom we need to prevail over the circumstances we are facing.

“Come, Holy Spirit.” That traditional prayer of the Church can be our link to the Holy Spirit, the Advocate who is always there for us.

## The Good Shepherd

**April 11, 2008**

The [Gospel](#) for the Fourth Sunday of Easter is a follow-up to the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees in the story of the Man Born Blind in Chapter 9 of John's Gospel. Toward the end of that story, Jesus berates the Pharisees for not having the spiritual vision they claim to have, since they do not recognize who he is.

In this Sunday's reading, Jesus uses a number of pastoral analogies to continue his assertion that the Pharisees are not living up to their responsibilities as spiritual leaders. First, he speaks of the sheepgate through which the shepherd goes to the sheep. A sheepfold is a low wall made of stone and open to the sky. Jesus notes that a shepherd of the sheep approaches his sheep directly instead of breaking and entering to get to them. The idea is that He is the true shepherd while the Pharisees are not. The sheep know the shepherd's voice and they follow him. Jesus is saying here that the people know and recognize him and follow him and ignore the Pharisees, who are false teachers. Again, Jesus describes himself as the gate for the sheep, meaning that if people want salvation they should come through him and not through the false guides, the Pharisees.

The intriguing thing about all of this is that the Pharisees think that Jesus is talking about sheep and shepherds and apparently have no idea that he is talking about them. John points this out to show how spiritually blind they are.

The moral of the story for us is that salvation comes through Jesus, who really cares about us, calls to us and enables us to recognize his voice. We are to discern between his voice and those of false teachers.

## Emmaus and the Mass

**April 4, 2008**

The Gospel for the [Third Sunday of Easter](#), the story of Jesus speaking with two disciples who were on the road to Emmaus, has the same components as our liturgical prayer in the Mass.

The story begins with the equivalent of the Penitential Rite. The two disciples leave Jerusalem and journey to Emmaus because they are sad and discouraged by the crucifixion of Jesus and the rumors of his resurrection. As they are discussing their heartache and confusion, they meet a stranger on the road who asks them what they are conversing about. When they tell him, he exclaims how slow they are to understand the scriptures and what has happened to Jesus.

Next begins the equivalent of the Liturgy of the Word. The stranger goes through the entire Scripture showing the disciples how the things recorded there speak directly to the things that happened to Jesus. It is a kind of Bible reading and homily all in one.

The disciples reach their town and head for home. The stranger begins to go his own way but the disciples invite him to their home. Here begins the equivalent of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. At the meal, the stranger takes bread, blesses it and offers it to the disciples. At that moment, they recognize him. They have been speaking with Jesus all along.

Finally, there is the equivalent of the dismissal at Mass. The disciples leave home, return to Jerusalem and inform the other disciples as to what they have seen and heard.

We come to Mass bearing all the joys and sorrows of our lives. We bring our hearts to Jesus for forgiveness and refreshment. We hear the Word of God in the readings and in the homily. We receive the Bread of Life in the Eucharist. And we leave rejoicing in God's presence in our lives as we prepare to share it with those we meet. The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus gives us not only a wonderful story in itself. It also helps us to reflect on the structure of the Mass.

## Doubting Thomas

**March 27, 2008**

The Gospel for the [Second Sunday of Easter](#) is the familiar story of doubting Thomas. Thomas did not believe the other disciples when they told him that Jesus had appeared to them. He refused to believe unless he could place his hands into the wounds of Jesus. The interesting part of this story is that Jesus allowed Thomas to do just that. In other words, he took Thomas just as he was, doubts and all. We sometimes wonder whether it is alright to doubt. Jesus' attitude toward Thomas shows us that doubt can be an important stage of believing.

When is doubt alright and when is it not? When we question the truth of something, all the while being open to the possibility of discovering the truth, doubt can be a legitimate aid to faith. When we absolutely refuse to be open, and instead proceed with an unshakable self-assurance in our own rightness, absolutely denying the very possibility that, for example, the Church may be right about a teaching we are having difficulty with, then doubt leads to hardness of mind and heart. In that case, it is an obstacle to our discovering the truth.

When we wrestle with, say, a teaching of the Church, all the while maintaining a desire to understand what the Church is teaching, then doubt can help our faith. When we adamantly deny the teaching, thereby diminishing our faith in the Church as our teacher, then our doubt takes us in the wrong direction.

When we allow doubt to help our belief, we permit ourselves to get past the notion that we absolutely must understand everything. When doubt serves faith, there is an act of intellectual humility, an acknowledgment that we may, after all, not have all of the answers. Doubt serving faith is an act of humility.

And it's true – we can't understand everything in life. As we get older and wiser, that becomes clearer and clearer to us. Recognizing that enables faith to morph into trust. We trust the God who is Truth to guide us to approach the truth. That is what Thomas did. That is why Jesus loved him so.

## Holy Week

**March 13, 2008**

Palm Sunday is here, and with it comes the wonderful time of Holy Week, in which we come close to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in a very special way. Today, we commemorate his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. [St. Matthew's](#) telling of the Passion draws us into the drama, the tragedy and the pain of the story of the crucifixion and death of Jesus in a profound way.

Soon the rest of the story unfolds – the story that leads to his suffering and death, which we commemorate on Good Friday and, in stark silence, first part of Holy Saturday. We contemplate the horrific events that constitute his Passion and death – the three tragic hours on the Cross and the Seven Last Words that he proclaimed. We cringe at the enormity of the pain, and we are humbled when we realize that Jesus underwent it for us. Along the way, we remember the bittersweet day of Holy Thursday. Jesus celebrates Passover with his friends and, with a heavy heart of his own, tries to console the disciples, who know that gruesome events are about to take place. And we remember as well the joyous moment when Jesus took the bread and wine and for the first time transformed them into his body and blood.

The Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday is a truly joyous event, celebrating the resurrection of the Lord and the way in which he makes all things new. New fire, new candle, new water, newly initiated Catholics – it is a joy-filled celebration of new life. After the sadness of the previous days, we now rejoice in the triumph of the Savior over sin, suffering and death.

This is a week in which to practice mindfulness. There is so much to experience this week. Let us keep the eyes of our mind and heart open to capture all of the wondrous moment that are there for us.

# The Raising of Lazarus

**March 7, 2008**

There are so many striking things about the story of the raising of Lazarus (the Gospel for the [Fifth Sunday of Lent](#)). One of the most interesting ones is that fact that Jesus waited two days from the time he learned that Lazarus was ill until the time he went to Bethany to see him. If he were such a close friend, wouldn't you think he would have gone right away?

I think the lesson here is that everything has its time. Jesus has work to finish where he is and he knows that what is happening to Lazarus is somehow part of the plan of God that would not ultimately end in the death of Lazarus. Humanly speaking, that means putting a tremendous trust in the plan of God. Most of us, I think, would drop what we were doing and head straight to Bethany. Jesus manifests a remarkable sense of God's timing. He also manifests a remarkable ability to stay in the present moment. Spiritual writers down through the centuries, scholars from all creeds and backgrounds, recommend keeping ourselves focused on the present moment as a key to living a spiritual life. Now we hear it from the Son of God himself! It goes right along with St. Matthew's gospel in which Jesus tells us to stop worrying. Worrying takes us out of the present moment, where we need to be.

This gospel passage also says something about grieving. Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, are very angry with Jesus because he did not come to Lazarus right away. Jesus feels the force of their anger and weeps. Anger can be a natural part of grieving and Jesus accepts the grief of the sisters as a natural thing.

In addition, this passage speaks to the question of why God permits certain tragedies to happen. I don't think God should be blamed for every misfortune people blame him for, but in this case it is clear that Jesus delayed before coming to see Lazarus. This tells us that sometimes God permits tragedies to happen when there is a higher good or purpose that we cannot fathom at the time. It's a hard lesson, but it is one that comes from the gospel for this Sunday.

The story of the raising of Lazarus also invites us to look inside ourselves. Are there places in ourselves that are lifeless and in need of resurrection? Can we give them over to the power of God and allow him to heal us in his own time and in his own way?

Clearly, this is one of the most important scenes from the public life of Jesus. It poses a number of questions and offers us much to think about in living a spiritual life.

# The Man Born Blind

**February 28, 2008**

The Gospel for the [Fourth Sunday of Lent](#) is the story of the man born blind. This story is remarkable for the ironic interplay between being blind and being able to see. It begins with the man born blind who, by the power of Jesus, comes to see. (Note that in John's gospel the word "see" means both physical sight and spiritual insight.) He comes to see physically, and by the end of the story comes to see spiritually as well.

Throughout the story we meet others who see physically but who have no spiritual vision. However, for the most part, they think they understand life and reality as clearly as can be.

The Pharisees in the story are the main example of spiritual blindness couched in absolute certainty. First they interrogate the former blind man, insisting that "the man" (Jesus) could not be an authentic healer because he healed on the Sabbath. Moreover, they were skeptical as to whether such a miracle could ever take place. They were really questioning whether the man had really been healed or whether he had been able to see all along and was just making it up. The man stands by his story - "I was blind and now I see."

Next, they query the man's parents as to whether he was truly born blind. The parents too have physical sight but they are afraid and refuse to embrace full spiritual insight. They are afraid that if they say that Jesus healed their son, they will be punished. Fear is often the source of spiritual blindness.

They then go back to the man again, full of insistence that Jesus must be evil and therefore could not have performed a healing. The man born blind not only stands his ground, but taunts the Pharisees, suggesting that perhaps they, too, would like to follow Jesus. In the end, they throw him out of the synagogue.

The really interesting part is where the Pharisees go to Jesus, saying "surely we are not blind." The irony of their self-condemnation is remarkable.

In this reading, we are asked to discern who is blind from who can really see. Many are so blinded by hatred, prejudice, racism and fear that they cannot see the image of God in their neighbor. They speak with forcefulness and surety as though they could see but their blindness endures. The gentle uncomplicated truthfulness of the man born blind is a symbol of the blessed assurance of those who truly see. They are the ones we should look for and emulate.

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# Transfiguration

**February 15, 2008**

On the [Second Sunday of Lent](#), we hear the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, which tradition tells us took place on Mount Tabor. Here, the divinity of Jesus is revealed, with Moses and Elijah, representing respectively the Law and the Prophets. Peter, James and John accompany Jesus and are witnesses of his Transfiguration.

It might at first seem strange that we are being led to this Gospel at the Second Sunday in Lent. The Church, in presenting this Gospel at this time, wants to give us a good dose of hope for this part of our Lenten journey. Last week, we read of the temptations of Jesus in the desert and perhaps we, too, have been experiencing temptations as we move along in our Lenten journey. The Transfiguration is an advance experience of the glorification of Jesus that will follow his death and resurrection. In meditating on this Gospel, we are invited to imagine our own glorification at the end of our life's journey and in so doing to hold fast when we are tempted to give way to actions and things that are not good for us. The Church presents the Transfiguration as an image of hope. Our journey through Lent and through life might be difficult, but there are moments of insight, inspiration and hope. This is why we read this Gospel this week.

# Whom Do You Worship?

**February 7, 2008**

The [First Sunday of Lent](#) is characterized by the question "Whom or what do you worship?" It brings us back to the temptations of Jesus after forty days in the desert. Jesus was in the desert as part of his preparation for his public life. At the end of the forty days, when his hunger was greatest, the devil tempted him to turn stones into bread, to worship him in order to attain all of the kingdoms of the world, and to obtain special angelic favor by throwing himself off the parapet of the temple. For Jesus to have done any of these things would have been to have breached his relationship with his heavenly Father, which, of course, Jesus was unwilling to do.

As we begin our Lenten journey, we, too, are asked, "What do you worship?" In order to make this forty-day journey with the Lord unto his passion, death and resurrection, we have to take stock of the direction in which we are proceeding. Are we going in the direction of Jesus Christ or are we going in the direction of selfishness, show and power? As we attempt to answer that question, we need to remember where our journey is supposed to be headed. During Lent, we are looking to walk more closely with Christ and to share in his consciousness and his life. Are our present attitudes of mind and heart leading us in that direction? The devil tempts us to believe that his way is the way to Christ. He hands us a map that shows that we are going in the right direction to get what we want in life. When we lose our way, he hands us another map and says, "Try this." Before long we are in no-man's land wondering how on earth we are ever going to find our way.

Our First Reading provides us with the age-old story of the fall of man. How different this story is from that of Jesus in the desert! Jesus took responsibility for who he was and governed himself accordingly. Adam and Eve sin and then try to find other to blame in order to shift the responsibility away from themselves.

Jesus said it clearly, "I am the Way." The map that Jesus hands us is himself, not glitter or magic or worldly power as a way to happiness. By reading the Gospels carefully and reflectively during Lent, we get the only map that is ever going to bring us what we want in life.

## Beatitudes

**January 31, 2008**

The Gospel for the [Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) is Matthew's account of the first and perhaps most famous sermon of Jesus. We know it as the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew makes a point of the sermon being given on a mountain because he is intent upon portraying Jesus as the new Moses, and Moses met God on Mount Sinai. Just as Moses was God's lawgiver, so is Jesus the giver of the Law of God for the New Covenant. The beatitudes are the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. They are a foretaste of what is to come, a discourse on what is truly the essence of the law that Jesus gives. One of the first things that we notice as we read the beatitudes is that they portray a very different way of thinking from that of most people. Most people do not think of the poor as blessed; Jesus does, and he lived his life highlighting the blessedness of the poor. Most people do not think of being blessed (a synonym here is "happy") when they are mourning the loss of a loved one. Jesus, on the other hand, says that "they shall be comforted." On and on through the beatitudes we find the same contradiction of ordinary thinking about what is important in life. Jesus is clearly teaching something new – the logic of the Kingdom of God.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches us an important lesson about how to get what we want from life. Instead of having us focus on the harsh realities of the moment, Jesus asks us to focus on the resolution of those harsh realities. When we think only of our problems and difficulties, we seem to get an increasing amount of those problems and difficulties. If instead we focus on the resolution of those problems, our hearts become lighter and our answers come to us more easily.

When we read the beatitudes, we get an insight into the mind and heart of Christ. This is perhaps the clearest expression of his values and his way of thinking about life. If we truly want to know Christ, reflecting on the beatitudes will help us to do so.

In this day and age when so many of our traditional values are mocked and people are persecuted for holding them, it is comforting to read the words of the last beatitude: "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven." We may be persecuted in this life, but we shall be rewarded in the next.

The beatitudes, then, are a guide for life, a way of thinking and an important entry into the mind and heart of Christ.

## Jesus and the Baptist

**January 25, 2008**

There's no question about it – John the Baptist was a pivotal figure in the life of Jesus. The moment when they met while both children were in their mothers' wombs, the moment when John baptized Jesus, and the moment of John's death were all pivotal turning points in the life of Jesus. So was the moment described in the Gospel for the [Third Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) St. Matthew speaks of the calling by Jesus of his first disciples, Simon, James and John – and he gives us the interesting detail that John the Baptist has been put into prison. . Without missing a beat he goes on to say that Jesus began to preach the message of repentance, the message that John had been preaching before him.

In our lives we, too, have pivotal people. They are with us across a span of our lifetime and their words and their presence reminds us of who we are and what we are to do in the world. Our Gospel for the Third Sunday reminds us to pay attention to these pivotal people, to thank God for them and to listen to what they have to tell us.

## "I Did Not Know Him"

**January 17, 2008**

The Gospel for the [Second Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) is from St. John's Gospel and it is an account of John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus. Interestingly, St. John has John the Baptist proclaim, in two places, "I did not know him (Jesus)." This is a seeming contradiction to the tradition noted in St. Luke's gospel which says that John the Baptist knew who Jesus was. St. Matthew's version seems to indicate that, too, since John protests Jesus' desire to be baptized by him. John the Baptist, does however say, "This is the one of whom I said, "The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me." So it seems he had some knowledge of who Jesus was.

Can the two versions of the story be reconciled? I think they can. Both versions imply that John was acquainted with Jesus. But, as in so many other instances, words in John can have double meanings. When John says, "I did not know Jesus," perhaps he means that he did not fully recognize every aspect of the identity and mission of Jesus. He knew and recognized Jesus, but he did not know him fully. The gospels tell us that from prison John would question the authenticity of Jesus and his message. One of the principal themes of John's gospel is precisely getting to know Jesus. Some of the disciples of John the Baptist ask Jesus, "Where do you live," and he answers, "Come and see." So many of the principal characters in John's gospel are people who in one way or other come to know Jesus – for example, the Samaritan woman and the man born blind. In saying, "I did not know him," John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, is anticipating one of the great themes of John's gospel: getting to know the Lord at a deep level, something beyond the superficial.

We, too, are coming to know Jesus. We may know many things about him, but do we truly know him as our Lord and Savior? To know him in this way is the challenge that the Gospel of John – and the story of John the Baptist – presents to us.

## An Amazing Silence

**January 11, 2008**

We celebrate this week the feast of the [Baptism of the Lord](#). With this feast, we mark the end of the Christmas season and the re-entry into Ordinary Time. It's interesting that the Church regularly extends the celebration of Christmas to include a period of about three weeks. There's something very wholesome about this. We have taken a great deal of time to anticipate Christmas through the celebration of Advent. Now we take time to savor and enjoy the feast. Those qualities of slow preparation and savoring are true gifts that the Church gives to us. In our fast-paced lives, we tend to sneak up on feasts and to forget about them once they are over. The Church suggests a different rhythm - one that is more deliberate and more conducive to a deep appropriation of the meaning of the feast.

The scene is the river Jordan. John the Baptist is preaching repentance and offering a baptism of repentance to those who come to him, and they are coming from everywhere. Something new is in the air, and people sense that if they are going to get in on it, they need to make some changes. John is offering just such an opportunity, and so they come to him to hear his message and to receive his baptism.

Along comes Jesus. He stands before John amidst the crowds just like everyone else. He has come, presumably, from Nazareth, where he has lived as the son of the carpenter Joseph with his mother Mary. You wonder whether anyone in the crowd notices him, whether he stands out in any way. He stands among all the others waiting to receive John's baptism of repentance.

But wait. Something different is happening. There is a conversation taking place between John the Baptist and this young carpenter, and John appears to be shaking his head, refusing to allow him to be baptized. Those nearby sense a moment of tension and uncertainty. Why would John refuse to baptize this young man? Is he perhaps unrepentant or insincere in his conversion? No, on the contrary, John is telling this young man that he doesn't need this baptism, that indeed he should be baptizing John! The conversation continues, and finally John relents and allows Jesus to go into the water. As he does so, an extraordinary thing happens - the heavens are opened, a dove descends upon Jesus and a voice from heaven can be heard, saying, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased."

What is remarkable here is the complete silence with which this magnificent moment is met in the gospel. The next thing we hear is that the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil. Amazingly, there is no record of a sense of wonderment in the crowd. One gets the impression that Jesus simply walks away, and everything goes on as before.

Why that silence? What happened after the baptism of Jesus? Was it wonderment? Bewilderment? Amazement? Disbelief? We simply don't know. Matthew's silence about those moments is as intriguing as the silence about the thirty years of hidden life that Jesus spent in Nazareth with Mary and Joseph. It's interesting - there is silence before the baptism and there is silence after it.

Perhaps we are being invited to slip into that silence and to experience it for ourselves. In our mind's eye, we can place ourselves in that crowd the moment after Jesus' baptism and see what we see. As we ponder our reaction to the events that have taken place, we are privileged to develop a personal appreciation of the Baptism of the Lord, to ask ourselves what it means to us, and so to prepare ourselves for the great adventure that is about to unfold.

## Friends Come and Gone

January 3, 2008

This week we celebrate the [Epiphany of the Lord](#). The magi, or kings from the East, made a journey to Bethlehem, following a star that would lead them to the Christ Child. On the way, they paid a visit to Herod who, wanting to kill the baby, asked the astrologers to return to him and tell him where the baby was. The wise men made their way to the Christ Child, following a star, and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Returning to the East, they were warned in a dream not to return by way of Herod and they made their way home by an alternate route.

This is the only place in the Gospels where the magi are to be found. They never appear again in Matthew's gospel. In this, they remind me of certain people who appear once in our lives, fulfill a particular function, and leave again as quickly as they came. I am reminded of a philosophy professor who taught in the college I attended. His name was Bob Kreyche. Though I didn't have him in class, he and I hit it off and we had many wonderful discussions about philosophy and its practical applications to life. A year or so before I graduated, Bob moved to Arizona and taught at the University of Tempe, and did a lot of social work on weekends. We kept in touch through friends but I never saw him again. Sadly, and much too early, he died.

To this day, Bob Kreyche remains one of the most profound influences upon my life. I bought a used copy of his book *God and Contemporary Man* and savor its wisdom from time to time. Bob was in my life for a very short time, yet what an influence he had. The story of the Magi leads me to think of people who come into our lives, stay a little while and leave. Though they are with us only briefly, they have an influence upon us that lasts our entire lifetime. Celebrating the Epiphany reminds me to cherish these people, in fact to cherish all of the people in my life. They may not bring gold, frankincense and myrrh, but they bring many other things that enrich my life.

# The Holy Family

**December 27, 2007**

The first Sunday after Christmas traditionally is the [Feast of the Holy Family](#). By the Holy Family is meant Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and it is by this title that these three most important people in the story of salvation are known. The Gospel for the feast shows the great love that Joseph had for Jesus, as he took Mary and the baby into Egypt, out of Egypt and ultimately into Nazareth to protect the Christ child from the murderous hand of the king. It is amazing to us how Joseph willingly received the guidance of the angel, believing firmly in the message and taking mother and child to safety.

We live in an age in which the notion of the family is under siege. At both ends of the life spectrum – pre-birth and old age – members of families are condemned to death for a variety of reasons. It takes people with the conviction and courage of Joseph to protect the unborn, the disabled and the elderly from danger.

The family is being besieged in other ways. People are attempting to rewrite the definition of marriage to include other relationships that the committed relationship between husband and wife. Others maintain that it is permissible for couples to live together without benefit of marriage, as though marriage were superfluous and of little import. Many today enter into marriage without sufficient preparation and are encouraged to give up on their marriage without trying very hard to save it. There is no question that the family, which is the very heart and soul of our social structure, is under attack. We need devotion to the Holy Family and prayer to them to offset the effects of such attacks. Having said that, it is important to congratulate those many committed married couples who are living the ideal and raising their children as God intended. It is amazing how many of them there are. From all reports, you would think that the family was a rarity, even a thing of the past. The fact is there are many wonderful families who, through prayer and practice, maintain a sense of values and Godliness in their family life.

It is also important to mention the many families headed by single parents, grandparents and other relatives. Death, divorce and other unforeseen circumstances can leave a family with one parent working arduously to maintain a sense of family for their children. The Feast of the Holy Family is for them as well, and the Holy Family serves as a model and guide for them as they work to maintain a happy and integrated family life.

The Feast of the Holy Family is a time to celebrate family life. Despite the challenges to families today, there is much to celebrate. Let us pray to the Holy Family for today's families that they and the true concept of family life may grow and prosper.

## A Preview of Christmas

**December 20, 2007**

Difficult though it might be to believe, we are up to the [Fourth Sunday of Advent](#). The Fourth Week of Advent is pretty short this year, since Tuesday will be Christmas. For the Gospel reading we get the story of the months before the birth of Christ from St. Matthew. Why, you may ask yourself, do we get a story which we would ordinarily expect to hear at Christmas when it's still Advent? The answer is that this preview of what we will hear about on Christmas is an important part of our preparation for Christmas.

When I was a student our teachers often gave us an overview of the entire course before teaching us anything about the subject we were going to study. In fact, when I was in high school and studying freshman English, we learned a method called [SQ3R](#) – Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. The first thing we did was to survey the entire body of material so as to get an overall feel for what it was going to be about. That way, we are able to see if we have any questions, which in turn helps us to read the material in a more focused way.

It's the same principle here. The Church gives us a preview of the Christmas story so that, when Christmas comes and we hear it again, we will be able to hear it intelligently and with greater concentration.

So don't be surprised to hear this part of the Christmas story read during Advent. Listen carefully, ask questions, and absorb as much as you can. You'll be amazed at how much more you will understand come Christmas Day.

## What Do You See?

**December 13, 2007**

The [Gospel](#) for the Third Sunday of Advent tells a story from the imprisonment of John the Baptist as it is told by St. Matthew. Later, Matthew tells us that John was imprisoned because he objected to the Herod taking his brother's wife as his own, an objection that ultimately led to his being beheaded. In the fourth chapter of his Gospel, however, and here in this passage, he simply tells us that John was in prison, but he reports that John sent emissaries to Jesus to inquire whether he was truly the Messiah.

Was John having doubts about Jesus? If so, that would be pretty serious since John had devoted his whole life to being a forerunner of the Jesus' public ministry. At the very least we can say that John was looking for reassurance. He must have sensed that his life was coming to an end and he wanted to be sure he had been doing the right thing. It's a pretty reasonable request when it comes right down to it.

Jesus responds to John's questions in two ways. One, he answers them directly. Two, he sings John's praises before his and John's disciples. Both of these things are remarkable. Jesus would have had every right to take offense at John's inquiry. But he didn't. He was not afraid to give the answers. And his answers are given in terms of the things that were predicted in the Old Testament: "The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." The last statement is especially poignant. It wouldn't surprise me if it were a gentle reminder to John to keep his faith strong and lively and not to waiver.

Far from being offended by John's question, Jesus goes on to praise John. "Why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." Jesus accepts John's questioning with poise and equanimity.

On the Gaudete Sunday, this Sunday of rejoicing, the Third Sunday of Advent, we are asked the same question that Jesus asked of his disciples in response to John's questions: "What do you see?" We are invited to look and see signs of the presence of God in our lives here and now. Where are the mighty works of Jesus being done? Where are prisoners being freed? Where are the downtrodden being stood up for? Where are the poor being aided? There is the Kingdom of God.

## Meeting John the Baptist

**December 6, 2007**

When you read the [Gospel](#) for the Second Sunday of Advent, it is amazing to discover the sheer number of people who flocked to hear the message of John the Baptist. It might be understandable if he had been teaching a course on how to live a positive and successful life. Or perhaps a course in how to use affirmations to create a successful life. The fact is, John was doing neither of those things. Instead, he was telling people to repent of their sins. And he was using extremely harsh language to do it. John's was a no-nonsense approach that told people that it was time to make some significant changes in the way they lives their lives. He told them not to tempt God. He told them to consider the judgment God could make upon their lives. "His winnowing fan is in his hand," he told them.

There was something about John the Baptist that rang true in the hearts of many people. He lived in the desert; he ate locusts and wild honey – both things that could have resulted in his being labeled insane. Yet people flocked to him to hear his message and to receive his baptism. He made people want to repent.

John the Baptist can have the same effect on our lives today, two thousand years later. His powerful presence and message reach across the span of time and touch our hearts just as he did to people in his own day. We hear his message and it rings true. Just as he was preparing hearts for the coming of the Savior, so today John the Baptist prepares our hearts for the celebration of Christmas.

Can we listen to his message as intently as people did back then?

That is the question that the Second Sunday of Advent poses to us.

# Christ the King

**November 21, 2007**

[The Solemnity of Christ the King](#) is a day to remember what life is really all about. As the Gospel reading reminds us, the Kingdom of Christ was and is not of this world. Nor does Christ often get the recognition to world gives to stars, celebrities and wealthy people. The bitter libation he was given to drink on the Cross is a symbol of the ridicule and misunderstanding that Christ received and which his followers must be prepared for.

On this Feast we can take time to examine what is most important in life. Is it fame, money, important positions, the admiration of others? Or is it humble service of God and of our fellow human beings? It is said that we think 60,000 thoughts each day. How many of those are about truly important things, and how many are thoughts that are negative, petty and mean? How many times do we see television or hear radio programs that have a positive message? Comparatively few. It's the same with movies and sometimes with concerts. We tend to dwell on the negative. The Solemnity of Christ the King challenges us to examine those thoughts and to reflect upon the cultural attitudes of society. The image of Christ on the Cross begs us to reexamine whether the vast majority of our thoughts and activities are focused on truly important things, such as praise of God and the welfare of others.

Christ's Kingdom is not of this world. That statement should be the guiding principle for the thoughts and actions of those who follow him.

--Posted November 21, 2007

## The Right Focus

**November 15, 2007**

The [Gospel](#) for the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time warns us about getting caught up in idle speculation as opposed to focusing on things that are truly important.

People were raving about the beauty of the temple and all of the precious stones and ornaments that it contained. Looking back from after the temple was destroyed (Luke's gospel was written about 80-85 A.D.), St. Luke recalls that, in response to all their praises of the temple, Jesus told them that one day the temple, with all its glory, would be destroyed. If we read the account of Josephus of the destruction of the temple, we see how horrific and how thorough that destruction proved to be.

Having heard these words about the ruination of the temple, the people, assuming that also implied the end of the world, began to ask when this destruction would take place. Jesus warned that many would try to deceive them about the end of the world. And he admonished them to be concerned, not about that, but about how they would respond to the persecutions they were to experience before that time comes. He wanted them to get themselves ready to face these trials. Yet at the same time, he told them not to prepare a defense beforehand. Instead, he told them, the Holy Spirit would tell them what to say when the time came..

How often do we, in our day, spend time speculating about useless matters. It would be much better if we were to prepare ourselves as best we can for the real challenges of life. In our society, they come every day. Christianity and Catholicism are challenge throughout the world every single day of the year. We must be ready to respond. The good news – all we need to do is to be ready. When the time comes, we will know how to act and what to say. The Holy Spirit will guide us and lead us down the right path.  
-- Posted November 15, 2007

# The God of the Living

**November 8, 2007**

The Gospel for the [Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) seems, on the surface, to be about marriage, but it is really an argument about life after death. The Sadducees do not believe in a bodily resurrection, while the Pharisees do, and for once in the Gospels, Jesus agrees with the Pharisees.

To bolster their belief that there is no life after death, and to try to trap Jesus into an error, the Sadducees pose an absurd story. A man has seven brothers, each of who inherits the first brother's wife when the subsequent brothers die. The woman will have had, in all, seven husbands. At the resurrection of the dead, they ask, whose wife shall she be?

Remember, the Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection of the dead, and they are using this absurd puzzle to make the case that belief in the afterlife is nonsensical.

Accepting his authority as an interpreter of the Law, Jesus gives two answers to their question, making the case that there is, indeed, resurrection from the dead. Marriage, he says, is for the living. When people die and pass over into eternal life, there is no marriage for they are like angels. In other words, they do not marry because they are in the glory of the afterlife. Marriage is for here and now, to keep the human race alive.

There is no need to do that in the afterlife.

Jesus' second argument is that Moses, the chief lawgiver of the People of God, referred to God as the father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses, he argues, did not name these important people in the history of salvation as people who were dead, but as people who were alive. God, says Jesus, is the father of the living, not the father of the dead, and he adds, "For in him all are alive."

In this passage, Jesus affirms, against the Sadducees, that there is life beyond the grave and proclaims God to be the God of the living, both here and in the hereafter.

This is a particularly good reading for November, the month in which we remember and honor the dead. The saints whom we honor and the souls for whom we pray are beloved of God just as we are who are here on earth. That is why we remember them from our place here on earth.

--Posted November 8, 2007

## Zacchaeus and Us

**November 1, 2007**

The [Gospel](#) for the Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time tells the story of Zacchaeus, the vertically-challenged tax collector who turned his life over to Jesus. Zacchaeus was much disliked in his home town, for he was a tax collector and, being a short person, was ridiculed by his fellow townsfolk.

In many ways, Zacchaeus was like each of us. We may not be short of stature as he was, but nonetheless it can sometimes be difficult for us to see Jesus. Zacchaeus had to climb up a sycamore tree. What we may have to do instead is to develop a higher point of view, to begin to look not only with the eyes of the body but with the eyes of the soul as well. Zacchaeus's climb really symbolizes that shift of perspective. We cannot see Jesus with merely human vision. Repeatedly throughout the gospels we see Jesus repudiating the "normal" way in which human beings look at life. He says that we must see with a higher vision which often contradicts and at least supplements the ways of human logic. In the Gospel of John, it is the difference between seeing the light and stumbling about in darkness.

Like Zacchaeus, we must want to see Jesus. In other words, we must be open to a different point of view. For example, Jesus did not see sick people as people to be ostracized as many did in his day, but as people to be healed. When others looked away from the poor and the downtrodden, Jesus embraced them. Many in his day sought earthly power; he proclaimed that his kingdom was not of this world. Seeing with the eyes of Jesus means seeing things differently.

We may also find it difficult to see Jesus because of our factors in our personal lives. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus was hated. The gospels often lumped tax collectors and sinners together. At any rate, he was hated by one and all in the town. In order to see Jesus, Zacchaeus had to put himself above the hateful situation he was in and look to something different, something higher. Somehow, he knew that he would find that in Jesus. Many of us may find ourselves hated and misunderstood by some of the people in our lives. We may be tempted to lock into that and live in hatred ourselves. Like Zacchaeus, we must bring ourselves to a higher perspective, one that includes forgiveness and the hope of a better life.

Zacchaeus gives away half of his possessions to the poor and repaid fourfold any wealth he had gained by extortion. We, too, must empty ourselves, be generous and giving and repay any damage we may have done to others. Having the higher vision is not merely a privilege – it has consequences for how we live our lives.

This week, we read the story of Zacchaeus. There we read our own story as well.

--Posted November 1, 2007

## Pharisee and Publican

October 25, 2007

The readings for the [Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) amplify the Lord's teaching from last week about the importance of praying with persistence. It takes his lesson on prayer to the next logical question: "What is the best way to pray?"

To illustrate this, the Lord teaches a parable. Now it's good for us to review what exactly a parable is. It's a story with one theme. A parable differs from an allegory, in which the story may have different elements which are images representing different things. A short story or a novel, for instance, deals in allegory. The author may use water or light or particular colors to represent life, darkness, good or evil and it's interesting to follow the imagery in the story to see how he is getting his message across. A parable is much simpler – it has one point and everything is focused on that one point.

There's something else about Jesus' parables. When Jesus speaks in parables he is making a single point, as we have seen. However, that point is always aimed at the Pharisees and some attitude or other of theirs that Jesus wants them to correct. We'll see in a moment how this applies to the parable from this week's Gospel.

Jesus is telling his listeners to pray persistently, and now he shows them how and how not to pray. He tells them the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. (A publican was a poor man, someone most people would consider to be an "ordinary person," perhaps even a public sinner. Here, he is identified as a tax collector.) Both enter the temple to pray. The Pharisee goes right up to the front of the temple and proceeds to pray to God by thanking him that he has such marvelous virtue that he is unlike the rest of men, -- "greedy, dishonest, adulterous -- or even like this tax collector." What's wrong with this prayer? First of all, it presents a horrible view of the rest of humanity – can everyone possible be so bad? Secondly (and this is Jesus' point), it is totally self-centered and prideful. The man goes right up to the front of the temple and spends his prayer time extolling his own virtues before God.

By way of contrast, the publican admits that he is a sinner. Humble, he does not even dare to lift his eyes to God. He beats his breast and prays, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." What a difference in the two kinds of prayer! The one is so prideful and the other is so humble.

The lesson for Jesus' disciples: do not be like the Pharisees. They prefer long prayers in public that extol their virtues. Pray like the publican – be humble and beg for the mercy of God. That is the sort of prayer that God prefers.

Throughout his life, Jesus was known for his love of sinners and for his dislike of the pomposity of the Pharisees. This parable is yet another example of this and a reminder to us to remain humble in the sight of God.

--Posted October 25, 2007

## The Father and the Judge

October 18, 2007

In the [Gospel](#) for the Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus once again makes his point by way of irony and contrast. He wants to teach the disciples to pray always and without ceasing. So he creates for them a story about a judge who had no fear of God nor respect for any human being. A poor widow kept pleading and pleading with him to make a decision against someone who was her adversary. The judge became so annoyed by her persistence that he granted her request just to get her off of his back. Jesus goes on to make the point that God will do the same for his children if they pray to him persistently and without ceasing.

It's a great point, but we have to scratch our heads and ask, "Is Jesus comparing the Father to that harsh and insensitive judge?" The answer is, yes and no. What Jesus is doing is using irony, a device that he often used in speaking with people. The [dictionary](#) defines "irony" as "the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of its literal meaning." So Jesus is using the example of the judge, not to be taken literally as an image of God, but ironically. He wants the disciples to pray persistently, but he is also saying that God is totally unlike the wicked judge. He's telling the disciples that if a wicked judge would honor persistence, so would a loving God honor it all the more. This passage in Luke's gospel follows a passage about the end of time. Jesus describes the end of the world, and yet does not directly respond to the disciples' question about when it will happen. His cryptic response is, "Where the body is, there also the vultures will gather," meaning that there is no way of knowing exactly when the end of time will be, but that we should be alert for signs of it. This Sunday's Gospel follows that passage, which shows us that Jesus is trying to teach the disciples to be ready by praying strongly and courageously.. In the passage that follows, he teaches them about correct and incorrect prayer: the Pharisee praises himself, while the publican humbles himself. These passages all fit together as part of Jesus journey toward his passion and death in Jerusalem. The inclusion of the end-of-time passage highlights the serious of this moment in the life of Jesus and his disciples. He has an important and serious message to give them, and time is running out.

For us this week, the basic idea is that we should be persistent in our prayer. We need not be afraid of bothering God. God wants to hear from us and wants us to repeat our requests over and over again if need be. He wants us to be in close relationship with him.

--Posted October 18. 2007

# Healing and Thankfulness

**October 12, 2007**

The Readings for the [Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) teach us at least two lessons that are of great importance for us in living our lives in Christ.

The first and third readings tell us about healings of lepers. The First Reading speaks of the healing of Naaman, who almost didn't get healed because he thought going into the healing waters of the Jordan seven times was not important enough to do. His assistants prevailed, however, and he entered the waters and was healed.

The Gospel talks about seven lepers that Jesus healed. The significance of both of those stories is that leprosy was a dread illness that rendered one separate from one's community. Lepers had to isolate themselves, hide from others and avoid contact with the community at large. They were ostracized, and their illness was often interpreted as a punishment from God. The healing of Naaman and the healing of the seven lepers speak to God's merciful desire to bring the ostracized back into the community, the sick back to health.

There is something else about these healings, and it is especially noticeable in the Gospel story -- giving thanks is so very important. Of the seven lepers who were healed, only one came back to say thank you to Jesus. Jesus noted and appreciated that.

We may or may not think of ourselves as being ostracized in our lives. We may feel it sometimes if we are sick or are maligned by others. The message for us is that God wants to remove us from our isolation, to free us from anything that binds us, and keeps us from being who we are really meant to be. So this is a message of hope.

It is also an encouragement to thankfulness. When God helps us and frees us, we should be thankful to him and express that gratitude in word and deed. The attitude of thankfulness enriches our life and deepens our relationship with God.

--Posted October 12, 2007

## Mustard Seed Faith

**October 4, 2007**

The Gospel for the [Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) is another of those passages that leaves us shaking our heads and wondering what Jesus is saying, or at least wondering how we can apply what he is saying to our daily lives.

First, the disciples approach Jesus with what appears to be a perfectly reasonable request, "Lord, increase our faith." Looking at the request, we see right away that there is something wrong with it. How can anybody increase someone else's faith? Are the disciples expecting Jesus to crawl inside them and do something with their wills to make them believe more? The fact is, nobody can increase another person's faith. That is the sole responsibility of the person himself.

However, there's something else wrong with the disciples' demand of Jesus, and it is this problem that he picks up on and upon which he focuses his remarks to them. Having a "large faith" puts the disciples in danger of inflating their egos. Once they had this "great faith," they might take it into their heads to lord it over others, to think themselves better than others, to be, as we say, "holier than thou." They might even become like the Pharisee who sat in the front of the temple praying, "Lord, I thank Thee that I am not like the rest of men." Jesus realized that a large faith was not what they needed, but a small one, a faith that would enable them to believe in him while at the same time staying humble.

It is hard for us to imagine what a "small faith" would be like, and it was difficult for the disciples to understand it as well. Therefore, Jesus told them a story. If you had a servant who had just come in from plowing, would you tell him to recline at table while you served him? Most people would not do that. Rather, they would tell the servant to prepare and serve the meal while they (the master) sat down to eat. In just the same way, Jesus tells them, do not think of yourselves as great people possessing great faith, think of yourselves as servants and simply go ahead and do your duty. "The kind of faith you should have," Jesus is telling them, "is the kind of faith that enables you to remember that you are servants of others and to remember that the only thing you need to focus on is doing your duty towards them."

"All the faith you need," he tells them, "is faith the size of a mustard seed. If you had that, you would not believe the power you would have. You could even move mountains."

Mustard seed faith is the moment-to-moment belief that God has put us here for a purpose and that he will give us all that we need to fulfill that purpose and to overcome every obstacle to our doing so. We do not need to focus on the size of our faith in

comparison with anybody else's. We need only focus on doing what we are hear to do today.

Helen Keller said, "am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do." That, in a nutshell, is faith the size of a mustard seed.

--Posted October 4, 2007

## A Lesson on Sin

September 27, 2007

The Gospel readings for the past several Sundays all stem from a simple complaint the Pharisees made about Jesus. Luke tells us that tax collectors and sinners were flocking to Jesus and the Pharisees were not amused. They complained about Jesus that he was welcoming tax collectors and sinners.

That simple comment starts a whole section of Luke's gospel on various aspects of sin and grace. Jesus begins with three parables on the subject of valuable things and persons lost and found. A man has a hundred sheep and loses one and leaves the ninety-nine in order to find the lost sheep. A woman loses a coin and sweeps the whole house clean until she finds it. A father loses a son to profligacy and welcomes him home when he returns. The message: people who are lost are worth taking time to rescue and to help. Then Jesus takes another tack. He tells the story of a steward who is being let go from his job and now is out of work. He decides to talk to his master's customers and reduce the bill by the amount of his own commission so that, without cheating his master, the customers will get a better price and consider employing the steward. The message: the children of light have something to learn from children of darkness about shrewdness. People who do evil can teach them a lesson.

Now, on the [Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#), the lesson takes still another turn. Jesus tells the story of a rich man who completely ignored the poor man at his gate and who was tortured in the afterlife while the poor man enjoyed bliss. The message: self-important people (such as those who complained about Jesus hobnobbing with sinners) need to realize that they are not doing themselves any favors when it comes to eternal life.

The Sunday readings skip a bit of the next part of Luke's gospel, but the theme continues as Jesus clarifies the message he has been giving up to now. He has talked about care of sinners, but he makes it abundantly clear that sin itself is evil and punishable. He goes on from there to say that forgiveness is to be our response when someone sins against us. He also adds another remonstrance for his arrogant critics: when they do something that they think is wonderful, they should remember that they are only doing their duty.

The entire passage from Luke is a lesson on various aspects of sin and goodness.

Beginning with a challenge from the Pharisees, it provides us a wonderful exposition of the nature of sin and what we can do to live a grace-filled life.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Should We Cheat Our Boss?

**September 20, 2007**

The Gospel for the [Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) has several puzzling and seemingly contradictory elements to it. Is Jesus really telling us to be like the servant who told his former master's customers to pay less than they owed? Does he really mean it when he says that we should make friends with dishonest wealth? Or does he mean it when he says that the person who is trustworthy in small matters will be put over larger ones? What is going on here?

What we have to understand in interpreting this passage is that Jesus sometimes uses irony when he speaks. For example, when he tells us to make friends with dishonest wealth, he is saying that if we do that our wealth is going to fail us and at that point we will realize the importance of wealth that is eternal. He is suggesting, by indirection that we make friends with eternal wealth instead.

Something similar is at work in the Parable of the Unjust Steward. The steward is not, as it seems, being praised for cheating his master. Here's the story. The total price of the master's goods was made up of the actual price due the master and a sort of agent's fee owed to the servant for brokering the transaction. What the servant was doing was writing off his own commission. The master was not being cheated and the buyer was getting a really good price. The servant made friends with the customers in the hope that one of them would hire him. That shrewdness is what he is being praised for.

And, yes, Jesus is saying that if we are faithful in small things we will be given greater responsibilities. That's why I always tell people who are looking for a better job not to shirk their duties in their present job, but rather to use it as a springboard to gain valuable experience. More begets more. Less begets less. That's the spiritual law.

Looked at in this way, Jesus' teachings here are neither contradictory nor quite so puzzling. In fact, this passage gives a very clever and consistent approach to doing business and to dealing with our fellow human beings.

--Posted September 20, 2007

## A Perfect Balance

**September 14, 2007**

The readings for the [Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) have a perfect balance about them. The First Reading describes God's wrath at the unfaithfulness of his people and his intention to punish them severely. (Moses, fortunately, manages to talk him out of this plan.) The Gospel, Luke's account of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, form a perfect counterpoint by showing the depths of God's mercy and his utter happiness when his children make their way back to him.

The Second Reading is the perfect fulcrum for balancing these two texts. Here, Paul tells Timothy of his own personal experience of God's saving mercy. He says, "I was mercifully treated, so that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in him for everlasting life." In this very personal revelation, Paul reveals his awareness of how God could have punished him severely, but instead gave him a second chance - and more than that, an important role to play in the spread of the Gospel.

Perhaps as we listen to these readings, we can engage in a spiritual exercise. They give us an opportunity to think about all of the ways in which we have invited the wrath of God by our thoughts words, actions and sins of omission. Then, think about how God, instead, has saved us, blessed us, and given us a place in his Kingdom.

Perhaps our words will be similar to those of Paul: "To the king of ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God, honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

Posted September 14, 2007

## Should You Hate Your Parents?

**September 6, 2007**

The Gospel reading for the [Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) could qualify as a "real shocker." Here is Jesus saying, "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

It is not difficult to imagine people in the crowd, admirers of Jesus, perhaps giving some thought to the possibility of joining him, and, upon hearing these words, having second thoughts. How could one possibly join up with someone who taught such things?

I can also imagine a rebellious teenage son or daughter listening to this sermon and thinking, "Hey, I hate my father and mother. Jesus is saying exactly what I want to hear!"

Both people would be wrong for the very same reason: they misunderstand Jesus' teaching. Both are interpreting Jesus' teaching literally, and doing that leads to genuine misunderstanding and confusion. Jesus is not telling us to literally hate our father and mother. He is telling us to prefer being his disciple to our relationship with our father and mother. The two things are very different. If a person feels the call to be a disciple of Jesus yet stays at home rather than heeding that call, he cannot be a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus is also speaking of the intensity of the preference of him over one's parents. He uses the word hate not to mean "hate" literally, but rather to say that one's preference for him must be a very strong one, one that puts him first over everyone and everything. As the Son of God, he is asking us to grant him the recognition and respect due to him.

Therefore, our would-be disciple would be wrong in thinking that the statement would provide a reason not to follow Jesus. Instead, it provides a good indicate of how much Jesus wants and deserves to be loved by one who feels called to follow him.

The rebellious teen would be wrong as well. Jesus is not telling him or her to hate their parents. He is telling them to consider hating no one at all, and instead to love him with all their hearts. His statement is a perfect antidote to the floating hatred that can often occur in young people. It encourages a redirection of that anger into love.

Jesus was a great teacher, and he knew how to get people's attention. He certainly would have drawn the focus of the crowds with his statement. Reading it as he intended it, it is a powerful invitation to love.

--Posted September 6, 2007

## Woman of Faith, Woman of Doubt

August 24, 2007

"Endure your trials as "discipline"; God treats you as sons. For what "son" is there whom his father does not discipline?" The words of St. Paul from the readings of the [Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) rung especially true to me in the light of a [story](#) in Time Magazine about a new book revealing letters from Mother Teresa about the dark night she bore with her for many years of her life.

We think of Mother Teresa as being so very close God, but these letters reveal that for much of her life she felt a great distance between herself and God. The letters reveal her struggle to understand that darkness. In the end, she reconciled herself with it by seeing it as a gift from God to help her fulfill her wish to embrace the sufferings of Christ on the cross.

When we think of all that Mother Teresa accomplished in her life and the zeal with which she achieved her dreams for the Missionaries of Charity, it is amazing to think that she went through this hidden struggle.

It helps us, I think, to remember that as we endure our personal hardships and at times wrestle with faith, we do not have to be toppled by our darkness. Like Mother Teresa, we can continue to fulfill our purpose for being on earth. God may discipline us in order to bring us closer to him, but nonetheless he gives us the grace to go on and to accomplish in the world what it is he has put us here to do.

Darkness and struggle are sometimes a part of life, but God's grace is always sufficient for us.

--Posted August 24, 2007

## Working Hard, Working Smart

**July 19, 2007**

The first sign that Martha was in trouble was that she was getting cranky.

The wonderful Martha and Mary story, which is our Gospel reading for the [Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#), has always peaked people's curiosity and interest. Upon reading this story, many people are inclined to disagree with Jesus' assessment of the situation. Why, they say, would he chastise poor Martha, who is the one doing all of the work? Why didn't he gently admonish Mary, "Go help your sister"?

As usual, the logic of Jesus runs much deeper than that of you and me. Martha says that the problem is that Mary is leaving her to do all of the work. Jesus sees the real problem - Martha is getting cranky. She needs to do her work in a different way, one that is less tiring and stressful. She needs to be more like Mary.

We tend to side with Martha in this story because we are so much like her. We live harried lives, endure crazy schedules, take too much on our shoulders and, like her, end up short-tempered and resentful. We need to do things in a different way.

I once interviewed Steven Scott, author of *A Millionaire's Notebook*. He's a very successful man, and I asked him if he worked hard to accomplish his goals. His response impressed me. "I don't work hard," he said, "I work smart." There's a big difference between working hard and working smart. Working hard, which is what most of us do, gets the job done, but at the expense of our well-being. Working smart gets the job done, but lets us do it with ease and grace and with time left over for ourselves.

What might Martha have done if she had been working smart instead of working hard? What might she have done differently? She might have organized her dinner preparations more carefully, leaving time for breaks where she could sit with Jesus and Mary and enjoy their company. She might have invited them to join her in the kitchen so she could visit with them while she worked. She might even have good-naturedly put her sister to work on an aspect or two of the meal. The point is, Martha had options, and instead of working smart, she plunged in and worked hard.

I find it interesting that Jesus did not tell Martha to sit down and abandon her preparations for the meal. That's wasn't his message to her. Instead, he was concerned about her state of mind and he wanted her to re-think her way of doing things.

There's another side to this, too, since Jesus was the Son of God. Part of working smart is to include God in the doing. Martha was missing a chance to visit with the Son of God

and instead chose to wear herself out in the kitchen. We do that, too. When we truly work smart, we begin and end our work with a sense of doing it for God, and we try to keep a sense of the presence of God with us as we work.

In this story, Jesus was not admonishing Martha in favor of Mary. He was trying to help Martha to work differently, to work with ease and grace and with a sense of the presence of God.

--Posted July 19, 2007

## And Who Is My Neighbor?

July 13, 2007

"And who is my neighbor?" These words from the Gospel for the [Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) have echoed down through the centuries as a critical question as to how to live a human and Christian life.

Because I have a daily radio program on The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159, I am privileged to come into contact with people who have found ways to answer this question and to make their answer the key to living what is called these days a "purposeful life."

There's the man who was wrongfully jailed for twenty years for a capital crime he did not commit, and who now goes all over the world preaching forgiveness and peace. There's the mother whose son and daughter-in-law were murdered brutally, who now publicly advocates for the abolition of capital punishment. I have talked to people who have suffered terrible personal tragedies who have used those tragedies as catalysts for helping others in similar circumstances.

I suspect that the man who was questioning Jesus in the Gospel could have found the answer to his question had he simply looked into his own life experience and had compassion for someone in need there. He was trying to turn the quest for eternal life into an academic exercise, but Jesus told him plainly that this was not enough. It's important, but not enough. "Neighbor" is not an academic concept; it is the person who is at your feet and suffering - that was Jesus' message to him.

I often think, when I read in the news of some terrible tragedy that has taken place somewhere on the face of the earth, that somewhere someone is reading that same story and saying, "What can I do about this?" All of the large and small charitable causes that exist today began when someone confronted a tragedy and said, "What can I do?"

So the real question hidden in this week's Gospel is not, "Who is my neighbor?" It is, "What can I do?" My neighbor is someone who is hurting. What can I do to help?

--Posted July 13, 2007

## Purpose, Egos and Results

**July 6, 2007**The Gospel for the [Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) shows us how Jesus dealt with some overly enthusiastic disciples who were in danger of letting their egos get in the way of their work.

St. Luke tells us that Jesus sent the disciples out on a missionary journey. There, they had tremendous "success" in ways that were apparently beyond their wildest imaginings. "'Lord," they report excitedly upon their return, "even the demons are subject to us because of your name." Clearly, they were overcome with amazement at what they had been able to accomplish.

Jesus listened to them and gave them some well-needed advice. "I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky... Do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven."

In their excitement, the apostles were letting their egos get in the way of their proper focus. In their excitement over the powers that had been given to them, they forgot that the purpose of their mission was to proclaim that "the Kingdom of God is at hand." Instead, they began to focus on their mighty deeds. Jesus had to bring them back to square one, to remind them of what was really most important - that their names were written in heaven.

Many of us nod our heads when we read this passage, because the scenario is all too familiar. All of us at one time or other have found ourselves so excited about our accomplishments that we forget why we were given our gifts in the first place. Our egos readily lap up the attention and "success" that we are experiencing and we forget what it is really all about. St. Ignatius of Loyola reminded his retreatants of this in the Spiritual Exercises: "We are made to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord and by this means to save our souls." That's why we're here. That's our purpose. The results are great, but when we focus on the results, we struggle.

Successful people know that, while results are important, they are not the Number One consideration. They have learned that results come most easily and effortlessly when they remember the reason they are doing what they are doing. They have learned, too, that focusing so much on results can get their egos pumping, and if that happens, the results are often endangered. Exalted egos can create obstacles and distractions that can easily thwart the realization of a goal.

Jesus' reminder to his disciples is a very important one for us to remember and take to heart. When we keep our focus on our true purpose, the results often enough take care of themselves.

--Posted July 6, 2007

## James and John

**June 29, 2007**

The Gospel reading for the [Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) is one that can help us to feel better about ourselves if we are discouraged about our progress on our journey. It tells the story of Jesus' wanting to go to Jerusalem by way of a Samaritan town. The Samaritans, disliking both Jerusalem and the Jews, refused to let him pass.

James and John had a brilliant idea, or so they thought. "Let's call down fire from heaven," they said, "and destroy the town."

Great idea, right? Jesus had no time for it and rebuked the disciples sternly. They went by way of another village.

James would go on to be known as the disciple of social justice. John would go on to be known as the disciple of love. On the day in question, both of them had a long way to go.

And yet, they made it. By the grace of God, they made it and so will we. We, too, have a long ways to go on the journey to perfection, and yet God loves us at every step of the way, just as he loved James and John to their perfection.

Now, there's something to think about.

--Posted June 29, 2007

# John the Baptist

**June 22, 2007**

Sunday this week, or last week, depending on when you read this, is the [Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist](#). When you read that liturgical title, which otherwise might read, "St. John the Baptist's Birthday," you know you are into some heady matters. And it's true. When you look at the life of St. John the Baptist, his life so paralleled the life of his cousin, Jesus that he became a pivotal prophetic figure for the unfolding events in the life of our Lord and Savior.

It all began when Jesus and John the Baptist first met, when they were each in their respective mothers' wombs. St. Luke tells us that at the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy. From the very, very, beginning, John was meant to be a precursor of the life and mission of Jesus.

That continued at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. The gospels tell us that John didn't think it appropriate for him to baptize his cousin, but Jesus insisted. His willingness to do so made it possible for the great epiphany with which the Father revealed the special identity and mission of his Son.

Later on, John was imprisoned for his forthrightness in challenging a member of the royalty for familial marital problems, and we are told that John's imprisonment became another turning point in the ministry of Jesus and its definition. John, from prison, asked his disciples to find out whether Jesus was really who John had thought he was. Jesus established his identity in no uncertain terms - the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and blessed is he who is not scandalized in the person who does these things. Clearly, Jesus saw the plight of John and realized that he, too, could be held civilly accountable for the work that he was doing.

And, yes, it happened. John was tragically and for very foolish reasons, put to death. And Jesus, on the occasion of that terrible loss, was reminded of what lay in store for him. He, too, after all, was preaching the message, "Repent, and believe the good news."

Throughout their lives, John the Baptist was a beacon of light for Jesus and a foreteller of what would happen to him. It was in the book of Father John S. Dunne, *A Search for God in Time and Memory*, that the relationship between the Baptizer and his cousin became so real to me, but it has never left me. We, too, have in our lives those people who make us aware of who we truly are. That was the role of John the Baptist in the life of Jesus, and that is what our Sunday celebrates.

--Posted June 22, 2007

## "Give Them Some Food Yourselfes."

**June 8, 2007**

"Give them some food yourselves." These words of Jesus to the disciples are taken from the Gospel for the [Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ](#). We may pass over them when we read or hear them, but they represent some important things for us to reflect upon.

The words, "Give them some food yourselves" are Jesus' initial response to the disciples' complaint that the huge crowd assembled to hear Jesus are hungry and have nothing to eat. Here, Jesus is telling the disciples not to simply complain about what is happening, but to do something about it.

The irony of his response, however, is he that is testing the boundaries of human capability. In this situation, the disciples do not have enough money to buy food for the vast crowd, and all they have are five loaves and two fish. Human ability alone is not going to solve the problem.

That is where divine capability comes in. When human resources fail, divine resources come in to save the day. Jesus takes the five loaves and the two fish (humanly deemed to be insufficient), blesses them and makes them be enough and much more than enough for the starving crowd.

When confronted with a problem, our first instinct is to try to resolve the problem ourselves. Often our efforts fail to succeed. It is when we unite our minds and hearts to God that the best (and often seemingly impossible) solutions appear.

--Posted June 8, 2007

## The Set of the Sails

June 1, 2007

"Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope." These words of St. Paul from the Second Reading for [Trinity Sunday](#) give us a great deal of wisdom in a nutshell. In the eyes of the world, our afflictions, whatever they may be, are not something to boast about. Indeed, they are something to complain about, and indeed we do at great length whenever we can find a sympathetic or at least a patient ear. Yet Paul is telling us that our afflictions are actually something we can boast about - how novel!

There are two possible reasons for boasting about our afflictions. The first is that boasting enables us to impress ourselves and others as to how much we are suffering and how cruel life has been to us. The other is so that we can convince others that, no matter how great the burden or the cross, God is always with us to guide us through it. St. Paul chose the latter, and he suggested that we do the same.

Before I wrote my first book [Good News for Bad Days](#), I came across a poem, the author of which I do not know the name. It goes like this: "One ship goes east, the other west/  
It's the selfsame winds that blow./ 'Tis the set of the sails and not the gales/  
That teach us the way to go." Two sailboats might go in two entirely different directions while experiencing the very same gusts of wind. So it is with us. Two people may grow up in the same tragic circumstances - one wallows and complains his entire life while the other uses his experience to motivate others to grow. What's the difference? 'Tis the set of the sails and not the gales.

Our readings encourage us to set our sails in the direction of Christ, who by his own example and his profound love for us can help us to take the blows that the winds of life may sometimes bring and turn them into something positive for ourselves and for others.

--Posted June 1, 2007

## God's Home

May 25, 2007

"We will make our dwelling in him." These words from one of the Gospel selections for [Pentecost Sunday](#) tell us something wonderful about our lives and about the God who made us. Sending the Spirit to us is an expression of God's desire to make his dwelling in us. Jesus has said this same thing repeatedly, as recorded in the Gospel of John, most notable, "Make your home in me as I make mine in you," and "In my Father's house there are many mansions....I am going to prepare a place for you."

These words remind us that God has no desire to be apart and aloof - he wants to make his home in us. Many have had the experience of shopping for a new home - we want just the right house, just the right location, close to schools, close to shopping - we can easily list all of the specifications we have in mind for our new dwelling place. Jesus is just as selective about his home - and we are the location! What he wants - all he wants - is to be close to us, and to have us be close to him.

What a wonderful and inspiring thought that is. People often think of God as being distant and overbearing. Jesus and the Holy Spirit change that image for us. God is God, yes, but he is someone who longs to be near to us. He wants to be our home, and he will go anywhere to find us.

This Pentecost Sunday, when we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and celebrate the Birthday of the Church, we do well to understand what this really means for us. We are meant to be God's home, and he is meant to be ours. Will we say, "Yes"?

--Posted May 25, 2007

## "Behold, I Am Coming Soon"

**May 18, 2007**

"Behold I am coming soon." These words from the Book of Revelation occur in the Second Reading for the Seventh Sunday of Easter. They are words full of anticipation as we reflect upon the ascension of Jesus into heaven and await the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

These days are very much like the days the apostles spent between Jesus' going up to heaven and the Pentecost events, with one exception. We know what is about to take place, and the disciples did not. They knew that Jesus was going to send them an Advocate, but they had no inkling of the power of the experience that awaited them. That experience transformed them greatly. In the gospels, they are portrayed as timid, as failing to understand the message of Jesus, and at times denying him and betraying him. After Pentecost, it is an entirely different matter. Reading the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Peter, James and John, we see men who are truly transformed into strong and brave leaders, fearless proclaimers of the name of Jesus, even in the face of persecution, imprisonment and death.

For us, knowing as we do the change that the apostles undergo, we can look to ourselves and ask that we may be emboldened by the power of the Spirit as they were. May each of us have the same joy, the same commitment, the same zeal and the same dedication to proclaiming and living the message of Jesus. We pray, "Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful." And he replies, "Behold, I am coming soon."

--Posted May 18, 2007

# Christ's Way of Peace

**May 11, 2007**

"Not as the world gives peace, do I give it to you." These words of Jesus from the Gospel for the [Sixth Sunday of Easter](#) make it clear that there is something very special about the peace of Christ, making it different from the peace of the world.

For a moment, though, let's focus on another aspect of that statement, one which, down the road, may give us a deeper insight into the nature of the peace that Jesus gives. In this statement, made at the Last Supper in the company of the apostles, Jesus is saying not only that the peace he brings is different from that of the world. He is also saying that the way in which he gives it is different from the way in which the world gives peace. Let's look at that for a moment.

How does the world give peace? Generally speaking, the world gives peace by compromise. If there is a conflict, let's negotiate. You give a little and I'll give a little, and then the conflict will be over and we'll have peace. If one or both of us can't yield a little, then we can have no peace. Conflict rules.

The problem is, that sort of peace seldom produces any lasting results, much less the desired ones. I may agree to give in on one or other points, but I will always feel that it would be better if I fully had my way. You and I may smile benevolently at each other. We may even work together fairly well. But there is no real accord among us, in the full sense of that word "being one of heart."

On the other hand, Jesus does not give peace by compromise. Peace, traditionally defined as "tranquility of order," is the transcendent calm that comes from above and from within. It is not negotiated or hammered out in board rooms or in the conference rooms of governments. It is a gift given by God, available within the hearts and souls of each and every one of us, which is to be embraced and accepted and which does not absolutely require the resolution of every negotiable problem. Peace within an individual may coexist with heartaches, uncertainties, unresolved needs and the like. It surpasses all of these and simply allows the divinely-endowed inner calm to make of all of those things what it will. A person may be beset by certain conflicts, for example, and still experience inner peace. Jesus was perfectly at peace in the garden of Gethsemane when he prayed, "Let this cup pass me by, but not my will but Thine be done." Peace begets surrender, which in turn begets the realization that life does not have to be perfect to be good.

It is the same among people. It's Mother's Day in parts of the world, and it is by no means unfair to say that mothers and children (including adult children) often have difficulties and conflicts in their relationship. A great moment of peace comes in the life of an adult child when he or she realizes that Mother (the same could be said of Father) is

Mother after all, and that there is no requirement that she be "perfect" by some arbitrary standard, no demand that she be other than she is. That realization is a triumph of peace.

What about peace among governments and corporations? This is a bit harder, because, frankly, we do not see much of it. Here we come to the understanding that the peace given by Christ is "peace which the world cannot give." We tend more to see peace by compromise, agreement and defeat of the enemy. But that does not mean that Christ's way of peace may not work; in fact, there is every hope that it will. The best way for it to work in these venues is not for us to wait until some great day when everyone suddenly "gets it." The best way for it to work is for each of us individually to cover the world with the peace of Christ by drawing upon it in our own lives, relationships and dealings with others. By example, and almost by osmosis, Christ's tranquility of order may silently creep in upon those larger negotiations and win the day.

--Posted May 11, 2007

# The Power of a Paradox

May 1, 2007

"It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."

"Behold, I am making all things new." Both of these quotations are taken from the readings for the [Fifth Sunday of Easter](#). The first, spoken by Paul and Barnabas, comes from the Acts of the Apostles. The second, from the Book of Revelation, is, in part, God's revelation to John about God's purpose in creating "a new heaven and a new earth."

These two statements help us to understand much about life. Both are true, even though they seem to be at opposite ends of the life spectrum. There is a real connection between them, however, which it is good for us not to miss.

Most of us would give no argument against the first statement. As Scott Peck wrote at the very beginning of his best-selling book, *The Road Less Traveled*, "Life is difficult." Hardly a day goes by when I do not learn of the heartache of someone who has become sick, lost their job, experienced the death of a loved one, or run into a financial problem. As a friend of mine says, "Enjoy the good times, for the bad times will always find you." I hasten to add that my friend is by no means a pessimistic person -- quite the contrary. He is one of the most optimistic and forward-thinking people I know. Yet he's stating a truth about life. While we do not have to be mired in difficulty, nonetheless snafus and problems will from time to time be a part of our life. When Paul and Barnabas uttered those words to the people of Iconium and Antioch, they were trying to strengthen the faith of neophyte Christians. They wanted those new converts to realize that, just because they had become Christians life would not be all sunshine and roses. They would have challenges to face, and they needed to learn that they could draw upon their faith to prevail over them. We, too, can benefit from that encouragement given two thousand years ago as we face the challenges of life.

Yet there is that second statement, no less true and no less consoling: "Behold I am making all things new." In his revelation, John noted that the old heaven and the old earth had passed away. God was making all things new.

Put these two statements together, and we have a wonderful perspective on life and its happenings. On the one hand, life is difficult; on the other hand, those difficulties pass away and God is making all things new. As we move through our difficulties, with the help of God they pass away and through it all, we are re-created. We find ourselves growing in courage, in wisdom and in grace. God is remaking us, despite and through our crises and mishaps.

Isn't it amazing how paradox leads to truth? Here we have two statements that seem so opposite but which are really connected with one another. Life is difficult, and God is making all things new. What could be better?  
--Posted May 4, 2007

## The Lamb Shall Shepherd

**April 27, 2007**

"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." These words from the Book of Revelation are part of the Second Reading for the [Fourth Sunday of Easter](#). They represent a great promise that God is making to his people, to us. For many who are plagued by so many crises and heartaches in their lives, this is welcome news indeed.

The passage indicates God's remarkable love and care for us. In the writings of John, there is a feature known to theologians as "realized eschatology." In simple terms, it means that we do not have to wait for the end of time to receive the blessings of the Kingdom of God. We can receive them, at least in part, here and now. For that reason, we can interpret the future promise of having every tear wiped away from our eyes so as to apply it to the here and now. The moral: God is working here and now to comfort us in our sadness and to lead us to the joy of eternal gladness.

There is an interesting turn of events in this passage that ought not to escape our notice. We are told "the Lamb...will shepherd them." Humanly speaking, that is an odd happening - usually it is a shepherd and not a lamb who does the shepherding. But in this case, it is Jesus Christ who fulfills both roles - he is the shepherd and the lamb of sacrifice. This fact can put us on alert to the realization that, when we need shepherding, God's surprises about - we may find ourselves being shepherded in ways unexpected by us and through means which, unbeknownst to us, are really the ways of God. We are to be on the alert for lovely surprises.

--Posted April 27, 2007

## Been There, Done That

**April 20, 2007**

"Been there. Done that." How many times have we heard someone say this? Perhaps we have said it ourselves. Someone comes along with a great new idea for us, but it's something we've already tried and it hasn't worked and we're just not buying into the idea of doing it again.

Our past experiences can make us smart and even wise, but sometimes they can also get in our way. We can reach the point where we have "seen too much" and "know too much" and we put up barriers to trying again.

In the Gospel for the [Third Sunday of Easter](#) is the story from St. John's gospel about the miraculous catch of fish. The disciples have been fishing all night and have caught nothing, and when Jesus appears on the shore and tells them to cast their nets into the waters at the right side of the boat, they are at first skeptical, I am sure. They go past their skepticism, however, and do as Jesus bid them to do. The result is that they catch more fish than they had ever dared to dream of.

It is said that Thomas Edison, the inventor of the light bulb, tried over 500 times before he succeeded. Somewhere along the way, someone asked him, "Why do you keep on going in the face of so many failures?" Edison's reply: "What failures? I know now 500 ways not to invent a light bulb!"

There are two things we can gather from the Gospel story of the fish. One is that we are inevitably going to have failures in life. There are going to be days when we do not succeed in reaching our goals. If we want, we can choose to give up, or, like Edison and the apostles, we can keep an open mind and maintain a sense of hope.

The other lesson is that it is important that we stay close to our true source of inspiration. It was not another fisherman, it was Jesus Christ himself who urged the apostles to fish just one more time. Christ is the source of all of our inspiration. By staying close to him we can learn what to do in the face of discouragement and find what course to take.

--Posted April 20, 2007

## Doubting Thomas

**April 13, 2007**

The remarkable story of Thomas and the Risen Lord, which is the Gospel reading for the [Second Sunday of Easter](#) is a wonderful lesson in how the Lord accepts us just as we are. Thomas doubted that the Lord had appeared to the other disciples in his absence and stated firmly that the conditions for his believing would be that he places his hands into the Savior's wounds.

Nothing happened right away, and Thomas was left with his doubt. This could not have been easy for him. As a disciple he had to have been deeply moved by the death of Jesus and wanted nothing more than to have Jesus be alive. But, to him, what the disciples were saying was outrageous and he was not about to be taken in by what, to normal human thinking, was considered nonsense. This had to have been a painful time for Thomas.

But then the Lord appeared, a week later. We might expect that he would have chided Thomas for his disbelief, but instead he approached Thomas and met him on his own terms. He told him to place his fingers into the wounds in his hands and his sides and be not unbelieving, but believing. He didn't argue with Thomas but instead let Thomas have his way.

In dealing with those who believe differently from us, there is often the temptation to put them down or to make them wrong. That is seldom effective. More often than not, it drives them farther away. Instead, we do well when we take a page from the book of Jesus and meet people where they are. This kind of open and respectful dialogue does more to bring people to the truth (on the subject of Christ or on most other subjects) than putting them down or making them out to be wrong. The deep respect that Jesus had for Thomas shines through in the story, and it is what wins the day.

--Posted April 13, 2007

# Christ is Risen!

**April 7, 2007**

"Seek what is above, not of what is on earth." These words of Paul to the Colossians in our [Second Reading for Easter Sunday](#) give us a wonderful guide for living. Our belief in the resurrection of Jesus is a perfect example of how being a Christian puts us at odds with the prevalent beliefs and "certainties" of the world in which we live. Who, from the point of view of unaided common sense would believe in resurrection? That was the precise problem of the followers of Jesus, at least initially. They saw an empty tomb, and their first thought was that somebody had stolen the body of Jesus. The enemies of Jesus, too, had their problems with the resurrection. They saw an empty tomb and thought that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus. The thought of someone rising from the dead was unheard of, and it was a truth very difficult for people to get into their heads.

Even today, we Christians often take the resurrection for granted. Yes, we celebrate the rituals of Holy Week and Easter, but how often do we really contemplate what it means that Jesus rose from the dead? This is something that is truly astounding - it constitutes a victory over death, and over sin as well. Today there are still many people who think that it's nice that we believe in the resurrection, so long as they don't have to. As well, there are some Christians who maintain that Jesus did not undergo a bodily resurrection, but that somehow the disciples experienced him as though he were corporeally risen. It's a very difficult truth to comprehend.

Yet the resurrection of Jesus is a perfect example of how Christianity challenges what "everybody knows." Throughout his life, Jesus insisted on doing what everyone thought was impossible. It was he who believed that sinners should be welcomed, not ostracized; and he acted accordingly. It was he who believed that the sick should be loved, not shunned; and he loved them to good health. It was he who believed that the poor in spirit, the meek and the persecuted would inherit the Kingdom of God; and he said it plainly. It seems that Jesus' whole life was a lesson in how to defy the conventionally held truths that everyone holds dear.

Believing in Jesus - and certainly believing in the Risen Christ - requires out and out defiance of what Whitehead calls "the prevailing form of the forms of thought." To be a Christian means to believe in astonishing things.

This Easter, may we all come to a greater appreciation of the wondrous reality that we celebrate. Christ is risen! Christ is truly risen! Alleluia.

--Posted April 7, 2007

## A Word to the Weary

**March 29, 2007**

The First Reading for [Palm Sunday](#), which is from the prophet Isaiah, can be taken as a passage foretelling the experience of Christ in his passion and death. We are seeing here in promise what will come to fulfillment in Christ Jesus.

In contemplating this, the passage emphasizes the all-important motive for the plight of the Suffering Servant and, in fulfillment, of Christ. "That I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them." Later, Jesus was to say, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will refresh you." Throughout his life, Jesus Christ reached out to the poor, the sick, the marginalized, made them feel loved by God. Down through the centuries, his words and his actions have always given hope and consolation to those beaten down by various life problems and cares.

As we contemplate the passion and death of Our Lord this year, let us look to those places within ourselves where we are weary and realize that Jesus underwent his suffering and death for us. In turn, we can ask ourselves where, in our neighborhood or in the world, we find people who are likewise weary, pray for them and care for them to the extent that we can.

Jesus came for the weary, came to rouse them and to give them hope.

--Posted March 29, 2007

## Christ Inward and Outward

March 22, 2007

The Gospel for Year A for the [Fifth Sunday of Lent](#) is the story of the raising of Lazarus, an obvious foretelling of the resurrection of Jesus. The story is intriguing from a number of viewpoints. For one thing, when Jesus learns that Lazarus is seriously ill, he does not proceed immediately to Bethany but instead waits two days to complete what he is doing where he is. That becomes a puzzling and even annoying fact for Martha and Mary, both of whom greet him with, "Lord, if you were here, my brother would not have died."

Why does Jesus delay? For one thing, it seems that Jesus does not allow himself to experience the panic that arises in most of us when confronted with such urgent news. It seems that Jesus always knows that whatever is happening at any given moment will work out for the highest good of all with the help of God. Clearly, that is due to the fact that, as he said, "The Father and I are one." That is why he is able to say with confidence, "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him." Even in the midst of sad and disturbing news, Jesus is able to react with calm and with a strong sense of what is really going on underneath the appearances. That's half of the story, and we see, as we move on in our reading, that Jesus is more deeply affected than he appears to be at present.

Martha and Mary, of course, have an entirely different reaction, one that most of us would describe as very normal. Having summoned Jesus and now experiencing the fact that Jesus did not come and Lazarus did die, they react with anger and disappointment. We understand because that is how we feel when we pray for something important and it doesn't appear to happen. What is important to notice is that Jesus accepts the two sisters just as they are. He knows they are angry, sad and disappointed, and he does not in any way chide them for being that way. In fact, as he experiences their sadness and that of the crowd over the death of Lazarus, he himself joins them in weeping. The lesson for us here is that in our time of sadness, God weeps with us, even as he is leading us toward a resolution of our difficulties.

At the same time, Jesus surrenders none of his knowledge of himself. Thus he is able to affirm to the troubled Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." To the skeptical Martha he says, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" Though he is very much caught up in the human element in this situation, he does not allow it to distract him from his role as Son of God.

The Christ in us points in two directions as well. We might call them outward and inward. On the one hand, he is deeply involved in the heart of our difficulties, anxieties, tragedies and fears. On the other hand, he maintains a higher vision, showing us that the story that we see before us is not the last word. Every problem has a spiritual resolution, and our souls point us in the direction of that resolution even while we are caught up in the emotions of the moment.

The story of the raising of Lazarus reminds us that there are two dimensions of our awareness - the outer and the inner. We can pray, in our times of difficulty, for the grace to remain the higher dimension to which we are called as followers of Christ. Wherever we are feeling bound by some difficult situation, may we hear the Christ within us saying the words, "Unbind him (or her) and let them go."

--Posted March 22, 2007

## Secularism and the Man Born Blind

**March 16, 2007**

The story of the Man Born Blind in the readings from the [Fourth Sunday of Lent](#) (in the A Cycle readings) leads us to reflections about the meaning of spiritual blindness and spiritual light. Pope Benedict has repeatedly warned of the dangers of the secularism that is so rampant in many parts of the world today. On many occasions he has pointed out that those who embrace secularism are searching for a deeper meaning to life but come up short because their philosophy does not admit of God, who is the deepest meaning a life can have. Interestingly enough, I recently had a conversation with a friend who is a rabbi. I asked him what he thought was the greatest challenge for Catholic- Jewish relations. Without a moment's hesitation, he answered, "Secularism." He went on to explain that the tendency to reduce life to shallow and superficial meanings has meant, for both Jews and Catholics, a tendency to reject traditional values and to replace them with superficial and materialistic values instead.

In the Second Reading for Sunday, Paul urges the Ephesians to reject superficial attitudes toward life and to adopt the deeper meaning that is the hallmark of Christianity. "Brothers and sisters: you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light, for light produces every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth." The problem of secularism is centuries old.

Just as the Man Born Blind had to be led by Jesus to fuller spiritual understanding, so must we allow ourselves to eschew superficial attempts to define the meaning of life and to grow in soulfulness and sensitivity to the ways of God. As Paul says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." May we, during this holy season of Lent, take the time to examine any superficiality there may be in our thinking and have the courage to delve deeper into the reality of Christ.

--Posted March 16, 2007

# Spiritual Thirst

**March 9, 2007**

The readings for the [Third Sunday of Lent](#) speak of the relationship between physical and spiritual thirst in our relationship with God. The people of God in the First Reading and the woman at the well in the Gospel (Year A Readings) are both thirsty in the physical sense. The people of God are actually grumbling that God has forced them to leave the security of Egypt and endure the arduous journey to the Promised Land.

That First Reading really describes how many of us are in times of change or transition. We left what we had for reasons that seemed very good to us at the time, and we went full of hope that the "promised land" that we were heading for would be wonderful. While we are in the midst of change - and sometimes even after we have accomplished the change - we may wonder whether it was really worth it. We look back at what we had and start to think how wonderful it was, how good things used to be, and how foolish we were to leave it. You read the passage and you see in an instant how typical this is. We've all done it. They say the grass is greener on the other side, and sometimes the other side is the one we've just left.

The good news in the First Reading is that God listens to the grumbings of his people and gives them the water they are seeking. Just so, God will hear us when we are in times of change and adjustment and he will understand. We can feel free to share our complaints with him - the message is that he doesn't mind and that he will pay heed to our words. We can endure times of change and transition because we know that God cares and will be faithful to us.

The Second Reading from Paul to the Romans reinforces that idea. Paul says, "And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Hope does not disappoint. What a powerful and consoling message that is for us.

The same is true of the Gospel, the story of the Samaritan woman. The woman does not know that she is in a transition period in her life, but indeed she is. She does know that she is in an awkward position, because she is ostracized by her townspeople and she has had five marriages, which likely represents a great deal of inner turmoil. She would be happy just to have an endless supply of water so that she would not have to carry that bucket every day in the heat of the noonday sun. She comes to realize that her real longing is for spiritual water, living water, Christ, the only person who can bring her into community and who can give her the stability it lacks.

Our readings today are about longing, thirsting. Less than halfway through our Lenten journey, we may be feeling some spiritual thirst ourselves. Let us remember that our thirst is for the living water, for Jesus Christ, who will ease our transitions, allay our fears and answer all our needs.

--Posted March 9, 2007

## Abram's Faith

**March 2, 2007**

The readings for the [Second Sunday of Lent](#) bring us into contact with the very origins of the covenant between God and Abram. God expresses that covenant with great simplicity and in terms that Abram can understand. "Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so shall your descendants be." God did not force some lofty theological treatise upon Abram. Instead, he just pointed heavenward and told him something he could understand, or at least relate to. It was the perfect explanation for Abram, for whom the issue of offspring was particularly important. That better enabled Abram to understand the mission which God was asking him to undertake.

Abram's response is equally simple. The story tells us, "Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness." Years later, Paul would use this as an example of how someone could be saved through faith. Abram's response is so simple, so straightforward, so trusting.

Looking back, we marvel at the certainty of Abram's faith. He had to leave everything and put his entire trust in his experience that God was calling him to something new. Who would believe him? Would Sarah, would others, think him to be foolish? What if, at the end of the day, he discovered that he had been mistaken and that his "experience" had deceived him? All of these were real possibilities, yet Abram proceeded strong in his faith and determination to serve this God who loved him so much.

We call Abram - Abraham - our father in faith. On this Second Sunday of Lent, we can pray that our faith, our willingness to take risks in behalf of God, might be as strong. We thank God for his example, and we pray that, should God ask, we may be able to follow it.

--Posted March 2, 2007

## The Map

February 23, 2007

The [First Sunday of Lent](#) is characterized by the question "Who or what do you worship?" It brings us back to the temptations of Jesus after forty days in the desert. Jesus was in the desert as part of his preparation for his public life. At the end of the forty days, when his hunger was greatest, the devil tempted him to turn stones into bread, to worship him in order to attain all of the kingdoms of the world, and to obtain special angelic favor by throwing himself off the parapet of the temple. For Jesus to have done any of these things would have been to have breached his relationship with his heavenly Father, which, of course, Jesus was unwilling to do.

As we begin our Lenten journey, we, too, are asked, "What do you worship?" In order to make this forty-day journey with the Lord unto his passion, death and resurrection, we have to take stock of the direction in which we are proceeding. Are we going in the direction of Jesus Christ or are we going in the direction of selfishness, show and power? As we attempt to answer that question, we need to remember where our journey is supposed to be headed. During Lent, we are looking to walk more closely with Christ and to share in his consciousness and his life. Are our present attitudes of mind and heart leading us in that direction? The devil tempts us to believe that his way is the way to Christ. He hands us a map that shows that we are going in the right direction to get what we want in life. When we lose our way, he hands us another map and says, "Try this." Before long we are in no-man's land wondering how on earth we are ever going to find our way.

Jesus said it clearly, "I am the Way." The map that Jesus hands us is himself, not glitter or magic or worldly power as a way to happiness. By reading the Gospels carefully and reflectively during Lent, we get the only map that is ever going to bring us what we want in life.

--Posted February 23, 2007

## Loving Our Enemies

**February 18, 2007**

The message of loving our enemies remains a difficult one, and been so down through the centuries. It's difficult to love even our friends sometimes, and married couples often find it a challenge to act lovingly toward each other. Yet the readings for the [Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) tell us clearly that this is what we are to do. The fundamental underlying principle is that even our enemy is a child of God and deserves to be treated as such, even when he or she does not act accordingly or reciprocate. We often forget that, with the result that increased tension, anger and frustration are put into our lives and into the world.

The First Reading gives us an example of someone who did fulfill this command. David had a perfect opportunity to kill Saul, but chose not to do so. It was a great opportunity to get even with the man who was trying to kill him. Besides sparing Saul's life, David did the remarkable deed of removing the spear, the instrument of killing, from the scene.

Perhaps there is a hint there for us about loving our enemies. Like David, we can refuse to allow ourselves to become like our enemies, but also we can remove any instruments of death-dealing - be they weapons, words or thoughts - from our sphere of influence. If our enemy, whoever he or she may be, acts badly toward us, we can refuse to be drawn into that sort of activity. We can take the higher road.

The Second Reading, from First Corinthians, speaks of the difference between the natural and the spiritual man. On the natural level, we might feel like fighting fire with fire. But the spiritual part of us takes a different point of view.

If this seems too difficult for us, we can always turn to God for help. He can do in us what we cannot do for ourselves, for "nothing is impossible with God."

--Posted February 18, 2007

## New Ideas

February 9, 2007

Often, when we apply the word "passion" to Our Lord Jesus Christ, we speak of the last days of his life - his time on Calvary. Yet I think it is also appropriate to speak of the "passion" of Jesus Christ in terms of the deep and profound and enthusiastic commitment with which he lived his entire life on earth. Simply put, it was his deep desire to change people's minds and hearts, to rid them of the false and destructive thinking that had been their custom and instead to turn them to thoughts of peace, of joy, of love, and of the Father. This was not easy for him to accomplish. A lot of people had a great deal invested in keeping the old thoughts alive and well, even to the point of trapping Jesus in his speech so as to put him to death.

The Gospel for the [Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) gives us a fairly good idea of why Jesus' thoughts seemed so radical to some of the people of his time. "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed are you who are now hungry, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude and insult you...." Those thoughts went entirely counter to the prevailing thoughts of Jesus' time and they go against the prevailing thoughts of our own time as well. At some point, perhaps during his hidden life in Nazareth, Jesus realized that many of the ideas people were simply taking for granted on a day-to-day basis needed to be changed. As time-honored and revered as they were, they were not consistent with the thoughts of his Heavenly Father and from the bottom of his heart Jesus knew that people needed better ideas. That was the case on a societal level. On a person-to-person level, he also knew that the unhappy, alienated and sick people in the world needed to realize that they needed to get rid of the notion that they had to be trapped in their unfortunate circumstances. They needed a savior and a healer, and he felt called to assume that role on their behalf. He knew too, that the common notion that those healings could be done superficially without a deeper engagement with the divine had to be overturned, along with certain notions that healing on the Sabbath was a forbidden act. He was really out to change people's minds and hearts radically.

Now, in the twenty-first century, Jesus continues that work, this time through us. It is still he who works, but he asks us to bring those life-changing ideas of his into the world in which we live. He asks us to be evangelizers of him and of those powerful ideas. He invites us to be, in the words of the Responsorial Psalm, people "who follow not the counsel of the wicked, nor walk in the way of sinners, nor sit in the company of the insolent, but delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on his law day and night." That is our role as Catholics and Christians. It will not be easy for us, no more than it was easy for him; but it is the most fulfilling and rewarding path imaginable.

--Father Paul Keenan, Office of Communications

## Impossible for Us, Possible for God

**February 2, 2007**

The Readings for the [Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) speak of the power of God and the powerlessness of man. The First Reading tells the story of the call of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah was overwhelmed by the prospect of the call to prophecy and declined, saying, "I am a man of unclean lips." But God knew exactly the person he was choosing, and brought an angel to purify Isaiah's lips with a burning coal, and in so doing created one of the truly great prophets of the Old Testament.

God calls each of us to a special task here on earth. Like Isaiah, we are, in and of ourselves, unworthy of that call. We are sinners and are in need of redemption. But what we cannot do for ourselves, God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Through the suffering and death of Christ, God renders us worthy of his call.

The Gospel reading tells the story of the miraculous draught of fish. The apostles had fished all night and caught nothing, but at Jesus' command they returned to the very spot where they had fished before. They were astounded at the enormous catch - tearing the nets they were using to catch the fish. Again, the lesson is clear - what we cannot do for ourselves, God can and will do in us.

There's something of the same theme in the Second Reading for today, in which St. Paul argues on behalf of his apostleship. There was some feeling among a few in the early Christian community that Paul should not be calling himself an apostle, since an apostle, by definition, was someone who had seen the Risen Christ. In this reading, Paul puts himself right up there with those to whom the Risen Lord appeared - but he says of himself: he is an apostle "like someone who is abnormally born." Strictly speaking, he would not have been included among the ranks of the apostles, but by the grace of God he was raised to true apostleship.

God can do in and for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He has a plan in mind for us and brooks no opposition when it comes to putting us exactly where he wants us to be.

--Posted February 2, 2007

## Jeremiah's Courage

**January 26, 2007**

There is great wisdom for us in the [First Reading](#) of the liturgy for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time this year. There, we see a section of the Book of Jeremiah in which Jeremiah's original call is set forth. When God calls him and asks him to be a prophet, Jeremiah argues that he is too young. God assures him that he is not too young, and that he will be with Jeremiah throughout his prophecy.

The passage for Sunday warns Jeremiah that he will have a difficult job, but that he is not to worry. "They will fight against you but not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."

And the reason for this? Here is a wonderful passage! "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you." Jeremiah's call is not an accident or a random occurrence. His life, his mission are part of God's long-range plan for the salvation of the world.

The good news is that this is true of us as well. Often people are afraid to stand up for what is right, fearing repercussions from others. Jeremiah's example shows us that we need not fear. God has known us from before our days in the womb. He has given us special gifts to enable us to perform the task he has given us. He has made it possible for us to say, "Yes."

Jeremiah's example is a call to courage and to trust. Trusting in the Lord to be with us, we can face the challenges of our lives with equanimity and courage.

--Posted January 26, 2007

## The Anatomy of a Beginning

**January 20, 2007**

Beginnings are important. In our task-driven, goal-centered age, we often think of beginnings as something we are plunged into or, if we do prepare for them, they are so rushed and instant that they simply get us going and moving along to the next stage of things.

Not so with God. We see in the Book of Genesis that God takes time with beginnings, treats each stage (of his creation of the universe) with exquisite care and attention. Every stage of the beginning is of great importance and is treated accordingly. The word that comes to mind is - "care."

The Gospel for the Third [Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) takes note of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The quotation from Isaiah, which Jesus reads from the scroll in the temple, shows us that this beginning has been prepared for a long time. And it's true. The coming of Jesus was no accident, suddenly brought upon the world with no prior forethought. Indeed, it was prepared for from the time of the Fall of man, carefully orchestrated through the Law, the Prophets, the Wisdom figures we find in the Bible, Mary, John the Baptist - everyone is a part of God's great preparation for this great moment when Jesus launches out into the world and, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, declares his mission, his reason for being here.

This gift of God for preparation is an aspect of his inestimable Wisdom. Isn't it wonderful to know that our salvation was worked out with great care, with no trace of haste or accident - something God wanted for so very long?

Doesn't that make us feel very loved and very special?

--Posted January 20, 2007

## Ordinary Time

**January 12, 2007**

Here we are, believe it or not, in the [Second Week](#) in [Ordinary Time](#). Ordinary time is very special, much more so than its name would indicate. By definition, it is the time of the Church year when there are no special seasons, such as Advent, Lent, Christmas and Easter. But in fact, it has much more significance than this negative definition would indicate. Ordinary Time signifies the fact that everyday time is sacred. We know that time is sacred and special when we celebrate the big seasons, but often we forget the significance of the other times, which actually make up the greater part of our days. Ordinary times are important, because the grace of God bursts forth in them in a special way. You might say it actually catches us by surprise. We expect the big seasons to be special, but ordinary time we often think of as, well, ordinary, perhaps at times even a bit humdrum. The fact is, God comes to us in our ordinary moments, enriching them with the power of his grace.

Lent will be upon us before we know it. Let us savor this Ordinary Time and find in it the wonder of God's grace.

--Posted January 12, 2007

## Who Are Our Magi?

**January 5, 2007**

We celebrate the [Solemnity of the Epiphany](#). Traditionally, it has been celebrated on January 6, but now it is a Sunday part of our Christmas celebrations.

We know the story - the Magi followed a star to find and honor the infant Jesus. Along the way, they stopped to visit Herod, who wanted to kill Jesus and who tried to entice the wise men to return, once they had found him, and tell him where Jesus was. Ostensibly, Herod wanted to worship him, but in truth he wanted to put the child Jesus to death.

The Magi continued on their journey, found Jesus, paid him homage with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and went home by a different route so as to avoid Herod.

There are many questions for us in the Epiphany story. One question to ask is, "Are there 'Magi' in our lives?" Who are the people, sent by God, who come into our lives and occasion a revelation of our mission and purpose in life? Who are the people who set off the spark of the divine in us? Each and every one of us has them in our lives. They may be people we like, but they may also be people who set our teeth on edge. They, too, can help us to explore and discover our God-like qualities. Perhaps they teach us patience. Perhaps they reveal to us something we would rather avoid knowing. In any event, they force us to draw upon the image of God that is at the very heart of our identity and challenge to act according to the ways of God.

Who are our Magi? Naming and recognizing them can help us to appreciate the people who come into our lives and to see them as people who may be challenging us to share with the world our unique God-given gifts.

--Posted January 5, 2006

## Parenting and the Holy Family

**December 30, 2006**

Last night, I was doing my show, "As You Think" on [The Catholic Channel/Sirius 159](#), talking about the then-impending execution of Saddam Hussein when the news broke that his execution had taken place. As I told my listeners, I was (and am) against capital punishment, and thought that some other form of punishment should have been utilized.

It was a caller who phoned in the news to us, and we turned on the television in the studio to confirm the report. Sure enough it was true.

I had many questions for the listeners that night, but one I asked received no answer from anyone. I asked, "What are you telling your children right now as they watch these reports of Saddam's death?" Hanging is one of the most brutal forms of capital punishment, and there it was, being reported for all to see. It was the family hour in much of the nation when these events occurred, and children would be watching. I wondered how parents were dealing with their children on this difficult subject.

The fact that no one responded to that question, I think, means that no one had any clear or good answers. The reason I bring it up is that this week is the [Feast of the Holy Family](#) and our readings indicate that Mary and Joseph had challenges from time to time in bringing up Jesus. We tend to think that their life was a bowl of roses: how easy it must have been to bring up the Son of God! Yet the Son of God came to earth in part to challenge the thinking of the world, and indeed at times he must have challenged Mary's and Joseph's thinking as well. The incident in the temple when Jesus was twelve is a good indicator of this. Mary and Joseph were clearly beside themselves over the disappearance of Jesus and over the response he gave when they questioned him.

Parenting is difficult, especially in these complex times. When facing situations such as what to tell their children when a violent news story breaks, parents would do well to turn to prayer. The example and intercession of Mary and Joseph could provide inspiration and guidance for parents to face conscientiously the taxing moments that inevitably come up in family life. They are the forebears of Catholic and Christian family life. Why not take advantage of their example and their prayers on our behalf?

---Posted December 30, 2006

## Christmas Thoughts

**December 23, 2006**

We celebrate Christmas and in so doing we remember and honor the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Mary. It is a joyous and wonderful time for many, a time of family celebration, renewed contact with friends, and best of all, a time to honor God and his infinite goodness to us.

Yet for many the days around Christmas are anything but happy. Many are suffering from health problems. Family difficulties can mar the joy of the season. Memories of those who are no longer here tug at the hearts of some. They experience the religious services and the various other celebrations of the birth of Christ, and yet they feel distanced from them. They simply cannot take part in the joy.

We tend to read the Christmas story selectively sometimes, choosing only those parts that evoke joy. But the gospel accounts of the first Christmas record many moments that remind us that all was not roses for the Holy Family.

When the angel Gabriel came to announce to Mary that she was to be the Mother of God, Mary's first reaction was to be deeply troubled. It was only with the angel's reassurance that she was able to surrender to the will of God and to find joy and peace in doing so.

When Mary told Joseph about her pregnancy, it was Joseph's turn to be deeply troubled. He wondered whether he should divorce her quietly. Again, it was angelic intervention that saved the day.

Mary and Joseph made the difficult journey to Bethlehem, with Mary on the verge of delivering the baby Jesus. They were told that there was no room in the local inn, and were forced to dwell in a manger, where Mary gave birth to the Christ Child.

When Herod learned about the infant Jesus, it became necessary for Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt to save the life of Jesus.

When Herod died, Joseph was instructed to return to Israel, but eventually left there for Galilee out of fear of Archelaus, and settled in Nazareth.

For all of the joy in the Christmas story, there is also a lot of inconvenience, difficulty and sorrow.

I point this out, not to mitigate the joy of this feast, but rather to emphasize that, for those who find it hard to be happy this year, there is a place to go with their feelings. They can turn in prayer to the Holy Family, who will understand their sorrows, and at the same

time remind them that for every instance of sorrow in the story there is an application of God's guidance and intervention.

That knowledge can most certainly sustain them this Christmas season.

--Posted December 23, 2006

## Holding the Vision

**December 15, 2006**

The [Third Sunday of Advent](#) is, by tradition, a Sunday of rejoicing, a time for noting that the Lord is near and for celebrating his closeness to us. In a week it will be Christmas, and the Savior will once again be born in our hearts. We rejoice, and the First Reading resounds with wondrous rejoicing.

Perhaps we do not feel like rejoicing at this time. If so, remember that the message of the First Reading was given at a time when God's people were in captivity and had little reason to rejoice. God sent the prophet to give them a vision, a vision that would sustain them and cheer them and give them hope. If we are feeling down during this holy season, we can read the prophet's vision and realize it was meant for us as well.

The Gospel shows us how simple it can be to live a life that would allow us to rejoice. John the Baptist, in preparation for the public life of Jesus, gives his listeners instructions which are very simple to follow. They amount to, "Do what you are supposed to do." Share with those in need and don't cheat other people. That's a pretty simple formula to follow. It's common sense, and it gives us something concrete to go on.

The Second Reading presents an ideal that can sustain us when times are tough. "Rejoice in the Lord always." The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all. These words remind us of what we stand for as Christians and give us something to help us in difficult times.

In these final days of Advent, let us hold the vision of joy and hope that God hold out to us.

--Posted December 15, 2006

## Robe of Glory

**December 8, 2006**

The readings for the [Second Sunday of Advent](#) are full of hope. The First Reading from Isaiah tells of the people of God taking off the robe of misery and wrapping themselves in the splendor of God. What a wonderful image! If we in our own lives could take off our robe of misery and put on the splendor of God, how wonderful our lives would be. And that is what Advent is for. During this holy season, we make every effort to come closer to God and to unite ourselves more fully with him.

It is important to notice in this reading that God, through the prophet, *invites* his people to take off their robe of misery. It is a direct invitation from God. For us, as the descendants of those people, this means that we, too, are invited to remove *our* robe of misery and to put on the glory of God. It's precisely what God is asking us to do. We are invited.

The problem is, far too often we prefer to keep our robe of misery wrapped around us. It is comfortable and familiar and we grow accustomed to wearing it. After a while, we find ourselves wearing it like a comfortable old jacket. We justify keeping it in our wardrobe. After all, we say, we've had so much misery in our lives. Life is difficult. It is a bed of sorrow. Other people may have it good, but that's not our lot in life. It's fine for them to be happy, but it just doesn't seem to be in the cards for us. So we wrap ourselves in our cloak of sorrow. It is warm and familiar and why should we let it go?

It may take some persuasion on God's part to convince us that he is serious about his invitation to put on the robe of his glory. He asks us to take some time envisioning ourselves wrapped in that robe. He wants us to feel how good it is to be free of misery and to be full of joy instead. He wants us to practice that vision until we absolutely cannot resist living it out. If we can do this during the season of Advent, we will be truly ready to come into the joy of celebrating the Savior's birth at Christmas.

--Posted December 8, 2006

## Being Vigilant

**December 2, 2006**

Welcome to [Advent](#) and to our preparation for the coming of the Savior. This wonderful season, if we celebrate it in our lives, gives us the opportunity to look beyond the ordinary ways in which we are encouraged to think about "the holidays" and see through to the true meaning of the feast.

In the Gospel for the [First Sunday of Advent](#), Jesus gives us some important advice about how to resist some of the ideas the world puts forth. He speaks of the end of the world and notes how everyone will be in a panic over the various signs that they will be seeing. He urges his followers to hold their heads high in the midst of all of the chaos and to remember that their salvation is near at hand.

After that, he gives a second piece of advice - be vigilant. When others are giving in to revelry and carousing, do not join them. It is one more invitation to resist the ways of the world.

And a final piece of advice - pray. "Pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man." We are constantly bombarded with messages that are far removed from the true meaning of life. We cannot stay the course without the help of God, and prayer helps us to stay in close touch with him who is our salvation.

This Gospel reading gives us a perfect formula for this wonderful Season. Happy and Blessed Advent!

--Posted December 2, 2006

## Not of This World

November 24, 2006

On this [Thirty-Fourth and Last Sunday of Ordinary Time](#), our thoughts are directed to the words of Jesus in which he said, "My kingdom is not of this world." This is in stark contrast to Pilate, whose kingdom is of this world and who is, in that gospel passage, trying to lord it over Jesus. Pilate, of course, has no idea what Jesus is talking about. The question is - do we? As we begin the holiday season, do we truly believe that it is about reflecting upon the birth of Christ or do we permit ourselves to get caught up in the buying frenzy that this season so often generates? Already on the day after Thanksgiving, we hear reports of fistfights in the parking lots of malls and of people driving crazily and distractedly going to and from the stores, causing accidents and endangering the lives of others. There will undoubtedly be arguments once again over whether Christmas trees and nativity scenes can be placed in public places, and the holy season will be treated as an occasion for division rather than for unity. The words of Jesus remind us that it is time to reclaim this holy season for what it truly is, a sacred time and a time to ponder the wonder of the Word Made Flesh. Certainly we can enjoy the lights and the festive songs and the times to get together with one another. But we lose so much when we forget what this special season is truly all about.

The theologian Karl Rahner once described Christmas as a time of profound silence, a time when what the season truly celebrates is something so precious that it is impossible to express in words. If as we enter into Advent we could make it a point of entering into that silence, truly preparing ourselves to fathom and to celebrate the remarkable thing that took place on that first Christmas, we would find a joy in the season that no amount of Christmas presents could ever bring. If we really pondered the words of the carol, "What Child Is This?" and made it our daily meditation during Advent, we would find ourselves at the heart of the season. When Christmas comes, we would be ready to celebrate "peace on the earth and good will to all." And, let's face it, I think we would be happier.

--Posted November 24, 2006

## The End of the World?

**November 16, 2006**

The Gospel for the [Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) speaks about the end of the world. We read these apocalyptic passages each year at this time, as we wind down one liturgical year and prepare to begin another in Advent. It is pretty clear that St. Mark expected a dramatic end to the world as he knew it.

It's important, however, to understand the tone of the message. Whenever we hear about the end of the world, we tend to become enmeshed in fear. We've all heard those sermons in which the preachers expound about a fiery cataclysm in which sinners will be destroyed. St. Mark, however, takes a different approach - one of hope. He focuses on Jesus' words, "Look at the fig tree." Here, Jesus portrays the end of the world as a natural phenomenon, just as natural as the sprouting of the leaves on a fig tree.

Moreover, the heart of the message lies in these words, "know that he is near." We are not to feel abandoned and helpless, but rather we are to understand that Jesus is near. Nothing else is as important as that, and we are not to be afraid.

These consoling words are echoed in the later passage, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." When everything seems to fall apart around us, we have something solid and substantial in the words of Jesus, something that will support us and sustain us.

We do not know when the end of the world will come. But we do know that from time to time, things happen that are truly tragic and which seem like the end of the world. In such times, we can take comfort from the words of Jesus, knowing that he is near and that we can always rely on the power of his words.

--Posted November 16, 2006

## The Widow's Mite

November 9, 2006

The story of the widow's mite is told in the Gospel for the [Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time](#). Jesus and the disciples are watching as people ostentatiously place their offering into the temple treasury. Very inconspicuously, a widow comes along and puts just two small coins into the treasury. Jesus observes her, and points out to the disciples that the woman has put in more than all the rest, since she has given everything she has.

We all know people who do a tremendous amount of good and who proceed to tell everyone about it. Yet what about those people who quietly go behind the scenes doing good that nobody knows about? They look for no honors or recognition; they seek only to do good. When I was in the novitiate of a religious order many years ago, I was always impressed by the Brothers. Brother Yanez was the cobbler, happily making and repairing shoes for the community. [Brother Witzofski](#) spent his days taking care of the grounds and, in days gone by, the grape crops. [Brother Hernandez](#) went on to become an accountant, but in those days he was the tailor, making cassocks for the priests and seminarians. Brother Fleer and Brother Schwendeman took care of the kitchen, buying food and preparing delicious meals for one and all. These were simple men. They had nothing. Not many people knew their names. And yet quietly and with a great sense of holiness, they went about serving all. We could not have existed without them.

We can all name such people, from all walks of life. They are the salt of the earth. Their quiet holiness and unpretentious spirit of service does so much to make the world a better place. They are the living embodiment of the widow's mite.

--Posted November 9, 2006

## Christopher's Commitment

**November 2, 2006**

Not long ago, I was reading the fascinating story of the life of the classical guitarist [Christopher Parkening](#). He had a remarkable career in classical music for many years. But he had made plans to retire at age thirty, and so he did, buying himself a house by a trout stream and spending his days fishing. That was fine for awhile, but eventually he began to develop a sense of utter emptiness in his life. A friend invited him to church, and there he felt the call to commit himself utterly to Jesus Christ. His life changed dramatically. Ultimately, he decided to resume his career as a classical guitarist, but this time with the motivation of doing it for the love of Jesus Christ. Though he was warned that he would never be able to pick up the tremendous career he had left behind, he placed his life in Jesus' hands and the result has been stupendous. He has since played with every major orchestra in the nation and has traveled all over the world! He considers his work a ministry, way of reaching out to others with the love of Christ.

Christopher Parkening is not a Catholic, but like us, he is a Christian. He is a shining example of the message of the Gospel for the [Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time](#): "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Those words of Jesus are just as true today as they were two thousand years ago. If, like Christopher Parkening, we can turn our lives over to Jesus, we will be a light to the world and find true and lasting peace.

--Posted November 2, 2006

# The Power of the Present

**October 27, 2006**

There's an interesting juxtaposition of verb tenses in the First Reading for the [Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#). The prophet Jeremiah first says that the Lord has delivered his people, and then he begins speaking in the future tense about the freedom they will have. The wording is intentional: the people are already delivered and they will experience the benefits of that.

What's that all about? I recently asked someone who is very successful about the attitude behind her great success. She told me that when she is inspired to undertake a venture, she sees it as already accomplished and then goes to work to make it happen. That seems to me to be what the Lord is saying here. He declares the freedom of his people here and now and then goes to work to do the things that will make that freedom apparent to them.

Jesus once told his disciples, "Believe that you have received and the rest shall be done to you." That is God's way. Claim, rejoice, believe in the present moment - that is the key to success.

The blind man described in the Gospel provides a further example of this. He knows that he wants to see and then it is given to him. Holding that vision, believing firmly in it and taking whatever inspired action is necessary - these are the God-given dynamics of manifestation.

--Posted October 27, 2006

# The Leadership of Jesus

**October 19, 2006**

My father used to say that in every group of people there could be found the same types of personality represented. So when we read the Gospel for the [Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary time](#), we smile as we watch the apostles arguing about who will be first among them in the Kingdom of God. James and John are eager to be at the top and the other apostles resent them for it.

The desire to be at the top is a good thing in and of itself, provided one keeps the perspective that Jesus had. The only reason for being at the top is to give service to others. People in top positions are there to serve, not to ingratiate or enrich themselves. As Jesus put it, "Whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all." There is so much of the opposite kind of thinking around that it is easy for us to be tempted to use our positions, whatever they be, to help ourselves rather than to see them as a way of helping others. Once again, Jesus turns around the ordinary human way of thinking and gives us a much better guideline.

To underscore the point, the Church has chosen one of the Suffering Servant Songs from Isaiah for the First Reading. The Servant suffered willingly for the good of all. We Christians see this as a foretelling of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. The passage captures the essence of Jesus' life and of his style of leadership.

The Second Reading, from Hebrews, provides a perfect link between the First Reading and the Gospel. Our high priest, Jesus, is compassionate and understanding of our needs because he himself has suffered. That sort of humility is a prerequisite for true leadership. That is why Jesus asked the apostles if they were ready to undergo what he would undergo. They had to be ready if they were to continue his example of leadership.

The readings are a good lesson in the meaning of leadership, and they provide a valuable insight into the Spirit of Jesus. We can pray to follow his example of expressing true leadership in the service of others.

--Posted October 19, 2006

# Putting God First

**October 14, 2006**

How many times, after a serious illness or other crisis, have we heard someone say, "It was a tough time, but it taught me what's most important in life." In the hustle and bustle of our busy lives, it's easy for us to get sidetracked into thinking certain material things or conditions are what life is all about.

The readings for the [Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) discuss the important issues and help us to clarify what they really are. The First Reading, from the Book of Wisdom, places the gift of wisdom at the highest point on the scale. What is wisdom? Simply defined, it is the gift of knowing what things are most important and what things are of lesser importance. If we know that God is the most important, we then can see all things with reference to him. When we think that we are most important, or when we think that material possessions or prestige are most important, we get everything wrong.

That was the lesson of the story of the rich young man in the Gospel. He was a very good young man, but for some reason he was unable to put God above his riches. Indeed, he went away sad, for he failed to realize who was the true source of his riches. As Jesus pointed out later in the story, he would have had nothing to worry about if he had simply put God first in his life.

The Second Reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, also encourages us to put God first. It reminds us that God is always watchful of us, and that his Word is always effective.

These three readings give us a very powerful instruction as to how to live happily and well. When we put God first, ordering all things with reference to him, we find a peace and happiness that so often eludes us in our busy lives.

--Posted October 14, 2006

# The Law of Creation

October 6, 2006

The readings for the [Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) are about the sanctity of marriage. They come across as very difficult readings in the day and age, but in actuality they provide an excellent guideline for those considering marriage. In addition, they are the basis of the Catholic Church's teaching on marriage.

In the Gospel, the Pharisees approach Jesus with an eye to trapping him. They ask him whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife and marry another. The method of discourse that Jesus uses is most interesting. First, he takes them back to Moses: "What did Moses command you?" This is a good strategy with them, for they believe in the authority of Moses and Mosaic Law. They answer him to the effect that Moses permitted divorce. But Jesus takes it one step further: Moses permitted divorce due to the people's hardness of heart. Now let's step back a minute. In Jewish tradition there were two main schools of thought about divorce. One was utterly against it, except in cases of adultery. The other permitted it for almost any reason. If the husband, say, didn't like the wife's cooking, he could divorce her. This practice made for an intolerable situation in the home, especially for the women. To free a woman from this hell on earth, caused by hardness of heart, Moses permitted a decree of divorce. In other words, Jesus is saying that divorce was not, in Moses' eyes, part of the original plan. It was an accommodation to deal with a situation caused by evil attitudes.

Having made that point, Jesus goes back one step further, to God and Creation. "But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate." The very nature of marriage as God created it is for the husband and wife to be one, not two; and to tamper with that is to tamper with the order of creation itself.

Notice the question here is that of divorcing one spouse and marrying another. Jesus' answer was probably as unpopular with his Pharisee hearers as it is to many today. Yet he was espousing, not an arbitrary law, but the very place of marriage in the order of creation. The situation of marriage in our day is as troubling as apparently it was in the time of Moses; the number of marriages that fail is staggering. That is why we need to reflect carefully on the words of Jesus, whether we are planning to be married, are actually married or are counseling those who are in either category. If correctly understood and followed, these words would provide a powerful remedy to the crisis so often apparent in family life today.

--Posted October 6, 2006

## Expansive Thinking

**September 28, 2006**

The readings for the [Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) are all about focus. Often in life we do not get the things we want or need because we have lost our focus and are paying attention to things that are really beside the point.

The First Reading shows how the seventy elders who had received the Spirit of prophecy became miffed when two others who were outside their circle at the time also received the gift. Instead of rejoicing over the wonderful privilege they had been given, they spend their time and energy complaining about the other two. Moses answered them in a wonderful way: "Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets! Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all!" We can easily see the difference between Moses' expansive view of God's graces and the constricted view of the elders.

The Second Reading from the Letter of James reveals once again the difference between an expansive view of life and a stingy one. James chides those materially wealthy people who have hoarded their wealth and have not paid a fair wage to their workers. Though they have much, their spirits are narrow and self-centered. James warns them that such a disconnect between their prayers and their actions will not be honored by God.

The Gospel reading echoes this theme anew. The disciples are upset because some people other than themselves are preaching and performing miracles in the name of Jesus. Like Moses, Jesus tells the disciples that "whoever is not against us is for us," and he directs their attention to the importance of avoiding sin and achieving perfection in their own personal lives.

The message in all three readings is clear. We are what we think about, and we can either choose petty thoughts or expansive, creative ones. The readings make it abundantly clear that God chooses to think in terms of the latter, and that he invites us to do the same.

--Posted September 28, 2006

## What's Really Important

**September 22, 2006**

It takes a great deal of strength and courage to remember who we are. All too often, we can forget, can start thinking we're better - or worse - than other people. When that happens, we succumb to faults such as pride or envy.

Essentially, that's the message of the Gospel for the [Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#). Jesus speaks to his disciples about his forthcoming passion, and immediately their conversation among themselves turns to who will be the greatest. Jesus has to remind them that the one who is greatest is the one who serves the rest.

Recently, a friend of mine was recalling the early part of this century, when a profound personal tragedy struck her which was almost immediately followed by the events of September 11. "It was then that I learned what was really important in life," she told me. "All of the things we get ourselves so worked up about are nothing in comparison with family and friends and treating each other well."

It a good lesson for us all to learn. The disciples forgot, and sometimes we forget as well. Jesus teaches us what is really important in life. By staying close to him, we can learn to remember.

--Posted September 22, 2006

# Catechetical Sunday

**September 15, 2006**

The [Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) this year is also [Catechetical Sunday](#). On this day we mark the opening of a new catechetical year in our schools and in our parishes. Catechetics includes the teaching of religion in Catholic schools, the religious education of children and young people who attend public schools and the [Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults](#) for those who are interested in becoming Catholics or who (if already baptized) wish to receive the Sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Eucharist.

The theme for Catechetical Sunday is taken from the Gospel for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, in which Jesus asks his disciples the question, "[Who do you say that I am?](#)" The whole catechetical process in dioceses, schools and parishes is intended to foster a deep personal relationship with Christ in the Catholic Church.

The dynamic at work between Jesus and the disciples in this story is really important to grasp. He begins by asking the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" That's a fairly easy question because the disciples have been traveling around with Jesus and have a pretty good sense of what people are saying about him. Gladly, they share the public's view of him. But here's where things go deeper. Jesus now asks the disciples a second question: "Who do you say that I am?" Enough of public opinion; what is your belief about Jesus? That question they find much more difficult.

The story cuts to the heart of what catechesis is intended to do. Society tells us many things about Jesus and about life. Some people say that Jesus was a good man, but not divine. Others say that he taught impossible ideals that cannot possibly be considered realistic in our modern day and age. Still others say that he taught a good message, but that the very thought of resurrection from the dead is preposterous, and so on. With all of the means of communication at our disposal, we are left to sort out for ourselves what we believe about Jesus.

That's where the Church steps in to help, and that is what catechetics is all about. Rather than leave us confused, the Church provides us with solid and systematic teaching about Jesus and helps us to apply his teachings and his spirit in our daily living. Many years ago, [Pope John XXIII](#) wrote an encyclical in which he referred to the Church as [Mother and Teacher](#). As Teacher, the Church helps us to sort through the myriad of opinions about Jesus and learn the truth. As Mother, she helps us to take that truth to heart every day.

Catechetical Sunday gives us an opportunity to pray for all of those who are involved in proclaiming the teachings of the Church and to thank God for the wonderful work they do.

--Posted September 15, 2006

## Beyond Fear and Courage

September 7, 2006

"Be opened." These are the words Jesus spoke to the man with the speech impediment in the Gospel for the [Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time](#). They are powerful words, which, upon reflection, contain a great deal of meaning for us.

Note that the man had a speech impediment. Implicit in the telling of the story was the lesson that the reason for the speech impediment had something to do with the man's needing to be opened. Somewhere along the way, he became closed up, and he needed to be freed.

Clearly, this was not only a physical healing but also a spiritual one. Jesus did not say, "I heal your speech," but rather he said, "Be opened." Opened from what? We don't know the specific details of the man's life, but at the very least we can say that he was in need of some sort of spiritual opening. Something was holding him back, keeping him from his true identity and making it difficult for him to express himself.

Perhaps there is a clue in the [First Reading](#), from Isaiah. The tone of this passage is very much like that of other places in which Isaiah describes the people's return from exile. Listen to his language: "Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you." The People of God were in exile. They were frightened - everything in their life was consumed with fear, especially fear of death and extinction. They were trapped in fear and felt that there was no way out. They were held captive by their fears as much as by their captors. The message of God through the prophet was, "Fear not!" In many ways, this is very similar to Jesus' "Be opened." The message is that God comes to take us above our fears and to show us unconditional love and hope.

Now here's a question. What would it be like if we didn't know fear? It is tempting to say that living a life without fear would be living a life of courage, but I wonder. Without fear, courage would have no meaning, since there would be no point in being courageous if there were nothing to be afraid of. No, I think it's rather the case that without fear, we would simply *be*, simply rest in the presence of God. Without fear, we would simply exist and act in perfect harmony with God.

So, how do we allay our fears? For most of us, there are probably two approaches. The first is an incomplete, but very good, solution; the second is the complete one.

First, we can turn our fear into courage, realizing that, given the help of God, we can meet everything bravely and forcefully. That's a big step.

But if we choose, we can go beyond the fear/courage dichotomy by prayerfully placing ourselves in the presence of God and living out of that presence. To some, this will look like denial, but truly it's not. Living in the presence of God, we will be called to take inspired action about the situations in our lives, but instead of summoning up our courage, we will act spontaneously, gracefully and almost effortlessly.

What does all this mean? Let's say we have a serious problem - say, an illness or a marital problem or a problem with drugs. We can react to that in one of three ways. We can cower in fear. We can summon our courage and try to face the problem using the various resources at our disposal. (This often results in trying various approaches in a helter-skelter fashion and wearing ourselves out.) Or we can, in the moment, place ourselves consciously in the presence of God, allow him to open us with his love, and allow him to inspire us as to what action, if any, to take. We may or may not instantaneously see the results we want, but this approach enables us live the totality of our life in peace and confidence while we are taking our inspired action. In addition - and this is important - it enables us to live in the moment, doing what we can in this moment that we are given. Throughout his life, Jesus encouraged his followers to live in the moment: "Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil." ([Matthew 6:34](#).) Recently, I heard someone whom I respect say that people who are spiritual masters never take on a big problem: they stay in the moment and do what they can from there. Our third approach, which takes us beyond fear and courage, enables us to do just that. We work less hurriedly, with less stress and more effectively when we work at the pace of God and in tandem with him.

"Fear not!" "Be opened!" Our readings give us some very sage advice about how to live.

--Posted September 7, 2006

## All From Above

August 31, 2006

At one point in my life when I was making the [\*Spiritual Exercises\*](#) of [St. Ignatius Loyola](#), I was given an exercise that was known as *De Arriba*, which means, in Spanish, "from above." In the fourth week of the *Exercises*, Ignatius asks the retreatant "to look how all the good things and gifts descend from above, as my poor power from the supreme and infinite power from above; and so justice, goodness, pity, mercy, etc.; as from the sun descend the rays, from the fountain the waters, etc." In other words, St. Ignatius wants the retreatant to understand that absolutely every good thing is a gift of love from God. He wants the person making the *Exercises* to literally bask in the love of God.

This brings to mind a similar notion from [\*The Acts of the Apostles\*](#), the story in which St. Peter has a vision of a blanket coming down from heaven with all sorts of things to eat. When a voice orders him to eat, Peter refuses, saying that he is not permitted to eat food that is unclean. The voice responds, "What God has made clean, you are not to call profane." The message here is, yes, that the Gentiles are as much favored by God as the Chosen People, but also that all people are a gift from above, from God.

James in the [Second Reading](#) for the [Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) presents this same idea. Apparently, there are some in the Christian community who believe that temptation comes from God and not from their own desires. James comes down firmly against this opinion and lands on the side of personal responsibility for temptation. The idea would be that we're not really responsible for our temptations since God gives them to us. That opinion would leave us off the hook, and James will have none of it. God, he says, is the giver of all good things and only good things. Temptations come from our own carnal desires.

It's a powerful idea, this notion that all good things come from God. Keeping this in mind, we can exercise constant gratitude for the things that are given to us. So often, we take for granted the good that is in our lives, or fail to notice it until it is gone. Or we notice it and try to take credit for it ourselves. Our very ability to produce any good at all is a God-given ability. We can do nothing without him. Nor does our good come from other people: their ability to produce any good at all is a God-given ability as well.

So let's make this a week of enormous gratitude, giving thanks to God for all the good that is in our lives. What a powerful, joyous week of praise this will be!

Posted August 31, 2006

# Discernment of Spirits

**August 24, 2006**

There is a definite parallel between the First Reading and the Gospel for the [Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary time](#). In both readings, the people of God are given a choice as to whom they will follow. In the first instance, God's people choose to stay with God and not attempt to find another. In the second instance, many of Jesus' disciples leave him, and some stay.

Understanding God's message and his ways has often proven difficult for people. The problem spans the centuries. People hear God's message but often it is not what they think they want to hear. Sometimes they grumble; sometimes they outright leave. Sometimes, however, they stay and surrender their own ways and thoughts to the ways and thoughts of God.

It's too bad that we so complicate the matter of hearing and understanding the word of God. Jesus tries to tell his hearers that it really should be very simple - his words are Spirit and life. So there's the criterion: does the message I am hearing promote the values of the Spirit, or does it promote the values of the flesh? Does my guidance sound like Spirit and life? Learning to discern that is a most valuable experience.

Down through the centuries, the ability to understand the ways of God has been known as the "[Discernment of Spirits](#)." It has a rich history in Christian thinking. In discerning whether or not a particular inclination comes from God, it is important to look at the beginning, the middle and the end of the disposition. Sometimes things start out looking as though they lead us to God and end up leading us in the other direction. St. Ignatius Loyola in his [Spiritual Exercises](#) pointed out that an initial good disposition may come from the Spirit or from the forces of evil, and we must keep a watch on it every step of the way to help us stay on course with God.

Sometimes when people talk about deciding between one course of action and another, they recommend lining up the pros and the cons. That can be a useful exercise, with the following caution: the better alternative is not always the one with the more pros and fewer cons. Sometimes, for example, when it is a question of taking a risk, the cons might seem to outweigh the pros. St. Ignatius believed that the pro/con exercise was valuable only insofar as it left a person with a felt sense of what God wants in this situation. When [Sir Thomas More](#) was opposing King Henry VIII in his rebellion from the Church of Rome in the hope of marrying Anne Boleyn, there were a lot of "cons" in his decision to oppose the king. One of them was his own likely (and actual) death. Yet Thomas More's sense was that God wanted him to stand firm and oppose the king. And so he did.

So how do we stay attuned to the ways of God? It requires a lot of prayer and a sense of our fundamental experience of God. What is it like when God is present to us? Was there a particular time in our life when we felt that God was near? Keeping attuned to that sense of the presence of God in our lives enables us to see patterns of inspiration and enables us to discern what God is asking of us here and now.

It also requires a fundamental willingness to believe that our experiences are not limited to the physical senses and to sense-based thinking. The crowd in John's Gospel could not see beyond the physical miracle of the loaves and fishes. They were looking for Jesus to give them more bread. When he suggested to them that he was, instead, the Bread of Life, they could not comprehend what he was talking about. In a similar fashion, we can go about our days living only at the level of problems, possessions and moods. If that is all there is for us, it will be difficult for us to grasp the higher level of the Spirit.

Another simple way to discern between the two is to think back to Peter's words: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Do the thoughts and feelings we are entertaining now sound like the words of eternal life, or not? Our answer to that question will give us a clue as to how to proceed.

--Posted August 24, 2006

# An Invitation to Wisdom

**August 18, 2006**

My alma mater, [Rockhurst University](#) in Kansas City, has as its motto: "*Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum*," which is the first line of the First Reading for the [Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) - "Wisdom has built herself a home." As undergraduates we were told that the mission of Rockhurst and its Jesuits was not only to give us knowledge, but to teach us to be wise as well.

There's a huge difference between knowledge and wisdom. The history of ideas shows us that among the intellectual and social movements of the history of civilization, many have proven to have a great deal of knowledge but very little wisdom, and as a result their efforts have resulted in divisiveness, violence and at times significant loss of life. While we don't want to entrust our health and well-being to people who know nothing, we also do not want to entrust ourselves to people who think they know it all. In the former, there is no basis for wisdom to build upon; in the latter, there is no room for wisdom.

How do we attain wisdom - the ability to order things well? The First Reading tells us that we attain wisdom by invitation. The imagery here is of a matron who builds her house, sets her table, prepares a scrumptious banquet and sends out her invitations.

To whom do these invitations go? This is interesting - they go to the simple and to those who lack understanding. Does that seem strange? Think back to what we discovered earlier, namely that those who think they know often don't know the overall picture of things. They only know what they know, and with such certainty that they cannot be taught. Those who do not know, who know that they don't know but who seek to know, can be taught. There's hope there. That's when wisdom can come in and teach.

Teach what? While there's some uncertainty about the exact order and structure of the Book of Proverbs, it is fairly clear that the section from which this passage (i.e., the first section of the book) is taken was written by the person who assembled the book overall. Therefore, the invitation given in this passage is fulfilled in the chapters that follow it. The remaining sections of the Book of Proverbs are the teachings that wisdom gives to those who accept her invitation. In many ways, it's an instruction manual for life. Reading the Book of Proverbs with an open heart will teach us much.

One final question: what qualifies us to receive an invitation to wisdom's house? There are a couple of answers. The best way is to pray to receive wisdom. Keeping our hearts open and humble and asking for the gift will dispose us to receive the gift. Sometimes, however, the invitation comes in the wake of something heartbreaking or tragic. It is then that people most often get on their knees to ask for help. One of the best helps to ask for is the wisdom to know how to do better. In his book *The Quest for God*, the

English historian [Paul Johnson](#) points out that, while in the face of a cataclysmic tragedy some cry out "Why didn't God do something to prevent this?", most cry out to God for help. It is when we realize that we don't know what to do that we can find the courage to ask for help. Wisdom can provide us that assistance.

--Posted August 18, 2006

## Bread of Life

**August 11, 2006**

They simply could not understand what he was talking about. First he gave them food to eat by multiplying the loaves and the fishes and then when they followed him in the hopes that he would feed them again, he told them that *he* was the bread of life. They couldn't understand him at all.

The Gospel for the [Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) reveals to us the complexities involved in people's understanding Jesus and believing in him. They found it hard to believe in what he was doing because they knew him, and they found it hard to comprehend his meaning.

The interesting thing about that is that it didn't deter Jesus from saying what he had to say or from continuing his mission. He knew that he had something important to bring to the world and something deeply significant to say. He knew that his message was being misunderstood, but he persisted nonetheless.

The entire Gospel of John is a study in the difference between the way God thinks and experiences life and the way human beings often do. In this particular story, people thought that because Jesus gave them bread once he would be their supplier of bread on an ongoing basis. They didn't understand that there was a spiritual significance to this - that they were to draw spiritual life from Jesus just as they drew physical life from bread.

Looking at the [painting](#) of the miracle by [Giovanni Lanfranco](#), we see how hungry everyone in the crowd was for the bread that Jesus gave them. The point, however, is that they were spiritually hungry as well, and didn't even know it. They could not get past the immediate meaning of the miracle to see its spiritual implications.

We often have the same problem today. We are bombarded with earthly meanings about things and often find it difficult to understand spiritual meanings and be nourished by them. There is a great hunger for things, and yet there is a spiritual hunger on the part of people that so often goes unrecognized and unaddressed.

That is why our prayerful reading of John and the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) is so very important. We constantly need to expand our vision and to resist the falsity that so often lurks behind human certainties. May we all continue to grow in our knowledge and understanding of Christ and come to bask in the warm love to which he calls us.

--Posted August 11, 2006

# Transfiguration

**August 4, 2006**

The [Transfiguration of the Lord](#) is the feast for this week's Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. The [story](#) is pretty straightforward but amazing nonetheless. There is a kind of three-way link between the [Baptism of Jesus](#), the [Transfiguration](#) and the [Passion-Death-Resurrection of the Lord](#). Both the Baptism and the Transfiguration are divine events in which the relationship between the Father and the Son is highlighted in a remarkable way. The Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist is in effect the Father's missioning of Jesus into his public life. Baptism itself, as [St. Paul](#) tells us, is an act whereby death is turned into life - dying and rising. The Transfiguration is the Father's missioning of Jesus into his Passion, Death and Resurrection. In both the Baptism and the Transfiguration there is twofold dynamic of affirmation and missioning: the Father acknowledges the Son and send him off to do his work.

As Christians by baptism, we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. At our [baptismal ceremony](#), the Father, in the presence of the priest, parents and godparents, welcomes us into our faith community. We are sent on our mission to bring the Love and Truth of Christ into the world.

Does the Transfiguration have an equivalent for us? It's a little different from Baptism in the sense that it does not have a direct sacramental representation. It's also a little different in that most of us don't hear the voice of God thundering out his affirmation of us. Most of the time, it's done more quietly, in the silence of our hearts. It's the quiet realization that we are moving in life with God and that he is pleased with our efforts. It may come in one moment of realization or it may come almost imperceptibly over a period of time. However it comes, it leaves us with the realization of God's unconditional love for us.

--Posted August 4, 2006

## Elisha's Lesson

July 28, 2006

The First Reading for the [Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) tells of the prophet [Elisha](#) telling a benefactor to give his gifts of food to the people instead of to the prophet. When the man suggested that what he was offering would not be enough to feed the people, Elisha persisted, telling him that the people would eat and that there would be some food left over. And, indeed, there was.

One of the tremendous gifts of Elisha was his insistence that people see the fullness of what they had. The widow in 2 Kings 4 who claimed that she had "only a little oil" in her house learned that her "little oil" would prove sufficient to pay her debts and support her family. Also in that chapter (the chapter in which our First Reading is found) are stories of a miraculous birth, a miraculous raising from death, and the cleansing of food prepared for the guild prophets which they thought was poison.

The entire [fourth chapter of 2 Kings](#) is a remarkable study of the importance of gratitude. Often we are led to think that we don't have very much or that what we do have is insufficient. Elisha always insisted that people accept the abundance in what they had. When people could achieve that vision and be grateful, goodness could multiply.

A prophet is someone who challenges someone's limited or erroneous vision with a higher vision. Elisha challenges our belief that our lives are lacking, and asks us to replace it with a vision of abundance. Suppose we could not fail, what might we do or accomplish? What if we had the God-given resources to overcome a particular evil in our lives or in the world - would we do it? Those are Elisha's questions to us. Once we believe that God is giving us everything we need and that nothing is impossible with him, we can do amazing things.

--Posted July 28, 2006

## Come Away and Rest

**July 21, 2006**

"Come away by yourselves and rest awhile." These words from the Gospel for the [Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) show Jesus' deep concern for the well-being of his disciples. They have been away on a mission in which they have worked very hard on behalf of the Kingdom, and now he wants them to rest.

It's a good passage for us to reflect upon, for often enough in our busy lives we do not give ourselves time to rest. It is all too easy to wear ourselves out with the burdens of daily life and to forget to take time for renewal. Especially when, like the apostles, we are young or engaged in a new activity and are full of enthusiasm, it is important that we create for ourselves the opportunity to refresh and renew.

Of course, it may happen, as it did with the rest period described in the Gospel, that the time of rest may be taken away by the pressing needs of others. All of us have had that experience - just at the time of vacation, a crisis or emergency arises that puts us back into action. Yet the principle remains valid - the balance of work and rest is important, and it is Jesus himself who recognizes that. Part of the stewardship of our time and talent involves the need for rest, including prayer and "down time" with the Lord. It is something that we can integrate into our daily, weekly or monthly schedule.

Many find themselves feeling guilty about taking time to rest. If those thoughts arise, remember that it was Jesus himself who urged the disciples to rest. If the Son of God recommends it, it must be quite alright.

--Posted July 21, 2006

# God's Empowering Call

July 13, 2006

There is a great deal to think about in the readings for the [Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#).

The [First Reading](#) from the prophet Amos tells of a confrontation between Amaziah the priest of Bethel and Amos. Amaziah had criticized Amos to Jeroboam, the King of Israel, for saying that Jeroboam would die by the sword as a God-given punishment. Amaziah confronts Amos and tells him to leave Bethel and do no more prophesying there.

Amos's answer is striking. He tells Amaziah that he is not a prophet by virtue of being part of a group of professional prophets. Rather, he was a shepherd and dresser of sycamores whom God personally called to proclaim his message. Amos stands his ground, secure that his calling did not come from any human association, but rather from God himself.

These days, we hear much about bullying in schools, but there are bullies in other places, too - sometimes at work or in the home or among our friends and associates. People seeking control over others can be terrifying. That's why the example of Amos is so important. Amaziah is a bully, and it would be understandable if Amos had turned tail and fled. Instead, Amos stood his ground, saying that he answered to God, not to Amaziah. There might be something in that for us. If people or situations are threatening us, we can turn back to God and claim authority over them in his name. We do not need to buckle or to give in to fear. God will help us and guide us.

The [Second Reading](#) from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians tells us much about the nature of God's call to us. "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved.*" If we read the opening lines of Paul's letter carefully, we can find ourselves amazed at what God has called us to be in Christ. But here's where we remember Amos: this greatness does not come from us nor are we appointed to it by other human beings. We can claim it only because God has given it to us. But because God has given it to us, no one, no circumstance need cause us to tremble in fear. We can stand up to it with the help of God.

The [Gospel](#) tells of another call - Jesus' call to the disciples, sending them off to preach for the first time. Again it is clear that the disciples are not acting on their own authority: he "gave them authority over unclean spirits." That they were also under his authority

and not acting solely on their own is clear from the fact that his gives them such definite instructions about how they are to order their lives. Again, the strength imparted by the call is apparent: the power that overpowers unclean spirits is a mighty power indeed! Unclean spirits could well inspire fear, but Jesus gave them the power to overcome the fear and the spirits.

These readings give us much to be thankful for. Remembering God's call to us and how it empowers us can give us the courage to face our lives with confidence in the help of God.

--Posted July 13, 2006.

# Blocking God?

July 6, 2006

Can we block the work of God? The Gospel reading for the [Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) seems to indicate that we can. Jesus came into his own hometown, but was unable to work many miracles there because his fellow townspeople did not believe in him. Last week, we observed that it was sometimes necessary for him to separate himself from unbelievers and skeptics in order to perform a miracle. But in this case, when practically a whole town refused to believe in him, it was an entirely different story.

We spoke [last week](#) and in a recent [Catholic Views blog](#) on this website about unanswered prayer. I personally believe that every prayer is answered, though not always in the way we want or expect. As Jesus once said, "Your heavenly Father knows how to give good things to those who ask him." Sometimes the things we are asking for are not good for us; and knowing that, God does not give them to us. At other times, we may ask for something but not be ready for it. It may seem to us that God is not answering our prayer, but it is entirely possible that he is building up some other area of our life to make us ready to receive what we have asked for. First things first. Someone may wonder why God is not answering their prayers for money, when what God is really doing is sending into their life the people who can help them find their mission and then finance it. Or one may find that God is giving him or her better health in order to be able to find and accomplish a special work. In assessing the effectiveness of our prayer, it's always good to look for the broader picture. There's no point in praying if we don't trust God to know and do what is truly best for us.

I think that often, when we feel our prayers are not being answered, it is because we do not see what God is doing. There may be a number of reasons that we don't see it. Suppose we don't believe that we are worthy of God's goodness. I recently read the story of a woman whose recovery from a paralyzing illness began when she discovered that she was worthy of good health. Perhaps we're afraid that if God answered our prayers, people close to us would leave us or be envious of us. Maybe we feel that God likes other people and favors them more than he does us. It could be that we feel that in the past we have moved so far away from God that he will not answer our prayers. These are the sorts of ideas that can block our relationship with God and make it difficult for us to see how God is moving in our lives.

Another problem in discerning what God is doing in our lives is the belief that we are destined to live in need rather than in fulfillment. People who believe this (and it's usually an unconscious belief) believe (and therefore experience) that life is a struggle, that there is not enough money, that they cannot get a better job, and that they have to fight for everything they have. There is a song that goes, "Everything we got, we got the hard way." Jesus had a different view: "Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or

reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span? Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? ([Matthew 6: 26 - 30](#))."

Jesus is not encouraging laziness; he's telling us can live in the sense of God's goodness to us and then act with God instead of against him.

There are, then, ways in which we can, if not block God, at least block our vision of what he is doing. It is the work of grace to remove those blinders.

One last thing, and this is an important footnote. In the spiritual life, which is profoundly rooted in mystery, two apparently contradictory things can both be true. That's the case with suffering. The suffering I spoke of earlier in this essay is suffering that, consciously or unconsciously, we bring upon ourselves because of false or at least inadequate beliefs. With the help of God, we can change those beliefs and change our lives.

There is another kind of suffering, however, which we can call "redemptive suffering," in the sense that it is suffering that we cannot change but which, with God's help, we can use as a source of grace. I think, for example, of people who suffer from long and incurable illnesses whose lives are spent in pain. I think of those throughout the world who suffer persecution because of their religion. They may be powerless to ease the pain, but their suffering is a prayer and a source of inspiration for others. In their suffering, they manage to find a redemptive meaning. I mention this because when you read some of the literature on healing, you get the impression that everyone is supposed to be in perfect radiant health and if you're not there is something wrong with you. The truth is, sometimes in life, we are simply asked to suffer and we may or may not know why. What this redemptive suffering has in common with the suffering mentioned above is that both challenge us to hear the voice of God and to see what God is doing in and through us. In both instances, there is a higher point of view.

By the way, it's worth noting what Jesus did when he was discouraged by the naysayers in his home town. Mark says it clearly: "He was amazed at their lack of faith. He went around to the villages in the vicinity teaching. (Mark 6: 6)" He went on about his work. The work of God is never conquered.

--Posted July 6, 2006

## Then He Put Them All Out

**June 29, 2006**

"Then he put them all out." This line from the [Gospel for the Thirteenth Sunday](#) in Ordinary Time might seem like a fairly insignificant detail at first. Especially when we've been talking about the healing of a long-standing hemorrhage in a woman and the apparently impending death of the daughter of a synagogue official. But upon reflection, it speaks volumes.

Who did Jesus put out? All of the naysayers in the home of the little girl who was dying. Why did he do that? Because of their negativity. Jesus was intent upon performing a miracle for this little girl and her family. Having skeptics around mocking him would be detrimental to what he wanted to do. So he put them out and allowed only the parents and the disciples in.

There are times in our lives where we feel called to make important changes. Perhaps, like the little girl, we are dying inside as we face our difficult situation. But we are afraid to change because if we dared to change we might be ridiculed. Especially if we failed.

Jesus' example tells us to allow ourselves to be guided by his life-giving inspiration in determining what course of action to take. First, we are to refuse to listen to any ridicule or negative thoughts, whether they originate from others or from within us. We are to put them all out, just as Jesus did. We bring only the companions of Faith, Hope and Love into the room with us, and let them stand by as Jesus does his healing work.

Notice that Jesus puts the negative thinkers into a completely separate room from himself and the others. He shuts them out, has nothing to do with them and pays them no heed. Similarly, we must refuse to listen to fear, discouragement and other enemies of the Spirit. Put them in a separate room and let them have their miserable reality. Otherwise, they will attempt to harm us and discourage our faith-filled, trustful thinking.

These days, there is a great deal being made of the importance of intention in contemporary spiritual writing and thinking. An intention is different from a hope or a wish; it is a firm declaration, backed up by action, that we are going to make a certain change in our lives. Once we have formed an intention, we have no room for anything that would speak or work against our intention. We associate ourselves only with those persons and ideas that support our intention. Everyone and everything else must leave.

That's what is at the heart of Mark's statement, "Then he put them all out." Jesus had made an intention to heal the little girl, and he would let nothing or no one stand in his way.

--Posted June 29, 2006

# The Power of Transformation

June 22, 2006

The readings for the [Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#) speak to us about transformation. Before we get too far into the readings, however, let's be clear about what "transformation" means.

By transformation, I mean changing from one state of mind to another, in some way "becoming new." People struggle today with many problems, burdens and difficulties and often wonder why their lives are not better than they are. Often they search for solutions outside of themselves. If only another person - a boss, a spouse, a parent, a child, a friend - would change, everything would be different. If they hadn't been born into this particular family or in that part of town, everything would be smooth sailing. If only they hadn't made this or that decision years ago, things would be dramatically different. What they don't realize is that these outer circumstances have created in them certain beliefs about how the world works and about what their destiny is. When things go wrong, it is often the case that these beliefs are to blame, not necessarily the outer events that appear to be at fault. If people can unearth and change their beliefs, often they will find that their circumstances change. They no longer have to be trapped in an unfulfilled and unhappy life.

Transformation occurs when we change our beliefs about life and about what we can do. And the readings this week are all about transformation.

The First Reading is from the Book of Job ([Job 38:1, 8-11](#)). It is from that section of the story in which God chastises Job for his anger over the loss of his family, health and possessions. Remember, Job's wife and three of his friends repeatedly insist that Job must have done something to bring about his dire disaster; but Job consistently maintains that he is innocent and undeserving of such a terrible fate. In the section from which this week's First Reading comes, God forces Job to face up to a belief that Job knows better than God about how to run the universe. Once Job gives up that belief, he is transformed, and all of his possessions are restored many times over. He is cured of that false belief, sees life differently and now is able to enjoy it again. The removal of one limiting belief can make all the difference in the world.

The Second Reading is from the Second Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians ([2 Cor 5:14-17](#)). Here, Paul challenges the Corinthians to give up their belief in the ultimacy of death and therefore of all limitations. He tells them that it was not just Christ who died, but rather all died with Christ. Therefore, all are resurrected as well. What does this mean for living? Paul tells them: "Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh." Like many of us, the Corinthians were immersed in the belief that "the life of the flesh" was all there was to life. As a result of this belief, they, like we, resorted to dissension, sin and discouragement. Paul tells them that by challenging that belief, they can literally become a new creation. "So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old

things have passed away; behold, new things have come.." Again we see that the transformation of one simple belief can literally change our lives.

The Gospel ([Mk 4:35-41](#)) is the story of the storm upon the lake. Mark begins this passage with a statement that is not to be missed for its spiritual value: "On that day, as evening drew on, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let us cross to the other side.'" This has a spiritual as well as a literal meaning. The apostles, accompanied by Jesus, are going to cross over to a new insight. They are going to be asked to dissolve their belief that their situation is dangerous, even though everything they see, hear and feel tells them that they are in danger. If this seems foolish, notice that it is the belief in danger that causes them to panic and renders them helpless in the crisis. Similarly, when we are in a stormy situation in life, we often tend to panic and to feel helpless. Jesus' teaching here is that by ridding ourselves of that belief and instead remaining calm in his presence, the storm will resolve itself into nothingness. Like Job, like the Corinthians and like the apostles, we often struggle and rail against the problems that we face. Jesus asks us to rid ourselves of the belief in our helplessness and instead to establish a firm belief in his loving care for us. Once we attain this vision of ourselves and our situation, we often find that the storm has passed.

Our readings this week tell us that by transforming our limiting beliefs and by establishing our belief in the power of Christ, we can see with new eyes, hear with new ears and find our lives infinitely more peaceful and enjoyable.

--Posted June 22, 2006

## The Wonder of the Eucharist

**June 15, 2006**

In these days of hi-tech communication, we are able to receive loads of information about almost any subject from every corner of the world. We can listen to radio programs and watch television shows from all over the earth via streaming media players. We can literally become experts in a variety of subjects just by pushing a button or two. It's amazing.

Because of this, we can get to know people from all over the world. Yet there is no substitute for personal contact. Have you ever had the opportunity to meet in person an author or performer whom previously you had only known through his or her books or performances? It can be a wonderful experience to learn that the person you have come to know and admire is "the real thing" when you meet them in person. Interacting with them, watching them in ordinary life situations, you see them in a whole different light. They are more real to us, more truly present.

It is even more wonderful when that person stays in touch, chooses to continue and to strengthen the relationship. Instead of being a form of admiration and appreciation, the relationship now becomes real and life-giving on an ongoing basis.

During Jesus' earthly life, people who had heard about his words and his healing works flocked to see him whenever possible. They wanted to see what he was like, to see how he responded to people, to get a fully accurate sense of his spirit. They developed a relationship with him, and found life in him, not just in his reputation.

In the Holy Eucharist, Jesus found a way for those people, and countless others through the course of history who had never seen him in his public life, to continue and to develop a relationship with him that would transcend the course of space and time, yet somehow be present in space and time. It was a brilliant way of getting in touch and staying in touch. Instead of knowing him through his reputation, they could know him personally and deepen a relationship with him. Through the Eucharist, Jesus could come in person and stay in touch.

On the [Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ](#), the Church highlights the wonder of the Eucharist, in which Jesus Christ is truly present under the appearances of bread and wine. It is one thing to have a knowledge of who Jesus was and to admire the things he said and did, but it is quite another to have him come to us personally; and that is exactly what the Eucharist is. It is Jesus Christ truly present in our lives, in our

churches, in our homes and in our places of business, and in our home towns as well. Think of it. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is here, truly present! That is the essence of our belief in the Body and Blood of Christ.

This is a Sunday of great excitement. When we know that an important person is going to be coming to our town or to our home, we feel excitement and eager anticipation. We spend time preparing, cleaning our homes, making things ready for this great personage to come. By the same token, it is important that we maintain a sense of wonder and anticipation at the realization that Jesus Christ himself is coming to us. It is a life-changing event, and we need to take care to make our hearts and our homes places in which he would feel welcome. There is nothing casual about taking the Body of Christ into our hands or onto our tongue. It is a life-changing moment.

Sometimes, after the visit of an important guest, the spirit of the visit becomes just a memory. The Eucharist takes us beyond that. It is not the case that Jesus comes once and may never come again, at least for a long time. Rather, Jesus comes to us on an ongoing basis, daily and weekly, throughout our lives. The Eucharist assures that. There is no need for the joy of the visit to become a distant memory. We can experience it every day and every week when we join in the celebration of the Eucharist.

If you would like to know more about what Roman Catholics believe about the Eucharist, here is a section from the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) that might be helpful.

On this Sunday often known as Corpus Christi (the Latin words for "The Body of Christ"), let us rejoice and be thankful for the wonderful gift of the Eucharist.

# The One and the Many

**June 8, 2006**

"I find," wrote Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in a letter from 1913, "that the single great problem of the One and the Manifold is rapidly beginning to emerge from the overly-metaphysical context in which I used to state it and look for its solution. I can now see more clearly that its urgency and its difficulties must be in terms of real men and real women."

Teilhard was right. We encounter the problem of the one and the many every day. In fact, it could be said to be our most perplexing problem, even though we seldom think in those terms. It's manifested in scenes such as the one in which Jimmy Stewart, in *It's a Wonderful Life*, walks dejectedly into his house and wonders aloud why he and Donna Reed have to have so many kids and live in an "old barn" of a house. It's manifested in the ways in which we treat or mistreat people who, in one way or other, are different from us. It's present in the overstretched couples who both work multiple jobs while trying to fulfill the demands of married and family life.

On [Trinity Sunday](#), we reflect on the problem of the one and the many from a divine perspective - the mystery of one God and three divine persons. The Father is pure being. The Son (who became incarnate as Jesus Christ) is the expression of the Father's fullness. The Holy Spirit is the Love between the Father and the Son.

Gallons of theological ink have been spilled in the attempt to make the doctrine of the Trinity comprehensible to us. Perhaps in the end when we see God face to face its full meaning will be revealed to us. For now, it's a mystery, too large for us to fully understand.

And yet the mystery of the Trinity, insofar as we can understand it, can help us as we wrestle with the one and the many in our lives. For we, made in God's image and likeness, have something Trinitarian about us. Imaging the Father, we have existence, the unity that holds everything about us together. The Father-aspect of ourselves reminds us that, contrary to appearances, we are meant to cohere, to have an inner unity. Insofar as we live from within, we can learn to live from that oneness.

The Son, the Word of God, is in us insofar as we strive to manifest the outer, to make a world. So often in our lives we try to build our world under our own head of steam. We are conditioned to believe we have to do everything ourselves, and we buckle under the strain. The Son-aspect of ourselves teaches us to express the Father, to express from within as we make our world. We do not have to wear ourselves out trying to do the impossible. With God, all things are possible, and God wants to express his creativity through us.

The Spirit, the bond of Love between the Father and the Son, is in us, too. Have you ever noticed that when you are doing something you love, everything (including time) just

flows? When we live from within instead of merely from without, we live in that same Spirit who, in the words of the well-known [prayer](#), "fill(s) the hearts of (the) faithful and enkindle(s) in them the fire of (his) Love." Life seems easier and more joyous, because we are united in ourselves with the three-fold power of God. We find that we are not as alone as we once thought we were.

As we celebrate Trinity Sunday, let us make a conscious effort to live from within and to experience within ourselves the presence of the Triune God.

# The Advocate

**June 2, 2006**

We celebrate [Pentecost Sunday](#), the day known as "the Birthday of the Church." On the first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appeared to the disciples in the form of wind and tongues of fire and emboldened them to leave their fearful seclusion and to go forth to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ to all nations. The story is recounted in the [First Reading](#) for Pentecost Sunday from the Acts of the Apostles.

One of the names given to the Holy Spirit is the name "Advocate." As we see in one of the [alternative Gospel readings](#) (from John 15 and 16) for Pentecost, Jesus called the Holy Spirit by that name. The Greek word is "Paraclete," a name familiar to most of us.

It may not always be clear what the name "Advocate" implies. In the simplest terms, it means someone who stands up on behalf of someone else. When politicians run for public office, they often have other politicians stand up for them at various meetings and rallies. An advocate endorses you, supports you, speaks up for you.

That's one aspect of what Jesus meant when he called the Holy Spirit "Advocate." In all of the sacraments, but most prominently in the [Sacrament of Confirmation](#), the Holy Spirit endorses the Christian and claims him or her as one of his own. The Christian is sealed with the Holy Spirit and anointed with the oil of salvation. He can now claim the sponsorship of the Holy Spirit. That's a powerful endorsement!

There's another meaning to the word "advocate" that's even more intriguing. An advocate is an attorney, a barrister, who represents someone before a court of law. The attorney is the one who speaks on behalf of the accused. How many times we read newspaper accounts of cases in which the client is allowed to speak only through his or her attorney. The law is complex and nuanced, and it is very difficult for most people to represent themselves adequately in court. The advocate does that for them.

Jesus called the Holy Spirit "Advocate." There are a couple of nuances to this. One is that the apostles were going to be accused of many things because they followed Jesus. They would be ridiculed, persecuted, made to stand trial and in some cases put to death. They needed an Advocate who would be their voice, their defender, their guide. The Holy Spirit was their Advocate.

But there's another nuance to this title for the Holy Spirit. Just as a defendant stands accused in a court of law, so by reason of sin each and every one of us stands accused of evil. Some of it we may have done deliberately. In other cases, our evil may simply be a state of separation from God in one or more attitudes or areas of life. At times we can almost feel in our bones the power of the voice that cries, "Guilty as charged!" We worry about whether we can ever be saved. Here's where the Holy Spirit as Advocate comes

in. He advocates on our behalf. If there are falsehoods in the charges against us, he brings to light the truth. If the charges are true, he pleads on our behalf against condemnation; he argues for mercy, lobbies for another chance. He makes us see the genuine error of our ways (we do not get "off the hook") but at the same time he draws us to desire better things for ourselves. [St. Paul](#) calls these better things "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." These he refers to as the fruits of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings us to the kind of spiritual place where we love ourselves enough that we want those better things for ourselves. In other words, we have a lawyer who argues for us, appeals for clemency on our behalf, and in addition puts us on the path of reform! This, by the way, is not only in terms of the Last Judgment; it is, as well, the exact agenda of the [Sacrament of Reconciliation](#).

In Confession, the role of the confessor is to act as the Advocate acts. When someone comes to Confession and accuses himself or herself of sin, the confessor listens, really listens from the heart. If the penitent is overly scrupulous or has misunderstood the law pertaining to his sin, the confessor gently helps the person toward a better understanding. If the sin is truly serious, the confessor gently emphasizes the seriousness of the actions and offers advice toward preventing their future recurrence. He listens to determine whether the person's repentance is sincere, and guides them toward desiring a better life. And in the name of Jesus, he absolves the sinner and sends him or her off to their renewed spiritual journey..

At Pentecost, we celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit throughout the history of the Church and today. We rejoice in this powerful Advocate who enables us to walk a better path.

If you would like to read a wonderful meditation on the Spirit as Advocate, take a look at the [reflection](#) given by Pope John Paul II in his General Audience of May 24, 1989.

--Posted June 2, 2006

# The Power of Love

May 26, 2006

I'm sure most of us have seen it at one time or other, and it's truly amazing - how new growth will often sprout up around a dead tree or tree stump. Whenever it happens, it's a wonderful sign of the power of life over death, of creation over destruction.

The readings for the [Seventh Sunday of Easter](#) tell us much about overcoming desolation with new life. The First Reading (from [Acts 1](#)) talks about the process of finding a new apostle to replace Judas. Judas had betrayed Jesus and killed himself, and now the Spirit moved Peter to find a replacement for him. From the devastation of betrayal and loss comes new life and a new process for retaining the continuity of the apostolic office.

The Gospel (from [John 17](#)) is Jesus' prayer for the disciples, called his "priestly prayer." The disciples are frightened at the prospect of losing Jesus, and they are worried about what will become of them. Into the midst of this negativity (which, in a way is quite understandable), Jesus interjects a positive prayer for joy and for unity among them. Often enough the negative moments in our lives can open the door to a positive outcome.

The Second Reading (from [1 John 4](#)) takes us "behind the scenes" to the "inner workings" that make the transformation of evil into good possible. "God is love," writes John, "and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him." Love is the power that enables us to move beyond evil into good. The universe is so constructed that by the power of God's love evil can be overcome and good accomplished. Of course, we cannot deliberately do evil so that good can come from it; but when evil happens, divine providence goes to work to bring good from it.

These days, it's easy to become discouraged when we read the newspapers and see the things that are going on in the world. Those things, on top of our personal challenges, could easily lead us to a sense of hopelessness. How comforting it is to know that there is a power that can overcome evil and promote Good. That power is God, and his name is Love.

--Posted May 26, 2006

## Clean or Unclean?

**May 19, 2006**

The story of Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius in the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles is the First Reading for the Sixth Sunday of Easter. The question at hand is whether the message of Jesus Christ was intended for Gentiles as well as for Jews. Peter wrestled with that question, until he had a vision of himself on a roof and a large sheet containing all kinds of food being lowered down to him. When Peter protested that he could not eat that food because it was unclean, a voice asked him how he could call unclean what God considered clean. From that, Peter realized that the message of Jesus was intended for everyone.

The story leads us to ask ourselves about our own prejudices. Who are the people we consider unclean? What are the things that we consider unclean? We must not interpret this story as saying that nothing is unclean, for that is the farthest thing from what it teaches. Nonetheless, we are sometimes inclined to make prejudicial judgments about people of certain ethnic or cultural backgrounds, people of certain religions, and people we just don't like.

It's a challenging story, because it asks us to examine those prejudices with this one probing question: is the way I think in this situation the way God thinks in this situation? That's another way of phrasing what Peter heard. Perhaps the God who made us all sees beauty and goodness and hope and possibility in those people and situations that we immediately dismiss. If God sees them as his children, do we need to reconsider how we see them?

--Posted May 19, 2006

# The Meaning of Unity

May 11, 2006

My good friend Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, my colleague on "Religion on the Line" (Sundays, 7:00 - 10:00 a.m. ET on [WABC Radio](#)) and the Executive Vice President of the New York Board of Rabbis, recently told me a very touching story. A young boy from Israel with a debilitating illness was brought to New York by his parents for treatment. At some point, the boy let it be known that he wanted to be a firefighter with the New York City Fire Department. It was his greatest wish.

At about the same time, New York City experienced the second worst fire in the history of the city. Buildings were destroyed, and several firefighters were injured, fortunately not seriously. The blaze raged on for two days. When they had finished fighting the fire, those weary firemen got into their vehicles, made their way to the hospital where the boy was staying, and witnessed the oath of office being administered, making him an official firefighter with the FDNY.

That's a story about unity. Those firefighters didn't have to add a hospital visit to their day. They were already exhausted from two solid days of fighting the daunting Brooklyn blaze. Nonetheless, they reached out to embrace this young boy who wanted to be one of them, and took him into their family.

In the [Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Easter](#), (John 15: 1-8), Jesus speaks to the disciples about the unity with them that he desires. "I am the vine, you are the branches," he tells them. Remain in me as I remain in you." Like the firefighters in the story, Jesus (weary from his busy ministry and anticipating his passion and death) reaches out to the disciples and by extension to all of us, inviting us to be one with him. There's no oath of office, but there's a loving invitation: "Remain in me as I remain in you."

Yet there is a difference. Jesus stresses that our acceptance of this invitation or our rejection of it is the difference between life and death. "Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me." We must remain in this union with him to which he has invited us.

Remaining in union with Jesus brings us to the very core of the universe. "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you." That's a very powerful promise.

What can we do to promote unity with others? Like Jesus, and like those firefighters, are there people to whom we can reach out, even in our weariness, and encircle them with our love? If each of us did that, just once today, how much we would add to the world.

--Posted May 11, 2006

# The Stone that the Builders Rejected

May 3, 2006

## THE STONE THAT THE BUILDERS REJECTED

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." These words are originally from Psalm 118, but they are quoted by Peter in the First Reading for the Fourth Sunday of Easter (Acts 4: 8-12). In the Psalm, they mean that God has made significant what other people have regarded as insignificant human beings. In Acts, they refer to the rejection of Jesus Christ, and to his death and resurrection.

But the words ring true in our everyday lives as well. If we look at the lives of creative people, we often find that their curiosity extended to things that most other people didn't bother to notice. Their attention to unnoticed things was the hallmark of their creativity and it made them unique. That was true of Jesus as well. Nobody in his time ever thought of associating the Kingdom of Heaven with a mustard seed or with the array of seeds sown by a farmer in his field. Nobody thought that the poor widow giving her mite in the synagogue was the biggest benefactor of all. Yet Jesus appreciated the little things that everyone else missed, and in doing so, he made them messengers of the divine.

It's true of our bad days as well. People who have been through hard times often say, in retrospect, that those dark days were among the best things that ever happened to them. They might appear to be obstacles to many, but to truly visionary people difficult moment brought them closer to God, made them realize who their friends really were, and gave them a wisdom that they would not otherwise have had.

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." The words of Scripture encourage us to think twice before blindly accepting what everyone else holds to be insignificant. We never know where the next hidden treasure may be waiting for us. (Come to think of it, Jesus said that, too!)

# Locks

April 27, 2006

## LOCKS

By Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications

In the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter (since Easter is a season in the Church year as well as a specific day, Easter Sunday is considered the First Sunday of Easter), St. John (John 20:19-31) recounts the appearance of Jesus to the apostles and later to Thomas in the upper room. A significant detail of this story is that the room was locked, because the apostles were afraid. Jesus in his risen body transcends the limits of the lock and makes his entrance into the room.

The symbolism here is significant for our understanding of the import of the Resurrection upon our lives. Jesus is not only overcoming physical locks but spiritual locks as well. Remember, the locks were in place because the apostles were afraid. Jesus bypasses the locks, but he also bypasses the fear and heals it. We Catholics look at Jesus' encounter with the apostles as the institution of the Sacrament of Reconciliation: "whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven." Given the context of that statement within the entire passage, it is safe to say that the forgiveness of sin is related to the forgiveness of fear. One of the reasons people sin is that they are afraid of trusting in God's ways. They feel inclined to take matters into their own hands because they are afraid of losing control of life and all that it implies. They are afraid of losing love, of losing prestige, of losing health, of losing money and employment. Fear is the basis of sin. Elsewhere, St. John remarked that perfect love does away with all fear. So this passage is a kind of unit - breaking through the locks, Jesus breaks through the fear of the apostles, and gives them the power to break through the fear in others.

As if the point were not already strong enough, John drives it home with the story of Thomas. Thomas is afraid to embrace the truth of the resurrection; it is too much for him and seems totally absurd. So he sets his standards: he must put his hands into the wounded hands of Christ and into the wounds in his side. What does Jesus do? He obliges. He invites Thomas to touch his wounds, and Thomas believes. His fear melts away and he becomes a believer.

What or whom do we lock out? Often we are afraid to allow ourselves to be who we truly are - people made in God's image and likeness, and as a result our lives are much less inspired than they are meant to be. We fortify ourselves with titles and job descriptions and overbooked calendars and things in general, all the while forgetting that the key to

real happiness is to live the inspired life God has in mind for us. The Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter reminds us that God wants to break through those locks and invite us to live in true freedom.

"Receive the Holy Spirit." We are meant to live inspired lives, the lives of people who live in the sense of being in God's image and likeness. The Easter season gives us an invitation to do just that.

--Posted April 27, 2006

# New Yeast

April 12, 2006

## NEW YEAST

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Our Jewish friends who have been celebrating Passover will understand very well the meaning of the words of St. Paul in the alternate Second Reading for Easter (1 Corinthians 5:6b-8), "Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough." One of the preparatory activities performed in Jewish households is the burning of the old bread. It symbolizes the renewal of spirit that holy feasts such as Passover and Easter hope to generate. In order to take on new life, we have to get rid of the old.

In a very real sense, Christians have been clearing out the old yeast during Lent. Along with its emphasis on the importance of baptism, the season of Lent is a penitential season in which we attempt to purify our lives so as to be able to receive the grace of the Risen Christ. Hopefully our observance of Lent has been more than a superficial giving up of this or that, but rather a deeply reflective look within ourselves in an effort to care for our soul. It is not too late to ask, "What can I do to nourish and nurture the deepest part of my being?" As we do that, we learn what things we need to get rid of, and we learn how to open ourselves to new life of the spirit as well.

The principle behind clearing out the old yeast is very simple. If the blinds are closed, the sunlight can't come in. If there's a cork in the bottle, the wine can't get out. We have to get rid of the obstacles and barriers to life to let the flow of the soul's life take place.

Now, no one is saying that this is easy to do. It's easy to write about, but doing it can be scary. If we're feeling that there's something missing in our lives, we have to learn to be firm but gentle with ourselves about making changes. We have to go ahead and make them, but we can best do it in small steps, which is, after, all how we learned to walk.

There's another aspect of all this that's very important to remember. Unfortunately, this expression has become so trite that we may fail to comprehend its brilliance, but here it is nonetheless: life is as much a journey as it is a destination, and we must learn to enjoy the journey. When we begin to take seriously the care of our soul, we may think the small things that we do (admiring a sunset, helping someone in need that day) are too insignificant to amount to anything. We need to remember that they are the journey. The more we take delight in things along the way, the fuller and more joyous our soul becomes, the less we feel robbed or cheated and deprived, and the more we feel as though

we are getting somewhere. In that sense, do sweat the small stuff; it's important. Enjoy it and give it its true value.

There's another aspect to the custom of burning the old bread - there's no turning back. Once the old yeast is discarded, the old bread burned, there is no way of retrieving it. We have to go forward with the new yeast and the new bread. Real change in our life demands the same thing. There can be no return, no half-measures. Small steps, yes, but forward steps, not backward ones. It's the only way we can be open to Christ's new life.

May you and yours have a very Blessed and Happy Easter, a joyous celebration of the Resurrection of Christ.

# Servant

April 6, 2006

## SERVANT

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The fiftieth chapter of the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament (partially taken as the First Reading for Palm Sunday) sets the background for this final week of Lent and for our celebration of the Sacred Triduum - Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. It harkens back to a time when God's people preferred following their own devices to being faithful to the Lord. Herein lies the third of the Songs of the Suffering Servant, and its depiction is a graphic one, indeed. "I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting." We Christians reflect upon these words and we immediately think of Jesus Christ and his passion and death. How openly and willingly he exposed himself to the insults and beatings; how insistently he refused to shield himself from them. "I have set my face like flint."

Why did Jesus Christ do this? Isaiah gives us an important hint: "The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them." We are the weary. We are the ones for whom the Servant underwent such terrible pain and suffering. He suffered so that we would not be weary, would not be beaten down by our sins and by the difficult moments in life. It is the intention of the Suffering Servant and of the God who sent him that we be refreshed, renewed in spirit, and free of burdens. His suffering touches our suffering. His resurrection is our resurrection as well.

These coming days are tremendously important for our understanding of the meaning of life and the joy that the Lord intends us to have. There will be moments of joy and moments of pain. But through it all, it is our journey toward a deeper relationship with God and with one another.

# Behold, The Days are Coming

March 30, 2006

## BEHOLD, THE DAYS ARE COMING

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The B readings for the Fifth Sunday of Lent begin with an excerpt from Jeremiah 31, which begins, "Behold, the days are coming...." It speaks of a new time and a new work to be done by God among his people. The difference is that in the days to come, God promises to put his law inside the hearts of his people. His law will no longer be simply an external piece of legislation, but rather something that will be written in their hearts. In a way, the words seem strange, because the "old law" that God mentions was part of a covenant, and therefore should already have been touching his people's hearts. But the sad reality was that his people never fully assimilated the law. They kept it outside themselves and in the end strayed from it. "For they broke my covenant, and I had to show myself their master, says the Lord." But in the days to come, "I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people." It will be a very different relationship between God and his people. We Christians believe that with the coming of Jesus, the law of God became more interior and the relationship with God became more truly familial. That was the message that Jesus came to deliver. Instead of shunning sinners, lepers, Samaritans and other "outcasts," Jesus personalized the law for them in a way that enabled them to accept it because they felt loved. His way was to embrace everyone and to bring them into his family circle so that, understanding love, they would be empowered to do what was right.

The lesson for us? During this time of Lent, we can ask God for the grace to be internally united with him. We can do what is right, not because we have to, but because we want to. We can know the joy of being part of the family of Christ in a world that, in various ways, can so often make us feel like outsiders. We can be persons who carry with them a sense of purpose and mission.

It is a gift to pray for, and Jesus promised us that, if we do, it will be ours. And, as he says, our "joy will be complete."

# Visions of God

March 23, 2006

## VISIONS OF GOD

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." These words from the third chapter of St. John's Gospel are part of the Gospel for the Year B readings of the Fourth Sunday of Lent. One of the many themes of John's gospel is that our image of God is often very confused and even erroneous. Throughout the gospel, Jesus is depicted as trying to change people's notion of God. There is a constant back and forth between those who think they know what God is and what God expects on the one hand, and the vision of Jesus on the other. Jesus is constantly trying to convince his hearers that their vision of God is not broad enough, not kind enough. All the while, he meets resistance, up to and including his crucifixion and death.

One of the great mysteries of life is why we so often insist on making God out to be dislikable. We often picture him as angry, jealous, vengeful, and punishing. Jesus did not back away from the notion that those who did evil would be punished, but he insisted on the notion of God as a loving Father who would go out of his way to help his prodigal sons and daughters when they went astray. Parable after parable speaks of God going after those who are lost. Story after story tells of Jesus' reaching out to those who were in desperate conditions or who were alienated or broken. Time and again he welcomes the sinner back into the fold. Even our First Reading from 2 Chronicles 36 recalls, "Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place."

This week, we are called to reflect upon the mercy and goodness of God. We are asked not to live in fear of him, but in the realization that he is trying to help us. We can surrender to his goodness, relax, and allow him to do his work in us.

--Posted March 24, 2006

# God's Wisdom

March 16, 2006

## GOD'S WISDOM

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." These words are taken from the Second Reading (1 Corinthians 1: 22-25) for the Third Sunday of Lent. They highlight one of the most important truths of the spiritual life - namely that God alone is wise and that our best decisions are made in alignment with him.

But what do those words mean? What is meant by the "foolishness of God?" St. Paul is speaking here from the perspective of ordinary human thinking. To get an idea of what he means, we could go back to the book of Job. In that book, everybody - Job, his wife, and his friends - has an opinion about the ways of God. Job's wife and friends are convinced that Job did something to offend God which resulted in his being punished. Job proclaims his innocence, and insists that God is unfair in removing all of his possessions. At the end of the book, God enters into a conversation with Job in which he chides Job for thinking he knows enough to advise God. He pretty much tells Job it is "too bad" he didn't have Job around to advise him as to how to create the world and all the creatures in it. He's being sarcastic, of course; and the lesson is - Job needs to learn to focus on the wisdom of God and stop pretending he knows it all. (The friends get a good talking-to as well.)

The point is - we don't know everything, and our minds, as intelligent as they are - need to be supplemented by the mighty wisdom of God. There is a plan to the universe, and if we are humble, we can get to know that plan and when we do, we will find that it is much better than the plans we make.

What does St. Paul mean when he speaks of the "weakness of God"? Again, he is speaking from a human perspective. We've all heard people say things like, "It's all very well to rely on God, but if you want to get anything done in this world, you have to roll up your shirtsleeves and do it yourself." We see the same attitude in the idea that religion is something to be practiced once a week, and the other six days run by other rules. The problem is, "human strength" usually fouls things up. Time and again, we go scampering back to God to straighten out the messes we have created. God's ways, which often appear to us to be weak, are really the strong ones, after all.

During this season of Lent, we can ask Our Lord for the gift to know his wisdom and to follow the leads it provides us.

# Ups and Downs

March 10, 2006

## UPS AND DOWNS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

Life has its ups and downs, that's for sure. Sometimes, we're riding the crest of a wave; at other times we are at a loss to know what happened to bring us to our present misfortune.

Our readings for the Second Sunday of Lent speak to that theme of ups and downs. The First Reading (Genesis 22) is the familiar story of the sacrifice of Abraham. We recall that Abraham and Sarah had been old and childless, and the miraculous birth of their son Isaac was a great joy to them. Now, God asks Abraham to go up a high mountain and prepare Isaac for sacrifice. We can imagine Abraham's devastation. Here is his only son, his treasure, and here he is being asked to give him up - indeed to put him to death. Imagine Abraham's great joy when God relents and lets Abraham know that he was merely giving him a test.

The Gospel reading (Mark 9: 2-10) also portrays life's ups and downs. The scene takes place on a mountain, where Jesus goes up with Peter, James and John. There, his transfiguration takes place in the presence of Moses and Elijah, and they hear the voice of God acknowledging Jesus as his beloved Son. Then they come down the mountain and Jesus tells them to mention the incident to no one.

Is there any stability for us when we encounter the ups and downs of life? St. Paul has the answer in the Second Reading (Romans 8: 31b-34): "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Our stability amidst the storms of life lies in the presence of God and in his love for us. As we learn to trust in him, we find that while things may come and things may go, we experience a peacefulness about it all and a steadiness within us. No matter what life may bring of good or of bad, we stay firm and secure in the wonder of his love.

# Matter, Spirit and Lent

March 2, 2006

## MATTER, SPIRIT AND LENT

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Appearances can be deceiving. In our everyday life, it appears that our lives are ruled by matter. We need food, clothing and shelter in order to survive. We need money. We need a job. We need people to support us. Much of our time is spent in attaining those things, and, as a matter of fact, in worrying lest they be taken away or lest we cannot accumulate enough of them.

Those are the appearances. What that view of life does not tell us is that there is much more to life than matter. Life is really about Spirit. Quantum physicists tell us today that the things that appear to be material are made up of energy, and that it is energy, not matter, that rules the universe. As Christians, we know that even "energy" is not the complete answer to the mysteries of life. We know that the ultimate source of energy and of everything else is our personal, loving God.

Sometimes - more than just sometimes - we find out the hard way that matter is not the be-all-and-end-all. The First Reading for the First Sunday of Lent (Genesis 9:8-15) recounts the story of the Flood. The human race had gone terribly awry in its thinking, the story goes, and God had to teach them a lesson. Our reading is from the part where God promises never again to destroy the earth by a flood, and seals his promise with a rainbow. Throughout this story, the message is clear - matter is meant to be a sign of the Spirit, meant to be under the influence of Spirit. When we forget that, things go badly, indeed.

In the Second Reading (1 Peter 3:18-22), Peter speaks of the flood as a kind of "pre-figured baptism," and he makes a most telling comment: "It is not a removal of dirt from the body but an appeal to God for a clear conscience." In his own way, Peter is telling the same story of Spirit and matter. Baptism is not meant to take something away on a physical level; it is meant to enable us to let our spirits grow.

The Gospel (Mark 1:12-15) tells the story of Jesus' forty days in the desert and the imprisonment of John the Baptist, which propelled Jesus into his public ministry. Both events, which speak to the limitations of the flesh, show how much more powerful than flesh Spirit is.

As we undertake our Lenten journey, we do well to remember the lesson these readings convey. Whatever we do for Lent, that is fine. But we need to make sure that what we are doing is not just for the sake of "doing something for Lent," but rather that it is done to renew our spirit and the spirits of others. Our Lenten devotion must put us in touch with the Holy Spirit, who is so willing to guide and console and renew us.

## When to "Fast"?

February 23, 2006

### WHEN TO "FAST"?

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Someone once told me about a newly-ordained priest who, while walking out of the rectory, witnessed a serious automobile accident. Without missing a beat, he turned and bolted back into the rectory, yelling, "Get a priest! Someone get a priest!"

There comes a time for all of us when preparation is over and fulfillment begins. A lot of engagements today are probably not long enough, but there comes a time when the engagement and the honeymoon are over, and the young couple has to get down to the everyday living of a married life. The seminarian, once ordained, has to begin acting like a priest. The student, not wanting to be a "perpetual student," has to advance into becoming a teacher, or apply his or her learning in research or in some sort of public practice. Just as the butterfly can't stay in the cocoon forever, so each of us has to discern when to end the time of preparation and to begin the time of action.

That is one of the lessons of the Gospel reading for the Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Mark 2: 18 - 22). Looking at the story from the vantage point of two thousand years, we might wonder what is the point of it. People are complaining that the disciples of Jesus do not fast, which the disciples of John the Baptist do fast. They approach the apostles with a tone that says, "What's wrong with you? Why are you different from John's disciples?" But what does that mean for us?

When the disciples ask Jesus about this teaching, he explains to them the difference between preparation and fulfillment. John the Baptist, he tells them, was part of the period of preparation for Jesus' public ministry. Fasting was a part of that: John told his disciples to repent and to fast. But now that the public ministry of Jesus is underway, there is no need to fast, for the preparation is over. Turning to Jesus means leaving behind all of the trappings of preparation and entering into the reality of Jesus' presence on earth.

Sometimes well-meaning people interpret this passage as saying that Jesus did away with all fasting. That is not, however, what he said. While he stressed that the time of preparation was over, he also told his disciples that a time would come when the bridegroom (he himself) would be taken away. Then they would fast. Jesus is saying that there is a rhythm to life - preparation and fasting on the one hand, followed by fulfillment and rejoicing on the other. Each is necessary if the other is to occur.

In our own lives, we can become trapped in prolonged preparation which can sometimes lead to discouragement and emotional darkness. There are times when we must step out of ourselves and actually do the thing we want to do. Our periods of darkness are, in fact, invitations to forge ahead to another stage of life. The First Reading (from Hosea 2) shows this. "Thus says the LORD: I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart." First the desert; then the speech to the heart. It's a natural rhythm.

Let us take a look at our own times of "fasting" in life. Can we get a sense of when we have been there long enough? Can we, in the desert, hear the Lord making a speech to our heart? Will we follow?

# Mary, the Mother of God

December 29, 2005

## MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD

By Father Paul Keenan  
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We often think of January 1 as New Year's Day, but in the calendar of the Church it is the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God. How fitting it is that the first day of the calendar year and the eighth day of Christmas, is dedicated to Mary. For us Catholics, the entire relationship we have to Mary is grounded in her relationship with Jesus Christ.

St. Paul hints at this in the second chapter of the letter to the Galatians which forms the second reading for the liturgy of the day. Paul writes, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Daughters, too, of course, but the point is clear - our adoption, our salvation, is grounded in the profound love between God and Mary and Mary and God, and her utter dedication to Jesus and his mission on earth.

The Gospel reading from Luke (Luke 2:16-21) emphasizes the contemplative side of Mary. Luke tells us, "And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." When it came to God and the work of his Kingdom, nothing escaped Mary's notice and careful attention. She treasured every bit of it and kept it in her heart.

What is the practical implication of all of this for our daily living? Here are some thoughts.

First, Mary is a model of how to face the challenges of life. Her unwavering dedication to God and to her Son as time and again the sword of misfortune pierced her heart, help us to know that it is possible for us to be faithful. Faithfulness is difficult in any age, but perhaps it is more difficult in this one, where there is so little universal support for maintaining integrity in the face of challenge. Pope John Paul II rightly referred to her as the "Icon of Redeemed Humanity." We are asked to model ourselves after her.

Second, Mary is a teacher. It's amazing for us to think that Mary taught her Son, who was indeed the Son of God. Yet we know from the scriptures that Jesus was "like us in all things but sin" (Hebrews 4:15) and that he subjected himself in obedience to Mary and Joseph. As we read the gospels and reflect on our rich tradition of teaching about Mary, we, too, become her students as we grow in love of her Son.

Thirdly, in a special way, Mary shows us that "nothing is impossible for God." Throughout her life, Mary faced many situations that were troublesome, when her life seemed to be at an impasse. Living in difficult times today, we may be tempted to despair. The words of the old prayer, "Hail, Holy Queen" say it well - Mary is "our life, our sweetness and our hope." When we feel like giving up on life, Mary is our life. When we are tempted to cynicism, she brings sweetness to our spirits. When we are tempted to despair, her example gives us hope.

Rightly, then, do we begin this calendar year with a day dedicated to Mary. Contemplating her, we find a perfect paradigm for framing our wishes and our hopes for ourselves and for our world in the New Year.

Happy New Year!

--Posted December 29, 2005

# What Was It Like

December 22, 2005

## WHAT WAS IT LIKE?

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Here's a thought for you.

What must it have been like for the Trinity the night before the Incarnation?

What must have been the thoughts of God the Father as he prepared to send his only Son into the world? Was there a sense of anticipation? Was there a sense of sorrow over the sinful condition of the world and a sense of joy that he was able to do something significant about it? Was the Father concerned lest people might misunderstand or even oppose his motives and do harm to his Son? If one can speak of God having sleepless nights, I wouldn't be surprised if the night before the Incarnation were a night of insomnia for God.

What must have been the thoughts of the Son as he prepared to become flesh? Was he looking forward to this pending adventure of becoming a human being and living on earth? Was he concerned about possible dangers he might encounter on his journey? Did he wonder how he would find the means to spread the message he would have to preach, and how people would receive it? He must have had a profound trust in his Father that in sending him on such a mission he would always watch over him.

What must have been the thoughts of the Spirit on that most portentous night? Was there in his heart a sense of adventure, that he would soon be expanding the spread and reach of the love between the Father and the Son? Did he feel the power of the forces of evil that this all-important mission was designed to overcome? As Divine Love Itself, did he worry that God's love might be rejected by some or be too much for some to fathom or to bear? Was he already anticipating the comfort he could provide for those who would accept the Son?

Of course, we are being very anthropomorphic here - it is so hard for us to fathom the thoughts of God. We always end up imagining that his thoughts are like our thoughts and

his ways are like our ways, and they are not. But when this exercise first occurred to me while I was listening to some Christmas music, I suddenly found myself caught up in the suspense and the wonder of the Incarnation. I understood what Karl Rahner meant when he spoke of silence as being at the very heart of Christmas. I found myself taken up into the silence of God as he prepared for this generous act of salvation.

I pray that this Christmas, you and yours may be taken up into that same silence. May you experience the wonder and adventure of the coming of the Savior. May his peace and love surround you and sustain you.

Merry Christmas!

--Posted December 22, 2005

## Two Loves

December 16, 2005

### TWO LOVES

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The First Reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent (2 Samuel 7) is really such a lovely account of the warm relationship that exists between God and his people. King David, with all the best intentions in the world, feels guilty that he is living in a palace while God is living in a tent. He determines to build God a suitable house. Obviously, this is a wonderfully generous act, done out of love for the Lord.

It takes the intervention of Nathan the prophet to make David see things differently. Through Nathan, the Lord reminds David that it is not up to the king to build a house for the Lord. Rather, it is the Lord who builds a house for David, who cares for his every need, who is near to him in time of trouble and who guides his people. If there are any houses to be built, it will be the Lord who will build them for his people!

The love on both sides of the equation here is palpable. David's concern for the Lord is tender and precious. And it is clear that the Lord appreciates it. He certainly does not rebuke David. Instead, he lovingly reminds David that he will always be with him, that he has no need for him to do anything but bask in his love and follow his guidance.

This is the love story with which we enter into the final week of our preparation for Christmas. What is it that we are to do for God? We are to know the depth of his love for us and to live our lives accordingly.

--Posted December 16, 2005

# Gaudete Sunday

December 9, 2005

## GAUDETE SUNDAY

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Rejoice! That is the theme of Gaudete Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent.

But why rejoice? Isn't Advent supposed to be a solemn time of preparation for Christmas?

The logic of the Church in having this Sunday of rejoicing during Advent is a brilliant way of accessing some important wisdom about human psychology.

It's all about anticipation. Have you ever noticed that when we anticipate something, we actually experience the event, even though it is not yet present in the physical world? Have you ever looked forward to time off, or a great vacation, or attending a concert? As you anticipate the event, you already experience some of the joy of it. It makes the event present to you, even though the full realization of it is some time away.

That's what Gaudete Sunday is all about. The Church encourages us to really intensify our anticipation of the celebration of the birth of Christ. We are asked to focus on what Christmas means, and to enjoy the realization of that even though the feast is a couple of weeks in the offing.

Enjoy Gaudete Sunday. It's a wonderful way to experience here and now the true meaning of Christmas.

--Posted December 9, 2005

# The Mercy of God

December 2, 2005

## THE MERCY OF GOD

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Few things are more wonderful to contemplate than the mercy of God. And the readings for the Second Sunday of Advent are full of references to his mercy. Time and time again, we hear people speak of the vengeful, punishing God of the Old Testament, but what we find today is mercy. "Comfort, give comfort to my people," he tells the prophet Isaiah (Is 40:1-5, 9-11). The tone is one of forgiveness, encouragement, love. As we prepare for the coming of the Savior in our hearts at Christmas, that encouraging tone can be very helpful to us. Advent is a time of return to God for many who have been away from their spiritual home. Often they will take time to do some serious reflection and to take advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and in so doing find rich rewards in God's grace and blessings.

It is in that same spirit that Peter, in the second reading, speaks to his flock (2 Pt 3:8-14). He reminds them of the patience of God, and warns them that, though the heavens and the earth pass away, God wants none of his people to perish. Peter challenges them to be at peace.

The Gospel is the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark (Mk 1:1-8). It tells the story of the coming of John the Baptist, who insists that he is not the Messiah, but has come to proclaim him. John preaches a baptism of repentance, preparing for Jesus, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Again, we are reminded of the need to repent, to change our ways, so as to enter into the new life of Christ.

--Posted December 2, 2005

# Thanksgiving and Advent

November 23, 2005

## THANKSGIVING AND ADVENT

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Here in the United States, we are celebrating Thanksgiving Day and weekend. In the Church calendar, we are beginning the season of Advent. On both counts, we are in the midst of a very important time.

A day of thanksgiving is celebrated in many countries throughout the world, at some point in the year. That's appropriate, because it shows a more or less universal recognition of the importance of giving thanks. In fact, being thankful is really an essential part of living a good life. And the greatest reason to be thankful is the fact that God loves us.

Interestingly enough, the readings for the First Sunday of Advent dovetail with the theme of appreciating God. The first reading (Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7) is not a happy reading - it is a prayer of repentance. God's people have strayed far from him, and now they are experiencing the effects of their alienation. They express their gratitude for the presence of God by means of a prayer of hope that God will come and reclaim them.

The second reading (1 Cor 1:3-9) is a much more cheerful passage. This is a wonderful Thanksgiving passage, for St. Paul thanks God for the faith of the Corinthians and reminds them of how blessed they truly are.

The Gospel (Mk 13:33-37) is a passage in which Jesus admonishes his hearers to be vigilant - "Watch, therefore;" he tells them. "You do not know when the Lord of the house is coming." When we forget to be grateful for the blessings in our lives, we literally lose our sense of the presence of God. Thankfulness helps us to realize that God is with us, bestowing abundant blessings upon us and guiding us on our way.

Thanksgiving and the Season of Advent do go together. Our grateful hearts gift us with the sense of the presence of God and enable us to hope in his continued blessings.

-- Posted November 23, 2005.

# Sheep or Goats

November 17, 2005

## SHEEP OR GOATS?

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel for the Solemnity of Christ the King (Mt 25:31-46) is one of those gospel passages that is difficult to hear. It speaks about the end of time, when the master will come and separate the sheep from the goats. His judgment is favorable toward the sheep and not so favorable toward the goats. It's very hard to keep from wondering which side of the field we will end up on when it comes to Judgment Day.

Fear is not the point of the story, however. The point is to ask us to prepare ourselves for our eternal destiny here and now. And the important thing to notice is that the master separates the sheep from the goats. Imagine a field where sheep and goats are all milling around together. There's a lot of confusion there. The shepherd needs to have things in better order.

Think about that very carefully. Isn't it true that for many of us, our thoughts and our desires are running around in great confusion? We need more than that, and instinctively we know it. Yet sometimes we are so caught up in the stress and strain of living that all we see is total chaos. We need to put things in order inside us.

But how? That's the sixty-four thousand dollar question.

Jesus gives us a simple blueprint in this gospel story. Get very quiet, and do what the shepherd does - sort things out. Consider the possibility that there are roughly two kinds of thoughts - those that are kind and considerate of ourselves and others, and those that are not. Keep the thoughts that are rooted in kindness, and send the others out of the pasture.

That's a daily task for most of us, but it's doable. It requires intention and prayer. It requires discipline and deliberate effort, but it's the only thing that makes our lives happy and loving. Of course, it's not just a matter of thinking the good thoughts - Jesus clearly wants us to put them into action. But we need to think them first and to make them the center of our consciousness.

This gospel reading is not intended to inspire fear, but rather to inspire right thinking. And with right thinking, we connect ourselves with God, with other people, and with our highest self. What we have here is a plan for peace.--Posted November 17, 2005.

# Sharing Talents

November 10, 2005

## SHARING TALENTS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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On a recent television program, I saw the story of a young teenage woman who for most of her life has suffered tremendous pain due to a fairly rare muscular illness. Strange as it may seem for someone with her physical condition, a loved one encouraged her to take up dancing. She went for lessons and soon discovered that she was getting much more than she bargained for. For it became clear to her that the only time she was pain-free was when she was dancing. Her body became lost in the rhythm and the sway and forgot its pain.

Hearing that story reminded me of something I discovered during my first days of radio broadcasting. I was really just beginning, volunteering as a reader at In Touch Networks, a radio reading service for the visually challenged. Depending on the nature of the program, we volunteers would read a magazine on the air for as little as a half-hour and as much as an hour at a time. Before long, I noticed that my on-air experience was changing my life. I might come to the studio tired and down from various things that had happened, but the minute my microphone went on, all of that negative energy just disappeared. It was as though there were nothing else but the booth, the magazine, my broadcast partner, the audience and me. I was in a whole other world, and I loved it.

When we are using our gifts and talents, ordinary cares and worries are lost to us. The Gospel story for the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Mt 25:14-30) is another in a series of parables or stories taught by Jesus. It tells of a master who was going away on a journey and, before leaving, gave three servants a sum of money (five, two and one talents, respectively). Upon his return, he discovered that the one with five talents and the one with two talents had each doubled his investment, while the man with one talent had buried his gift out of fear and had not increased it at all. The first two were rewarded, while the third man was punished. What happened? The first two men put their talents into motion, ignoring any fear of risk or of displeasing the master. The third man immobilized his gift by giving in to his fears. Forgetting their fears, the first two men were rewarded; giving in to his fears, the third man was not. When we use our talents, it seems, our fears melt away.

Several years ago, there was a man by the name of Leo Buscaglia whose programs often appeared on public television. Given where I was personally at the time, I remember thinking that his enthusiastic lectures were naïve and simplistic. All he talked about, after

all, was love; and when he finished his lectures, he hugged his audience. Before long, he became known as "Dr. Hug." Looking back now, I realize how much I missed and how I wish his programs were rebroadcast today. Here's one example of Leo Buscaglia's wisdom: "Any action that inhibits is not love. Love is only love when it liberates."

He was right. The young woman in pain was inhibited by her illness until she learned to dance. The man with the one talent in Jesus' story was inhibited by his fear, while his colleagues were liberated enough to look beyond theirs.

The message? While there's no way to prescribe one universal cure for the things that hold us back from living full lives, each of us can do one thing each day to get ourselves beyond our "stuckness." If we want to be dramatic, we may do something daring such as ballooning or going on a safari. But we don't have to go that far. In fact, our risk-taking might be of a much simpler nature, such as doing an errand for someone, lending a listening ear, or being kind to someone difficult. Perhaps a key lies in some other words of Dr. Leo Buscaglia: "Don't spend your precious time asking, 'Why isn't the world a better place?' It will only be time wasted. The question to ask is 'How can I make it better?' To that there is an answer."

--Posted November 10, 2005

# Being Foolish, Being Wise

November 3, 2005

## BEING FOOLISH, BEING WISE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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In our past several weeks' reflections on the parables of Jesus, we have been noting that a parable is a story that has only one point to it. It differs from an allegory, which has a certain complexity in its use of symbol and imagery. The Gospel for the Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Matthew 25: 1-13, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins) indeed has one main point - be ready for the coming of the Lord. It tells us not to be like those foolish virgins who did not have oil in their lamps when the bridegroom came, but rather to be like the wise ones who were ready. The parable is telling us to be watchful.

Despite their directness and simplicity, sometimes there are little twists to the parables that capture our attention and give us something to think about. In the parable of the virgins, one such twist occurs in the exchange between the wise and the foolish virgins once it is announced that the bridegroom is coming. The foolish virgins, in a state of panic, ask the wise ones to give them some of their oil. The wise virgins refuse, fearing that if they do, their lamps will burn out and everyone will be in darkness.

That exchange might not be so interesting except for the fact that it is Jesus who is telling this parable. Wouldn't you expect that in a story told by Jesus, the wise virgins would take pity on the foolish and let them have the oil? So much of the message of Jesus is about serving others, caring for the poor and for those in need. Why would Jesus tell the story the way he did?

Let's think about the setting of this parable, which is the coming of the bridegroom as he goes to the wedding feast. The virgins are to meet him at whatever time he comes and, with their lamps lighted, escort him. That is their purpose. If the wise virgins in the story give of their oil to the foolish virgins, everybody's lamp is likely to go out and the bridegroom will enter in darkness. But if those who already have their oil keep their oil, there may be a shorter procession, but at least there will always be light.

It seems that, in Jesus' mind, part of the "readiness" to meet the bridegroom includes keeping clear about our purpose. St. Ignatius Loyola said that "we are created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord and by this means to save (our) soul." Whenever we are asked to be of assistance or to give of ourselves in some way, we should ask ourselves, "Will this help or hinder my fulfilling my true purpose for being here?"

Sometimes the answer will be yes. Sometimes it will be no. But the criterion, in the final analysis, is the greater glory of God.

Another point St. Ignatius made might help us to understand this better. He often advised his followers to take heed of the beginning, the middle and the end of any possible course of action they might be considering. He knew that things that seem very good in the short run could cause a great deal of damage in the long run. In having the wise virgins say no to their foolish sisters, Jesus is subtly reminding his followers to be clear about the possible consequences of their actions.

--Posted November 3, 2005.

# Heart and Soul

October 27, 2005

## HEART AND SOUL

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Have you ever had one of those annoying days when a song runs through your head and you can't get rid of it, no matter how hard you try?

I was having that problem recently, and complained to a friend about it. In the course of our conversation, I mentioned that years ago, I had seen something about there being one particular song that, when remembered, would get rid of any other song playing in your head. The problem was - I couldn't remember the name of that song.

A few minutes later, my friend sent me an e-mail, telling me that he had gone on the Internet and found the song that would get rid of songs playing in your head. It was the old favorite, "Heart and Soul," by Hoagy Carmichael.

I tried it, and it worked.

Thinking about this later on, I was amazed to think that a song about love called "Heart and Soul" would have this effect. Yet it makes a great deal of sense. The words "heart" and "soul" are primary words, words that touch to the very core of our existence. It's not surprising that they would have such power. Reciting them is like bringing yourself home.

The readings for the Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time speak of the loss of - and the return to - heart and soul. The First Reading from Malachi (Chapters 1 and 2) and the Gospel Reading from Matthew (Chapter 23) show how the God of the Old Testament and Jesus, respectively, dealt with people who had lost heart and soul. The people of God and especially their leaders had wandered far from their true calling and had truly lost their way. You get the impression that they were really so lost that there was almost no hope for them. In the Matthew reading, however, Jesus suggests to his followers that by remembering who God is and who they are, they can replace the "old tunes" with new music that is really the song of the Lord.

Paul says something similar to the Thessalonians in the Second Reading (1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13). He speaks of his message as not being a human word, but rather a divine

word, and implies that this song of God is best communicated to a weary people through love and gentleness - virtues which wipe out the wearying music we humans can often conjure up.

The message is clear - to return from spiritual weariness, we must return to heart and soul. They are those inner places that are the wellspring of God's grace and the secret to true refreshment and vitality.

--Posted October 27, 2005

# The Great Answer

October 21, 2005

## THE GREAT ANSWER

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Here in the United States we have been going through hearings for nominees to the Supreme Court. One issue that has come up recently - and in the past as well - in nomination hearings is the extent to which a candidate must answer certain types of sensitive questions. It's a complicated issue, because there are some issues that an examining committee feels it should know about, and sometimes the candidate feels disinclined to discuss those issues in any detail. The question is constantly in the air: to what extent does someone being examined for the judiciary have the right to avoid directly answering the questions of a panel?

That controversy came to mind while I was looking at the readings for the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, especially the Gospel (Mt 22: 34-40), where in response to a challenge by the Pharisees, Jesus answers the question about which commandment of the law is the greatest. In previous Sundays, we have observed that there are occasions when Jesus turns a tough question back upon his interrogators rather than allow himself to be trapped by their interrogation. What is so striking about this part of the passage, though, is that this time Jesus does not "dodge the bullet" so to speak, but rather faces it directly.

What is going on? For one thing, it's important to notice that, unlike last Sunday's gospel (about the lawfulness of Jews paying the temple tax), the content of the question is as important as the intent of the question. In the question about the temple tax, Jesus' opponents were simply looking for any topic that would set a trap for him. The topic of the temple tax was as good as any for that purpose; the content of the question was really of less importance to them than the intent - namely, to trap him. Here it's a different matter, because the question of the importance or unimportance of the laws of God was far more central to the religious thought of the day. There were over six hundred commands to choose from. To claim that one was more important than the other would violate something deeply ingrained in Jewish moral understanding -- the idea that every law was sacred and was therefore essential to the entire moral code. To get Jesus to say something else would not only be grounds for destroying him, it would also be grounds for undermining his understanding of Jewish thought. The strategy was this: discredit Jesus as a teacher, and it makes very little difference whether you actually get around to killing him. More than any other question, the answer to which might be debated or even rationalized, the answer to this question was absolutely key. Jesus had to answer it, and how he answered it was critical.

Answer it he did. He answered it so brilliantly that he actually expanded the moral horizon of the question. Here's how. Suppose, for example, Jesus had said that "thou shalt not kill" was the most important commandment. A host of really good reasons could be assembled for this line of thought, but the Pharisee's response would always be, "You blaspheme, because you value human life above the majesty of God." And so for any other choice Jesus might have made. Yet on the other hand, had he told them that honoring God was the greatest commandment, they would have said, "You blaspheme, because the Lord himself said, 'Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,' and 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.'" (Leviticus 19: 2 and 18.) You claim to honor God but instead you dishonor him by diminishing his command to care for others." Instead, Jesus brings both God and neighbor within the moral scope of the divine law and unites them as a single moral force. Nothing is left out. Nothing is diminished. Love of God and love of neighbor are, as Jesus says, the essence of both the law and the prophetic message as well. There is no need to choose between them.

The answer is brilliant, because it's a direct answer and at the same time it goes beyond (and transforms) the limitations of the question. And, once again, it does all that without falling into the intended trap.

It's brilliant, too, because of the moral course upon which it sets us. To honor God but dishonor neighbor is to dishonor God. To ignore or dishonor God while honoring neighbor is to diminish the true value of the neighbor. These are insights that we struggle to grasp as we wrestle with moral questions today. Jesus' answer provides a firm guideline for meeting the challenging issues which beset us.

--Posted October 21, 1005

# Render, But Don't Surrender

October 14, 2005

## RENDER, BUT DON'T SURRENDER

By Father Paul Keenan  
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People often treat the Gospel for the Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Matthew 22: 15-21) as though it were a text on Church and State, and perhaps they're right. Personally, however, I see it more as a lesson in how to stand up to opposition when we encounter in it our life of proclaiming the Gospel.

Matthew is very clear about the context of the passage - the Pharisees have the sole purpose of trying to trap Jesus in his speech. The topic could be anything; it simply happens to be the paying of the tax.

They begin, of course, by paying Jesus a false compliment - meaning, a compliment that they really don't mean. They appear to think that this will distract Jesus, get him to let down his guard a little. Let's see how well it works.

They pose the question, "Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" That's probably a matter of some controversy in Jesus' time because it embraces the larger question of the relationship of the Jews to the Romans. A positive answer ("Pay the tax.") would signal that though they are God's people, the Jews are still meant to be subordinate to the Romans. But a negative answer ("Don't pay the tax.") would signal that Jesus had some sort of rebellious agenda against Rome. No matter what he might say, he would find waiting for him either a group saying that he was blasphemous or a group claiming he was a rebel. Either way, he would be setting himself up to be killed.

Instead, Jesus cleverly turns the tables on his inquirers. Notice how he forces them to face the question, without allowing himself to be ensnared. Effectively, he tells them, "You people should be able to figure this out without any help from me." He then proceeds to ask them the simplest of questions: "Whose image do you find on a coin?" They are forced to answer, "Caesar's." A kibitzer, hearing that response today, would likely say, "Well, DUH!" Jesus is politer. He simply tells them, "Well, then, render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

Notice what has happened. Jesus has turned the question upon the questioners. He has refrained from being entrapped, and he has exposed the fact that the question was meant to set a trap.

That's the lesson I get from this passage. When people try to make us say or do things which will put us in danger, we can implore the help of Jesus, and learn from him.

# Parables and Allegories

September 29, 2005

## PARABLES AND ALLEGORIES

By Father Paul Keenan  
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There's a difference between a parable and an allegory, and many times a story in the gospels will contain elements of both. What Jesus told as a parable, the Gospel writers, upon reflection, would sometimes allegorize so as to help people to understand better the point Jesus was making. The parable of the sower is an example of that: we get both Jesus' original telling of it and then the early community's reflection upon it.

One way to describe a parable is that it is a very simple story with one point to it. An allegory, on the other hand, takes the story and finds a network of meanings in its various parts. There's a charm in the simplicity of a parable, and there are cleverness and depth in the multifaceted nature of an allegory. Each has its unique beauty.

The Gospel for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Matthew 21: 33 - 43) was told by Jesus as a parable. Jesus' parables are often meant to awaken the minds and hearts of the religious leadership of his day; their "one point" was often aimed at them. The point Jesus was making there is similar to the one we saw last week in the parable of the two sons: it is best not to be smug about one's place in the Kingdom of God. Get too self-confident about it and you might find that others will get there before you. Now Jesus was a great storyteller, and his parables reflect that. They often have twists and turns that make them intriguing and capture the hearer's attention. But if you want to capture the story in its freshness, don't get caught up in the twists and turns. Stick with the story, enjoy it, and learn from it the lesson that is its moral.

Later on, though, you might want to go back and let your mind be intrigued by the various parts of the story and how they are woven together. You might, for example, think of the owner of the vineyard as God, the vineyard as the Kingdom of God, the servants as the prophets, the wicked tenant farmers as the obdurate leadership of the people of God, the ripe vines as the good works necessary for belonging to the Kingdom and the owner's son as Jesus himself. Reading the story allegorically enables you to see more meaning in it, to get more from it, to make wonderful connections that enrich your understanding of its message.

It's perfectly all right to read the same story both parabolically and allegorically. In fact, the Church encourages it, and it is a long-standing tradition within the Church to do so. By so doing, we enrich our faith, make it deeper and more imaginative. We feed our

souls more richly from such reading of the scripture. It's a bit like sitting down to a delicious holiday supper, enjoying the experience at the time, and later going back to think about how each of the foods there, each of the people there, and each of the decorations there contributed to the warmth of the occasion. The experience then grows inside us as we live through it in a more vibrant way. We improve our lives and we nourish our souls.

--Posted September 29, 2005

# On The Team

September 23, 2005

## ON THE TEAM?

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Certainly, one of the most annoying traits we sometimes find in people is smugness. It's hard to stand people who go around looking and sounding like they have it made, and who deliberately lord it over the rest of us whom they clearly regard as inferiors.

If we wait long enough and dig deep enough we usually find that these apparently self-satisfied individuals are really not as full of self-esteem as they attempt to appear. Usually, they are laboring under a façade of great confidence and superiority while, truth to tell, they have very little self-regard. They build up their wall of arrogance because it's their only defense against their sense of helplessness in the face of the real or perceived cruelty of others.

More often than not, life comes along and knocks our friends out from under their smugness, but until that happens, they can be pretty unbearable and can cause a great deal of pain.

In the gospels, Jesus is constantly dealing with people who are smug and his job is to try to soften their hearts. Many of them are religious leaders of the day, and as we see during the Passion, others of them come from the political leadership as well. In fact, you could say that there is a kind of aura of smugness that keeps growing throughout the public years of Jesus' life, one that deliberately, though ultimately unsuccessfully, tries to manifest his inferiority. The irony is that people who are publicly branded as "sinners" do not appear to be in that category. They seem to be willing and able to make changes in their lives, to admit mistakes and to seek new direction with the help of Jesus. It's the others who are simply impenetrable.

The Gospel reading for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Mt 21:28-32) is an attempt on the part of Jesus to confront smugness at its root. It tells the story of two sons, each of whom is called by his father to go out and work in the vineyard. The first one says no, but then thinks better of it and finally goes and gets to work. The other says yes, but never goes. "Which one," Jesus asks, "did the father's will?"

The first son in the story operates more or less along the lines of the sinners who populate the gospels. They are placed here on earth, but follow their own ideas of right and wrong, until at some point and for some reason they realize a need to change, and change they

do, with the help of God. The second son is more or less like the smug people who feel very pleased with themselves, because they believe they have found a way to appear to be perfect while in actuality their only concern is to fuel their over-inflated egos. These sons will go on at great length about how good they are and how important they are and how much more they are doing to further the cause than anybody else. But it's all for show. Truth be told, they're really not on the team.

The idea here is not that we should point fingers at others. Rather, it s for us to examine ourselves. Are we on the team as far as the Lord is concerned? Or are we just pretending?

--Posted September 23, 2005

# Workers In The Vineyard

September 15, 2005

## WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel reading for the Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time is the story of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20: 1- 16a). My father, when he was alive, always scratched his head over this one. It's the story of the vineyard owner who pays the same wage to those who worked one hour and those who worked one day, to the considerable irritation of the latter. Dad was never pretentious or claimed to know or to understand something he did not, so when he said he didn't understand something, he genuinely meant it. "I can't figure out for the life of me," he would say, "how it's fair to give the same amount to people who have only worked an hour of the time." (I'm sure that, in heaven, he now has the answer. Who know, perhaps he helped me to get it, if indeed I did.)

You can't blame my Dad for not getting it. The whole concept of it is totally foreign to the way we do business. I also think that the times in which he lived had something to do with it. As a kid, I can remember hearing about the evils of Communism. One typical saying was, "Communism is a totalitarian system. Everything comes from the government, and the government metes out the same thing to everybody. In a democracy like ours, if you work hard, you can earn more money and that's the way it should be." Against the background of that mind-set, Jesus' parable becomes fairly incomprehensible.

So, what do we make of it?

Here's a clue - one expression that Matthew keeps repeating in this section of his gospel is, "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." Jesus has been running into people who continually convey the impression that they have earned some special entitlement to the Kingdom of God because of who they are and what they have done. (This includes, by the way, the kind-hearted mother of two of his closest disciples.) He uses this story about the workers to tell these people not to assume that they are the only ones who will be blessed. There may be some people - reformed sinners for example - who will find their way into the kingdom sooner than others who think they have it "all locked up." The parable serves as a friendly warning to us, as well, not to resent the reception of certain people (people we don't like, for example) into the friendship of God. They are as entitled as we believe ourselves to be.

That's pretty much it. We do not earn our way into the Kingdom of God by what we do, and we can't assume that certain people will never be invited by God to take part. There may be times in our lives in which we feel that God has been more generous to others than to us - that's none of our business. C.S. Lewis repeatedly states in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, "No one gets anybody else's story." Our job is to do our job, and in time we will rediscover the generosity of God in our lives. Rejoicing in the good fortune of others is the best way to see it extended to us.

We're always better off to seek and to accept our own good rather than someone else's. As a child in school, I used to envy adults who no longer had the pressure of papers and exams and grades that I had as a student. I would have traded places with them for anything. If I could do that, I assumed, I would be free as a bird. What I didn't realize was that those much-admired adults of mine were working under tremendous responsibilities and pressures themselves. They only appeared to me to be free of care. If I were to have what they enjoyed, I would have to take the time to build the infrastructure that would enable me to meet those responsibilities in a way that would let me fulfill what they entailed. If I had been magically whisked out of school and into their lives, I wouldn't have been ready. Sometimes you envy what someone else has, not realizing that if you had it, it wouldn't be right for you. If we are wise, we will learn to seek our own good, not that of someone else. C.S. Lewis was right.

It's not so difficult after all, to understand this wonderful little story about breadlines and jobs and a generous employer. For it's really not about any of those things. It's about finding our own place in God's vineyard and rejoicing when our neighbors find theirs.

--Posted September 15, 2005.

# The Call To Forgive

September 9, 2005

## THE CALL TO FORGIVE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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I knew when I first looked at the readings for the Twenty-fourth week in Ordinary Time that they would fall on September 11. I didn't know that they would be about...forgiveness! Yet it's unmistakable, and there's really no escaping it. The call to forgiveness is abundantly clear and we can't change the date on the calendar.

We have some reflecting to do.

For the obvious question is - are we being asked to extend forgiveness to those who perpetrated such horrible violence, and who have continued to do so in various parts of the world?

Some thoughts about forgiveness might be useful.

First of all, what is it? The American Heritage Dictionary defines "forgiveness" as "1: compassionate feelings that support a willingness to forgive; 2: the act of excusing a mistake or offense"

Consulting the dictionary seemed like a good idea at the time, but that word "excusing" in the definition leads to all sorts of problems. It's one thing to excuse a friend's or acquaintance's rude or hurtful remark, but is "excuse" the word we want to apply to what happened September 11? I don't think so. Yet the dictionary may be helpful in one respect. It makes a distinction between our willingness to forgive and actually forgiving. Let's start there and meander a little.

That distinction is important, because it allows us to raise the issue of a timeline of forgiveness. When we speak of forgiveness, we often assume that what is demanded of us is instantaneous forgiveness. Yet I believe that forgiveness is something that can take place over time. Otherwise, it seems to me, we are inviting plenty of superficial forgiveness. Remember when we were kids and we did something we shouldn't have done, and our Dad caught us and told us, "Now go tell Mary you're sorry"? It's the last thing in the world we wanted to do, but to cut our losses and to keep the peace we went ahead and apologized to Mary. Mary clearly wasn't in the mood to believe us, but her Dad was there and chimed in, "Well, Mary, what do you say?" Mary, too, knew what she was in for if she didn't agree to forgive, so she said the words and everybody (except you

and Mary) were happy. It was a superficial forgiveness, though, a forgiveness in word only and it didn't accomplish anything. We've all had experiences in which both apologies and forgivings have been superficial and meaningless, a mere social formality.

Real forgiveness is more than that. It can take some time before we're honestly ready to forgive, assuming that the forgiveness is to be deep and sincere. The dictionary reminds us that we may, at times, want to forgive before we can. Sometimes we just need to be patient with ourselves.

Another myth about forgiveness is that it is exactly the same as reconciliation. It's not, though the two are related. It is possible, I think, to forgive someone, and still not to want that person to be in our life. You might understand and forgive someone's road rage, yet still not want to get into a car that they're driving. Or you might forgive someone's abusive behavior toward you, yet not want to subject yourself to any more of it. We hear so much about Pope John Paul II's visiting the man who tried to kill him; yet that act of reconciliation took years to accomplish.

In our discussions about forgiveness, it is often implied that forgiveness means that we come to condone what the other person is doing. Not true. Sometimes we are asked to forgive people with whose beliefs and actions we strongly disagree. Jesus told us to love our enemies; he did not say that we had to become close friends with them. It is possible to forgive someone and wish them the best, and at the same time to realize that we need to protect ourselves from what they do and say. Forgiveness is not even an invitation for the other person to change. Forgiveness means letting ourselves be freed from the burden of negativity and hoping that the same might be true for the one who has offended us. Forgiveness means that our hearts become tender and compassionate; it does not mean that they become naïve or careless about who or what they associate with.

Another consideration: different traditions have different ideas about what forgiveness consists in. Some traditions believe that forgiveness cannot (and should not) occur until the other person sincerely apologizes and shows repentance through their actions. Others see forgiveness as a gift we can give, even when the other person refuses to say they're sorry. We need to get clear as to where we stand on this issue. Personally, I take Jesus' rule about turning the other cheek as meaning that we do not have to wait for the other person to apologize before we forgive.

But it's not what I personally think that matters. Listen to the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, commenting, as it so happens, on the parable of the merciless servant, which is the Sunday Gospel reading:

"2843 Thus the Lord's words on forgiveness, the love that loves to the end, become a living reality. The parable of the merciless servant, which crowns the Lord's teaching on ecclesial communion, ends with these words: 'So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.' It is there, in fact, 'in the depths of the heart,' that everything is bound and loosed. It is not in our power not

to feel or to forget an offense; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession."

That last sentence is extremely important. We often think of forgiveness as something we do. The Catechism tells us that we cannot do it by ourselves, but the Holy Spirit can do it in us if we let him.

The Catechism, in a later passage, makes it very clear that this definitely extends to forgiveness of our enemies.

It's time to sum up. What, as Christians and Catholics, must we do about forgiveness?

1. We must forgive all who have injured us, as much as seventy times seven times. 2. We must forgive our enemies, even if they continue to besiege us. 3. Forgiveness does not imply that we agree with our enemies and with what they are doing. 4. We can be patient and give ourselves time, but the overall intention must be to arrive at forgiveness. 5. We must understand however, that forgiveness is not within our power; but even so, we must not use that as an excuse, but rather must turn our hearts over to the Holy Spirit to work forgiveness in us. 6. We can see forgiveness as a gift given to us; it has nothing whatsoever to do with whether the offending party has expressed remorse. 7. Forgiveness is not always the same as reconciliation; there are times when it is not wise for us to have the other person in our life. Nonetheless, we forgive him or her and treat him or her charitably in our thoughts, words and deeds. 8. Our heavenly Father will treat us as we treat others with regard to forgiveness.

This is a tough challenge for tough times. My greatest comfort in struggling with all of this is the Catechism's remark that forgiveness is not something we can do alone, but can do only by turning our hearts over to the Holy Spirit.

--Posted September 9, 2005

# Job and the Three Ways of Seeing

September 1, 2005

## JOB AND THE THREE WAYS OF SEEING

By Father Paul Keenan  
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As I write this column, the words, sounds and images of desperation continue to pour from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast of Mississippi in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Especially if you know that part of the country, it is hard to believe what you are seeing. The loss of life and destruction of property are simply staggering, and the news seems to worsen every day.

Across the board, the needs right now are so primitive, so basic. Media coverage focuses on the devastation, the loss of life, the heroic rescue and humanitarian efforts that are being required just to get life to a basic standard. Yet even now, in these early days, you begin to hear the deeper questions coming to the surface. Considering this tragedy along with the multiple other tragedies that have been happening with great frequency around the world, should we be thinking that the world is about to end? Is God punishing us for our sins? Are such events meant to represent a test of our faith? If God is so loving, why does he permit such things to happen?

In the light of these heartrending events, it is not surprising, I suppose, that my thoughts have been turning to the Book of Job. Job's devastation was similar to that of that caused by Katrina; like many of its victims, he lost all his property and most of his family and his health as well. As the drama of the book unfolds, Job's wife and three of his friends repeatedly try to get him to admit to a wrongdoing for which he is being punished. Time and time again, Job maintains his innocence, strenuously arguing that he did nothing wrong. Typically, we treat Job as the innocent whose suffering is just part of the unfathomable mystery of life. "Poor Job," we cry. "At least, in the end, he got everything back."

Whether or not we have been faced with the unspeakable losses we have been watching on our television screens this week, most of us have faced heartbreaking tragedy in some form or other. Like Job, we are bewildered. We are sure we didn't do anything that deserved such a sad outcome. Or even if we feel we did somehow deserve it, we wonder why we were singled out for punishment when so many others do evil and seem to go unscathed. It just seems so unfair.

Taking a second look at Job, it seems to me that Job's greatest mistake lay in his becoming so preoccupied with his innocence. He allowed his wife and his friends to

direct the course of his mind instead of taking charge of his own thought processes. In so doing, he missed the important thing he should have been focusing on - namely, what he needed to do next. "Look, I've lost everything here. Do I want to rebuild my life or do I want to give up? If I do want to rebuild it, where do I start? Will I be able to rebuild it to the extent I did before? Do I want to shoot for a greater life? What does that mean? Do I envision my new life as being just the same as the old one, or do I want things to be different?" If Job were a modern man, he would certainly ask those questions, and even more.

But let's take a third look at the story. Reading it once again, I find that there's a deeper insight in this book than anything we have uncovered yet. Take a look at Job 42:10, just prior to the end of the book: "The LORD restored the prosperity of Job." In those words is contained the lesson Job most needed to learn - that his former prosperity had not really been the result of his own efforts, nor had it been lost through any misdeed of his. It was God who gave, God who took away, and God who restored (twofold, by the way). Job needed to see that what he regarded as his gains and his losses were manifestations of a greater truth - that there is a divine plan for every single aspect of creation, that each aspect of the plan has its unique meaning, and that God knows better than we what is happening. And in the end, it is God who restores the property, not the know-how or stick-to-itiveness of Job.

What does all of this suggest to us as we look at New Orleans and Biloxi? To date I think, the media has done a remarkable job of showing us the heartbreaking tragedy, people's first reactions and the initial efforts at restoring the barebones basics. In mystical terms, you might call this the "purgative way" - the level of basic, raw, human suffering. At this point, we cannot even think about "meaning."

There is talk about restoration. We are told it will take months and even years. Here, human know-how and the search for meaning will surface. God's guidance may, in some instances, be called upon for energy and inspiration. This might be considered analogous to the "illuminative way" of the mystic - ideas and inspiration and plans that get you beyond the purgation. The media will show us some of that, though doubtless without the mystical slant.

Yet here's the real question, I think. Like Job, will we allow our minds to be directed by what we see and hear and read, and by what others say and lead us to assume? Or will we stay in charge of own mind, and live by the greatest lesson of the Book of Job? As we look at the flood and the rubble, will we get caught up in thoughts about the end of the world, who's to blame, punishment for sin, and anger at God? Or will we hold fast to the great truth of Job - that in prosperity, in adversity and in restoration there is something and someone greater than anything we can fathom; that he is the one who gives and who takes away; and that when he takes away it is not for the sake of being cruel, but for the sake of freeing us from our petty visions and notions that cannot satisfy and that are hard-wired to fall apart? Can we find and focus on him...and trust? If so, we will have reached the "unitive way," the deepest level of thinking, loving and living. In this realm, truths

cannot really be told; they can only be shown to us. Can we be silent enough, critical enough, and patient enough to seek those signs and follow them?

If we can, we will, in time, see a restoration that will be magnificent.

--Posted September 1, 2005

# Renewing the Mind

August 27, 2005

## RENEWING THE MIND

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Thirty years ago, when I was a young college Theology instructor, I used to speak in my classes about "metanoia" or change of mind and heart, the kind of thing we need in order to follow Christ. I used to speak of it as a kind of "brain transplant." If science were able to allow us to change our mind in the same way it allows us to have a heart transplant or a kidney transplant, we would be able to put aside the thinking of our current generation and instead to "put on the mind of Christ."

Looking at the Second Reading for the Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, I realize that there existed both something right and something wrong in that comparison. What was right about it was the sense that the thinking of Christ is very much unlike the thinking of the world about life, success, failure, love, truth and so many other of the deeper aspects of life.

What was wrong about it was that it made it seem as though the movement from world-thinking to Christ-thinking had to happen in one fell swoop. When you're in your twenties, I suppose, that is how it seems; and, of course, it can happen that way. There are many instances of that, in which a profound spiritual moment leaves someone finding himself or herself deeply changed from one way of thinking to another in the wink of an eye.

Yet looking back from the vantage point of thirty years, the words of St. Paul (Romans 8:2) stroke me very differently: "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect." Paul speaks about being transformed by "the renewal of your mind," and his words bring with them the realization that oftentimes the transformation into the ways of Christ comes not in one lightning-flash second, but rather over a period of time. Were we transformed all at once, there would be no need for Paul's injunction about "the renewal of your mind." The renewal would simply take place once and for all.

Yet the fact is that often we intuit slowly and we change slowly. Sometimes, we do not even understand why the longed-for changes in our mind and heart do not come more quickly than they do. We reflected last week upon "the gift of faith," and at times it is

beyond us why, despite all of our best efforts, God does not appear to bestow that gift upon us more quickly than he does.

There are a thousand answers to that question, and no real answer.

What Paul tells us is that our transformation often comes through our day-to-day effort of keeping the Spirit of Christ alive in our minds and hearts from day to day. We get to feeling we are making some progress, and a phone call, a letter or a personal encounter sets us back again, and we become discouraged. Paul tells us to find ways of keeping ourselves in contact with inspiration on a daily basis, so that we go forward, not backward, in times of discouragement.

Perhaps there is yet another answer. Perhaps the "renewal of our mind" does not require the changes that we seek to be either exclusively instantaneous or excruciatingly slow. Perhaps there is room in a lifetime for both. I look at the lifetime of the Savior, and there I find both the "Aha" moments (the Baptism and the Transfiguration) and the agonizing, day-to-day crawl towards the Cross and Resurrection. There are the words "This is My Beloved Son in Whom I Take Delight" and there are the words "How I want to cast fire upon the earth, and how I long for it to be accomplished." One lifetime, two sets of experiences.

What we do know for sure is that we, in Christ, are called to "cast fire upon the earth." A fire can be a huge blaze, or it can be the warmth of a fireside or a campfire - it is still fire, nonetheless. We miss the bulk of Romans 12 in the liturgical reading, and it would be good to go back and read there all of the practical ways in which Paul suggests that we can cast fire on a daily basis. But the nub of it is found in these words: "Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good."

In those words lie our challenge and our inspiration. We may or may not have in our lifetime another of those great transforming moments. We most certainly have this day and every other day. In the Gospel, Matthew 16: 21-27), Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." It is certainly a daily thing, with God's inspiration at the ready to guide us and lift us along.

--Posted August 27, 2005

# Two Questions and a Gift

August 19, 2005

## TWO QUESTIONS AND A GIFT

By Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

When we think back upon our experience with teachers, we inevitably come up with a list of really good teachers, those who were outstanding and truly memorable. Usually that is a "short-list" in comparison with all of the others whose classrooms we graced over the years. There may be several reasons for the excellence of the those on the short-list, but certainly one quality they had in common was their ability to take our thought to a whole new level. "They taught us to think," is often how we describe them.

When we look at the Gospel for the Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (Matthew 16: 13-20), we can see why Jesus has so often been described as a great teacher. Often in the New Testament it is said that Jesus was recognized as a great teacher because "he taught with authority," unlike other spiritual teachers of his day. But it's also true that he taught people to think, to question, to challenge and to work their way from puzzlement to hard truths.

But is there more than that, I wonder?

The gospel scene begins innocently enough: Jesus is in a teaching session with the disciples. He begins by throwing out to them a fairly straightforward question: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" This is rather a "no-brainer": the disciples have been going around from village to village, and as they visit each place, they stop in the town square and listen to what people are talking about. Jesus has become a topic of considerable interest, and when the disciples come to town, naturally enough, people seek them out. "What's it like being with him all the time?" "Is he the same in private as he is in public?" "How does he do the things he does?" "I've heard that he is really John the Baptist come back to life." "No, he's not John the Baptist; he's Elijah." "Well, I think he's Jeremiah come back again." The disciples have heard it all, and in this question, Jesus asks them simply to report back to him what people are saying. The apostles readily chime in with their answers about the various things they have heard during their travels.

The apostles have done well, and I'm sure Jesus is pleased with them. Their answers show that when they go about from place to place, they are really listening to what people are thinking and saying. A good apostle needs to have the gift of listening and needs to have a gift for understanding what is on people's minds.

But it doesn't stop there. Jesus knows that a good apostle needs another trait in order to do his job well: he needs to evaluate what the people are saying and to see whether or not there is any merit in it. In order to do that, an apostle must have his own convictions. It's not enough for an apostle simply to parrot back the wisdom of the village.

So Jesus asks a second question, "Who do you say that I am?" The disciples' faces fall. It dawns upon them that just because they have been traveling around with Jesus doesn't mean they don't have their doubts about him. Sometimes his teachings make sense and sometimes he leaves them scratching their heads. Even though they may have some reservations, it's still fun being with him and getting the inside scoop on this great personality whom everybody is talking about.

All of that changes with Jesus' second question. "Who do you say that I am?" Suddenly, it's decision time. No more avoiding the issue or covering it over with pleasantries. The answer to that question necessitates their taking a stand on every issue that Jesus has raised during his time with them. They could say, along with everyone else, "You're John the Baptist" or "You're Moses" or "You're Elijah" or "You're one of the prophets," but they've heard those answers before and they know there's something not right about them. But, heavens, are they quite ready to say that they think he's the Son of God? It's decision time, the question is out there begging for an answer.

Peter finally comes forward and says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus praises that answer and adds something very important: "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father." In other words, this is not an answer that has come forward from any of the town squares. Moreover, it's not an answer that they would get by putting together all of the teaching and the miracles they have seen or heard - not an answer they might have logically deduced from the teachings and deeds of Jesus. No, it is something more; it is the revelation of God himself. "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father." Jesus takes the disciples to the ordinary, beyond the ordinary, and even beyond that. It is truly an amazing moment, for he leads them to where Truth overtakes them.

Now, what about us? I think this gospel story can help us to grow in a similar way. We hear people say lots of things about Jesus - he was human, he was divine; he was merely a great teacher; the New Testament tells us his every word; the New Testament was made up by the early Church; Jesus gave us his real body and blood in the Eucharist; the Eucharist is only a symbol of his presence; he physically rose from the dead, there was nothing beyond the empty tomb - by this time we have just about heard it all. But now the other shoe drops: "Who do you say that I am?" Can we honestly say that he is "the Son of the living God"? On the one hand, so many miracles are done in his name and so many hearts are healed. On the other, there are terrible wars, persecutions, disasters and famines and so many prayers seem to go unanswered. We can go back and forth, back and forth, while the Master taps his foot waiting for our answer.

We cannot get to Peter's answer, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," by repeating the answers of the marketplace. We also cannot get to it by reasoning our way

to it: it is not the logical conclusion of any premise. That answer is a gift from God. We call it the gift of faith, and it is indeed a gift. The footnote on Romans 8: 33-36 (the Second Reading of the day) in the New American Bible gets it exactly right: "As Paul has indicated throughout these chapters, both Jew and Gentile, despite the religious recalcitrance of each, have received the gift of faith. The methods used by God in making this outreach to the world stagger human comprehension but are at the same time a dazzling invitation to abiding faith."

If we want Peter's answer, we have to receive and accept it. It is ours for the taking; God has given it to us. It is not the product of our gossip, not the product of our cleverness. Nor, to the one who has received it, is it just one theory equal to and as good as any and all other theories about who Jesus is. When we receive and accept that answer, we cross a threshold and from that moment we are never the same. We enter into a new relationship with God, with ourselves, with each other. The dots in our lives and in our universe become interconnected in a way we have never experienced before. We see life in a new way. The old ways no longer satisfy. We have been reborn.

To bring our thoughts full-circle, was Jesus a great teacher? Yes, but he was more. He was (and is) "the Christ, the Son of the Living God," the one who helps us to go beyond the uncertainties inherent in our ordinary conceptualizations of him, and to go beyond our reasonings as well. More than a teacher, he delivers us, if we will let him, from all of this, and places us straight into the arms of a waiting God.

--Posted August 19, 2005

# Good News, Bad News

August 11, 2005

## GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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There's good news and there's bad news, and they're the same.

The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. (Romans 8:29, from the Second Reading for the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time.)

I'll say it again: the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.

Why is it good news and bad news?

It's bad news for those who are looking to "get off the hook" in terms of doing what is right or in terms of fully standing up to the challenge of living out God's word. We'd love to be able to slip out from under God's gifts and call, but we just can't. God doesn't take them back once he gives them to us. At different times and seasons in our lives, he allows us to live them out in different ways, but that's not the same as trying to escape from them. When we try to slip out from under God's call and his gifts, or to ignore them, we find a creeping sense of dissatisfaction in our lives. Something isn't quite right, even if on the surface everything appears to be in place. A gift is a call from God that just itches and begs to be used. The prophet Jonah tried desperately to escape from prophesying to the Ninevites. He stowed away on a ship; the sailors found him and threw him overboard. He managed to get inside the belly of a whale; the whale spewed him ashore in three days. Reluctantly, he gave in and did a magnificent job of getting the Ninevites to turn back to God. There's more to the story, which you can read in the Book of Jonah; but for our present purposes, the point is that Jonah really needed to do what he was called to do, even if he didn't like it.

Not doing what they are called by God to do on earth is one reason for the massive dissatisfaction with their lives that many people experience today. Somewhere along the way, they sacrificed what was deepest in them, the contribution which they are called by God to make to the world. The call just doesn't go away. It nags and tugs and pulls and begs to be listened to. In some instances, people will listen and really change their lives. But many times, they'll disregard the call or drown in it alcohol or silence it with toys. But it will not be silenced. Once God gives the call, he doesn't take it back.

Now, the good news: the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. They don't leave us even when we abandon them, and if we have abandoned them, we can repent and pick them up again. But the other aspect of the good news is that the gifts and the call do not disappear when they are challenged; indeed, they are strengthened. There are a lot of influences in the world today that seek to silence good men and women who are following the call God has given them. Some days can be discouraging and it can be tempting to give up or to give in. But when people are following their call from God, challenges simply push them forward to new and greater triumphs.

The Gospel story for the Twentieth Sunday is Matthew 15, the story of the Canaanite woman who has a strong inner conviction to intercede for Jesus on behalf of her daughter. Interestingly, Jesus decides to test her conviction. (Who knows, maybe he has other plans for her once her daughter is healed?) Every test serves only to strengthen the woman's resolve. That is how it is when people are following their true path - there are challenges, but instead of deterring them, the challenges spur them on.

There's bad news and good news in these readings: the gifts and call of God are irrevocable. Let us pray for the grace to hear the inner call of God and to follow it with all our hearts.

--Posted August 11, 2005

# Habit and Fear

August 8, 2005

## HABIT AND FEAR

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel for the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Mt 14:22-33) is St. Matthew's account of Jesus' walk on the water. During a storm on the lake, Jesus walks toward the disciples as if to join them on board their boat. The disciples are terrified, Matthew tells us, and believe that what they are seeing is not Jesus, but a ghost. Peter recognizes Jesus and, at Jesus' invitation attempts to walk across the water to him, but falters and nearly drowns. Jesus saves him and queries him about the strength of his faith.

Just why did the disciples mistake Jesus for a ghost? The answer - habit and fear. If we look a little more closely at each of these elements of our own experience, we might learn something about how we unwittingly block our recognition of the Lord in our lives.

"Habit" means doing things the way we have always done them. It implies following the usual patterns. If you remember your high-school Latin, you might suspect it comes from the word "habere," which means "to have," and you would be right. That's the very essence of a pattern - you have a certain way of doing things and you hold onto it.

Another meaning of the word "habit" has to do with wearing a distinctive dress or costume. One example is the "riding habit." Another - more familiar to Catholics - is the religious habit worn by many members of religious communities. The "habit" is the particular attire that they wear, which tends to be uniform among members of each religious group.

The word "habit," then, means that we do things in a uniform manner (no pun intended) much of the time.

Habit, of course, is a good thing. It frees us from having to think about how to do simple tasks each time we have to do them. Our habits help form our personality. There are, of course, bad habits, which make it easy for us to do things we shouldn't be doing.

But habits can become a problem when they start to limit our vision. When our habits of thought become entrenched and begin to tell us, "Listen to me: there is no other way to think or to experience things" - that's when the trouble begins. Our habits are meant to serve us. We are not meant to serve them. When our habits begin to exercise tyranny over us - that's when we need to step in.

Habits of thought become entrenched in a number of different ways. They become re-enforced by parents, teachers and other authority figures. They are passed along to us by society as the only sensible way of thinking. Our peers repeat them over and over again to us, sometimes subtly, sometimes pretty bluntly. The common element is that when they become entrenched, they try to become our masters and to make us their servants.

Here is where fear comes in. When habits become entrenched, they gladly teach us that if we should dare to think beyond them, something terrible will happen to us. "If you dare to challenge us," they sometimes say, "we'll make you the laughing stock of this town." Or, "Everybody knows that this is the way to think. You'd look like a fool if you ever called this bit of common sense into question." Or, "Look, this is how we think. If you dare to think otherwise, we'll ruin you." Thus, habits of thought entrench themselves through intimidation, through fear. Often enough, we're not even aware of it.

Our habits can limit what we observe. There's a great story in the movie "Crossing Delancey" in which a man who has worn the same old hat for years, has the hat blown off by the wind while he is crossing the street. He goes crying to his friend who simply smiles, reaches into his wallet and pulls out five dollars for a new hat. The man gets the new hat, and suddenly he's a whole new person. He sees life in a whole new way, because the old hat kept him from SEEING life.

It's just a story, of course, but it explains a great deal about what is going on with the disciples in the boat. They are not accustomed to seeing Jesus or anyone else walk on water, so they can't get themselves to comprehend what they are seeing. Their habit of thought says, "People don't walk on water." Jesus wants them to change that and to see that "with God, all things are possible," and he almost, but not quite, succeeds with Peter. Fear sets in and re-enforces the old thought: "Peter, if you believe what you are seeing, you are going to drown." See how it works?

If you want a non-biblical example of how this works, I have heard that, when Christopher Columbus arrived on shore, he had the hardest time getting the aboriginal people to actually see his ships. They had never seen huge ships before and it took some time before they could actually, visually, see them. Their beliefs affected what they could visually process.

So a question to ask ourselves about this gospel story is - when we complain that we do not see Christ showing up to help us in our daily lives, to what extent might we be blocking that vision because of habit and fear and the tyranny of old thought? Thoughts like, "God is so busy, why would he bother with my requests?" or "There's no help for me," and so on - could make it difficult for me to see and to believe what God can actually do.

It's something to think about, so don't be afraid.

--Posted August 8, 2005

# Working Smart

July 30, 2005

## WORKING SMART

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"Come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk! Why spend your money for what is not bread; your wages for what fails to satisfy? Heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare."

If we were to read these words in a newspaper advertisement, it is for sure that people would come from far and near to the store that placed the ad. The shelves of that store would be empty in no time.

Yet these are the very words with which God invites his people in the First Reading for the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Isaiah 55: 1-3).

Imagine - could such a thing ever be true?

It's so "too good to be true" that people often interpret this passage as having a spiritual, not a material, meaning. "It's obvious," they say, "that here God is calling the people into his spiritual treasures, where they will find an abundance of grace, life, peace and satisfaction that no material food or drink can provide."

They are right - there is infinitely more satisfaction in what God can provide than in any of the things we can provide for ourselves. No matter what good providers we might be, no matter how well we can present the food and drink that we serve, nothing can compare with the way in which God can refresh us when we allow him to open his spiritual storehouses to us. That interpretation of the passage has a great deal to be said for it, and it is a lesson that we cannot afford to forget.

Yet alongside of that, let us not so readily dismiss a more practical interpretation of Isaiah's words. And dismiss it we do. How often have we heard people say, "That's all well and good, but you can't just sit around and wait for God to provide for you. The Lord helps those who help themselves, after all."

Here's a question that might help resolve matters for us: how many people do you know who truly love what they do for a living? You can answer that question for yourself, but my experience tells me - not many. It is commonplace to hear people talk about how much they hate their job (or jobs), how exhausted they feel and how they just "live" (or

"are dying for") weekends, vacation time and/or retirement. Despite all of the informational and labor-saving resources we have at our disposal and despite all of the gadgets and toys we have succeeded in creating, far too many of us have succeeded only in wearing ourselves out to the point of not enjoying the life we have been given here on earth.

What has happened to us?

Some philosophers of the human condition have opined, over the years, that society has alienated the laborer from the product and from the land, labor, capital and management that helped to produce it. Argue that if you will, but that's not really the answer.

The answer is that we have alienated ourselves from God. We have allowed ourselves to be seduced into thinking that God (if we believe that he even exists) is to be relegated to the purely spiritual and has absolutely no interest whatsoever in the success or failure of the material world. Add to this the concurrent belief that he will intervene in that world only on an exceptional - miraculous - basis. God wants us to remember him on the Sabbath, it goes, but for the rest of the week we are on our own. The yoke of land, labor, capital and their management - the art or business or whatever you will of living a human life - holds no interest whatsoever for God. Build what we may, it will all be blown to bits on Judgment Day and we ourselves will be judged by our spiritual fruits. Part of the human race wants to be remembered for the names it has placed on buildings and part hopes to Goodness that somehow it will manage to slide through to the upper and not the lower echelons of the Pearly Gates. Some, both. (I'm painting with a broad brush here, of course, but it's a pretty recognizable picture.)

What's wrong with it is that it presumes the alienation of the eternal from the temporal and the temporal from the eternal. The Isaiah passage quoted above speaks of the spiritual in material terms and of the material in spiritual terms - it's not an either/or. It tells us that God is interested in both. How could the Father who created his world not be interested in what we make of it? How could he not weep, seeing how we wear ourselves to a frazzle believing that the yoke of the earth is entirely on our shoulders?

When we believe in such alienation between Spirit and matter, we forget how to work and how to manifest. The most successful people I have known have been people who have told me either that their work was like play to them or that, rather than "working hard," they have learned how to "work smart." They have learned how to bring the spiritual and the material together in the practical living of their lives.

This is not about becoming "bone idle" and letting God do it all. It is about working together with God, not in isolation from him, much less independently of him. It is about taking God as the starting point of our labors in such a way that we see him as the source of our spiritual inspiration and energy, as the source of the land, labor, capital and management with which we work, and as the smart-working co-worker who will work alongside us, if we will let him, taking the yoke upon himself along with us and even, at times, in our stead. He both reaps the harvest and feeds us from it!

The Gospel for the Eighteenth Sunday is Matthew's account of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves (Matthew 14: 13-21). Reading this passage makes it abundantly clear that Jesus did not give these people either bread or inspiration: he gave them both. "They all ate and were satisfied" is a very telling phrase: it is "they" who were satisfied, not merely their stomachs. Reading John's account of this in his sixth chapter will bring it home even more.

When it comes to our lives and to our labors, if we are going it alone, we are thinking something that is incorrect and doing something that is incorrect. When we turn to God, allowing him to renew us and to guide us to a new and perhaps different understanding of our time here on earth, we will, at last, learn how to work smart - more easily and effortlessly -- with time and eternity working, not in isolation or in enmity, but in tandem.

Then, in the words of Paul from the Second Reading (Romans 8: 35, 37 - 39), "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

--Posted July 30, 2005

# The Habit of Anticipation

July 21, 2005

## THE HABIT OF ANTICIPATION

By Father Paul Keenan  
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As we work our way through Jesus' various descriptions of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Gospel for the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Matthew 13: 44-52) gives us three descriptions which Jesus presented in parable form. Remember, the parables were meant to interest those who were simply along to hear Jesus as a popular preacher and to provide some food for deeper reflection for those who wanted more than that.

The Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus says, is like a buried treasure, like a pearl of great price and like a net full of fish. On a superficial level, we can imagine Jesus telling each of these stories in a dynamic and exciting way which would interest and even entertain his listeners.

If anyone wanted to look more deeply into the stories, he or she would find a common element in all three, and that common element has to do with the difference between appearances and reality. In each of the three stories, the object of value emerges after first appearing not to exist. The treasure is buried and stumbled upon. The pearl turns up in the course of a search for fine pearls. The fish were underwater and were brought up from the depths in a huge net. In each case, no-appearance is followed by appearance.

Indeed, Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is like that. To the naked eye, it seems as if nothing is there. But to the one who looks more deeply, there is buried treasure, there is a really fine pearl and there is a ton of fish in the sea.

How does that work in real life? Let's look first at what we observed about Jesus' listeners. Some of them simply wanted to hear a popular and entertaining preacher, and that is what they got. Others heard exactly the same sermon, but because they wanted to hear something deep, they found the deeper meaning in it.

Similarly, we can go through life satisfied with the superficial, thinking what everybody else thinks and living the way everybody else lives. Doing that, we'll see life in a certain way and do what everybody else does. It's simple; that's how life is. No problem.

Or we can realize that there's a whole lot more to life than thinking like other people, and if we want that more, it can find us, just as the treasure found the merchant, the pearl found the pearl-seeker and the fish found the fisherman.

A lot of it has to do with anticipation, expectation. When we go into a day, do we anticipate that we might find something different, something really worthwhile, or do we expect that it's going to be one more day just like every other day? Today might be the day in which we find the love of our life, or have the experience that simply re-defines our whole life purpose, or we may see beauty, or truth or God in a whole new way. The habit of anticipation opens us to that possibility. Of course, it might not happen; but it won't likely happen if we think it won't or if we set the expectation that nothing new ever really happens.

The Kingdom of Heaven, then, is like the person who refuses to believe that today is going to be just like every other day.

Are you up for it?

Wow, did you see that gorgeous pearl over there?

--Posted July 21, 2005

# The Mastery of God

July 14, 2005

## THE MASTERY OF GOD

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The thirteenth chapter of St. Matthew's gospel contains that wonderful parable of the wheat and the weeds, and that is part of the Gospel reading for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. The tremendous wisdom of the householder in telling his servants not to pull up the weeds for fear of also pulling up and destroying the wheat gives us a great example of long-range thinking. When a crisis comes, we, like the servants in the story, often want to react out of panic and in doing so we can cause great destruction and lose the very thing we were striving for.

The parable, however, is really intended to be an end-of-time story, and the suggestion is that God is infinitely patient in allowing us to continue to grow in a world that is, figuratively speaking, full of weeds, things that tend to hinder growth and destroy life. There will be a day of judgment, a day when the wheat and the weeds will be separated, and we do not know when that day will be. Nonetheless, the Lord allows us to grow and to change and gives us many opportunities to flourish in the midst of our enemies.

This is a sentiment that emerges from the First Reading as well, which comes from Wisdom 12. God is mighty, and from his might comes justice, but also mercy. Along these lines, there is a saying in Verse 16 that cries out for our attention: "For your might is the source of justice; your mastery over all things makes you lenient to all." That's an important line, because it tells us that God's mastery over the universe is not that of a harsh and judgmental master, but rather that of a lenient one. In other words, God is so self-composed in his mastery that he remains gentle and patient in his exercise of it. He does not fly off the handle, but rather judges calmly and with kindness. In fact, the reading goes on to say that the only time the Lord really loses his composure is when people disbelieve in "the perfection of [his] power." When people treat him with respect, he treats them with respect. When people recognize his power, he empowers them.

Let's perhaps take that one step further. There is a tendency, down the ages, for human beings to try to strip God of his power. One contemporary example of this is the vague belief that since we now have so much knowledge and understanding, we really don't need God anymore. Believing in God was fine in less sophisticated times when we didn't know as much as we do now about how things work. But now we know enough that we can make up our own rules and be total masters of ourselves, and so God is really a useless hypothesis that we just don't need anymore. Or so the story goes. To the contrary,

the general confusion that we see these days about what it means to be human, about what is right and what is wrong, and about how to achieve any kind of lasting peace in the world is the result of our attempts to replace God with ourselves. How many times have we seen it in our own personal lives - we sail along on our own, we think, without bothering too much with God, and before we know it we find ourselves shattered and in pieces. It is then that we acknowledge the power of God; when we do, all is right again. As in the Gospel, God doesn't tear us up or destroy us, but rather lets us grow amid the weeds until we are ready to acknowledge him again.

The readings tell us about the power and mercy of God and of our need for God. The Second Reading, from Romans 8, tells us that not only is God merciful to us, but he comes directly to help us: "The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings."

And so we give thanks to our God, who is powerful, who is merciful and who comes to our aid, and we acknowledge how great is our need for him in our lives.

--Posted July 14, 2005.

# Parable of the Sower: How Jesus Thinks

July 7, 2005

## PARABLE OF THE SOWER: HOW JESUS THINKS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel reading for the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Matthew 13: 1-23) has some puzzles for us, as indeed it had for many of its original hearers. A principal one is that in response to the question as to why he chooses to speak in parables, Jesus seems to say that he does so in order to make it more difficult for people to understand what he is saying! We had best take a moment to sort that one out.

When Jesus tells the parable of the sower, he is speaking to a large crowd of people, many of whom most likely do not think very deeply about life. Jesus is a well-known speaker and healer, and, indeed an object of great public fascination. He is in their midst and they have gathered in great numbers to hear him. Now, if, say, such a large crowd had gathered to hear the Pharisees, for example, it is likely that they would hear a fairly somber lecture on a moral or theological subject, something which might go right over the heads of most of them. Jesus goes a different route. He decides to tell them a story, one that is entertaining, I suppose, but which also has a moral purpose which at least some of his audience might catch. If not, at least they would be entertained and not bored or turned off, and there's always a next time.

So he tells the parable of the sower; and the crowd, I am sure, delights, because Jesus is (as we hear it said on many occasions in the Gospels) such an engaging speaker. Most likely, they are pretty happy.

Not so the apostles. They hear the parable of the sower, and are not content to hear a nice story. They want something more. They also know that there is something more to the parable, but for the life of them they can't figure out what it is. Frustrated, they complain to Jesus that he teaches in parables, and Jesus reminds them they are at a deeper level of understanding than the multitudes and that they need to focus on how a parable works and how to decipher the underlying message that it contains. So as Matthew's account goes on, he breaks the story down for them and helps them to find the deeper meaning latent in it.

Something quite similar happened to us in the fairy tales we were read as children. They were wonderful stories, and kept us greatly entertained; and sometimes we managed to catch a glimpse of a "moral" or a teaching about life. Rereading these stories as adults (perhaps to our children and grandchildren), we might be astonished to learn that many of

these simple stories had much more complex meanings than we had ever imagined. It can be fascinating to see that beneath the apparent simplicity of the story lies a whole substructure of deeper meaning.

Thus we see that Jesus is trying to find a way to appeal to everyone - to those who can handle a deeper meaning and to those who can't or who can't just yet. That is what makes him such a wonderful teacher.

Now, then, what of the parable of the sower? Well, beneath the story line, the parable manages to say the very thing that Jesus is trying to do with the crowds and with the disciples. He casts a seed, and some see it not at all, others see it a little, still others see it for a bit longer but then get distracted by something and still others really see it and make the most of it in their lives. There's something in it for everybody.

Isn't it amazing to discover how Jesus thinks?

--Posted July 7, 2005

# You Don't Have To Do It All

June 30, 2005

## YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO IT ALL

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The readings for the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time reveal a powerful and, hopefully, welcome secret about living successfully.

Have you ever felt exhausted and discouraged because you have worked so hard and found your results far less than you had hoped?

Have you felt that this same sort of hard work is the only option open to you?

Are you struggling, say, with a difficult marriage or with raising kids and feel that despite your best efforts, nothing is happening? Or at least nothing good?

Understand this: hard work and struggling are not the secrets to a successful life.

I once interviewed on the radio a man who had written a book about how he became a millionaire. I said to him, "You must have to work incredibly hard."

"No," he replied. "I don't work hard, I work smart."

There's a difference. Working smart means knowing when to work and when to stop. It means that working all the time and constantly worrying about it dissipates your creativity and actually lessens your ability to achieve what you want. The key to working is to work smart.

And as for the struggling part, struggling does no good at all. If you believe that life is a struggle, then the only thing to do is to change that belief. Change it in your mind. Change it in your feelings. Change it in your intentions. Forget the results you have or have not achieved until now. Unless you want to see the same results over and over again, you must change your belief in struggle. It just doesn't work.

So what's the answer?

Sunday's Second Reading (Romans 8: 9-13) gives it to us. It's a little hidden when we first look at it, but it's there. Paul writes, "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Now, we have to be careful. Putting to death the deeds of the body

has nothing to do with suicide. Nor does it mean that you have to wait until death to experience the blessings you seek. In addition, it does not mean abruptly quitting your job or leaving your marriage or abandoning the kids. Why? Because none of the above has anything to do with the Spirit. They are desperation decisions on the part of the flesh. Paul specifically says, "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh..." What does that mean?

It means going back to last week's readings and remembering what was said there - namely, that the key to life lies in remembering that absolutely everything you have comes from God. Your soul, your body, the food you eat, the air you breathe - absolutely everything comes from him. You and I are not the sources of it. We get to have it only insofar as we open ourselves to receiving it from him. In fact, one of the reasons that our normal view of work doesn't work is that we are conditioned to think that we have to do it all, and unless we literally work like a demon we will never succeed.

When we work by the Spirit, we put a stop to both the mentality and the actuality of working as though we had to do it all and instead realize that God will do it all for us and in us if we only let him do it. What a different world we would have if we realized that we do not need to wear ourselves out working alone, but that by working for God we would achieve much better results and happier lives.

Because that's the situation, when it comes right down to it. We do not work for a boss or a corporation or for anyone else. On earth, we work for God and for him alone. If we would work "by the Spirit" as Paul says, we would live. He also says in the passage. "For if you live according to the flesh you will die." Looking at your life, does that sound familiar?

The Gospel (Matthew 11: 25-30) reinforces that and makes it very concrete and specific. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light." In other words, we don't have to struggle, unless we are stubborn and block what God would give us. "Come to me." It's as simple as that.

Even the First Reading (Zechariah 9: 9 - 20) speaks of this, though at first glance it seems far removed from it. It gives us a vision by which to fuel this renewed way of looking at things. "Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you." For just a moment, suspend the historical context of this reading and see it instead as a vision for you. You are "daughter Zion" caught in your present difficulties. The Lord is the king who comes to you, "a just savior, meek and riding on an ass." Why riding on an ass? Because a donkey is a beast of burden. The Lord rides on top of your burdens and actually uses them as a means of getting to you. He banishes "the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem, and the warrior's bow shall be banished." All of the oppressive thoughts, feelings, words, people and situations he will banish (if you surrender them to him and do not join the opposition by defending them). "And he shall proclaim peace to the nations [to you]. His dominion [notice, his

dominion, not yours or mine] shall be from sea to sea [your vision of what is possible for you shall become boundless] and from the River to the ends of the earth."

You are not alone. You do not have to do it all. God is using your burdens to reach you. Stop doing it all and let him establish his dominion.

--Posted June 30, 1005

# The Key of Life

June 25, 2005

## THE KEY OF LIFE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel for the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Matthew 10:37-42) is a real puzzler when we first look at it. But in some ways, that's just the point. Jesus wants to get his disciples (and us) to think differently, and in order to do that, he often speaks truths that fly in the face of what we normally think and believe. This passage is one example of that. Jesus tells the apostles that if they do not love their parents more than him, they are not worthy of him. The same is true for one's son or daughter.

What is going on here? Our ordinary belief is that we must love our parents above everything else, and a parent's natural instinct is to love his or her children above all else. Jesus calls that into question, because, as good an attitude as it is, it does not represent the whole truth about life. The whole truth is that everything we have - family, possessions, prestige and so on - comes from God and is an expression of God's love for us. We must, therefore, love God more than anything. That is not some sort of arbitrary command set up by God to test us. Rather, it is exactly, existentially, the way creation is. In other words, we are created to praise, reverence and serve God, and this is how we are to be and how we are to be happy. Everything, no matter how precious it is to us, is secondary and has merit only in relationship to our walk with God. And that, in turn, is because everything we have, God has given to us. He is the source of all our supply. Students of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola will recognize this as "The First Principle and Foundation," both of the Exercises and of life.

From this eye-opening declaration comes the key to living well. It is sometimes demanding, and it is to be practiced every day. ("Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.") It brings our entire web of relationships into its proper network with God ("Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.")

This principle also gives us important information as to how to manifest what we desire in life. We wonder why we seem not to get what we want and ask for, and often the reason is that we have not begun from the right principle. Jesus says, "Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward." In other words, our "reward," our manifestation, comes as a result of our alliance with the

First True Thought - namely, that God is the source of everything we have or manifest. This is true both of our earthly and of our heavenly rewards.

And in contrast to the widely-held and deeply-feared belief that when we give, we lose something of what we have, Jesus says, "Whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because the little one is a disciple-amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward."

For those of us who think that true success in life is hard to achieve, we would do well to meditate upon the phrase "only a cup of cold water" to see how simple and how easy it really is.

There is much to think about in this Gospel passage. In these mystifying words lies the key of life.

--Posted June 25, 2005

# Acknowledgement

June 19, 2005

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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"Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father." These words from the tenth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel are at the very end of the Sunday readings for the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time. We ordinarily think of these words as referring to public witnessing, and indeed they do.

But they have another meaning as well. They refer not only to our public witnessing to Christ, they also refer to our silent, day-to-day, acknowledgment of his presence and his essence as the Word of God. One can proclaim the Lord vociferously, yet not have taken the words to heart. The key is to do both.

The readings here refer to our making on a daily basis the decision to link ourselves to the power and presence of Christ, and to allow our daily decisions to be influenced by him. Many times, we think we would prefer to do things our way rather than his way; and when we do, we are affirming ourselves and denying him. In such instances, he must indeed deny us before the heavenly Father because we are not living up our true identity and there is no way in these moments that he can vouch for us. On the other hand, when we allow his love and his goodness to flow through us, we are affirming him. In turn, he affirms us to the heavenly Father. Put it all together, and this establishes a great pipeline from the Father to the Son to us and back again. We experience what we call the "flow." Everything seems easier to do, even the most difficult things. People show up who can help us. Ideas surface spontaneously when we need them. We wish we had something and suddenly it is there. And it's all because we have linked ourselves with Christ, affirming him so that he, in turn, can affirm us.

We do need to praise Christ before others. Yet when we do this without putting our entire selves into his ambience, things become a little flat and tasteless. The secret to spicing up our lives is to do that inward acknowledging in virtue of which we allow ourselves to be within the flow of God's grace.

That's when things really begin to happen

--Posted June 17, 2005

# Refrigerator Games

June 9, 2005

## REFRIGERATOR GAMES

By Father Paul Keenan  
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I know people who have posted a word game on their refrigerator door. All over the door are words and phrases, each inscribed on a magnetic piece of metal and attached to the door. Whenever someone passes by the refrigerator, they string together different words and phrases to make either sensible or amusing sentences. They constantly challenge themselves by seeing what combinations of words and phrases they can come up with.

If it hasn't happened already, I am sure that sooner or later, someone will invent a magnetic biblical phrase game that will allow people to link together random phrases from the bible. In a sense, I've invented that game already - there are three phrases from the readings for the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time that, linked together, give us a powerful message from God.

From the First Reading (Exodus 19: 2-6), I have selected the words, "I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself." From the Second Reading (Romans 5), the words, "while we were still helpless." And from the Gospel (Matthew 9), "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."

So let's string them together: "I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself while we were still helpless, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Hmm...that needs a little improvement, so let's cheat a little (when you invent the game, you can bend the rules, right?).

How about: "While we were still helpless [the Lord said to us], "I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself, [for] the kingdom of heaven is at hand?"

Now there's something to think about. And it's true; it happens every day, several times a day, in fact. It means that in the midst of the moments in life when we feel - or seem to be - helpless because the situation is overwhelming, we are caught in a habit of sin, or are dealing with the results of sin or other bad choices - in just those moments, the Lord comes in with his love and his grace, lifts us up on eagle wings, swoops us out of the situation and brings us straight to himself, because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Awfully long sentence, but the reality is very simple and straightforward.

Plus, it's absolutely true.

Want to see it work?

Stick it on your refrigerator door.

Notice what happens.

--Posted June 9, 2005

# Mercy, Not Sacrifice

June 2, 2005

## MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"What I want is mercy, not sacrifice." With these words (from the Gospel for the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time), Jesus gives us a great insight into God. It's amazing how often we hear people complain about the vengeful and punishing God of the Old Testament, when there are so many instances of his mercy, his forgiveness and his kindness. "Of the kindness of the Lord the earth is full," it tells us and to my mind, at least, that is the prevailing tone of the God of the Old Testament.

It's the same in the New Testament. It seems that the one thing Jesus consistently cannot stand is people who take a sacrificial tone about their lives. The person who sits in the front of the synagogue praying, "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like the rest of men," is the one who gets taken to task. On the other hand, the one who sits in the back of the synagogue praying, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner," receives the divine praise. The first person has a sacrificial tone to his prayer. He is doing lots of hard things that other people are not doing and he expects to be rewarded. The second man has no pretensions about himself. He simply relies on the mercy of God.

We are to be kind and considerate toward others, not because we "have to" but because we sincerely want to. The Good Samaritan is praised for this attitude. He has every reason to be resentful - it is late in the day and stopping to help the man is interruptive. The victim is a Jew and Samaritans and Jews hate each other. But instead, he gladly goes the extra mile, even offering to pay the man's expenses. For this the Lord praises him.

"What I want is mercy, not sacrifice." These words are meant to enshrine a way of life. With these seven brief words, Jesus gives us a key that opens the door to happiness both here and in the hereafter.

--Posted June 2, 2005

# Body and Blood of Christ

May 26, 2005

## **BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST**

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ brings to a close the group of very special Sundays following the celebration of the Ascension. It is fitting that a special Sunday be dedicated to reflection on this tremendous sacrament, this wonderful gift that God has given us.

From time to time, we read stories about brave and generous people who donate a kidney to someone else who is in need. Through their kindness, they give their loved one the gift of life. In the best sense of the word, it is truly a gift of themselves.

Yet even this great gift does not equal the gift that God gives us in the Eucharist. The Body and Blood of Christ are a true physical and spiritual giving of life and love on the part of Jesus. It is the giving of divine life. Moreover, it is the giving of divine life won through the Passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This gift cost a great deal of suffering - and even death - on the part of Jesus. It was something given, if you will, at tremendous expense.

This special feast to honor this tremendous gift is so appropriate, because often we take the gift for granted. Parents might remember times when they have given a child a very expensive present, only to find the gift unappreciated or at least not as appreciated as they had hoped. When we receive the Eucharist with less than full attention and reverence, we do the same thing to God. This is his gift of himself. It certainly deserves our reverence and our attention.

As we celebrate the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, let us exercise the true meaning of the Eucharist and give thanks to God for this very special gift. And let us resolve to receive it frequently, and with utmost reverence and love.

--Posted May 26, 2005

# One and Many

May 22, 2005

## ONE AND MANY

By Father Paul Keenan  
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At this time of year, as Spring approaches for those of us north of the Equator, we have the wonderful opportunity of looking up into trees that are just beginning to bud and to bloom. It's amazing, isn't it - we stand underneath one tree, and yet we see many branches and even many more leaves and buds and flowers on every branch.

When Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places," (John 14) our experience of the trees can help us to understand. We receive an insight into the nature of God's abundance. On the one hand, there is singularity - one tree. On the other hand, there is plurality or abundance - many places for leaves and buds and blooms (and birds) to dwell. Similarly, there is one God, and yet, Jesus tells us, a plurality of dwelling places for his many creatures.

The disciples Philip and Thomas were deeply troubled. Reclining around the table with Jesus at the Last Supper, they were deeply disturbed at the thought that he would leave them without giving them some sort of roadmap, some sense of direction. Could it be, they wondered, that Jesus was going to throw them to the wolves, take off on his own path and leave them clueless?

If you've ever experienced a moment of panic, you understand very well why Thomas and Philip thought the way they did. When we are upset, we tend to think in minimalist terms - there is one way out (and it probably won't work) or there is no way out. Jesus calmed them down by reminding them that there is indeed one way to the Father and it is he, and that there are many ways to get to him, many dwelling places of safety.

For us, as for them, this is great news. When a problem arises and panic sets in, think of that tree. Take the problem to Jesus, the one Way to the Father, who will guide you to look up and to see the many branches, the many avenues of resolution that are there for you.

--Posted April 22, 2005

# Prayers of the Faithful

May 20, 2005

## PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

By Father Paul Keenan  
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For Trinity Sunday, the Responsorial Psalm is from the Book of Daniel (3: 52-56). We read there many magnificent praises of God. But unless we go back to the context of the passage, we do not see that it is a section of the long canticle of praise sung by Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were cast into the fiery furnace when they refused to worship the gods of King Nebuchadnezzar.

But this is not a prayer offered from within the flames. It is a prayer offered under the protection of the angel sent by God to blow the flames out of the furnace and keep the men from being harmed. The passage tells us that the angel "made the inside of the furnace as though a dew-laden breeze were blowing through it." The men in the fiery furnace are unharmed. There follows a longer version of the passage we see in the First Reading for Pentecost.

Prior to that passage, we see something that challenges us to the very core. From within the flames, Azariah sings a hymn of praise to God! But more than praise, it is a hymn begging God's forgiveness for the people who have turned away from him and toward Nebuchadnezzar's gods. In it is contained a pledge to "follow you with our whole heart."

The pattern here is worth our noticing. Innocent men take on the guilt of their people, praise God, apologize and rededicate themselves to him. God responds by offering them protection. The men in the furnace are a foretaste of the mission of Jesus, who, though innocent, offered his life for our sins and in return was raised up from death.

It is interesting, too, because it reminds us that even in danger, God is with us. Even if we have turned away from him, we but need to ask his forgiveness and we will receive his protection and his blessing.

And finally, there is the lesson of how the faithfulness of a few can win the salvation of many. Perhaps when we are tempted to waiver, the thought of how our being faithful can put a powerful force into the world, will help us to stay on the straight and narrow path.

Amazing, isn't it, how one small act of faithfulness can have a powerful impact upon the lives of so many?

--Posted May 20, 2005

# The Two Bestowals

May 13, 2005

## THE TWO BESTOWALS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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If we reflect on the readings for Pentecost Sunday, we might find ourselves a bit puzzled. The First Reading (Acts 2: 1-11) recounts the events of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost. The Gospel reading, however (John 20: 19 - 23), tells about a previous bestowal of the Holy Spirit by Jesus upon the disciples on the "first day of the week," the day of his resurrection. Which one do we celebrate on this "birthday of the Church," and why do we have two accounts of the bestowal of the Spirit? Isn't that contradictory?

If we think it through, there's no contradiction; and clearly part of the Church's message to us is that on Pentecost we celebrate both bestowals of the Spirit. But why would there be two, and not just one? One answer might be that the disciples needed time to become accustomed to the power of the Spirit. Had they received it all at once, it might have overwhelmed them. Jesus was giving them a fifty-day period, most of it with him still with them, to become accustomed to their role as Spirit-bearing ministers.

Yet perhaps there's something more. We might wonder about the thought of the bestowal of the Spirit in parts or portions - a little now, a little later. Yet there are places in the Old Testament which refer to "portions" of the Spirit. Take a look at 2 Kings 2: 9 -10. Elijah the prophet is about to complete his work on earth, and he addresses Elisha. "When they had crossed over," the passage reads, "Elijah said to Elisha, 'Ask for whatever I may do for you, before I am taken from you.' Elisha answered, 'May I receive a double portion of your spirit.' 'You have asked something that is not easy,' he replied. 'Still, if you see me taken up from you, your wish will be granted; otherwise not.'" (Note that this reference to a double portion of the prophet's spirit comes in the context of his being taken up to heaven. Pentecost happened after Jesus has been taken up to heaven as well.) There is a precedent for speaking of portions of Spirit, even though there is only one Spirit involved.

Be that as it may, some real light comes when we go a step further and examine the respective natures of the two bestowals of the Spirit upon the disciples. At the first, Jesus says to them, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." The apostles are endowed with the ministry of forgiveness, and along with it the power and responsibility to discern the hearts of candidates for forgiveness.

The second bestowal of the Spirit is of a different nature. There are no formal words, no mandate, but rather an empowerment (though wind and fire) that facilitates proclamation (preaching in the various languages of the earth).

Going one more step, we can see that the order of the two bestowals is most enlightening. First, the discernment of hearts. Then, the power to proclaim. During his earthly life, Jesus had made it clear that true religion was not merely about uttering words and performing deeds; it was also a matter of the heart. If the heart of the hearer were not ready, the message, though true and powerful, would not be effective. By the same token, the disciples could not be fully effective proclaimers of the Word unless they were first discerners of the heart. Hence, the first bestowal of the Spirit empowered them to discern hearts and the second empowered them to touch those hearts with the Word. We see, then, that the order of bestowal was not random, but profoundly important. First the heart, then the message. That was how it was to be.

There is an important lesson for us in all of this. Receiving the Spirit is not simply a matter of performing spectacular deeds or even of proclaiming a remarkable message. It is also a matter of the heart. Like the disciples, our hearts must be empowered with wisdom and understanding or else the wonderful message with which we have been entrusted will be hollow. The disciples needed the fifty days to deepen and to grow before they could be sent out to evangelize. We, too, need to be attentive to our own inner growth and to let our message and our works proceed from Spirit-filled hearts.

--Posted May 13, 2005

# The Apostles' Five-Point Plan

May 6, 2005

## THE APOSTLES' FIVE-POINT PLAN

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The First Reading from the Seventh Sunday of Easter (Acts 1 :12 - 24) finds the apostles in a quandary. They can't do what they have been doing, and they can't move ahead. Jesus has ascended into heaven - it seems he has gone even more definitively than when he died. They saw it; they watched him go up to heaven. To make matters worse (in the short run), an angel tells them explicitly to stop staring into heaven. So there they are - they can't go back to their "normal" relationship with Jesus, yet they don't know how to move ahead. It appears that they are at an impasse.

The truth is, we are never at an impasse; and they are wise enough to realize it. So instead of doing nothing at all, they go to the upper room in Jerusalem, where they have been staying, and enter into an intense period of prayer.

Now, a strange thing happens (though this is not part of our First Reading for this Sunday). During the course of their prayer, Peter is moved to stand up and, recalling the betrayal and death of Judas Iscariot, directs them to select someone to replace him; and they enter into a process for doing so.

There can be no doubt that Peter is acting on a direct inspiration from his and the others' prayer. Otherwise, what he is suggesting is an act of downright foolishness, which would be human reason's assessment of his actions. After all, these people have not a clue about their future or how they are supposed to do what Jesus told them to do - to be his witnesses throughout the world. There's no earthly reason at this point to be naming another apostle. And yet, Peter is inspired to do just that. But not without some discernment - Peter gets everybody to pray about the decision. And then they take action and choose Matthias.

There's a model there for us, for times when we have our backs to the wall and have nowhere to turn. Perhaps it could be delineated in five simple steps. (1)Go to the upper room. Don't just give up; go within and pray. (2)Take supportive people with you. When possible, get other people praying, too. (3)Listen for any leads that might be forthcoming, even ones that might seem strange. (4)Discern the leads - get everybody praying again. (5)Take action.

This five-point plan worked for the apostles, and it can work for us as well.

One footnote. It's interesting to speculate as to what might have happened had Peter and the others not been so willing to follow the advice they heard. Could this have been a kind of test, to see if they were ready to receive the outpouring of the Spirit? Perhaps. So seek out and listen to God's guidance - it may be the key that opens the door to abundant blessings.

--Posted May 6, 2005

# Two Ways of Seeing

April 28, 2005

## TWO WAYS OF SEEING

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel reading for the Sixth Sunday of Easter (John 14: 15 - 21) highlights one of the great spiritual struggles we human beings experience in our journey on earth. Jesus tells the disciples, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live." Here Jesus underscores the difference between the vision that belongs to the world and the vision that belongs to the Spirit, and the struggle that we here on earth have in order to see with spiritual eyes.

From the time we are in the womb, we are subjected to the vision of the world. When a child comes into the world, he or she immediately becomes immersed in the opinions, feelings, and attitudes of people about what life is and how it works. The child learns the prevailing attitudes about whether life is sacred, about how to treat other people, about how to get along in the world, and about what makes for a successful life. These beliefs are often grounded in a pragmatic and indeed materialistic viewpoint that puts a premium on efficiency and short-term results rather than long-term outcomes and values.

The crisis of understanding often arises in one of two ways. As a child reaches the age of formal education he or she, through attendance at church and school, may be exposed to two opposing sets of teachings. On the one hand, there are the teachings of society - the things that "everybody knows" about how to get along and lead a successful life, and about what constitutes failure. On the other hand, there are the teachings of religion, which bring the commonly-known knowledge to the bar of a higher point of view and often contradicts it or corrects it. It is during these early years that the child learns how to deal with the dissimilarities between these two approaches. For example, he or she might learn that, "Well, those religious teachings are fine for Sundays and for religious fanatics, but the rest of us have to live in the real world." Alternately, he or she might learn something like, "Just because other kids cheated on their test doesn't mean you have the right to do that." The battleground is ready for the skirmish between the thoughts of the world and the thoughts of the spirit, and our child will have the life-long challenge of discerning what to think and to do.

On the other hand, the crisis might come in adult life. After a lifetime of faithfully observing the tenets of his or her religion, a person might come to believe, for one reason or other, that the religion has failed them. Major changes or a scandal within the religion might trigger the belief that the religion is not all that it claims to be. This, in turn, might

lead to a belief that all religions suffer from the same fatal flaw. Perhaps, one thinks, religion is inherently flawed and so concludes that it's best to use "common sense" and accept the "real world" point of view. Or it might work the other way: after a painful personal loss in which all or many of the cherished persons and things in one's life have crumbled to ashes, a person might say, "Perhaps not taking time for the spiritual was not the best idea in the world. I need to evaluate what is truly important in life."

However it unfolds, you and I have a lifelong struggle to decide which point of view we are going to follow. Jesus drew the battle lines very clearly - there is a spiritual point of view that is often incomprehensible to those who think the way people generally think. Learning to think spiritually demands that we set aside many cherished beliefs, including those held by the people who are closest to us. Josef Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) alluded to this inherently human challenge in his book "Introduction to Christianity." "In short," the Cardinal wrote, "there is no escape from the dilemma of being a man. Anyone who makes up his mind to evade the uncertainty of belief will have to experience the uncertainty of unbelief, which can never finally eliminate for certain the possibility that belief may after all be the truth."

Are we left, then, to flounder upon the surging waves, battered by the storm? It may seem that way at times, but it is the hallmark of the spiritual to fly in the face of "what seems." Here is where the words of Jesus steady us: "I will not leave you orphans." They are the words he said to his disciples just prior to the words we read at the beginning of this essay. Just as he held out that hope to them on the eve of his crucifixion, so he holds it out to us as we struggle with our dark night when it comes. The reward lies in our increased ability to see with the eyes of the Spirit, to know that the destruction and sadness that often appear are not the end of the story. More than that, Jesus told the disciples that he would send an Advocate - the Holy Spirit - to plead for us when we are unable to plead for ourselves. That is wonderful news, because it means that we do not have to struggle alone. When we do not know where to turn, the Holy Spirit comes and speak for us, calms the storm, and lead us into safety.

--Posted April 28, 2005

# Building the Kingdom of God

April 15, 2005

## BUILDING THE KINGDOM OF GOD

By Father Paul Keenan  
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We all know the difference between a worker who does his or her job conscientiously and one who simply doesn't care about it. Workers of the former kind put their heart and soul into the work. They care about what they do. They want to do it correctly and they genuinely enjoy what they do.

The second kind of worker is detached from his or her trade. Whether or not the work gets done correctly appears to be of little or no concern and whether or not the customer feels satisfied matters even less. There's a lot of that sort of thing around anymore. The first kind of worker is a rare commodity, and a treasure when found.

In the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Easter (John 10: 1-10), Jesus distinguishes himself from other shepherds. He puts it this way: "A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy. I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly."

We meet a lot of people who promise us life. They claim that what they have to offer us will make us love life, will help us to enjoy life more and to feel better about ourselves. But are they there when we need them? That's the test. Jesus is always there for us. He is the one who cares. When we unite ourselves with him, we find ourselves doing our work as he does his. We do it with care. We do it diligently and with concern for the persons who are benefiting from it. We do it with love.

And when that happens, our work becomes transformed. It becomes a means of building up the Kingdom of God.

--Posted April 15, 2005

# Emmaus Today

April 8, 2005

## EMMAUS TODAY

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (the Gospel for the Third Sunday of Easter) is a story that has captured the hearts of people for centuries. It is an emotional rags-to-riches story that shows how a surprise encounter with the Risen Christ takes two disciples from being totally disheartened to being alive with faith.

The progression of the days since the death of Pope John Paul II has had a similar effect on the hearts of the world. Saturday brought the sad news of the Holy Father's death. A mourning crowd applauded from under the window of the Holy Father's apartment, signaling its appreciation of the Pontiff's life. Bells tolled sadly in St. Peter's Square. The Office of the Dead was chanted solemnly. All was in mourning and sadness.

Many of the same things happened at the Holy Father's funeral on Friday. Bells tolled, the crowd applauded, and litanies and psalms were chanted in the course of the service. Yet this time, though sadness was present, there was an undertone of resurrection joy and hope.

In the services for the Holy Father, we saw the powerful effect of the Church's ritual, bringing us in prayer and song and symbol through the throes of grief into joy. We saw ritual, powered by the grace of God, breathing life into our weary souls. We were moved emotionally, as the Emmaus disciples were moved, from sadness into joy.

The Preface of the Mass for the Dead says, "vita mutatur non tollitur" - "life is changed, not ended." That is the hope to which we cling as we honor the resurrection of the Lord. It is our consolation as we reckon with the passing of our Holy Father.

--Posted April 8, 2005

# Wounds and Resurrection

April 1, 2005

## WOUNDS AND RESURRECTION

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Hearing the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter (also Divine Mercy Sunday), we discover one of the most tender of the post-resurrection accounts - the account of the doubting apostle Thomas putting his hands into the wounds of Jesus' hands and sides. It's a beautiful, tender story, perfect for a reflection on the mercy of Jesus.

But does it surprise you that, in his risen condition, Jesus would still have the wounds of his Passion? Wouldn't it seem as though the resurrection would wipe out all traces of the crucifixion? The fact that those wounds remain is a wonderful image for us of the intimate connection that exists between suffering and resurrection. Even in his risen condition, Jesus continues to identify with the sufferings of humankind. He never, even for a moment, abandons his care, concern and deep association with those who are needy and in pain.

As we reflect on this, we see a twofold movement between suffering and resurrection. From the perspective of suffering, the resurrection shows us that there is life beyond suffering, a way out of the prison in which we find ourselves. From the perspective of the resurrection, the suffering shows us that the resurrection has the higher purpose of bringing meaning and healing to the difficult moments of life. Suffering and resurrection work together in dynamic teamwork.

One other aspect of this is that we are able to identify with Christ more closely. Without his wounds, some might be inclined to think that somehow Jesus was incapable of understanding their plight, that he had crossed over a threshold that put him beyond the pale of their experience. The presence of the wounds in his risen state shows that we can indeed identify with Jesus, even when our sufferings are intense, and that he always identifies with us.

--Posted April 1, 2005

# Easter This Year

March 25, 2005

## EASTER THIS YEAR

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Following some of the events in the news recently, Catholics and other Christians can find much to think about in pondering the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. With rapt attention, the world is watching the Holy Father battle the forces of illness with determination, courage and faith. Recently, Cardinal Ratzinger was interviewed on a television program produced to air on Good Friday, which was called "The Pope's Calvary." That is truly an apt expression. At the same time, the eyes of the world are riveted upon the hospice bed of Terri Schiavo, whose life has for days been inching toward death as her parents valiantly battle to have her feeding tube restored. In both instances, we see the ravages of sickness. Where, in it all, can we find life and resurrection?

St. Paul is someone who can get you to think about things like this in a totally different way. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul uses the expressions "died with Christ" and "were raised with Christ" in ways that should really wake us up. Unfortunately, most of us pass over those lines without giving them a second thought. Yet in this epistle (see Colossians 3: 1-4), Paul says something to the people of Colossae that is really very bold: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above."

The question is: how have the Colossians died and been raised with Christ? It's clear that they did not physically die and come back to life. So what Paul is talking about is a spiritual death and resurrection, one that comes from their baptism. Paul is telling them that their baptism should make a difference in their lives, and that this difference has a great deal to do with a change of consciousness. Their baptism, he is telling them, should have marked the death of one form of consciousness and their entry into another.

What in the world does that mean?

In the preceding two chapters of the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul makes three things abundantly clear. The first is that accepting Jesus Christ means that one comes to acknowledge that there is a difference between what is visible and what is invisible. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." (Colossians 1:15.) The second is that God the Father has "delivered us from the power of darkness and

transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (1: 13-14.) The third is that Paul himself struggles daily to be conscious of the difference (to which his own conversion made him heir) between the visible and the invisible. The intended impact of this is that the Colossians, in their sufferings, are to remember that God has delivered them, that what they experience in terms of suffering is by no means all that there is, and that Paul himself is a model for them of how to maintain their focus on Christ in the face of their sufferings. In other words, they have resources to draw upon other than the bad news the world so often gives them. And so do we. The upshot of this for us is that our celebration of Easter implies that we recognize that the Truth about life is not necessarily, or even often, the truth about life that we hear from those around us. Just as Paul warns the Colossians about people who would deceive them as to how to find God, so we are challenged to keep our eyes on the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life and not become diverted by fads, fashions or false prophets. It also means that the Colossians - and we, too - have to avoid giving in to activities that represent doing what "everybody else" does. He tells them, "But now you must put them all away: anger, fury, malice, slander, and obscene language out of your mouths. Stop lying to one another, since you have taken off the old self with its practices." (3: 8 -9.) In other words, there is no room for anything but the mind of Christ.

It all comes down to one simple question: "What is the Truth?" Does acting maliciously in the ways Paul describes represent the Truth about who we are as children of God? Or does keeping our eyes fixed on the Risen Christ and knowing that we are called to rise above those death-dealing activities represent the Truth about ourselves? Is death the Truth, or is life?

That's the central question for us at Easter. We may celebrate Easter, rejoicing that Lent is over; and that is good. We may celebrate Easter, glad in the joyous news of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ; and that is better. But do we choose death-dealing actions or do we choose to act in ways that give life? Or do we give in to the morbid pessimism the world so often maintains concerning the sufferings of the Holy Father and the valiant battle of the parents of Terri Schiavo, not to mention her own battle of life and death that is the center of it all? St. Paul makes it clear that the true celebration of the Resurrection has consequences for our consciousness and for the actions that we choose to perform. We are new creatures, and the message is clear: we are to act accordingly, think accordingly and pray accordingly.

--Posted March 25, 2005

# Thoughts From Isaiah

March 18, 2005

## THOUGHTS FROM ISAIAH

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"The Lord GOD has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled, have not turned back. I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting.

The Lord GOD is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame." (Isaiah 50: 4-7)

These words from the prophet Isaiah constitute the First Reading for Palm Sunday. As I read them now, I like to think of Jesus reading these words in the course of his earthly life. On a day when he had been publicly challenged or threatened with stoning, I can imagine him going off quietly and reflecting upon these words, drawing comfort and consolation from them. Comfort, consolation and a sense of direction. Reflecting upon these words would have given Jesus a sense that he was following the Father's directive after all, that the suffering he was enduring truly was a part of the Father's plan.

At the same time, this passage from Isaiah kept the Passion in the forefront of Jesus' mind. Whatever he suffered now was just a foretaste of what was to come.

The response of the prophet and his suffering servant fueled Jesus' response as well. He set his face like flint, knowing that he would not be put to shame.

And we shall see it all unfold during this wonderful week.

--Posted March 18, 2005

# God's Timing

March 11, 2005

## GOD'S TIMING

By Father Paul Keenan  
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One of the most difficult aspects of the spiritual life for us to face is that God's timing is not necessarily our own. That's why Jesus' response to the news of the death of Lazarus (John 11: 1-45) is so striking. John tells us that Jesus was a good distance away from Bethany when he heard the news that Lazarus was dying. The dying man's sisters, Martha and Mary, presumed that Jesus would come right away to help his friend. Nonetheless, John tells us, Jesus stayed where he was for two days, presumably finishing up whatever he was doing. For all intents and purposes, he seemed to be doing nothing about the fact that his friend was terminally ill. When he finally did go to Bethany, he was greeted by Lazarus' two sisters, outraged that Jesus had not come and that, as a result, their brother had died. They were disheartened and angry with Jesus. He seemed to have done nothing to help his friends.

What happened? John has an odd way of expressing Jesus' decision to stay where he was. Listen: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he remained for two days in the place where he was." We can scarcely believe our eyes - he loved them and therefore he stayed where he was? That's certainly not what we would have done.

Yet Jesus' sense of timing was absolutely perfect. Think about it. Had Jesus gone to Bethany right away, Lazarus presumably would not have died, and that would have been wonderful. Yet waiting to come until Lazarus was dead allowed Jesus' loved ones to be part of a tremendous miracle that gave them a very special role in his ministry and in his passion, death and resurrection. He loved them enough to give them that privilege, even though it seemed that his decision represented the exact opposite of love.

God's ways are not our ways. When we're in doubt about what God is doing, the best thing to do is to trust.

--Posted March 11, 2005.

# The Best Man

March 4, 2005

## THE BEST MAN

By Father Paul Keenan  
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It's funny, isn't it, the way we use words sometimes? Our everyday language has all sorts of expressions that, while we understand what we are saying, really miss the mark somehow.

One of these is the expression, "The Best Man." I'm thinking here of weddings, where the Best Man is the witness from the groom's side. Now, think about it. In the context of a wedding, shouldn't the groom be the Best Man? If the bride didn't think he were the Best Man, why would she marry him in the first place? So where does that leave the groom? Is he the Second Best Man? Hopefully not. And where does it leave the Best Man? Is he really Second Best?

The frivolous musings ironically lead us into the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, where the question is, "Who really is the best man?" The first reading, from 1 Samuel, tells of the selection of David as king. No one thought that David was the best man for the job. He had a host of older brothers, any of whom, everyone thought, was better than he. But God had other ideas. He had David summoned from the fields where he was tending the sheep -- young David, innocent and inexperienced; and God appointed him the king. "Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the LORD looks into the heart."

The Gospel story (from John 9), is the lengthy follow-up to the cure of the Man Born Blind. Jesus is the best man in this story, but even the Son of God doesn't seem to get a great deal of recognition. The Pharisees, who think that they are the best men, think that he is an evil influence because he cured on the Sabbath. They further think that the man who was healed must be a sinner, even though the Son of God thought enough of him to heal him. The man's parents are afraid to chime in one way or the other. The man born blind knew exactly who the Best Man was, and proclaimed it to the Pharisees. In the end, he is blessed once again by Jesus.

It's a wonderful story, because it highlights the great and wonderful mystery that is at the heart of John's gospel and of our lives as Christians -- the wonder that the Son of God is the Word Made Flesh. He is truly the Best Man.

--Posted March 4, 2005

# God at Work

February 24, 2005

## GOD AT WORK

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel reading for the Third Sunday of Lent, the story of the woman at the well (John 4), is a familiar one to most of us. Jesus approaches a Samaritan woman, to her surprise, as she draws water from a well at midday. Jesus asks her for water, which also surprises her; and their conversation turns to the subject of living water, and eventually to revelations about her personal life, and in the end, to the woman discovering that she is speaking to the Messiah. It is one of the best-known gospel stories in the Bible.

There are two references in the story that give us some insight into the relationship between the work of God and our work. Astonished that a Jewish male has asked her for a drink, the woman is even more astonished that Jesus tells her that if she had only asked him, he would have given her living water. She says, "Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where then can you get this living water?" Later on, speaking to his disciples, Jesus tells them, "I sent you to reap what you have not worked for."

Both passages raise the question of who really does the work in the spiritual life. In our usual way of thinking, we tend to praise those who are "go-getters." They are the successful people who make it to the top. They get things done.

We often try to apply that same model to resolving problems in life. Sometimes we push solutions way beyond the point where our actions are doing any good. We become frantic in our pursuit of solutions to our problems. We simply must find something that works.

The Samaritan woman is thinking humanly. Jesus is talking about drawing water, but he doesn't even have a bucket. She doesn't yet realize that God has already provided the living water without any human effort.

The disciples, to whom Jesus addresses his statement about reaping, are making the same mistake. They want Jesus to eat, and he tells them that he has food that they know not of. And then he tells them that this food is the result of a harvest that has already been reaped. They do not need to bake any bread for him.

What are we to learn from this? We are to learn that God is the provider of absolutely everything we have. Anything we do or make is the direct result of his giving us existence, life and the means with which to live. From where we stand, we get the

impression that we are the movers and the shakers. Sometimes we think that we have to outdo others in order to attain the results we want. The reading is telling us that we already have everything we need in order to do what we are here to do on earth, and that if there is anything else we will need, God will be sure that it comes our way at the right time.

Does that mean that we are to do nothing at all? No, it means that we are to do our work in tandem with God, not in place of him. When God gives us life and the things we need, there is included with them a call to follow him, to look for his guidance and to act as he tells us to act. This is the great importance of the inner life, which is the way in which we develop our understanding of when and where God wants us to act, and when he wants us to rest. We will find that everything goes much more easily and effortlessly when we follow his plan and his way.

--Posted February 24, 2005

# Visions

February 18, 2005

## VISIONS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Most of us at one time or other have played a word-association game. You're given a word and then are told to quickly name whatever other word or words come into your mind. It would be interesting to do this with scripture passages. Given a particular passage from the Bible, what other passage or passages come to mind when you hear it?

The Gospel for the Second Sunday of Lent this year is Matthew's account of the transfiguration of Jesus (Mt 17:1-9). There is Jesus on the mountain with Peter and James and John, and suddenly there is a bright light and his garments become dazzlingly white and Abraham and Moses are beside him. It is one of the best-remembered passages of the New Testament, and a powerful testimony to the divinity of Christ.

If I were asked to pick a passage to associate with this one, I would not immediately think of the call of Abram (Gn 12:1-4a). Yet that is precisely the passage that the Church brings to our attention as the First Reading of the Sunday. Granted, both passages are calls by God, and both involve the presence of Abram/Abraham. But there must be something more. Why is the Church bringing this passage to our attention?

If we take a close look at this passage, we see that it has some remarkable insights both into the mission of Abraham and also into ours. This passage is a story of beginnings, yet it takes place in Abram's advanced years. At a time when most of us are tempted to settle, Abram is called to "go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you." In other words, Abram is leaving familiar territory in advanced years and going to a destination he does not know. God is asking him to leave behind everything he knows and to put his entire trust in him.

Many of us have had the experience of having had everything material collapse. It may have been through loss of health or loss of job or loss of money or loss of relationships. When that happens, we are asked to leave familiar territory and head into the unknown. It may seem as though there were nothing left for us in life, because we have left the known and don't know where we are going. That's true from a material point of view, but what about the spiritual?

The answer is, though we may appear to be at the end of our rope materially, our spiritual dimension gives us a vision. If we refuse to give in to the limitations of our material

vision, we can have a much higher, loftier vision, which is what God wants for us. In our story, God gives Abram that spiritual vision, and it is a powerful one. He will become a great nation, his name will be great, he will be blessed by God and he will be a blessing. Those who bless him will be blessed and those who curse him will be cursed. God sends Abram out from his familiar surroundings with a tremendous vision of universality, blessing and love.

There's a similar strain in the transfiguration story. Jesus has just been speaking of his suffering and death, and the transfiguration is, in effect, the spiritual vision that is to sustain Jesus through the torment he is about to undergo. Again, matter collapses, spirit sustains and restores.

What a wonderful vision for us! So often we find ourselves hurt and feeling abandoned and afraid when life takes a painful turn. Yet that is not the end of the story; indeed, it is not, despite appearances, a very large part of the story. The larger part is that God is sending us forth with his comfort, his blessing, his protection and his love. Our material vision may not tell us much about our direction, but our spiritual vision tells us that we are safe and secure. Now, we can be free from bitterness, anger, fear and the pull of painful memories.

Now we can see the association of the Abram story with the transfiguration story. Taken together, they are our story, and a lovely and hopeful one it is, indeed.

--Posted February 18, 2005

# Basking in the Light

February 10, 2005

## BASKING IN THE LIGHT

By Father Paul Keenan  
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One of the great themes of Lent is the increase of daylight that takes place both in the world and in our souls. (The word "lent" has roots that mean "long," in the sense of the lengthening of days.) Our days are getting longer and during Lent we pray that day by day the Light of Christ may grow in us, lengthening our spiritual daytime.

The Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent (Matthew 4: 1-11) is Matthew's account of the temptation of Jesus by the devil in the desert. The desert is a place of extremes and that includes the quality of its light. Its light is extreme, and so is its darkness. We ordinarily think about the intense sunlight and heat of the desert, so for the time being we can put our focus there.

The devil tempts Jesus, who for forty days has dwelt in the unmitigated light of the desert. Think about it - who can stand for any length of time the intensity of unadulterated sunlight? Anyone who has stayed on the beach for too long and has experienced painful sunburn knows the feeling. So does any one who has driven a car with the blinding sunlight ahead. We need our light to be modified, and we are not uncomfortable when it is not.

When it comes right down to it, the temptations are attempts to distract Jesus by having him excuse himself mentally from the intensity of the light. "Turn stones into bread. Jump off the parapet. Fall down and worship me (Satan)." It would have been understandable had Jesus allowed those distractions - wouldn't we? - but mercifully this was not to be. Jesus chose the intensity of the light and of the Father's love, its spiritual counterpart. Can we?

That is the challenge offered to us during Lent. Can we allow ourselves to bask in the Light of Christ, to let it become so important to us that nothing can tempt us away from it? Can we learn to say with confidence the powerful words with which Jesus repelled Satan in the desert, "The Lord, your God, shall I worship, and him alone shall I serve"?

--Posted February 10, 2005

# Salt of the Earth

February 3, 2005

## SALT OF THE EARTH

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"You are the salt of the earth." This line from the Gospel reading for the Fifth Sunday of the Year provide an excellent introduction to the Season of Lent. The Lord's reminder to us of our true identity enables us to reflect upon how we want to better live that identity and follow in the footsteps of Christ.

Pope John Paul II used these words, "You are the salt of the earth," as the theme of his remarks to the young people assembled for World Youth Day in Toronto in July of 2002. "Dear young people," he told them, "do not be content with anything less than the highest ideals!... If you have an ardent desire for the Lord you will steer clear of the mediocrity and conformism so widespread in our society."

Salt is especially given to overcoming mediocrity. When food tastes flat, we can put salt on it and enhance its flavor. Now, salt works in a very subtle way. People who are unfamiliar with salt may believe that by adding generous amounts of it, they will improve the taste of their food. They are disappointed when they discover that all they can taste is the salt. Salt works, not by imposing itself on the food by teasing out the natural flavors inherent in it. Salt brings out the best in what is there.

It's the same with people. Some people, when they share of themselves, impose themselves upon others and, in effect, overpower them. Instead of developing the natural gifts of the other, they suppress them. That usually has deleterious effects for everyone. Wise people know how to bring out the best in others. For example, people who employ good communication skills in their marriage know that they can criticize without devastating the other spouse. Parents who learn how to correct their children's behavior without screaming at them often find that their lessons bear fruit rather than cause resentment.

The same is true when it comes to sharing faith. There are those whose strategy is to be so forceful in communicating their beliefs to others that they unwittingly become oppressive. Under those conditions it becomes difficult for their listeners to absorb their lessons. It can cause great resentment when people feel they are being imposed upon. That is why in missionary work today there is a tendency to integrate a people's natural customs and cultural practices into the evangelizing message as a way of respecting and honoring the good that is already there.

Being the salt of the earth means not being timid about our beliefs, but rather being respectful in the way we present them. That respect can do more to win others than almost anything.

--Posted February 3, 2005

# Consider Your Calling

January 27, 2005

## CONSIDER YOUR CALLING

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"Consider your own calling, brothers and sisters," begins our Second Reading for the Fourth Sunday of the Year (1 Corinthians 1: 26 - 31). Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians gives us some good advice. On the feast of the Baptism of the Lord this year, I received an e-mail from a friend asking, "What does your baptism mean to you?" It was not your typical e-mail question, and it made me realize that it had been awhile since I really sat down to think about it. I'll bet it's the same for you as well. We can become so busy that we forget to consider something so very central to our lives. And that's exactly what Paul is saying to the Corinthians. They, too, were very busy and cosmopolitan people some of whose Christian observances Paul had to correct. But before going into all of that, Paul wanted them to put first things first and to think about their baptism. One of the things Paul suggests for the meaning of their baptism is humility. "Whoever boasts," he reminds them, "should boast in the Lord."

Looking at the Gospel reading (Matthew 5: 1 - 12), we find Jesus' reflections upon what one's baptismal commitment should mean. We know them as the Beatitudes. From beginning to end, they are the very heart and soul of our baptismal commitment to God and to one other. We eavesdrop on Jesus telling his followers, "If you recall these things and put them into practice, blessed shall you be."

It is good for us to be reminded that our life in Christ is not something that we gained by right, but by invitation. Because it is a privilege, it is all the more a treasure. Our readings encourage us to reflect upon that treasure and to let it show forth in our everyday lives.

-- Posted January 27, 2005

# John The Baptist, Jesus and We

January 20, 2005

## JOHN THE BAPTIST, JESUS AND WE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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There is no doubt that John the Baptist was a pivotal figure in the life of Jesus. From the prophet's leap in the womb of his mother Elizabeth to the baptism at the Jordan through the Baptizer's imprisonment and eventual beheading, John's presence always had a way of highlighting the next steps in the life and mission of Jesus.

The Gospel for the Third Sunday of the Year (Mt 4:12 - 23) shows the profound effect John's imprisonment had upon Jesus. "When Jesus heard that John had been arrested," St. Matthew tells us, "he withdrew to Galilee." In other words, Jesus felt drawn to go apart by himself, to withdraw, to reflect and to pray. Even to change the place in which he lived. It was such a somber moment for Jesus when he learned that John had been imprisoned. When the news reached him, it became clear that if John had been imprisoned for his dedication to the Kingdom of God, Jesus' own day of reckoning might not be far behind.

Though there is a withdrawal phase to his response, the story does not end there; and this is where we can draw a powerful lesson from the Lord. "From that time on," Matthew reminds us, "Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" In other words, Jesus' ministry became more focused than it had been before.

In addition, it was from this moment that Jesus took the inspiration to gather disciples around him. Matthew tells us that he called Peter and Andrew, James and John, two sets of fishermen brothers whom he called "fishers of men."

Whenever in life we feel the weight of adversity, like Jesus, we can take time to withdraw; but we cannot stay there. We can allow our adversity to give us new focus, and to draw new direction and life from it. That's the way of Jesus, and it can be ours as well.

--Posted January 20, 2005

# "I Did Not Know Him."

January 13, 2005

## "I DID NOT KNOW HIM."

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"I did not know him." Twice in the gospel for the Second Sunday of the Year (John 1: 29 - 34), John the Baptist makes that statement about himself and Jesus. It's a striking statement because, from St. Luke's account of John's leaping in the womb of his mother Elizabeth when Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus, visited her, we would assume that John would certainly have known his cousin. If we were going to reconcile the two accounts, we would have to say that the womb-knowledge of John did not carry over into his later consciousness. Clearly, what we are reading in this second account is meant to convey that John the Baptist did not recognize Jesus in his spiritual identity. John the Evangelist appears to be telling us that John the Baptist was going on pure trust in the inspiration of God to tell him what to do about Jesus. "I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'" Now, as a result, John the Baptist has seen and bears witness to the identity of Jesus for himself.

How do we know Jesus? We know him in lots of ways - from our participation in the life of the Church, from our reading and study of the Scriptures and other books, and from the testimony of others about him. Yet there is that defining moment when, like the Baptist, we are graced with the ability to acknowledge Jesus for ourselves. That is a whole different thing. "Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God." We still benefit from the witness of the Church, from the Scriptures, from the testimony of others and from the sacraments. Yet our faith has a more personal quality to it. We believe, not just because of what others tell us, but for ourselves.

There is an even deeper significance to John the Baptist's statement, given the fact that we are reading it in the Gospel of John. One of Jesus' key statements in that gospel is, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). It is clear from John the Baptist's statement that his coming to know the true identity of Jesus was freeing for him. Something was opened up in him that was not there before. Similarly, we are opened up and freed for life in the Spirit when we come to know Jesus.

The words of John the Baptist provide for us an invitation to know the Lord and to experience true inner freedom.

--Posted January 13, 2005.

# A Glorious Week

January 1, 2005

## A GLORIOUS WEEK

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

The week between Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord this year proved to be most interesting from a liturgical perspective. Epiphany, of course, honored the coming of the Savior as a light to all nations. Baptism of the Lord marks the bringing of that divine light and power to bear in the public life of Our Lord. In between there were the memorials of two men and a woman whose lives exemplified what it means to let the light of Christ shine forth in everyday life.

Tuesday, January 4, was the memorial of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821), the foundress of the Sisters of Charity. A New Yorker and a convert, a wife, a mother of five and all-too-soon a widow, she initially planned to teach in order to educate her own children. After a host of obstacles and complications she opened a school in Baltimore. Gradually, women joined her and a small religious community was formed which grew to become the Sisters of Charity. They established schools and orphanages in Emmetsburg, Maryland; Philadelphia; and New York. Mother Seton's schools were the model for the parochial school system that blossomed across the country. She taught her Sisters how to teach, and even wrote many of the textbooks. All the while, she never lost sight of the needs of the poor wherever she went. Her words inspire us: "We must pray without ceasing, in every occurrence and employment of our lives - that prayer which is rather a habit of lifting up the heart to God as in a constant communication with Him."

Wednesday, January 5, was the memorial of St. John Neumann (1811-1860). Born in Bohemia, he came, unannounced, to America after being told that Bohemia did not need any more priests. He arrived in New York City, where Bishop John Dubois ordained him in 1836. After working as a priest in rural New York State, he joined the Redemptorists in 1840 and became the Bishop of Philadelphia in 1852. In his time as bishop, he established fifty churches and a hundred schools and wrote extensively. Among his sayings: "A true education aims at the formation of the human person with respect to the good of those societies of which, as a man, he is a member, and in whose responsibilities, as an adult, he will share."

Thursday, January 6, was the memorial of Blessed André Bessette (1835-1932), affectionately known as Brother Andre. A Holy Cross Brother in Montreal, he had a special gift of healing the sick. When they came, he would rub them with holy oil. He was instrumental in the building of St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal and used St. Joseph's

oil to cure people. It is said that at the time of his death, 80,000 letters a year were coming his way, asking for prayers and healing. When doctors ridiculed his ministry, he would simply say, "I do not cure. St. Joseph cures."

Just as the solemnities of Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord inspire us to let the light of Christ shine through us, Elizabeth Ann Seton, John Neumann and Brother André are examples that encourage us to know that we really can accept the Lord's challenge.

--Posted January 6, 2005

# Epiphany

December 30, 2004

## EPIPHANY

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Feast of the Epiphany, sometimes known as the Feast of the Three Kings, is one of the highlights of the Christmas season, indeed of the Church year. The story of the arrival of the Magi represents not only the acknowledgment of the Savior by the entire world, it also marks the saving of the Savior's life by the ingenuity of the three visitors when they learned that Herod was about to kill him.

But down through the centuries, that Epiphany has set the stage for all the epiphanies - experiences of divine presence - that have occurred ever since. An epiphany is an experience of the presence of God. Just as in the first Epiphany, the Magi confirmed the divine nature of what to all appearances was an ordinary baby, so do we find the presence of God in things, persons and situations which, from our perspective, appear to be ordinary.

How easy it is for us to get trapped by ordinary observation and thinking. We easily become tempted to give in to weariness, discouragement and fear and to lose sight of the presence of God on our life journey. The pressures of life build up, and before we know it we've lost perspective. We need to be refreshed again, to remember that ours is meant to be a higher, spiritual, vision and that being victimized by negative and limited thinking is not an acceptable option.

We call them Wise Men, those Magi, and they teach us much about being wise. When we allow ourselves to see God in the ordinary moments of our lives, we act wisely, we respond more hopefully and learn how to remove ourselves from danger. We may not follow a star, but we do learn to follow the illuminating wisdom of God.

--Posted December 30, 2004

# The Other Face of Christmas

December 23, 2004

## THE OTHER FACE OF CHRISTMAS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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We celebrate Christmas and in so doing we remember and honor the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Mary. It is a joyous and wonderful time for many, a time of family celebration, renewed contact with friends, and best of all, a time to honor God and his infinite goodness to us.

Yet for many the days around Christmas are anything but happy. Many are suffering from health problems. Family difficulties can mar the joy of the season. Memories of those who are no longer here tug at the hearts of some. They experience the religious services and the various other celebrations of the birth of Christ, and yet they feel distanced from them. They simply cannot take part in the joy.

We tend to read the Christmas story selectively sometimes, choosing only those parts that evoke joy. But the gospel accounts of the first Christmas record many moments that remind us that all was not roses for the Holy Family.

When the angel Gabriel came to announce to Mary that she was to be the Mother of God, Mary's first reaction was to be deeply troubled. It was only with the angel's reassurance that she was able to surrender to the will of God and to find joy and peace in doing so.

When Mary told Joseph about her pregnancy, it was Joseph's turn to be deeply troubled. He wondered whether he should divorce her quietly. Again, it was angelic intervention that saved the day.

Mary and Joseph made the difficult journey to Bethlehem, with Mary on the verge of delivering the baby Jesus. They were told that there was no room in the local inn, and were forced to dwell in a manger, where Mary gave birth to the Christ Child.

When Herod learned about the infant Jesus, it became necessary for Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt to save the life of Jesus.

When Herod died, Joseph was instructed to return to Israel, but eventually left there for Galilee out of fear of Archelaus, and settled in Nazareth.

For all of the joy in the Christmas story, there is also a lot of inconvenience, difficulty and sorrow.

I point this out, not to mitigate the joy of this feast, but rather to emphasize that, for those who find it hard to be happy this year, there is a place to go with their feelings. They can turn in prayer to the Holy Family, who will understand their sorrows, and at the same time remind them that for every instance of sorrow in the story there is an application of God's guidance and intervention.

That knowledge can most certainly sustain them this Christmas season.

--Posted December 23, 2004

# Anticipation

December 17, 2004

## ANTICIPATION

By Father Paul Keenan  
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If you want to make something happen, there's no better way to do it than to use your gifts of visualization and imagination. Putting yourself mentally into the scene while you're working to get there will do wonders for making your desire come to fruition more quickly and with greater effect.

Medical schools discovered this a few years ago and put it to work in the training of doctors. A number of schools began the practice of letting the students see hospital patients on a limited basis so that they could have some of the experience of being doctors while still in their studies. Not only did it give the students more experience, it enabled them to think of themselves as doctors even though the attaining of their degree was still a few years away.

The Church employs this principle in helping us to round out the season of Advent and enter into Christmas. The Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent is Mt 1:18-24, the account of "how the birth of Christ came about." We are given a glimpse of the Christmas story - not the whole thing, of course, but a glimpse. We are asked to envision Mary having to explain to Joseph that she was pregnant with Jesus. We see Joseph wrestling with his thoughts and feelings. We sneak a quick look at his dream in which the angel appears to him and tells him to go ahead and take Mary into his home. And we experience Joseph's obedience to the angel's command. In so doing, we are placing ourselves at the heart of the story of the Incarnation in anticipation of the season. When Christmas comes in a few days, our hearts will already be grounded in the event.

At once we get a look at the Christmas story, and we get to experience the power of imagination. Two wonderful gifts in anticipation of the Christmas season!

--Posted December 17, 2004

# Prophetically Correct

December 9, 2004

## PROPHETICALLY CORRECT

By Father Paul Keenan  
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These days we hear a great deal about what is called "political correctness." Basically, it means couching opinions in such a way that they say very little and are offensive to no one. Political correctness generally ends up taking the clout out of opinions and rendering discussions about values bland and pointless.

In an age that exudes political correctness, it is refreshing to hear the readings for the Third Sunday of Advent. They bring us out of the desert of "PC" and into the moral courage of BC and AD. We might call their message - "Prophetic Correctness."

The First Reading, from Isaiah 35, is a joyous and hopeful reading that speaks of the qualities of Messianic times. Among those qualities are the strengthening of feeble hands, weak knees and frightened hearts. The watchword is, "Be strong, fear not, here is your God...he comes to save you."

The Second Reading, from James 5, is about patience, but it includes an admonition to "make your hearts firm because the coming of the Lord is at hand." As with the First Reading, the message is clear: the coming of the Lord strengthens and does not appease or attenuate.

Finally, in the Gospel, from Matthew 11, Jesus remarks that the reason the crowds went out into the desert to see John the Baptist was that he was anything but "a reed swayed by the wind." Indeed, Jesus points out, John the Baptist was a prophet and more than a prophet. John was not one to give in to flattery or conciliation. He was a bedrock of faith, a model of uprightness, a beacon of courage.

These readings give us much to think about in an age that often panders to a hollow relativism and tries to render it palatable. They remind us to take courage in the face of opposition. But at the same time they tell us why it is possible for us to do so.

The reason is: the Lord is near.

--Posted December 9, 2004.

# The Consistent Question

December 2, 2004

## THE CONSISTENT QUESTION

By Father Paul Keenan  
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One thing you can say about John the Baptist - he had an eye for consistency. In the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent (Mt. 3: 1- 12), John confronts the Pharisees and Sadducees who have come to him for baptism. Reminding them that his is a baptism of repentance, not merely a ceremonial event, he confronts them by saying, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance."

Produce good fruit. Don't just stand around telling me that you want to repent. Let your repentance prove itself in what you do. It seems that John had little tolerance for people who talked a good game but didn't follow through with actions.

What is very interesting is Matthew's later account (in Matthew 11) of a query that John makes of Jesus from prison. He sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" From Jesus' answer to that question, it is clear that he understands the question to be about his works. "Jesus said to them in reply, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.'"

In other words, when Jesus hears John's question, he understands the focus of the question to be, "Have you done the works you should be doing if you are the Messiah?" In other words, John has just leveled at Jesus the same challenge he leveled earlier at the Pharisees and Sadducees: do your works support what you say? Or are you saying one thing and doing another? Or perhaps saying one thing and doing nothing?

We can conclude that this criterion - making your deeds match your words - was the consistent litmus test of a person's authenticity for John the Baptist. It didn't matter to him whether he was dealing with a religious leader or with someone claiming to be the Messiah, the criterion was the same: do your deeds match your words?

That's the question the Church is posing to us during Advent. Do our deeds match our words? Do we claim to be preparing our hearts for the celebration of the birth of the Savior? If so, how can we document that fact in terms of our works? It is as though we are standing at the banks of the Jordan ready to receive John's baptism. Seeing us

approach him, he looks us squarely in the eye and tells us that we have no business being there if we don't intend to manifest our repentance in good works. Otherwise, it's just hypocrisy for us to be there.

It's a tough question to listen to, but then Advent is a tough season. If we pay attention to what it demands of us, we can recapture our commitment to Christ and let it play an ever-deeper part in our everyday life.

John's question is there for us. How shall we answer?

--Posted December 2, 2004

# Christ The King

November 18, 2004

## CHRIST THE KING

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Eucharistic Liturgy for the Solemnity of Christ the King brings us to a specific scene in the Gospels. Jesus is on the cross, undergoing a terrible agony. A crown of thorns has been placed upon his head, and the words "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" have been nailed to the cross just above his head. Clearly, he is being mocked, and only the truly perverse could find this scene anything short of brutal.

On either side of him are crucified two thieves. One joins the mob in making fun of Jesus. "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us." The other, though, is a truly remarkable man. He defends Jesus and proclaims the latter's innocence. Then he turns to him and says, "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom."

There is a tremendous mystery at work here. This man, known historically as "The Good Thief," somehow manages to let his vision penetrate to a point beyond what his senses perceive and realizes that, all of the mockery aside, this person next to him truly is a king. Perhaps in happier times he had heard or someone had told him about Jesus' remark, "My kingdom is not of this world." Or perhaps he perceives it on his own. In either event, he knows and proclaims with all his heart that Jesus is innocent of the charges and undeserving of the mockery. And he makes of Jesus a heartfelt request, "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom." In return, he hears the comforting words, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Where do we see Christ the King today? This gospel reading suggests that one place to look is wherever someone is being taunted or mocked, cruelly or unjustly treated. If we want to see what the Good Thief saw, we can begin there and, as he did, pray for God's grace to follow.

The seventeenth-century British poet George Herbert wrote a beautiful poem called "The Elixir" which summarizes this attitude.

"All may of Thee partake./ Nothing can be so mean {menial}/ Which with this tincture,  
'For Thy Sake,/' Will not grow bright and clean./

"A servant with this clause/ Makes drudgery divine: / Who sweeps a room as for Thy  
laws/ Makes that and th' action fine."/

Christ the King does not appear on a throne, but proclaims his kingship among the downtrodden and in small places and circumstances. Not only can we look for him there, but to our great delight, we can find him.

--Posted November 18, 2004

# The Case of the Missing Widow

November 12, 2004

## THE CASE OF THE MISSING WIDOW

By Father Paul Keenan  
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We do not read the story of the widow who put everything she had into the temple treasury in the Gospel for the Thirty-Third Sunday of the Year (Luke 21: 5- 19). But if we remember that the story occurs just prior to it in Luke's gospel, we get an important insight into how we might deal with the end times.

Recall, Jesus was watching various people make donations to the temple. He saw many wealthy people making their contributions, perhaps somewhat ostentatiously. Then he watched a poor widow give the only two small coins she had. "I tell you truly," Jesus commented, "this poor widow put in more than all the rest."

In Luke's gospel, we go from there to a discussion about the splendor of the temple, and then to Jesus' lengthy discussion of the end of time. Jesus' words caused consternation among his hearers and they do for us today. It's frightening to think about the end of the world, especially when you consider the accompanying judgment. Many a preacher has caused trepidation in the hearts of his or her congregation by enumerating the horrors of the end of the world.

That's why I like the story of the widow's mite. Calmly and without flourish, she gives to God everything she has. Nothing more can be taken from her. No earthquake, no thunder, no signs in the sun, moon and stars can shake her. She has given her all, and she is ready for whatever is to come.

The widow is a model for us when we think of the end of time. We must face it with utmost calm and confidence, but we can do so only if we have nothing left to lose. Not literally, perhaps, but in our spirits. It's an attitude that St. Ignatius Loyola called "indifference." By that, he didn't mean "not-caring;" in fact, he meant quite the opposite. By "indifference" Ignatius meant recognizing that everything we have comes from God and goes back to God. There is nothing we have a necessary claim on, yet we will always have everything we need. The widow gave her all and always knew she would have enough. She could face whatever might come - even the end of the world - with equanimity, because she put her trust in God.

These days especially, when terrorist threats play such a prominent role in the news, we can feel very scared. The widow gives us a good model for living each day. Her attitude

of complete dedication to God shows us that we can live peaceful and productive lives by living quietly and with utter confidence in God. Whatever comes, whatever goes, we appreciate what we have and know that God will never let us down.

--Posted November 12, 2004

# Zero Brides for Seven Brothers

November 5, 2004

## ZERO BRIDES FOR SEVEN BROTHERS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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There are places in the Gospel where we get real insight into the mind and heart of Jesus, and the Gospel reading for the Thirty-second Sunday of the Year (Luke 20: 27-38) is one such place.

The Sadducees do not believe in a resurrection after death, and so they come to Jesus with a story the intent of which is to say, "Isn't the concept of a resurrection a ridiculous one!" It's the story of a man who dies and whose brothers subsequently marry his widow and die. The question is, in heaven, whose wife will she be? I'm sure the Sadducees think themselves very clever to have come up with such a watertight story that can only serve to show that resurrection is too ridiculous for words.

Notice what Jesus does. Instead of making sport of their idea, he listens carefully to it and responds to it. He takes them straight to the hole in their argument, but does it in a way that shows that he takes them seriously. They're wrong, he tells them, in assuming that marriage was meant to carry over into heaven. Marriage, rather, is for here on earth. In heaven men and women neither marry nor are given in marriage, for "they are like angels; and they are the children of God because they are the ones who will rise." In other words, people will carry over into the next life, but marriage will not. It will have fulfilled its purpose. Having stated his argument, Jesus backs it up with authority - none other than the authority of Moses.

What a difference in the two approaches. The Sadducees ridicule what they do not believe in. Jesus, on the other hand, does not ridicule them, but takes their argument seriously and refutes it.

Jesus' approach here was the same one he took with sinners. Throughout the gospels, religious people complained that Jesus loved to be around sinners. They, however, being "righteous," would mock sinners, embarrass them, and even shun them altogether. Jesus' approach was to try to understand sinners - to listen to them, to comprehend them, to go in their door so as to bring them out his own. That's why he was so successful with sinners and why so many of them stayed with him after their conversion. They knew that he loved them, even while they were still lost. Who wouldn't want to be around a love like that, instead of listening to people who did nothing but express revulsion?

Looking deeply into this week's Gospel, we see into the heart of God. May we imitate his compassion and his mercy.

--Posted November 5, 2004

# Zacchaeus

October 29, 2004

## ZACCHAEUS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"He has come to stay at the house of a sinner." According to St. Luke's gospel (19: 1-10), these were the first words out of the mouths of the bystanders when Jesus asked the diminutive tax collector Zacchaeus to come down from the sycamore tree and to have him to his house for dinner.

Zacchaeus probably didn't lose any friends over this incident; it seems he was pretty well disliked already. Yet for his fellow citizens of Jericho, Jesus' words added insult to injury. They disliked Zacchaeus and wrote him off as a sinner, and now, wonder of wonders, Jesus was going to his house!

What is particularly interesting about Zacchaeus is that, when he climbed the sycamore tree, there was no indication that he was motivated by anything other than curiosity. Nothing is said at that point in the story that would lead us to believe that he was motivated by repentance. Yet it's clear that Jesus' overtures had a deep affect upon him: he gave half of his possessions to the poor and made fourfold restitution to anyone whom he had cheated. Jesus defined what happened as "salvation": "Today salvation has come to this house." By implication, Jesus was also saying, "and not to the house of anyone who stood around grumbling."

This little story is full of lessons. One is that as small a thing as curiosity about the Lord can result in salvation. Another is that envy has the ability to thwart the work of salvation for those who are envious. A third is that perhaps we need to be extremely careful about whom we dismiss as "sinners." Is being a sinner a stopping point (as it was for Zacchaeus's neighbors) or is it a starting point (as it was for Jesus)? And a fourth is that true repentance (such as that of Zacchaeus) results in concrete actions, not only in feelings or words.

As we hear this Gospel reading for the Thirty-first Sunday of the Year, we can pray that the Lord will come to stay at our house, and that we will have the grace and humility to change our lives as Zacchaeus did.

--Posted October 29, 2004

# Missions

October 21, 2004

## MISSIONS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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This Sunday is World Mission Sunday. On this day, we renew our understanding of the importance of those who spread the Good News of Jesus Christ around the world and who engage in numerous works of mercy in behalf of those in need.

When I was growing up, we thought of missionaries as priests and religious who spent their lives in foreign lands. As children we supported them with our prayers and by the coins that we placed in "mite boxes," little cardboard boxes designed to hold our pennies, nickels and dimes saved for the missions. At least once a year, a missionary would stop by our school and tell us stories of the missions. Many of us who were considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life imagined ourselves working among the inhabitants of some forgotten corner of the world. I remember reading mission magazines and even a book by a Father Charles McGoey called "Nor Scrip Nor Shoes," which detailed his experiences as a missionary in China. Missionaries like Father McGoey were often called "foreign missionaries."

Today, the Church's understanding of mission has changed in some important ways. For one thing, there is a much greater care to integrate a people's culture into their faith experience rather than to have them abandon elements of their culture as a requirement for turning to Christ or to the Church. When I was a young priest, I spent some time on a reservation, where the priests and Sisters were endeavoring to have the Native Americans (Arapahos and Shoshones in this case) integrate their language, music and religious practices into their life of faith and worship. It was a new experience for everyone; and all were excited to see how the ancient customs could enrich their practice of religion today.

Another important difference is the increasing realization that "missionary work" is not the exclusive domain of the clergy and religious, but is very much shared by laypeople as well. There are many groups of dedicated laymen and laywomen who serve as missionaries in various parts of the world.

Related to this is another change in the concept of mission. Much more widely than ever it is realized that each of us is a missionary in his or her own corner of the world. Parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts are missionaries to their families. People in the workplace are missionaries, touching minds and hearts in the normal course of their

everyday lives. Those engaged in helping professions are missionaries to those whom they serve. Homebound people are missionaries through their prayers, their good works and their offering up of their sufferings to God for the good of all. All of us are on a mission to bring the Lord into the lives of those around us.

This World Mission Sunday, we can pray with gratitude for those who go to other parts of the world to spread Christ's love. We can give thanks for those who are missionaries in various ways here at home. And we can ask God to strengthen our own sense of mission that we may grow in our awareness of our call from Christ to be lights in the world.

--Posted October 21, 2004

# UnJust Judge

October 14, 2004

## UNJUST JUDGE?

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel for the Twenty-ninth Sunday of the year (Luke 18: 1- 18) is a very puzzling one. In it, Jesus tells a parable about a widow who repeatedly asks a so-called "dishonest judge" to find in her favor against her adversary. The judge tries to ignore her, but finally gives in because of her persistence. He reasons, "I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and strike me." The passage literally says "hit me under the eye," which shows us why the judge was so cautious.

This passage from Luke is so intriguing that it merits our time and reflection. In a passage on persistence in prayer, why would Jesus use a dishonest and unfeeling judge as, apparently, a model for God?

Think about it for a minute and see if this makes sense in terms of your own experience - sometimes when we pray, we envision God as though we believed he were like that judge. Instead of seeing ourselves as praying to a loving God who is eager to do what is best for us, we pray as though God were cold, indifferent, and keen on vetoing our every request. We talk of "storming heaven" as though God would only answer our request if we made a sufficient nuisance of ourselves.

Jesus asks us to envision God differently. There's an interesting similarity between this passage and the story in Luke 12: 13-14, where a man approaches Jesus asking him to make his brother give him his share of the inheritance. Jesus asks him, "Friend, who appointed me as your judge and arbitrator?" Jesus distances himself (and therefore the Father as well) from that judicial model. Instead he asks, "Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them?"

But then, there is that sad question that closes this section: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?" What will faith be like on earth when Jesus comes again? Will we be trembling before a vengeful God when we pray, or will we confidently bring our requests to one who loves us?

--Posted October 14, 2004

# Chains

October 7, 2004

## CHAINS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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There is a wonderful sentence in the middle of our Second Reading for the Twenty-Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (2 Timothy 2: 8- 13). Paul says, "I am suffering, even to the point of chains, like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained." That simple declaration gives us much to think about in terms of the importance of the Scriptures in our lives.

Many times in life we feel chained. People feel chained to their jobs or to their health or to their relationships or to their financial situation or to their feelings. Though they may go about freely, they feel hampered by the situation in which they find themselves. Those chains can weigh pretty heavily and make them feel lost and alone. When Paul says, "The word of God is not chained," he is giving those men and women a powerful reminder that there is a different, indeed a higher perspective on their lives. The Bible presents a powerful message of hope and freedom. It tells many stories of burdened people who broke their chains through the help of God. Two such stories are found in this week's readings. The First Reading (2 Kings 5: 14 - 17) tells the story of Naaman, a valiant army commander, who was freed of his leprosy under the guidance of the prophet Elisha. Our Gospel (Luke 17: 11 - 19) tells the story of the ten lepers healed by Jesus, only one of whom came back to say thanks. In both cases, it appeared that there was no hope, no release from suffering. In each case, God broke through the chains and worked a healing. Whenever we feel that we are in chains, having nowhere to turn, the Word of God has the power to break those chains, through the power of the God whose Word it is.

But there is another sense in which Paul's expression can be effective. In this passage, Paul was speaking not only of the pressures under which he worked, but also of real chains: remember he was imprisoned for preaching Christ. He is saying here that, despite his physical confinement, his soul is free because he can still continue to pray and to reflect upon the Word of God. These words, then, have special meaning for men and women who are in prison and for their loved ones. The Word of God can be an effective help for them, nourishing their spirits and enabling them to rebuild their lives.

Yes, the Word of God is powerful, breaking our chains and allowing our spirits to soar.

--Posted October 7, 2004

# Small-Enough Faith

September 30, 2004

## SMALL-ENOUGH FAITH

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The apostles were having a difficult time of it. Jesus was instructing them, and he was telling them all sorts of things which were difficult to understand and almost impossible to do. The last straw, it seems, was what he told them about forgiveness. "If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he wrongs you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I am sorry,' you should forgive him." (Luke 17: 1-4.) How in the world could anyone expect to figure that one out, much less put in into practice!

Exasperated, they asked him, "Increase our faith." That was a very sensible prayer. Obviously, their faith wasn't big enough to grasp what the Lord was trying to teach them. They needed a bigger faith, right?

Wrong again. In fact, the Lord told them that their faith should be the size of the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that produces the largest of trees. "Don't ask for your faith to be bigger," he told them, "ask for it to be smaller."

I'm sure that must have baffled the apostles even more. St. Luke gives no indication that they understood him at all. In Chapter 17, Jesus went right on to cure lepers and to talk to Pharisees. The disciples, it seems, lapsed into silence.

How can a faith be too big, and when is a faith small enough? From this gospel passage (part of which forms the Gospel for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday of the Year), one approach to this question is to say that if you can't figure out forgiveness, then your faith is not small enough. It's too big.

Perhaps forgiveness really is a good example. It seems that part of Jesus' message here is that the apostles (and just about everybody else) made a huge thing out of forgiveness. "How many times must I forgive my brother? Give me a formula so that I can figure out whether I have to forgive him this time. Is there a certain number of times beyond which I don't have to forgive him?" Jesus' answer: "Stop making it so complicated. Just forgive him. Every time."

As Chapter 17 in Luke continues, Jesus shows other dimensions of a simple faith. There's a problem, by all accounts a huge one. "What in the world are we going to do about those

Samaritans? We hate them; they hate us. Will it ever be any different?" Once again, Jesus says, in effect, "Stop making such a big problem of this. It's simple. If you want to 'do something' about the Samaritans, start by walking into their territory. Stop avoiding them. Put yourself among them." And he walks right into their midst.

Then there is another huge problem: the lepers. You have to make sure you don't go near them, touch them, or associate with them. They are deformed, smelly and obnoxious. Jesus says, "The problem about the lepers is simple. Embrace them." And he goes and touches and heals ten of them. And in the end, guess what? The one that comes back to thank him is - gasp - a Samaritan!

So here's what we can learn about the difference between a faith that is too big and a faith that is small enough.

A large faith creates problems by magnifying things out of all proportion. A small faith creates solutions by simple direct action.

A large faith creates impossibilities. A small faith creates opportunities.

A large faith makes you feel helpless. A small faith makes you feel empowered.

--Posted September 30, 2004

# Who Does God Root For?

September 29, 2004

## WHO DOES GOD ROOT FOR?

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Who does God root for when Notre Dame or Holy Cross or Fordham or some other Catholic college plays ball? If you're an alum of one of those schools, the answer to that question is very clear to you: God roots for your alma mater. Of course, the perennial question remains: if God is rooting for your team, how come it loses from time to time? It seems that shouldn't happen.

In the Gospel for the Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Luke 12: 13-21), Jesus deflects a similar question from someone who wants the Lord to settle the inheritance dispute between his brother and him. In effect, Jesus tells the man that he is not there to be his financial or legal adviser. As eagerly as the Fighting Irish want God to be on their side did this man want Jesus to side with him against his brother. Nice try.

The readings for the Eighteenth Sunday tell us that there are two ways of seeing the world - a higher and a lower - and that we are expected to choose the higher. "Think of what is above, not of what is on earth" (Colossians 3) St. Paul advises the Colossians. Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes puts it in as dire a way as possible: "Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!" Jesus reminds his friend with the inheritance that not everyone who stores up treasure on earth will necessarily be rich in heavenly treasure.

Why is this important? Is it simply another religious attempt to downplay the importance of material goods? Not at all. It's about telling us that we are meant to look at the world through spiritual eyes and not to focus exclusively on matter, titles and things.

How does it work, this spiritual vision that we are supposed to have? In the case of the man who confronted Jesus, instead of convincing himself that somehow God was on his side and against his brother, it would mean praying for the best for all concerned. In the case of the Colossians, Paul wanted them to see that they didn't have to be satisfied with immorality greed and the view that God was on their side and against their enemies. "Here there is not Greek and Jew," he tells them, "circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all."

There's the answer: Christ is all in all. It is Christ who takes us beyond the limitations of ordinary thinking (where more is better, might is right, and my ethnicity is better than yours) and instead says, "Everything is holy." What an opportunity that fellow missed

when, instead of coming to Jesus for spiritual advice, he came to him for legal. There was his one shot at talking to the Son of God on earth and he blew it. How many times we have done the same thing and missed an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Does that mean that we shouldn't come to God with our problems? Not at all. That fellow could have come to Jesus and asked him what would be the best way to resolve the dispute so that good would be done for all. Behind every material problem lies a spiritual insight. Coming to Jesus for help in times of need, we come asking him to increase our spiritual consciousness so that our problem may be resolved with the highest good for all.

Who does God root for? He roots for himself, and gives everyone his blessings.

--Posted July 29, 2004

# Old Habits Die Hard

September 23, 2004

## OLD HABITS DIE HARD

By Father Paul Keenan  
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We often hear the expression, "Old habits die hard." The Gospel for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday of the Year takes it one step further - some old habits do not die at all, even though they should. The story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19 - 31) is often taken to be a story about potential evil inherent in riches. But when you look closely at the story, it's not the riches that are the problem - it's the attitude of the rich man both before and after his death. In fact, the real problem is that his attitude is exactly the same after his death as it was during his life. Dying, apparently, has taught him nothing, nor have the tortures of the underworld.

We can identify the rich man's attitude. Both in life and in death, he believes that it is the business of other people to provide for him, and if they can't or won't do that, he has no interest in them. During his lifetime, Dives (as he is often called) had no interest in the leper at his gate, for the leper had nothing to offer him. Now that he is on the "other side," so to speak, he still has no real regard for the (former) leper. Dives' whole consideration of him lies in whether he can, first, get him a drink of water and, second, go and tell his living brothers not to make the mistake he made. His problem lies not so much in having a great deal of wealth as in allowing the wealth to establish in him the belief that others are there only to serve him. Put simply, he's a taker, not a giver; and that's his real problem.

In Luke's gospel, this story was told because some Pharisees sneered at Jesus' story about the unjust steward (last week's gospel) and his reflections upon money and its use. That, in turn, was part of Jesus' response to the earlier Pharisaical sneering about his welcoming and eating with sinners. Again, it comes back to an attitude toward life more than an attitude about money. The money is secondary to the attitude that the sick and the sinners are not worthy of human consideration.

The underlying question is, whom do we consider unworthy of being treated as human beings? Are we takers or givers? Are there people in whom we have no interest because we feel they cannot do anything for us? Have we consciously or unconsciously set up a club in which those who are not virtuous enough or wealthy enough in our estimation cannot hold membership?

God does not have such a club, and he has no qualms about laying bare the foundations of those who do. If we are very discerning, we will see that the questions here are not asked of Pharisees from two thousand years ago. They are asked of us. Like the brothers of Dives, we have an opportunity to hear the message or to ignore it. The story is for us to ponder.

--Posted September 23, 2004

# Small Matters

September 16, 2004

## SMALL MATTERS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Now, here's a word game for you. The Gospel for the Twenty-fifth Sunday of the Year, taken from Luke 16, contains a saying by Jesus about entrusting people with large matters only after they have proven capable in small matters.

Here's a question for you, one that may help you get a fresh insight into the saying. The question is: what part of speech is the word "matters"? Of course, in Jesus' saying, the word "matters" is a noun - being faithful in small matters.

But suppose we changed things a little and turned "matters" into a verb. That would make our phrase into an actual clause: small "matters". Now that gives the truth that Jesus expresses a whole new twist. In fact, it gives us the underlying principle behind what he actually says. One must be faithful in "small matters" because small "matters"!

When we forget to be faithful in small matters, it's because at some level we have chosen to ignore the fact that small matters. There's an old song (dating, I must confess, back to my childhood and before) entitled "Little Things Mean a Lot." It's true. But we can get busy, or annoyed, or forgetful and fail to take time for the small things in life that not only can give us a great deal of pleasure but which also keep our attention honed in on important niceties in life. Things like "please" and "thank you." Things like grace before and after meals. Being considerate in the parking lot after having just given the greeting of peace in church. In many homes, family meals have gone the way of all the earth - a real loss of something small that really matters. Gentlemen used to tip their hats or make the sign of the cross when passing a church - but no more. I guess it seemed like a small thing that didn't matter. Kindness to employees and co-workers (and to spouses, too, let's not forget) often expresses itself in small words and gestures that make all the difference in the environment. At home, bringing a huge bouquet of flowers can be a wonderful thing, but so is helping with the dishes after a tiring day, even if it's not your turn. How many times have racial tensions or religious differences been overcome by a simple act of kindness!

Yes, these things are small, but they matter. When we lose sight of the small things, we lose the very basis of leadership. As Jesus says, how are we going to run countries if we can't take care of the small niceties in our personal relationships?

Yes, small "matters" in almost every area of life. May we listen to the words of Jesus and learn this powerful secret of life.

--Posted September 16, 2004

# Stories

September 9, 2004

## STORIES

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Most people love stories. They love to be entertained and to entertain others with their stories. Even more than hearing anecdotes, people love to share them. Being a good storyteller is very special. Made-up stories are wonderful, but true stories are even better. We can hear someone tell a story he or she has made up, but when the story is true and of a personal nature it really commands our attention.

The readings for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time are all stories. The First Reading (from Exodus 32) tells of a time when God was so angry with his people that he threatened to destroy them, and Moses reminded God of how he had freed his people and how he had promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to make their descendents "as numerous as the stars in the sky." It's a powerful story about how one man's prayers influenced God.

The Gospel reading (from Luke 15) is a compilation of three stories told by Jesus to show God's zeal for recovering lost souls. The stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost (prodigal) son are famous among Christians and non-Christians alike as reminders of the mercy of God.

But for me, at least, it's the Second Reading that is the best story of all. In it (1 Timothy 1: 12-17) St. Paul speaks in a deeply personal way about how God's mercy has taken hold in his own life. There is nothing quite like a first-hand account of something, and here we have it straight from Paul. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost. But for that reason I was mercifully treated, so that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in him for everlasting life." It's a first-person account of God's mercy and how it has affected not only Paul's life, but the lives of many others as well.

The mind loves logic, definition and principle. The soul loves stories. Each has its proper place in the life of faith. We can know in our minds that God loves us, but to hear it related in stories gives us confidence and hope that his steadfast love can touch us where we live.

--Posted September 9, 2004

# Leaving All Gracefully

September 2, 2004

## LEAVING ALL GRACEFULLY

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Years ago, I heard a very touching story about a couple whose sixteen-year-old daughter had passed away. There is probably no greater sorrow in life than to bury one's own child. Nonetheless, this husband and wife developed a beautiful way of looking at their loss. "We did not own our daughter," they said. "She was given to us on loan, and now we have been asked to return her to the One who loaned her to us.

"We would honestly have preferred," they reflected, "to have had her with us longer. But we are grateful for who she was and the joy she brought into our lives. We are grateful for the beautiful memories we will always share, and we look forward to the day when we will be together with her again."

Their reaction to their tragedy is truly remarkable. When the experience of loss comes our way, we naturally tend to become possessive about what we had, and we often feel angry and resentful, sad and depressed about our loss. Those are normal feelings, and I'm certain that, prior to arriving at their aforementioned response, our couple went through those feelings themselves. Yet somehow they managed to arrive at a perspective about their daughter's death that enabled them to honor her and still go on with life.

In the Gospel for the Twenty-Third Sunday of the Year (Luke 14: 25 - 33), Jesus gives a no-nonsense speech about the necessity of renouncing all of our possessions if we are to enter the Kingdom of God. That's a very difficult thing to do, emotionally. In the practical order, it is required of all of us as a condition of our existence here on earth. We came here with nothing; we will leave with nothing. In between there will be various sorts of losses and separations. Coping can be very difficult.

That is where the story of the couple can be helpful to us. Despite their grief, or perhaps because of it, they had caught the spirit of what Jesus was saying. It often takes us awhile to realize that we truly don't own a single thing, not even our bodies. Everything we "have" is given to us for our temporary use and enjoyment, and all of it comes and goes. The "going" can be very painful at times. Yet if we can recall ahead of time that we are blessed both in accepting what we are given and in letting it go when the time is right, we do a great deal toward experiencing wisdom and peace.

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# The Leader

August 25, 2004

## THE LEADER

By Father Paul Keenan  
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When I was a kid, the boys and girls in the neighborhood used to get together and join in various games. We'd pretty much make it up as we went along, and as it turned out we had a wide variety of things to do and to play. Seldom were we bored. It was great - it was an experience of neighborhood that probably is not available to many young people today. And we didn't have all the sophisticated electronic games and gadgets that are the staple of young persons nowadays.

I have often thought of one boy in particular. He and I were friends for several years, and we lost touch when my family and I moved away from the neighborhood. I have often wondered what became of him. My father, who never lost his propensity to find comical names for my friends, referred to him as "The Leader." The reason for that was that, almost without fail, whenever we kids would get together, my friend would announce, "I am the Leader!"

When you stop to think about it, it's amazing that he got away with it. But he did. Whatever the game, he would end up assuming the role of Leader, while the rest of us waited for his every command.

I hope my friend has done well in life. I am quite sure, however, that most likely he met people along the way who took him down to size. I hope so. If he did go through life as a Leader, he would need a humiliating experience or two to make him a good one. Lacking that humbling experience, he would be insufferable as a husband, a father or the head of a business.

In the Gospel for the Twenty-Second Sunday of the Year (Luke 14), Jesus talks about the importance of humility in leadership. He talks about the person who automatically goes to the head of the table at a banquet, assuming that he or she would have no less than the most exalted dinner place. How embarrassing it is for him or her to be told, "Oh no, your place is down at the other end."

On the contrary, Jesus recommends that, in order to exert true (spiritual) leadership, we take a different tack. Instead of automatically declaring, "I am the Leader," we should consider the possibility of taking our place among those in less exalted positions. We might well be left where we are, but it is also possible that we might find ourselves being called up to a higher place at the table.

This is great advice, not so much for its social astuteness as for its practicality with regard to life. Think of people who were great teachers, great parents, great employers. Weren't they people who maintained a common touch throughout their lives? Such leaders were not hesitant to exert their authority when the occasion demanded. But more often than not, their leadership was affected by listening and by persuading. "I am the Leader" was not part of their vocabulary at all.

My friend's family were churchgoers, and I hope he grew up to be one too. Somewhere along the way, perhaps he heard Jesus' parable and learned from the real Master the secret of good leadership.

--Posted August 26, 2004.

# Questions

August 19, 2004

## QUESTIONS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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A friend was talking with me the other day about the importance of asking the right questions. When you stop to think about it, there is a sense in which asking the right question is more important than getting the right answer, since it is the question that guides us to the answer and defines the parameters within which we receive the answer.

A good example of this is found in the Gospel reading for the Twenty-First Sunday of the year (Luke 13). As Jesus is traveling along through the various towns and villages, someone asks him a question: "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" It's a very good question, of course, but it reflects a certain attitude toward the answer it seeks. Framed within that question is a whole set of presuppositions about salvation. Life is so difficult. The challenges are so hard. It's so easy for people to slip up. God is so exacting a judge. Salvation is so difficult to attain. All of these ideas are hidden within the question, and you can almost hear the fear in the voice of the one who asks it.

Watching the way in which Jesus responds to that question, it is clear that he does not believe that it is exactly the right question to be asking. We notice that he does not directly answer the question. Instead, he gives some very prudent advice, telling the questioner to be sure to enter through the narrow gate - to keep his life focused on the right things and to make sure that his actions follow in line with that focus.

Then, Jesus shifts to another question, one that is more appropriate to be asking about salvation. The question is, "Who will be saved?" This is a very different question from the "how many" question of the passerby. Jesus shifts the question because, in discussing salvation, the question of who will be saved is far more important than the numerical question as to "how many" will be saved. And this question he answers by saying that people will not necessarily be saved because of their genealogy or because of their hometown or because of their connections. They will be saved because of their actual goodness, regardless of who they are or where they came from or who their family connections were. They will be saved because they acted rightly and remained faithful to God.

That's why Jesus speaks about the "narrow gate." He is telling his questioner that the important question is not that of the number of people who will be saved. Indeed, the implication is, the man would be better off making sure his life were properly focused.

The appropriate question is that of who will achieve salvation. Again, the implication is that the questioner would be far better off to assure that he would be among those who will be saved, rather than worrying about how many people will be with him.

Questions are all important. Sometimes when we are searching for something, we feel cheated if we find ourselves with questions and not answers. We would do well to concentrate on the questions, because if we are asking the right ones, we will find the proper answers showing up more quickly than we imagined.

--Posted August 19, 2004

# Haste

August 12, 2004

## HASTE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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It is interesting to notice that, in his account of the Visitation (the Gospel for the feast of the Assumption, Luke 1:39-56), St. Luke mentions that Mary traveled "in haste." That seems odd, because I, at least, don't often think of Mary as doing anything in haste. I think of her more as moving slowly, deliberately, her attention fixed upon God. Yet there she was, traveling in haste toward her cousin in Judah.

The haste, I imagine, had a great deal to do with what had just happened to Mary. Her visitation of Elizabeth followed immediately upon the Annunciation - the Angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she was to be the Mother of God. Mary's response: "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word." With that response, she confirmed her lifelong commitment to living for God alone. She traveled in haste to Elizabeth. She was literally on fire with the presence of God. So Luke, the great storyteller, has us see her as not being able to wait one more second to share her news with her cousin.

We don't know, of course, how quickly or slowly Mary was assumed into heaven when her earthly life ended. But I would guess that then, too, she traveled in haste. Mary's entire life was taken up with God, and I can only imagine that she simply could not wait to experience the Beatific Vision and to be united with him.

We often travel with haste today; we live in such a fast-paced world. Yet I don't believe our haste is quite the same as Mary's. Our haste tends to have to do with meeting deadlines, with getting things done more because we have to do them than because we want to do them. As a result our haste tends to be scattered and distracted. Mary's haste, by way of contrast, had nothing to do with deadlines or unwanted tasks. Her haste was the gracious movement of one who moves in God. In the early chapters of his gospel, Luke compares Mary with the Ark of the Covenant that carried God about from place to place. Her movement was not scattered by any means, but rather gathered up into the presence of God. Remember Jesus' words, "Whoever does not gather with me, scatters"? Too often we forget to gather up with God, and as a result we end up feeling scattered and depleted. Mary knew the secret. Consumed with God, she moved with haste and her movement was gracious.

As we celebrate the Solemnity of her Assumption body and soul into heaven, perhaps we will ask Our Lady for the grace to move with her poised and deliberate haste - which, when you stop to think about it, is really asking her for the grace of moving at the speed God has in mind for us..

--Posted August 12, 2004

# Faith Here and Now

August 5, 2004

## FAITH HERE AND NOW

By Father Paul Keenan  
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What does the Letter to the Hebrews mean when it says, "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen"? If we look carefully at this line from Hebrews 11 (the Second Reading for the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time), we can discover that it unlocks for us a valuable key to the Christian spiritual life.

The first thing to notice is that the verse is in the present tense. It does not say, "Faith will be the realization of what is hoped for...." It says, "Faith is the realization...." That's important, because we often speak in terms of believing that something will be true. However, this passage tells us that when we have faith, the realization happens now.

That's very different from what we usually think. Normally, when people talk about having faith, they think in terms of their wish or request being fulfilled eventually or down the road. They'd like it to be fulfilled now, of course, but deep in their hearts they find they have to be patient with God. Happiness is down the road, and for now they have to learn to live in disappointment and hope for the best.

How differently the Letter to the Hebrews portrays faith. It follows the lines of Jesus' thinking when he said, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." (Mark 11:24.) It says that right now, even when the appearances are otherwise, faith leads us to live as though the realization of our wish or request were true." People sometimes maintain that this is just wishful thinking, but that understanding misses the point entirely. The point is that when we live with a sense of present fulfillment, we remove all barriers and obstacles in our thinking that might interfere with God's generous action. It expresses the truth that our faith in God implies our complete trust, here and now, in God's love for us. What kind of trust is it if we claim that God will be good to us "some day" but not now? The ramifications of all of this appear in the second part of the verse: "the evidence of things not seen." This tells us directly that while we may not see the evidence that our prayers are answered, that does not mean that they are not. It tells us that the spiritual life requires that we expand our horizons beyond the material evidence of our five senses. Did you know that the word "evidence" comes from Latin words that mean, "seeing out"? When we only see what our eyes tell us are outside of us, we have not yet expanded to spiritual vision. It is spiritual vision, not sensory vision, which enables us to

# Persistence

July 22, 2004

## PERSISTENCE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The readings for the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time have to do with persistence, particularly with persistence in prayer.

The word "persist" comes from etymological roots meaning to stand through, to stand for or to stand by. Each of these variations has a shade of meaning to contribute to our understanding of prayerful persistence.

To stand through. We may stand through or throughout a long bus ride, a play or a concert in a "standing room only" theater. In terms of prayer, it means that sometimes we may have to wait for what seems to be a very long time for our prayer to be answered. That's persistence. "Stand through" can also imply hanging in during a time of real conflict, turmoil, misfortune or opposition. Conditions in our lives may sometimes seem to be no better and even worse while we are praying. If we are persistent, we continue to stand and pray through those difficult times.

To stand for. Have you ever met someone who was a lifelong Democrat or Republican or environmentalist or human rights advocate? These people really know how to persist in their beliefs. They stand for something and they stand tall, regardless of whether their position is popular, regardless of what others might say. When we pray persistently, we "stand for" the belief that God will always come through for us.

To stand by. If a friend or family member is in trouble, we will stand by them if we are persistent friends. In persistent prayer, we stand by God and God stands by us. The persistence is a two-way street. In the Gospel for the Seventeenth Sunday (Luke 11: 1-13), Jesus speaks of God's persistent love for us: "What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg?" God stands by us, even when we behave foolishly. Jesus also exhorts us to be persistent in our love for the Father. He tells the story of a neighbor who pounds on his friend's door in the middle of the night, and who gets what he wants because of his persistence. Jesus says that we should stand by God and count on his faithfulness to us.

Standing through, standing by and standing for. These are the characteristics of persistence in our prayer. Such prayer is a tribute to the twofold current of love between God and us that truly makes our world go round.

--Posted July 22, 2004

# That They All May Be One

July 21, 2004

## THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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“That they all may be one.” This powerful line from the Gospel for the Seventh Sunday of Easter describes, it seems, the deepest desire of Jesus. He tells the Father directly that his prayer is that all might believe in him and that all might be one in him.

Two thousand years later, we are still a long way from the realization of Jesus’ wish. Yet we can take great comfort in recalling that in the past forty years, tremendous strides have been made in the dialogue among people of different faiths. Not only in this country but around the world as well, there has come into being a powerful movement of interfaith conversation and prayer. Here in the Archdiocese of New York, Cardinal Egan has fostered a number of interfaith dialogues, and has appointed people to participate in those discussions. They are a tremendous source of understanding, as Christians and non-Christians come together to listen and to learn.

A common misunderstanding about ecumenism is that its goal is to make all religions the same. But that is clearly not what Jesus said. Listen to his words: “...so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” However it is going to come about that the world may believe that the Father sent Jesus, it is clearly not going to happen by blending all faiths into a common soup. The analogy Jesus gives is to the relationship between the Father and the Son. The Father and Jesus are one, but they are not the same person. So it seems that however our different faiths are going to be expressed, they are not going to just be all mixed together without difference or distinction. The key phrase that Jesus uses is “that they also may be in us.” As with so many other things in life, the outcome of the ecumenical movement is in the hands of God. How the prayer of Jesus will be realized in this regard is, in the final analysis, a mystery.

In our prayer, discussion and collaboration with people of other faiths, it is of the utmost importance that we be alert to that mystery and how it manifests itself. Perhaps the words of Pope John Paul II in his encyclical “Ut Unum Sint” can help us here: “What is needed is a calm, clear-sighted and truthful vision of things, a vision enlivened by divine mercy and capable of freeing people’s minds and of inspiring in everyone a renewed willingness, precisely with a view to proclaiming the Gospel to the men and women of every people and nation.” As we work together, we pray for that vision and we watch for signs of its unfolding.

--Posted May 21, 2004

# Entertaining

July 15, 2004

## ENTERTAINING

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Two of the readings for the Sixteenth Sunday of the Year are about entertaining. The First Reading is the story (from Genesis 18) of Abraham welcoming three strangers who were passing by his tent. Instead of letting them simply pass by, Abraham went out of his way to greet them and to make them feel at home. He and Sarah went to work to prepare a veritable feast for the visitors. At the end of the story, one of the visitors foretold the birth of a son to Abraham and Sarah.

The Gospel reading (from Luke 10) recounts the famous story of Martha and Mary entertaining Jesus. Martha bustled about readying the house and the meal, while Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and engaged him in conversation. When Martha complained, Jesus told her that Mary had chosen the better part, and it would not be taken from her.

It is not clear how well Jesus' remarks went down with Martha. It is hard to imagine that she would have taken them kindly. In the case of Sarah, we know how the visitor's words resonated with her. She laughed, the Bible tells us, for she was well beyond the normal childbearing years. In fact, her laughter gave rise to her son's name, for "Isaac" means "he laughs." After Isaac's birth, Sara remarked, "God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me." (Genesis 21:6.)

Both readings deal with hospitality; and in both cases they show the importance of extending hospitality to others. But there's even more to them than that. They speak not only about entertaining, but also about the importance of our attitude when entertaining. In this, we can now include the Second Reading, which is from Colossians 1. Paul speaks of himself as rejoicing in his sufferings for the sake of his faith community. Which means, Paul entertains his sufferings gladly. That's a striking statement, because it is a very difficult thing to do. Yet Paul says, "I rejoice...." Here, his attitude is in contrast to that of Martha, who complains about having to do all the work. Paul entertains his sufferings gladly, because by doing so he is able to help his brothers and sisters to grow in Christ.

From these readings, we learn that it is godly to entertain others, and to do it with joy, even when things are difficult.

And if on some weary days, we find ourselves either grumbling with Martha or laughing with disbelief like Sarah, we can take comfort in remembering that their respective reactions are an important part of their stories. Curmudgeons have a place in God's kingdom, too.

--Posted July 15, 2004

# Simple Commandments

July 8, 2004

## SIMPLE COMMANDMENTS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Have you ever noticed how hard it can be for people to undertake a task, even a fairly simple one, when they think the task is going to be unpleasant? There are a million excuses for not taking out the garbage, not cleaning out the garage or not writing those thank you notes. In reality, it would be so simple to just hunker down and do it. But in our minds, we make the doing of the task much more complicated than it truly is because we do not look forward to doing it.

The readings for the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time speak to the psychology behind needlessly complicating something we know we should do. Specifically, they speak to the issue of keeping God's commandments. How complicated is it to learn and follow the commandments? In the first reading (Deuteronomy 30: 10-14), Moses urges the people of God to return to them with all their heart and soul. He argues that to do so and to follow the will of God is by no means a complicated matter. "It is not up in the sky," he tells them, "or across the sea." Rather, he tells them, "It is already in your mouths and in your hearts. You have only to carry it out." Apparently, the people have been creating all sorts of excuses for not obeying the law of God. Moses pooh-poohs their delaying techniques and reminds them how simple it is to keep God's commandments.

The Gospel, Luke's account of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37), echoes this theme. Who, in the story, fulfilled the law of God? The one who was merciful to the man in need, not the ones who walked away from him. It's simple. No rocket science there. The neighbor was the one who helped. The ones who didn't simply weren't neighbors. And only the neighbor fulfilled the law of God. So much for the legal scholar who tried to test Jesus by asking him, "Who is my neighbor?" Another delay tactic goes by the boards!

The message of the readings comes together beautifully in the Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 19. The psalmist speaks of the law of the Lord as "giving wisdom to the simple," as "refreshing the soul," and as "rejoicing the heart." When we do the right thing, we reap the benefits.

We hear so much these days that people are trying to live more simply. The readings remind us that simplicity begins within and that simplicity within consists of our following the twofold law of love.

--Posted July 8, 2004

# Perspective

July 1, 2004

## PERSISTENCE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The readings for the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time have to do with persistence, particularly with persistence in prayer.

The word "persist" comes from etymological roots meaning to stand through, to stand for or to stand by. Each of these variations has a shade of meaning to contribute to our understanding of prayerful persistence.

To stand through. We may stand through or throughout a long bus ride, a play or a concert in a "standing room only" theater. In terms of prayer, it means that sometimes we may have to wait for what seems to be a very long time for our prayer to be answered. That's persistence. "Stand through" can also imply hanging in during a time of real conflict, turmoil, misfortune or opposition. Conditions in our lives may sometimes seem to be no better and even worse while we are praying. If we are persistent, we continue to stand and pray through those difficult times.

To stand for. Have you ever met someone who was a lifelong Democrat or Republican or environmentalist or human rights advocate? These people really know how to persist in their beliefs. They stand for something and they stand tall, regardless of whether their position is popular, regardless of what others might say. When we pray persistently, we "stand for" the belief that God will always come through for us.

To stand by. If a friend or family member is in trouble, we will stand by them if we are persistent friends. In persistent prayer, we stand by God and God stands by us. The persistence is a two-way street. In the Gospel for the Seventeenth Sunday (Luke 11: 1-13), Jesus speaks of God's persistent love for us: "What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg?" God stands by us, even when we behave foolishly. Jesus also exhorts us to be persistent in our love for the Father. He tells the story of a neighbor who pounds on his friend's door in the middle of the night, and who gets what he wants because of his persistence. Jesus says that we should stand by God and count on his faithfulness to us.

Standing through, standing by and standing for. These are the characteristics of persistence in our prayer. Such prayer is a tribute to the twofold current of love between God and us that truly makes our world go round.

--Posted July 22, 2004

# Threshold

June 24, 2004

## THRESHOLD

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"His heart wasn't in it." Oftentimes we hear that expression used of someone who didn't want to be doing what he was doing. Physically, he may have been on the job, doing the work; but somehow, his mind and his heart were somewhere else. Many people are unfortunate enough to have that experience most of the time. They show up for the day, but their heart just isn't in it. It's a difficult way to go through life.

Working with your heart not being in it is a little like trying to be in two rooms at the same time. You can't be in the kitchen and the living room at the same moment. If you leave the kitchen, you cross a threshold and enter the living room, and if you leave the living room, you cross that threshold to enter the kitchen. You can't be in both rooms at once. When our hearts aren't in it, our bodies are in one place and our hearts in another. It just doesn't work very well.

In the readings for the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we see three distinct admonitions that the spiritual life requires us to leave the room of ordinary thought and to enter the room of spiritual thought. The readings from 1 Kings, Galatians and Luke all warn us against the idea that we can have it both ways.

The First Reading (1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21) shows the prophet Elijah putting his cloak over Elisha, and thereby bestowing upon him the prophetic office. In order to accept that prophetic office, however, there was something Elisha had to do. He had to leave completely his present way of life and cross the threshold into the life of a prophet. He had to have his mind and heart totally available for the life that lay ahead of him. That is why we see him slaughtering the oxen and destroying the plow.

In the Second Reading (Galatians 5:1, 13-18), we see Paul admonishing the Galatians about the import of their conversion to Christ. He urges them not to use their newfound freedom for the flesh, but for the Spirit. Many of the Galatians were attempting to embrace the new way while continuing to live the old way. Paul tells them in no uncertain terms that this cannot be. Having left the room of the flesh, they must live fully in the room of the Spirit. They cannot be in two places at once.

In the Gospel (Luke 9: 51-62), Jesus teaches the same principle in two ways. First, he admonishes the disciples who wanted to cast down fire upon the Samaritans who would

not let Jesus pass through Samaria to get to Jerusalem. This was their old way of thinking speaking, not their new. Secondly, he begins to speak about total the total renunciation of an apostle. There is no turning back; one must leave everything in order to follow him.

In reading these passages, it's important for us to remember that they are not intended to be a denunciation of our families or of material goods. The true meaning of these passages is that we should live in the Spirit and not in the flesh. For example, these passages speak of leaving home. How does that apply to the selfless generosity of adult sons and daughters who, in addition to caring for their own families, take loving and generous care of their parents in their old age? It certainly doesn't mean abandoning the parents. It does mean that when the world casts the elderly aside as though they were unimportant, these faithful adult children treat their parents with utmost love and respect. They see their parents through the eyes of the Spirit rather than through the eyes of the flesh, and that is how they fulfill the principle our readings are espousing.

These readings give us much to think about. They invite us to lift our minds and hearts ever upward, rejecting the simplistic answers offered by the world and instead embracing the breadth and length and heights and depth of God.

--Posted June 24, 2004

# A Faith that is Personal

June 18, 2004

## A FAITH THAT IS PERSONAL

By Father Paul Keenan  
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One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is wisdom, and it is a gift that comes, neither from rote textbook learning nor from repeating the opinions of others. It comes only from personal reckoning with life. The Gospel for the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Luke 9: 18-24) shows how Jesus tries to help the apostles to differentiate between truth that is simply repeated and truth that is assimilated. First, he asks them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" The apostles have been traveling around with Jesus and they have a pretty good idea of what people are saying about him. So they tell him, "John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, 'One of the ancient prophets has arisen.'" The apostles have answered well, and have given an accurate report of the state-of-the-art thinking about Jesus.

But Jesus wants them to do better than that, so he asks them, "But who do you say that I am?" This is an entirely different question from the first one, for it asks the apostles to think for themselves and to answer for their own understanding of the identity of Jesus. Only Peter speaks up and says, "The Christ of God." At first, it seems strange that Jesus rebukes them, telling them not to tell this to anyone. One way of looking at this, however, is to say that his problem lies, not with Peter's answer, but with the fact that the apostles have not yet internalized the answer. It is not really their own. They have a lot of work still to do before they are ready to proclaim the Good News. And so he tells them not to repeat Peter's answer to anyone. They are not yet ready to do so.

This is borne out in the next words that Jesus says to them. He foretells his own suffering, death and resurrection, and warns them that before they are ready to proclaim his message, they must be willing to take up their cross, too. He is not about to have them parroting what he has told them; rather, he wants their message to come from their hearts.

This is an important lesson in discipleship. Jesus knew that his disciples - both those of two thousand years ago and those of today - would never be able to withstand the world's challenges to his message unless it came from their own personal conviction. Instead, they would falter and in many instances walk away. For them - for us - to truly be disciples, we must let Jesus' message touch our hearts and become a truly personal creed.

--Posted June 18, 2004

# Only

June 10, 2004

## ONLY

By Father Paul Keenan  
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We use it all the time, but one of the most limiting words we have in our language is the word "only." It seems that one of the works of God as recorded in the Bible is to get us to stop falling prey to its limitations.

In the first book of Kings, chapter seventeen, the prophet Elijah is sent by God to Zarephath, where he sees a widow gathering sticks. He asks her for water and some bread and she replies, "I have nothing baked; there is only a handful of flour in my jar and a little oil in my jug." The prophet tells her to go and make him a cake, promising her, "The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the Lord sends rain upon the earth." Indeed, the widow, her son and the prophet are able to eat for a year from the "little" flour and oil in her pantry.

Similarly, in the second book of Kings, chapter four, the prophet Elisha is approached by a widow who is suffering the taunts of creditors who are threatening to come and sell her children into slavery. "What do you have in your house?" the prophet asks her. "Only a little oil," she woefully replies. The prophet tells her to go to all of her neighbors and ask them to give her all of their empty jars. "Don't ask for just a few," he admonishes. When the widow has accomplished this, the prophet tells her to close the door of her house and begin pouring her "little oil" into the jars. She is amazed to watch herself fill each and every jar, and when the last jar has been filled the oil stops flowing. Then the prophet tells her to sell the oil, so that she can pay her debts and have a surplus for herself and her children to live on.

In the Gospel of Luke, chapter nine, from which comes the gospel reading for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, Jesus is faced with a huge multitude of people to feed. One of the disciples informs Jesus that they have "only" five loaves and two fish with which to feed the crowd. Jesus takes the food, gives thanks for it, and distributes it to the crowd. All are filled, and twelve baskets of fragments are left over.

How often do we look at our possessions, our lives, our resources and our accomplishments and use the word "only"? We are "only" one person. We can "only" be

in one place at one time. We have "only" a limited income. Perhaps we are an "only" child. The word "only" creeps all too readily into our daily discourse, and the results are most unfortunate. Of course, this is not to say that we need not set reasonable limits upon the use of our time and our resources, but that's not the problem. The problem comes when we habitually see ourselves as not being enough or not having enough. That is the problem that each of the three aforementioned Bible stories addresses. The two widows think that they are limited to "only" the paltry supplies they find in their cupboards. The apostles think that they are limited to "only" five loaves and two fish. Elijah, Elisha and Jesus all insist that there is a different way in which to think about the perceived limits. The moral of the story is that God does not see limits - he sees opportunities.

In the face of a problem, look for an opportunity. There is no human need that cannot be met with the help of God. We can become so focused on our need - our "only" - that we automatically box ourselves in. Instead, we must realize that the limits are only part of the story, and that the bigger story is that God is both unlimited and willing to help.

We need to be careful of saying "only." "Only" may not seem to be that important a word, but it has the power to limit us and to keep us from reaching our full potential. When instead we remember that we are children of God, we can transcend "only" and bask in the abundance that is our inheritance from God.

--Posted June 10, 2004

# Wisdom

June 3, 2004

## WISDOM

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The first reading for Trinity Sunday (Proverbs 8:22-31) is an absolutely delightful account of the wisdom of God. It falls into two parts, and together they form an early chronology of God's wisdom.

The first section of the reading tells of the origin of divine wisdom before the dawn of creation. Several important things are said here. "The Lord possessed me." This can have two meanings. The first has the sense "the Lord took over me and possessed me fully." The second has the sense "The Lord owned me; I belonged to the Lord." The first speaks to the fullness of divine wisdom; the second alludes to the close bond between God and his wisdom. When we speak of someone being possessed, we mean that he or she has been taken over completely by someone else. When we say that someone possesses something, we mean that a bond or relation of ownership has been established. Fullness and closeness are the marks of divine wisdom.

Still in this first section, wisdom refers to herself as "the beginning of [God's] ways." Scripture often refers to God's ways. "My ways are not your ways," says the Lord." (Isaiah 55:8.) "Make known to me your ways, O Lord." (Isaiah 25:4.) Someone's "ways" are certainly their actions, but they are really the actions endowed with a personality. Have you ever said of someone, "She has her ways, alright"? That's what wisdom is talking about when she refers to herself as "the beginning of [God's] ways." She is the jump-starter of the character of God. To this attribute she adds, "the forerunner of his prodigies of long ago." Wisdom foretold everything that God would do, and how he would do it.

How did wisdom do this? "From of old I was poured forth." Wisdom describes herself as a liquid, not a solid substance. Take a solid substance, let's say a wooden board, and place it on top of a table. What happens? It sits atop the table, on the surface. Now, take a liquid substance and pour it over the table. What happens? It permeates the table, flows all around it, and, if the surface is permeable, it flows into it as well. In describing herself as a liquid, wisdom is saying that she permeates all of God's creation, both outside and in. There is no part of creation to which she is not present.

To punctuate this, wisdom then gives a litany of the various part of creation into which she was brought forth: "when there were no depths," "when there were no fountains and springs of water," "before the mountains were settled into place," and "before the hills." Not even the earth or "the first clods" of the world were made prior to wisdom.

The second stanza of the poem flows from the first, detailing the further steps of God's making of creation. But suddenly there is a change, an abruption into the flow of creation where we gain new insight into the identity of wisdom. "Then I was beside him as his craftsman." More than a liquid substance, wisdom is the divine craftsman working beside the creator. What is the relationship between them? "I was his delight day by day." If God looked at his creation and saw that it was "good and very good," it was because it was formed in and through wisdom, which gave him delight.

Now we see yet another attribute of wisdom: it plays. "Playing before him all the while, playing on the surface of the earth." The craftsman plays with and on what he makes. Have you ever watched a child play with plastocene clay, and noticed how he or she delights in making various shapes and objects? That's how wisdom was at creation, playing and delighting at the feet of the Lord.

"And I found delight in the human race." The creator and his wisdom delight in humanity. How often do we stop to imagine God delighting in us? We sometimes think of him as being stern or avenging or punishing. Do we ever think of him delighting in us? It's in the Bible, so perhaps it's time we did!

What are we to make of all of this? The realization that there is no part of creation which is devoid of God's wisdom. The understanding that wisdom is part of God's "ways." The realization that God's wisdom flows in and through all. The knowledge that wisdom (not chaos) is in the very fabric of being. That God's wisdom is a source of delight to God, and in turn we are a source of divine delight as well.

God's wisdom gives us much to think about.

--Posted June 3, 2004

# Pentecost

May 27, 2004

## PENTECOST

By Father Paul Keenan  
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According to the “Catholic Encyclopedia,” the Jewish feast of Pentecost was given two different interpretations. The first was as a harvest feast, to celebrate the end of the harvest, and therefore the fruits of the harvest. The second was as a celebration of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Each of those meanings has significance for our understanding of Pentecost Sunday as Christians. On the one hand, it commemorates the end of one phase of God’s plan of salvation and the beginning of another. Jesus’ earthly life, his resurrection and the days afterwards and his ascension into heaven constitute one segment in God’s salvific plan. With Pentecost, a new phase begins, the phase of the Holy Spirit, which will see the spread of the message of Jesus to the entire world.

The second meaning of Pentecost is contained in our celebration of this feast as well. Just as God gave the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, so now God entrusts his Law to the Church to proclaim to the whole world. Implicit in the gusts of wind and fiery tongues of Pentecost is the mandate to spread the Gospel throughout the earth to wherever there are men, women and children capable of hearing it.

These realizations give us a deeper appreciation of God’s plan. The events of the giving of the Law, the coming of Jesus Christ, and the Pentecost mandate were not random events. Rather, God planned them. There was nothing accidental about them; they were part of God’s plan of salvation. There is a pattern to their occurrence. Thus, they are one more reminder to us that we are always under the care of God. As Paul said in Romans 8, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” We are never alone, abandoned or forgotten. There is nothing random or accidental about our lives. We are under the constant care of God.

--Posted May 27, 2004

# "My Lord and My God"

May 16, 2004

## "MY LORD AND MY GOD!"

By Father Paul Keenan  
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"My Lord and My God!" When I was a little boy being taught by my parents the mysteries of the Mass, Mom and Dad taught me to say those words as the priest lifted the Body and the Blood of Christ after the consecration. Later, I learned that they were the words of Thomas, the apostle who doubted that Jesus was raised from the dead and appeared to the other apostles.

They are powerful words, indeed. Sometimes, people tell me that God seems very far away. They long for something that can put them instantly into the presence of God. Of course, they are always in the presence of God; but sometimes we all have that sense of his being far away. The mystics call one version of it "the dark night of the soul," and it is very dark indeed.

The words of Thomas the Apostle after putting his hands into the wounds of Christ are a very powerful way of giving ourselves the sense of God's nearness. Said reverently and with meaning, they are a kind of mantra that enables us to open the gates of the Kingdom of God which is within us. They establish in us a sense of the greatness of God and yet his nearness – we can call him "my" God. He is not just "everybody's" God; he is mine.

"My Lord and My God!" Say those words the next time you feel alone in life. You'll be amazed at what you'll discover.

--Posted April 16, 2004

# The Advocate

May 14, 2004

## THE ADVOCATE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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In the Gospel reading for the Sixth Sunday of Easter (John 14: 23-29), Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as "the Advocate." Perhaps we are more accustomed to the older form of that title, "Paraclete." Many of us remember reciting the Divine Praises after Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament and saying, "Blessed be the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete." Today one version of the same prayer goes, "Blessed be the Holy Spirit, the Consoler." There is nothing wrong with that translation, except that it doesn't really capture the full range of "Paraclete."

If you look up the word "Paraclete" in the dictionary, you will discover that it comes from Indo-European roots that mean, "to call to the side of." Indeed, that could include the function of a consoler, but "Advocate" adds something more. Granted, the Holy Spirit comes to console us when we are grieving, sad or discouraged. But an advocate goes one step farther by standing by our side in a difficult situation. An advocate represents us in going up against an enemy. We often use the word "advocate" to describe the work an attorney might do on our behalf, representing us in a court of law. That is particularly interesting in John's gospel, where much of the Fourth Evangelist's telling of the life of Jesus employs the image of a trial. Just to give one example, here is what Jesus says to people who are questioning his curing of the man at the pool of Bethesda: "I do not accept testimony from a human being, but I say this so that you may be saved. He [John the Baptist] was a burning and shining lamp, and for a while you were content to rejoice in his light. But I have testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father gave me to accomplish, these works that I perform testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. Moreover, the Father who sent me has testified on my behalf. But you have never heard his voice nor seen his form, and you do not have his word remaining in you, because you do not believe in the one whom he has sent" (John 5: 34-38.) This sort of language about testifying and testimony and witnesses permeates the Fourth Gospel. There is a subtle message here that there is a trial going on that involves the testimony of the forces of good and the testimony of the forces of evil.

We face that same trial in our world today; our lives are part of that. Sometimes we become confused or afraid and don't know what to say or what to do. That is why the promise of an Advocate is so reassuring to us. Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit, not only to console us in time of trouble (important though that be), but also to represent us,

to give us words when we don't know what to say and counsel when we don't know what to do.

There is a section in Joseph Califano's new autobiography, "Inside," in which he talks about the privilege of being a trial lawyer. He reflects on how confused, exhausted and paralyzed people often feel when the government or another private citizen takes them to court. The attorney, he says, has the privilege of being there in that difficult moment and helping them. That's the role of our Advocate, too. The Holy Spirit comes to our side when we are lost and in need of help.

The title of Advocate is a wonderful name for the Holy Spirit. It tells us much about our God, who longs to help us.

--Posted May 14, 2004.

# Wiping Away the Tears

May 6, 2004

## WIPING AWAY THE TEARS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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This past week, I had the opportunity of celebrating the funeral Mass of an old friend. He was very beloved to his wife, his children and his grandchildren assembled in the church; and for all of us his passing came all too soon. He was the sort of person you want to have around for a very, very long time.

During the Eucharistic prayer, I said the prayer customarily said at funeral Masses. "Welcome into your Kingdom our departed brothers and sisters and all who have left this world in your friendship. There we hope to share in your glory, where every tear will be wiped away."

How striking, then, to look at the readings for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, and to find there, "God himself will always be with them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes..." (Revelation 21: 3-4).

The promise for my friend and his loved ones is the same as the promise God made to his people: every tear will be wiped away.

That is such a beautiful promise, because it is the word of a tenderhearted God. Here we are told that God cares so much about our sorrows that he promises to wipe away all of our tears. He is really that beloved parent to whom we can turn for consolation in our times of sadness.

And that is because he understands. He is the Father of the Christ, who, as we saw in last week's readings, is both Lamb and Shepherd. Having suffered, he understands our suffering.

This week, we have a special invitation to bring our cares and sorrows to the one who has promised that he will wipe away our tears.

--Posted May 6, 2004

# Lamb and Shepherd

April 29, 2004

## LAMB AND SHEPHERD

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The readings for the Fourth Sunday of Easter are basically about God's protective care of us. The first reading (from Acts 13) shows how Paul and Barnabas were saved by God from people who started an insurrection against them in Antioch. The second reading (from Revelation 7) describes a multitude who have survived the time of great distress. And the Gospel (from John 10) has Jesus giving assurance that, for those who follow him, no one can snatch them from his or the Father's hand, for "the Father and I are one." These readings provide us with a tremendous sense of comfort in time of turmoil.

There's an interesting juxtaposition of images in the second and third readings. In the Revelation reading, there is the Lamb who was slain, shepherding the people. In the Gospel reading, Jesus describes himself as a shepherd. Again, we have the protection imagery and promise.

But there's a question, too: how can the lamb be the shepherd? If we were back in English class, and put such a thing in our composition, we would likely be handed our essay back and be told to clear up the mixed metaphors! No sheep was ever a shepherd. But that's not the case here. Jesus is both the Lamb who was slain and the shepherd of his flock. He was the Lamb of sacrifice and the Good Shepherd who guards his sheep. That is true, simply in an existential way.

But it's true in an experiential sense, too. How can one be a shepherd without having, in some way, been a lamb of sacrifice? The pain in our lives can serve to make us better shepherds, better caretakers of the people and the creation that God sends into our lives. Without that pain, we are not in a position to be good and caring friends to those who need us. By the grace of God, our pain is transformed into strength. We who have been protected are now in a position to protect others.

--Posted April 29, 2004

# Something Better

April 23, 2004

## SOMETHING BETTER

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel story for the Third Sunday of Easter (John 21: 1-19) tells of an incident in which the Risen Jesus fed breakfast to his exhausted disciples. They were tired because they had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. They didn't know, at first, that the man on the shore telling them to try again was Jesus. But when they followed his advice, they caught more fish than they could ever imagine.

All of us have had in our lives at least one time when, despite our best efforts, we were unable to succeed. We felt frustrated. We thought we had tried everything. We were at an impasse.

I have often thought that, given the complete lack of normalcy in their lives over the past few days, the disciples went fishing because that was familiar to them. It would at least give them a respite from the craziness and get them back on sure footing. What happened? They failed. And fishing was something they knew how to do! Imagine their feelings of frustration.

When we are feeling frustrated, the answer is not for us to return to something old and familiar. The answer is for us to look ahead, in Christ. When the disciples went back out to fish again, this time with the instructions of Jesus, they succeeded and more than succeeded. Upon reflection, this story reveals to us our invitation, not to go back to ordinary ways of doing and thinking, but to turn instead to "the mind of Christ," as St. Paul tells us. When we do so, our thoughts and our lives are transformed by the power of Christ. Indeed, our whole lives are transformed.

There's another thought here. Like the disciples, we can sometimes become frustrated at the apparent absurdity of the things that happen to us. The apostles' failure to catch fish, as things turned out, was a sign that something higher, better was about to happen. Is it possible that, when things seem crazy, we could ask ourselves, "Is there a sign here that something better is about to happen to us?" It is quite possible that we are being invited to a higher way of viewing our lives.

--Posted April 23, 2004

# Is Enough Enough?

April 12, 2004

## IS ENOUGH ENOUGH?

By Father Paul Keenan  
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When is enough enough? It's a tough question, and we may find ourselves faced with it many times in life. If someone repeatedly offends or hurts us, we forgive him; but at what point do we run out of forgiveness? If an employee consistently does a poor job, how many months of warnings need to take place before you finally give him or her the pink slip? On a human level, it's hard to say and people differ in their application of mercy and justice.

The Christian answer is: treat the other person as you yourself would want to be treated. That's the Golden Rule, of course; and we see Jesus applying that rule in the Gospel from the third Sunday of Lent. He gives a stern warning to his listeners, but then hints at God's mercy. After hearing them gossip about various tragedies that have recently taken place, Jesus warns them that their fate will be worse than that of the victims of those tragedies if they do not start doing the right things. And then he tells them a parable in which the owner of a fig tree, having waited three years in vain for his fig tree to bear fruit, comes one more time and finds it barren. He decides that he has waited long enough, and that it is time to cut the tree down. His gardener, however, has another idea. He tells the owner to give it another year, and he will work hard on the tree so that it may bear fruit in the future.

In that story, Jesus gives us a way of dealing with situations that test the limits of our patience. We may feel like raising the hatchet here and now, but Jesus suggests otherwise. Following his example, there is nothing wrong with giving fair warning of the possible consequences of continuing the status quo. Yet mercy demands that we do everything in our power to see to it that the dire consequences do not come about.

There's another dimension to that story, though. Notice the difference between the owner's attitude and the gardener's. The owner is interested only in what the tree can produce. However, the gardener is interested in the health of the tree. They come to the problem with two very different perspectives.

When we are faced with trying to resolve a tricky situation, which attitude do we take? The attitude of someone who wants only to get the problem resolved efficiently, or the attitude of someone who truly cares for the welfare of all involved? Hopefully the latter. Notice that the kinder solution does not necessarily do away with the sterner one. However, it does everything in its power to see to it that the ultimate blow will not have to be dealt.

--Posted March 12, 2004

# Easter Hope

April 10, 2004

## EASTER HOPE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The end of Holy Week and the beginning of the Easter Season is a very poignant time in the life of the Church and of the world. The lives of so many today are ravaged by worries and cares of so many sorts and people of all nationalities and faiths are eager for hope. The profound message of hope offered by the Risen Christ is a definite answer to the prayers and wishes of humankind today.

As we hear the gospel stories of the first Easter, it is good for us to think about our needs and those of people everywhere, and to realize that the Resurrection was meant to be a source of hope and inspiration as we work, with the help of God, to resolve the tensions, the turmoil and the suffering in the world.

May you and yours recognize the Risen Christ in the depth of your hearts and may he bring you hope.

--Posted April 10, 2004

# The Passion Behind the Passion

April 1, 2004

## THE PASSION BEHIND THE PASSION

By Father Paul Keenan  
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This has been a remarkable year as far as public attention to the suffering and death of Christ is concerned. Who would ever have guessed that the portrayal of these events would consume so much of the public's interest? Regardless of whether we liked or disliked Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ," we are better positioned this year to absorb the meaning of the original Passion than we have been for a very long time.

When we think of the Passion of Christ, we certainly think of the tragic, heartbreaking and painful things that happened to Jesus during those dreadful days. In my seminary days, when we were on retreat and reflecting upon the Passion, our director commented that every single kind of human being and every possible human condition entered into the story. That's appropriate, since the purpose of those happenings was the salvation of all humankind. The gospel accounts tell us that all humankind was somehow mystically drawn to Golgotha.

There's a secondary meaning of the word "passion" that provides an excellent catalyst for our comprehension and appreciation of the gift Jesus gave us during those troubled days. In this sense, the word "passion" means "impetus, chief motivating force, existential drive." In the fullest sense, the Passion of Christ was his burning desire to win the souls of human beings and to open them to the joys of everlasting life. During Holy Week we tend to remember the ways in which the events of Holy Thursday and Good Friday were presented to us down through the years. As a little boy, when I once asked my mother why Jesus said, "I thirst," she told me, "He's thirsting because he is dying on the cross, but he's also thirsting for the salvation of human souls." That truly was the Passion of Jesus, and it can be observed throughout the gospels. It was the Passion behind the Passion, and it is helpful and salutary for us to remember that.

Concentrating on what we might call the meta-Passion, or the Passion behind the Passion, we might catch some of that divine fire ourselves, and recommit ourselves to working together with the Christ to make the world a better place.

--Posted April 1, 2004

# Lazarus

March 25, 2004

## LAZARUS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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If your Roman Catholic parish has a catechumenate program, your Gospel reading for the Fifth Sunday of Lent is the story of the raising of Lazarus by Jesus (John 11). Reflecting on that story gives us some valuable lessons for life.

First, though, it's important to remember that there are at least two ways to read a Gospel story. The first is at the literal level, to get the actual facts of the case as reported by the evangelist. In this story, we see Jesus receiving the news that his dear friend Lazarus is ill. Instead of leaving right away, Jesus decides to finish his work and then to go to Bethany. On his way to Bethany, he learns from Martha, the sister of Lazarus, that Lazarus has died. Martha and her sister Mary express considerable anger at Jesus, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died." Others in the crowd remark that if Jesus could perform other miracles, he should have been able to cure his friend. Jesus asks that the stone be rolled back from the tomb, and then, weeping, offers a prayer and calls Lazarus forth. Lazarus comes forth from the tomb, and Jesus asks that his bandages be untied. Those are the basic facts of the story, and they are the first level at which we read the story.

At the second level, we look to experience the story in a spiritual way. This is not only an event that happened two thousand years ago, it is also a story about human life and the effect that the Christ has upon it.

There are at least two aspects of this spiritual reading of Lazarus. The first allows us to read the story as a foretelling of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Like his friend Lazarus, Jesus would die and would be raised from the dead. The story prepares us for that.

The second allows us to read the story as a story about human life, and therefore about the life of you and me and every other human being. It tells us that life is a story of death and resurrection, that the death aspect of the story raises all sorts of emotions (like the anger of the sisters, the nastiness of the taunting crowd and the sorrow of Jesus). But it also tells us that death is not the end of the story. God calls us forth, as Jesus calls forth Lazarus, meaning that he calls out our true identity as people made in his image and likeness, and in doing so evokes in us an ability to overcome the limits of death and enter

into the expansiveness of eternal life. When we see ourselves being taunted by forces of sin, sickness or death, we can ask our Lord to call us forth just as he did Lazarus.

A sidebar on this gives us an insight into miracles and the answers to our prayers. Martha, Mary and the crowd in Bethany are upset because Jesus seems to have let them down and let Lazarus down. When we read the story, we, too, might well be amazed that Jesus did not go immediately to help his friend, but waited to finish his work where he was before heading off to Bethany. The story of Lazarus is one of the difference between ordinary mortal consciousness and spiritual consciousness. From a purely human standpoint, Jesus delayed going to his friend, his friend died and he betrayed his friendship with the two sisters and Lazarus. But from a spiritual standpoint, the miracle, though imperceptible, was already at work the moment the request was made. There was no delay at all and certainly no betrayal. We can think of this at times when we feel that our prayers have not been answered. We may believe, like Martha and Mary, that God is far away, refusing to speak to us or answer our prayers. We may wonder, like the crowds in Bethany, why some people's prayers seem to get answered while ours seem not to. The story of Lazarus tells us not to trust in appearances, but instead to know that the answer begins once the request has been made. It also tells us that, in God's providence, we may not get what we originally asked for, but we will get something better.

--Posted March 25, 2004

# The Master Dreamer

March 18, 2004

## THE MASTER DREAMER

By Father Paul Keenan  
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If you were to ask people what their favorite scripture passage was, the story of the Prodigal Son would certainly rank in the top ten. It's a compelling story, which Jesus told to show us the power of God's love, and the generosity with which we are called to love one another. One of the best things about the story is that the characters are so familiar to us. We can almost put ourselves in their shoes, for each of them represents an aspect of ourselves. Each of them – the younger son, the father and the older brother – holds a mirror in front of our face. When we look we see a bit of who we are, whether we like it or not.

For example, when the younger son decides to claim his inheritance and head for the open road, we can identify with him. There's a little bit of the dreamer in all of us. Even though we might be very happy where we are, still we can't help fantasizing about the future. How we would love to put all our money together, leave all our cares and worries behind and undertake a great adventure! It would be terrific not to have to worry about money and responsibilities, and just enjoy life. How we would love to be like that younger son, gather up our inheritance, and take off on our own.

When we're young, we tend to forget that dreams require planning if they are to succeed. The difference between successful and unsuccessful dreamers is that successful ones plan how they are going to fulfill their dream. They take time to figure out what they want, how long it will take for them to get it, how much it's going to cost, and what they need to learn in order to achieve their goal. They talk to other people who have undertaken similar experiments, and they know how to react to setbacks and losses along the way. Even so, there is no guarantee of success; but doing the research ahead of time leaves dreamers in a better position to lessen their risks and to know what to do when things go wrong, as they inevitably will.

The younger brother in the Prodigal Son story was not so wise. He knew a great deal about dreaming and only a little about life. Having made no plans and set no goals, he drifted into whatever pleasure came his way. Before long, he had used up all of his money on wine, women and song; and at the moment he decided to return to his father's house, he was looking after pigs and eating the husks that the pigs had rejected.

The elder son in the story, it seems, scarcely had any dreams at all. He was so angry with his brother and with his father that he could see little more than the task he was doing. He had no vision, literally no imagination, nothing of color and passion to bring to life.

The real master dreamer in the story was the father. He could look beyond the misguided dreams of his younger son, heal those dreams and make the expanded, healed dreams come true. He could also look beyond the utter lack of imagination of his older son, love him, and prod him toward a more expansive vision.

That's our God. When our dreams have been dashed or when they have become clouded in negativity, our heavenly Father is there, urging us to continue to dream and showing us how to dream expansively.

--Posted March 18, 2003

## New Vision

March 4, 2004

### NEW VISION

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Just as the readings of the First Sunday of Lent reminded us of the importance of directing our focus, so do the readings of the Second Sunday of Lent teach us about vision, the power with which we focus. They tell us that the vision of God is always broader than the vision of human beings, and they challenge us to enlarge our vision by focusing on God.

The first reading (from Genesis 15) describes the call of Abram, through which God eventually changed him from being Abram to being Abraham. At this point in his life, Abram, a very old man, had no intention of doing very much more with his life. He expected to live out his days with Sarai, his wife, and that was about the extent of his vision. But God was about to change all of that; and in order to expand Abram's vision, God told him to look up into the sky. There, Abram saw more stars than he could count. Just so," God told him, "shall your descendants be."

The Gospel story is Luke's account of the transfiguration of Jesus. (Luke 9.) Luke tells us that Peter and his companions were asleep on the mountain, and there is irony in Luke's mention of that. Peter, James and John were physically asleep; but they were spiritually asleep as well. They needed to be awakened, and that is precisely why Jesus took them up to the mountaintop. When the transfiguration of Jesus began, and his face and clothing became dazzling white, Peter became confused and began babbling something about building tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Luke tells us in plain language, "He did not know what he was saying." It would be quite some time before Peter and his fellow apostles would understand what they had seen. What they had seen was a revelation of Jesus as Son of God.

The message for us is clear: God is looking to expand our vision, to turn it from the condition of simply seeing things the way "everybody" sees them, to the condition of seeing things as God sees them. It is a much broader vision, and it heralds a much better way to live. "He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself." Those words of Paul from the Second Reading (Philippians 3) show us that our transformation is to be physical as well as mental and spiritual. We are being invited to the best kind of "makeover" there can be – the one orchestrated by God himself.

--Posted March 4, 2004

# Keeping Focus

February 26, 2004

## KEEPING FOCUS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent this year (Luke 4: 1-13), shows Jesus being tempted by the devil in the desert. There are many lessons to be gained from meditating upon this story. Surely one of them is the importance of putting one's focus totally upon God.

The devil tries to distract Jesus. He tries to get him to focus on his hunger, on power and influence, and on his more-than-human abilities. That's the precise nature of a temptation – to get us to focus away from God as our never-failing source and instead to put the focus upon ourselves and what we can do.

Jesus does not buy into it. Instead, he keeps his focus upon his relationship with his heavenly Father and refuses to put his attention upon anything else. In so doing he defeats the devil (though, as Luke points out, only for the time being) and sets the stage for what we have come to call his public life. There, we will see that his Father is the constant focus. For example, before every major decision or event in his life, we see Jesus taking time to be alone with the Father.

As we begin our observance of Lent, the question is, "Where is our focus?" Have we allowed ourselves to be distracted by the cares of life or by a misguided focus upon ourselves? Can we allow ourselves to put all of those things in God's hands, and learn to say, "Not my will, but thine be done?"

--Posted February 26, 2004

# Abundant Return

February 19, 2004

## ABUNDANT RETURN

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Sometimes, one of the most surprising things that people discover after they have read the gospels for awhile is that the lessons taught there by Jesus really can improve their lives. They know that the gospels are meant to give them information about what is right and wrong, and that they are supposed to follow that advice. But often they do not realize that the gospels contain secrets for happy and effective living.

The Gospel for the Seventh Sunday of the Year (Luke 6:27 – 38) is a case in point. In it, Jesus speaks of loving our enemies and doing good to those who hate us. His general theme is that we should not return evil for evil but should return love when others act hatefully toward us. Now, everyone knows that Jesus taught this; and Christians try as best they can to put his words into practice, difficult though that be sometimes. But what is seldom spoken of is the fact that, underlying the moral message, there is a great overarching truth about the nature of being, which, if understood and applied, would do much to help us to live more successful and happier lives.

Jesus expresses that principle with the words, “For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.” With these words, Jesus lifted his message above the level of moral teaching and showed that instead it is immediately linked to the very nature of being itself. In other words, he is saying that life is such that we get back what we give out, regardless of what someone else gives or does not give to us. In other words, we are not to worry if someone hates us or acts disagreeably toward us. The only thing we need ask ourselves is, “How do I want to act, and what do I want to get back?” Because life is such that we get back what we give out.

Well, that’s close to what Jesus is saying, but it’s still not quite there. Jesus actually takes it a step further, and says, “Don’t think at all about what you will get back. Just go and do what is right.” If it appears that someone has acted wrongly toward you and has obtained the upper hand, don’t worry. Just continue to love, and don’t concern yourself with what you will get back because life invariably rewards those who are good.

In other words, in this passage, Jesus unleashes an important key to success in life. The successful man or woman is the one who focuses only on loving and doing what is right, knowing that life will make up for whatever is lacking in the human response. By this

teaching, he is saying that the spiritual life is not about the results we get or the treatment we get; rather, it's about what we put into the world.

It's a powerful lesson for those days when we seem to be getting nowhere or when people don't pay attention to us or when they minimize, ridicule or demean us. The message is: do not worry. Life will always return to us what we put out.

--Posted February 19, 2004

# The Eyes of Jesus

February 12, 2004

## THE EYES OF JESUS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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When listening to someone, it is always interesting to watch his or her eyes as they address you. Their words tell you something, but their eyes also speak volumes and help you to read between the lines of what you hear. A salesman might make a perfect sales pitch in terms of the words he uses, but if his eyes have a shady look or if they are lackluster, you get a whole different impression of how much he believes in what he is saying.

In the Gospel for the Sixth Sunday of the Year (Luke 6:17, 20-26), Jesus makes a number of statements that, to human ears, sound incredible. Blessed are the poor? Blessed are the hungry? Blessed are they who mourn? Blessed are the persecuted? On a human level, most of us would say, "I don't think so" and walk away to find someone who would support sensible teaching.

The disciples must have wondered, "Is this man serious? How could he possibly believe what he is telling us?"

The answer lies in his eyes. St. Luke tells us that Jesus brought the disciples to a spot of level ground, and that when he began to speak, he raised his eyes toward them.

There are two things we can draw from this. The first is that he was not afraid to look them in the eye as he spoke to them. When someone looks you in the eye, it indicates that he or she really means what they say. Even when the teaching seems strange, if it is said by someone who looks you in the eye, it conveys the impression that the speaker is really serious about his or her message. In other words, Jesus is not kidding here.

The second thing we can infer is that, in raising his eyes, Jesus is imparting a new level of teaching. Before he starts to speak, his eyes are looking to the ground; when he starts to speak, he raises his eyes. What this indicates is that Jesus' teaching is at a higher level than the "ground level" of ordinary human thinking. It is of the divine order. That is why it seems so strange. On the human level, we simply hate it if we are hungry, poor, persecuted or grieving. On the divine level, these things have a redemptive meaning.

The gospel tells us that the gaze of Jesus lifts us up from our ordinary levels of understanding to the divine level. Jesus' gaze transforms his hearers and enables them to

embrace higher thoughts and a higher level of reality. When the eyes of Jesus focus upon us, we are transformed as well.

This gospel passage reminds us to pray for the gift of watching the eyes of Jesus. His is a look that can transform us.

--Posted February 12, 2004

# Using the Gift

February 5, 2004

## USING THE GIFT

By Father Paul Keenan  
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There is something about the commitment to follow Jesus that is different from most other human commitments: it is not meant to be fulfilled in half measures. The reason for this is that it requires a unique way of viewing oneself and, indeed, life itself. Granted, it may take awhile for some to catch onto this; but once they do, it is as though they have crossed over a line of demarcation.

Mary the Mother of God is a perfect example of one who crossed the line and did so definitively. We can mark the moment when the crossover occurred. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to reveal to her that she was to be the Mother of God, he was, in effect, defining for Mary the true purpose of her life. Mary's response was, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done unto me as you say." From that moment on, Mary not only intellectually accepted her role, but she also acted like the Mother of God. From what the gospel stories tell us, she went to Joseph and told him directly about what had happened. If necessary, she was willing to face the consequence of having him divorce her, which was his original inclination. When she went to her cousin Elizabeth, it was not just to provide a familial visit. It was as Mother of God that she went. We know that from Elizabeth's greeting: "Who am I that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?" For the rest of her life, Mary acted in accordance with the dignity and responsibility of being Mother of God. She never cowered, faltered or hung back. She was every inch God's mother, and she behaved accordingly.

In the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of the Year (Luke 5: 1-11), we see Jesus inviting his first disciples to come and follow him. They are obviously a bit frightened at the prospect, and he feels the need to reassure them with the words, "Do not be afraid." Though they are fully apostles, it will not be until Pentecost that they are able to cross the defining line and fully assume their role as Mary did hers. They will need much instruction and some correction. All but one will abandon him. One will deny him and one will betray him. At Pentecost, the eleven who remain are ready to accept the full responsibility of apostleship; and at that point their commitment becomes unwavering.

There's a lesson here for us, and an invitation. There's often detectible among Christians the subtle belief that we can be Christians on Sunday and operate on a whole different set of principles the rest of the week. We don't quite cross the line. If only we knew what a great treasure has been given to us in our baptism as Christians. When we sign on to live

according to the mind and heart of Christ, we are agreeing to live out a way of life whose core belief is that Christ is all in all, that nothing can ever be lacking to us, and that we have the power to overcome the forces of evil. It is important that we act as people who understand and accept the tremendous gift we have been given. It is vitally important that we use that gift, within the context of our state in life. Jesus once commented on the foolishness of a man who was given a gift of money and who buried it rather than using it. We too have been given a precious gift. Let us ask the Lord each day for the grace to use it to the full.

--Posted February 5, 2004

# Be Not Crushed

January 29, 2004

## BE NOT CRUSHED

By Father Paul Keenan  
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“Be not crushed on their account, as though I would leave you crushed before them.” Powerful words of God to Jeremiah the prophet, taken from the first reading for the Fourth Sunday of the Year. In times past, most of us thought of a prophet as someone who foretold the future; and indeed that notion is partially correct. What needs to be added to it is the idea that the prophet often foretells the future by challenging some of the prevailing customs and ideas of society. People loved the prophets when they promised wonderful times, full of prosperity and happiness. But on many occasions, the prophetic message of necessity was one of repentance, telling God’s people that unless they brought themselves back to the ways of God, they would be in for some unhappy surprises. False prophets often wavered when it came to delivering these messages. Real prophets delivered them no matter what.

Jeremiah was just such a prophet. There is even a word in English, “jeremiad,” which means a speech whose content is full of doom, so noted was he for speeches that were difficult for his hearers to listen to. Jeremiah received very little applause for his prophetic efforts. Most of the time, he managed to set everyone’s teeth on edge.

That’s the lot of the prophet, who, if he or she is doing it right, is setting himself (or herself) up for a good stoning.

Jesus was just such a prophet, too. The Gospel from the Fourth Sunday tells us that, though, at first, people marveled at his words, it was not long before they were trying to put him to death. Like Jeremiah, Jesus was telling people to repent, to change, and they didn’t like it. At first, they were happy to be called his townfolk; now, they wanted nothing to do with him.

There are times when you and I will be called upon to speak a word of truth, one that could put our lives and limbs in jeopardy. The word of God is there for us, just as it was for Jeremiah and for Jesus: “For it is I this day who have made you a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of brass, against the whole land. They will fight against you but not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

The Church holds up to us the examples of Jeremiah and Jesus for those times when we might be called upon to compromise upon the truth in order to “save our necks.” And at

the same time, it holds out to us the wonderful promise of God: “I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” His safety-net presence on behalf of his prophets allows them, and us, to step forward in faith and to speak the truth, no matter how unpopular.

--Posted January 29, 2004

# The Power of Intention

January 23, 2004

## THE POWER OF INTENTION

By Father Paul Keenan  
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A visitor to this website asked me a wonderful question last week after reading my reflections on the wedding feast of Cana. I had reflected that part of the message of the miracle was that even though we love auspicious beginnings, by working together with God we can manifest endings or resolutions of situations far beyond our ability to imagine.

That's all well and good, my correspondent said. But what if you find yourself in constant and unrelenting pain, particularly pain of soul?

I replied that I thought the answer to that question had a great deal to do with what we might call "intention."

When we find ourselves blocked or at a crossroads, we have an opportunity to ask ourselves both what we want the outcome to be and what we intend the outcome to be. Those two things are not the same. It's fine, of course, to want to be happy. But it's an entirely different thing to intend to be happy. Intention takes the want and gives it legs, gives it power, and elevates it to the level of a decision.

When we hear about the possibility of intending or deciding to be happy, we might get a little nervous. We might feel that we are being asked to sugarcoat the pain or to deny it. Perhaps we've tried putting on a happy face, only to find ourselves feeling even worse or having a relapse. That's not at all what I want to convey. My idea is that it is of the utmost importance that we acknowledge the pain we feel, but is also of the utmost importance that we intend to be in better circumstances and to feel better. Once we make the firm decision that we intend to be happy, we tend to take notice of different things than we noticed before. Suddenly, things start showing up in our lives that give us opportunities for happiness. Perhaps they were there before and we just didn't see them. Perhaps not. But they are there now, and we discover more and more of them.

What if we have a relapse or catch ourselves feeling down? We simply remind ourselves of the intention. "This is a tough situation, and I am really feeling it, but I am determined not to let it spoil my chances for happiness." It's in times like these that having a firm intention really pays off.

Having said all this, let's take a look at the readings for the Third Sunday of the Year. There we will definitely see the power of a firm intention.

The first reading is a very important Old Testament passage from the eighth chapter of the Book of the prophet Nehemiah. It's a powerful passage in which the people of God come together to hear the reading of the Law. When they hear the Law read to them in its entirety, they become deeply discouraged and downcast, even to the point of weeping. How can they ever hope to follow such a complex set of laws? Nehemiah steps in at this point and shows them the power of intention. He tells them that though they feel burdened, they should intend to rejoice. "Do not be saddened this day," he admonishes them, "for rejoicing in the LORD must be your strength!" They are to hold the firm intention to be happy, even when the demands of life are difficult.

The Gospel reading shows us the power of intention in the life of Jesus. As he begins his public ministry, he goes to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and stands up to read the portion. It says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor." At the end of the reading, Jesus tells his hearers, "Today this Scripture passage has been fulfilled in your hearing." Here at the very start of his public ministry, Jesus is guided to set the intention to spend his life spreading joy and liberty to those who need it. He never wavered from that mission, even in the most difficult of times.

Intention is a powerful tool. With a firm intention, there is nothing that can stop us.

--Posted January 23, 2004

# The Best Wine for Last

January 16, 2004

## THE BEST WINE FOR LAST

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel for the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (yes, the holidays are really over) is the story of the wedding feast at Cana, where Jesus changed water into wine. It's a famous story, one that people use to draw all sorts of implications and conclusions.

One of the many lessons that can be drawn from this story derives from the fact that it was the best wine that was served last. The headwaiter in the story said as much to the bridegroom, and marveled at the fact. Ordinarily, the best wine was served first, and then the cheaper wine was served, after people had drunk freely of the better one.

The best wine last. That's what happens when God steps in.

We human beings love auspicious beginnings. We love to celebrate births, baptisms, the start of a new business or project, the beginning of the baseball season. We love beginnings and we love to find ways to wish other well. Yet sometimes after the auspicious beginnings, we can become very discouraged. The business starts to decline. The vagaries of life take their toll on us. We start having problems with the marriage. The home team goes into a slump.

That when it's good to remember – the best wine comes last. When we work hand in hand with God, we may well find ourselves having difficult times. But by keeping God in charge of our lives, we can always remember that the better wine lies ahead. No matter how great our promises were or how magnificent our celebration at the beginning, what God has in mind is even greater.

In times of discouragement, remember – work with God and better times will be ahead.

--Posted January 16, 2004

# The Baptism of Jesus

January 9, 2004

## THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Continuing our celebration of Christmas, we arrive at the Solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord. We might well wonder why, indeed, Jesus, the Son of God, would ask for the baptism of repentance that John was offering. Surely, he would be the last person in the world to need or want a baptism of repentance.

There are at least two answers to that question. The first and more obvious one is that Jesus was here on earth to atone for sins he did not commit, to atone for the sins of humankind. Just as he was to die to atone for those sins, so here, at the beginning of his public ministry, he received John's baptism of repentance to mark the beginning of his public life of atonement for our sins.

There's another answer, though, which parallels the first one and comes from an understanding of the effect of John's baptism of repentance upon the lives of the people who received it. The gospels tell us that when people arrived to receive John's baptism, they often asked him what he wanted them to do in order to change their lives. It was a reasonable enough question, and more often than not John would answer them by telling them to justly and honestly fulfill the responsibilities they had within their current state of life. Tax collectors were to stop imposing too much tax. Soldiers were to stop grumbling about their pay. Ordinary citizens were to share with those in need (see Luke 3). In other words, there was something about the baptism of John that enabled and exhorted people to live their lives on earth with a sense of charity, fairness and justice. Now, when Jesus came along for the same baptism, it had the same effect for him. However this time, it was not John the Baptist who gave the exhortation; it was the heavenly Father. Jesus was proclaimed publicly to be the beloved Son of God, and the effect of John's baptism was to reinforce in his consciousness that his mission on earth was to live a life of charity, fairness and justice in line with his identity as Son of God. It was, in other words, an important milestone in Jesus' life; it set the course of what he would do, by defining precisely who he was.

--Posted January 9, 2004

# Truth and Epiphany

December 31, 2003

## TRUTH AND EPIPHANY

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Happy and Blessed New Year! May each and every one of you enjoy abundant blessings in every area of life.

The first Sunday of the New Year is a celebration of the Epiphany, when the Magi went to Herod and eventually went to honor the child Jesus.

There is much to contemplate about this feast, which is an important part of the Christmas season. Indeed, in some cultures, the Feast of the Three Kings takes on an almost greater significance than Christmas.

When we think of the Christ Child as the Word of God, it is clear that in the New Testament, he represents Truth, the Truth of God and the Truth that is God. Hold that in mind as you contemplate the Epiphany story. The Magi were members of a priestly caste whose special gift was to engage in sacred mysteries and to speculate intellectually about the workings of the universe. They are sometimes called “magicians,” but there the word is used in a much different sense from the way in which we use it today. They were engaged in sacred mysteries, whereas today we usually think of magicians as doing tricks for entertainment. These Wise Men were not entertainers; they were holy men who dedicated their lives to understanding the arcane wonders of creation.

In the story, the Magi are first approached by Herod, who wants to use their powers in order to take the life of the Christ Child. He asks them to go and find the child, and then to return to him and tell him his whereabouts, ostensibly in order that Herod might worship the child. The Magi do, indeed, visit the child and present him with gold, frankincense and myrrh. However, when they consult their higher powers, they determine to steer completely away from Herod. In so doing they protect the Christ Child; and in doing that, they are protecting Truth from coming under siege.

There are some lessons for us here. First, we notice that the same powers – even spiritual ones – can be used for a good purpose or for a bad purpose. Herod tries to employ them to destroy Truth. The Magi use them to protect Truth. In everything, it’s so important that we employ the gift of discernment.

Second, the correct use of any special gift is to protect Truth. Truth is under siege these days, even though Herod is long gone. In our age, Truth is often mistaken for opinion or for a range of opinions. In some places, it is considered arrogant to mention the name of God or to speak of there being a Truth. Yet Truth is the standard by which all opinions are tested, a truth which is often forgotten.

Third, in life, as in this story, Truth prevails over evil and falsehood. Human beings may think of themselves as having debunked the idea of God or Truth, but the story tells us that Truth prevails. In an age that so often prefers relativism, that is an important thing to consider.

There's a great deal to think about in the Epiphany story. As we prepare our New Year's resolutions, it is fitting that the feast falls on the first Sunday of the year. It is more than just a lovely story from two thousand years ago, although it is certainly that. But in addition it is a powerful lesson in how to use our powers and our gifts for the betterment of the world and the glory of God.

--Posted December 31, 2003

# Blessed Christmas

December 27, 2003

## BLESSED CHRISTMAS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Where did it go? We rushed, we shopped, we sent Christmas greetings, we cooked, we entertained, we ate, all in preparation for Christmas. Now that we've picked up the wrappings, cleared the table, and done the dishes, we ask ourselves, "Where did it go?" It seems as though Christmas should last longer, we put so much time and energy into getting ready for it. Was it worth all of that fuss?

Maybe now is when Christmas really begins, when you stop to think about it. Now that we have a chance to calm ourselves, to unwind a little and think, perhaps we can get a sense of what the season is all about. It's about a moment, two thousand years ago, when the silence of the night was shattered by the sounds of birth, the birth of the Savior. In our own silence, we can hear that baby cry and feel within ourselves the warmth of the presence of God. The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. Perhaps it's only in the aftermath of all our celebrations that we can realize what Christmas truly means.

For some reading this, Christmas was a time of immense joy. The festivities went well, people gathered with joy, gifts were appreciated, and the dinners were splendid. For others, sad to say, the season did not go happily for one reason or other. Whatever your experience, now that everything has died down, take a moment of quiet to experience Christmas. Let that be your real gift to yourself.

Take time to get in touch with the Prince of Peace.

Merry Christmas!

--Posted December 27, 2003

# Blessed Belief

December 18, 2003

## BLESSED BELIEF

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Here we are at the end of Advent; and, as promised, we see in the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday the words that we have been taking as the theme for this holy season: "Blessed are you who believed."

The words are spoken by Elizabeth, the expectant mother of John the Baptist, to Mary, the expectant mother of Jesus. We note that Elizabeth's words indicate that Mary believed even before there was any evidence of what God was planning to do. Mary's belief stems from a long-standing relationship of trust in God.

Throughout the Sundays of Advent, we have seen the Old Testament prophets foretelling a glorious future for the people of God. In every case, they spoke these hopeful words even though the people of God were in dire straits. At the sensory level, it looked like their words were false, but..."blessed are they who believed."

The message is very clear. We are to experience here and now the joy of the glorious vision God has in store for us. Sometimes we may not feel like it. Many days, the news we get in the papers or on television or radio seems very far away from the joyous vision of God. Yet blessed are they who believe.

In these final days of Advent, may you and I reflect on the quality of our belief. May we pray with the disciples of Jesus, "O Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

--Posted December 18, 2003

# Joy and Simplicity

December 11, 2003

## JOY AND SIMPLICITY

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Continuing with our theme for Advent, "Blessed are you who believed," we find that the readings for Gaudete Sunday, the Third Sunday of Lent, make the matter of belief very simple and down to earth. When asked the meaning of repentance, John the Baptist gives each group of inquirers a different answer, but one that has a common thread. It comes down to this: "Do what makes sense to you under your present circumstances." When the crowds approach him, he tells them, "If you have two cloaks, give one to someone who has none." To the tax collectors he responds, "Stop charging people too much tax." To the soldiers he says, "Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages."

It's amazing how simple the Baptist's notion of repentance truly is. There is no complicated breast-beating, no unusual feats. It's simple. If there's any area of your life where you're not acting properly, then change it.

The Baptists' advice gives us one more facet of what it means to believe. To be a believer means acting responsibly according to your circumstances. Give to those in need. Don't cheat or lie. Don't grumble.

Going back to our readings from the previous two weeks, we can see that, for all its simplicity, there is a lot of depth to this message. As with our First Reading from Zephaniah, our readings from the previous two weeks emphasize that God wants his people to rejoice now, even though outer appearances may seem dire. The joy that the Lord has in mind is something that is meant to be experienced now, even if the results haven't yet manifested. As a consequence, there is no reason for us to act any other way but fairly and sensibly, because we are living in complete confidence and joy in God. The spirit of the whole matter of belief makes everything so simple.

It's a time of year when many of us long for simplicity. Our readings tell us that joy and simplicity go hand in hand. What a great thought for these final two weeks before Christmas.

--Posted December 11, 2003

# God's Vision, Our Vision

December 5, 2003

## GOD'S VISION, OUR VISION

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The theme we are exploring for Advent this year is “Blessed are you who believed,” the words of Elizabeth to Mary at the Visitation. The idea is that the signs of the Kingdom of God are present and available, even though what we experience with our senses often seems to contradict that fact.

The readings for the Second Sunday of Advent indeed highlight that idea. The first reading, from Baruch, shows God extending an invitation to his people to cease their mourning and misery and change their focus. They are to put on the glory of God, to rejoice, to envision their children coming from all over the earth. And they are told that every valley will be raised and every mountain laid low. It is a wonderful vision, full of hope and joy.

But it is not meant to be a vision of the future, though that is what it appears to be. Rather, it is to be a vision in the present. The prophet is revealing to the people one of the most wonderful secrets of the human condition – that when we envision the future, we hold and enjoy that vision here and now. Regardless of our circumstances, we can enjoy the vision and its fulfillment right now. That means we do not have to wait until some future day to experience joy. It is ours here and now. Our envisioning gives it to us. What a wonderful gift from God this is! What very good news, indeed!

The second reading gives us another vision from God – Paul’s vision of the Philippians, which certainly applies to us as well – “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” This is a wonderful corollary to our principle – God will continue to complete the good, to realize the work he has begun in us. In other words, if we can just get out of his way, he’ll do what he intended to do from the beginning!

The Gospel makes it very clear what “getting out of God’s way” means. It’s Luke’s account of John the Baptist preaching and proclaiming a wonderful vision of life for those who will repent and receive his baptism of repentance. So getting out of God’s way means parting with any sinful thoughts, words and actions that might be part of our life. If that sounds negative, remember this – turning away from sin means seeing ourselves as deeply loved by God. That’s very positive, and it results in our realizing that there is no

reason to sin once we understand how much God loves us. What could sin gain for us that God's love will not provide?

Once again, the story of the Second Week of Advent is "Blessed are you who believed." We are called to a wonderful vision, called to believe the Good News and to disbelieve the bad news about life and about ourselves. No matter how dire our circumstances or how far away from God we feel, what he asks of us is to share the grandeur of his vision. What could be more comforting?

--Posted December 5, 2003

# "Blessed are You Who Believed"

November 25, 2003

## “BLESSED ARE YOU WHO BELIEVED”

By Father Paul Keenan  
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“BLESSED ARE YOU WHO BELIEVED.”

These words of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, spoken to Mary, the mother of Jesus, from the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, provide a theme for the four Sundays of Advent this year. As you read them, take special note that the verb Elizabeth uses is in the past tense, not the present. She is not praising Mary for believing now; she is praising her for believing right from the moment that the angel Gabriel announced her motherhood to her. We'll say more about that as time goes by, but that's the theme that flows through all four Sundays this year – the notion that belief means acceptance even when there is no sensory evidence for what we are believing in. Many times, the evidence may be to the contrary; but the true believer sees the realization of his or her belief here and now, and acts accordingly.

First things first, however; and that brings us to the First Sunday of Advent. We'll be reading St. Luke's gospel this year, and so the reading is taken from the twenty-first chapter of Luke. As we begin to read the passage, we're probably going to feel a great deal of fear and trembling. It talks about nations being in dismay and people dying of fright, and what it's talking about is the end of time.

But look more closely. What the passage really does is to highlight the difference between the response of people who have no faith and that of people who do. It's the people who have no faith who are in dismay and horrible fear. But it's the people of faith who “stand erect and raise [their] heads because [their] redemption is at hand.” What a difference!

It reminds me of something that happened when I was a boy. Our next-door neighbors were going away on vacation, and before they left they bought a whole lot of wooden planks and boarded up their basement windows and some of the other windows in their house. By the time they finished, the place looked like a fortress. I had never seen anything quite like it. When we'd go on vacation, we'd stop the milk and mail deliveries, let the police know we'd be away, and otherwise take normal precautions but nothing like what the neighbors were doing. When I remarked about it, my father very quietly took me aside and said, “Son, when you have faith in God, you need only take the normal precautions, because you know that God is taking care of you.”

That's the spirit of the First Sunday of Advent. And it's not just about the end of the world. When a crisis hits, we may find ourselves tempted to give in to fear and panic. We've probably actually done that, and we certainly know people who do so on a regular basis. We also know people who spend their entire lives in fear that something bad is going to happen to them. The message is: we don't have to live that way. As people of faith, we know that we already bask in the loving care of God and are forever safe.

We are blessed because, when everything told us to be afraid, we believed.

--Posted November 25, 2003

# Christ the King

November 21, 2003

## CHRIST THE KING

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The Solemnity of Christ the King calls to mind the powerful drama that took place between Pilate, the Jewish leaders and Jesus. It is a real study in the relationship between truth and illusion and gives us a great deal to think about in terms of our own perception of truth.

Roughly, here is the sequence of events that takes place.

1. Jesus is brought before Pilate, accused of claiming to be King of the Jews. 2. Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you King of the Jews?" 3. Jesus replies, "My kingdom is not of this world." 4. Pilate asks, "Then you are a king?" 5. Jesus responds, "You say I am a king. I came into the world to testify to the truth." 6. Pilate asks, "What is truth?" 7. Pilate tells the crowd of Jews, "I find no guilt in him. Shall I release him or Barabbas?" 8. They reply, "Give us Barabbas." 9. Pilate has Jesus scourged, crowned with thorns, garbed in a purple cloak and publicly mocked. 10. Pilate reiterates that he finds no guilt in Jesus. 11. Chief priests and guards demand Jesus' crucifixion. 12. Pilate tells them to crucify him themselves. 13. Chief priests and guards demand Jesus' death. 14. Pilate asks Jesus where he is from. Jesus doesn't answer. 15. Pilate tries to release Jesus; Jewish leaders refuse, and accuse Pilate of being no friend to Caesar. 16. Pilate seats Jesus on the judge's bench, tells Jews, "Behold your king!" 17. Jews reply, "We have no king but Caesar." 18. Pilate hands him over to be crucified.

The irony here is that Jesus never claimed to be King of the Jews, and in fact tells Pilate that any kingdom he has is not of this world, and that it is Pilate alone who is claiming that Jesus is King of the Jews. By the end of this horrible scene, the Jewish leadership itself is disclaiming that Jesus is King of the Jews, saying, "We have no king but Caesar." Jesus, the incarnation of Truth, is beaten, humiliated and in the end, handed over to be crucified – all because of a false accusation that neither Pilate nor Jesus' Jewish accusers believe.

Yet despite these dire appearances, Truth prevails, as we see in the resurrection of Jesus. And that is the thing we most need to remember. Truth, harassed, beaten up, publicly mocked, sentenced to death and put to death, ultimately prevails. That's important to remember, because we live in an age where human power and bullying all too often seem to win the day, and the real truth of things seems to take a back seat. It even happens in

our personal lives, where instead of doing what we know to be right, we are frequently urged to give in to what “everybody else is doing” or to what “opinion polls say” or what some self-styled celebrity is saying on television. The feast of Christ the King reminds us that the truth is often not what it appears to be. Yet despite the best efforts of many to undermine Truth, God’s Truth is always there, behind the scenes but very much surviving the blows that are dealt to it. Nothing can circumvent the true nature of reality, even though it appears to.

It’s a comforting thought for those of us who often find the present times discouraging.

--Posted November 21, 2003

# Wisdom

November 14, 2003

## WISDOM

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The first reading for Trinity Sunday (Proverbs 8:22-31) is an absolutely delightful account of the wisdom of God. It falls into two parts, and together they form an early chronology of God's wisdom.

The first section of the reading tells of the origin of divine wisdom before the dawn of creation. Several important things are said here. "The Lord possessed me." This can have two meanings. The first has the sense "the Lord took over me and possessed me fully." The second has the sense "The Lord owned me; I belonged to the Lord." The first speaks to the fullness of divine wisdom; the second alludes to the close bond between God and his wisdom. When we speak of someone being possessed, we mean that he or she has been taken over completely by someone else. When we say that someone possesses something, we mean that a bond or relation of ownership has been established. Fullness and closeness are the marks of divine wisdom.

Still in this first section, wisdom refers to herself as "the beginning of [God's] ways." Scripture often refers to God's ways. "'My ways are not your ways,' says the Lord." (Isaiah 55:8.) "Make known to me your ways, O Lord." (Isaiah 25:4.) Someone's "ways" are certainly their actions, but they are really the actions endowed with a personality. Have you ever said of someone, "She has her ways, alright"? That's what wisdom is talking about when she refers to herself as "the beginning of [God's] ways." She is the jump-starter of the character of God. To this attribute she adds, "the forerunner of his prodigies of long ago." Wisdom foretold everything that God would do, and how he would do it.

How did wisdom do this? "From of old I was poured forth." Wisdom describes herself as a liquid, not a solid substance. Take a solid substance, let's say a wooden board, and place it on top of a table. What happens? It sits atop the table, on the surface. Now, take a liquid substance and pour it over the table. What happens? It permeates the table, flows all around it, and, if the surface is permeable, it flows into it as well. In describing herself as a liquid, wisdom is saying that she permeates all of God's creation, both outside and in. There is no part of creation to which she is not present.

To punctuate this, wisdom then gives a litany of the various part of creation into which she was brought forth: "when there were no depths," "when there were no fountains and

springs of water,” “before the mountains were settled into place,” and “before the hills.” Not even the earth or “the first clods” of the world were made prior to wisdom.

The second stanza of the poem flows from the first, detailing the further steps of God’s making of creation. But suddenly there is a change, an abruption into the flow of creation where we gain new insight into the identity of wisdom. “Then I was beside him as his craftsman.” More than a liquid substance, wisdom is the divine craftsman working beside the creator. What is the relationship between them? “I was his delight day by day.” If God looked at his creation and saw that it was “good and very good,” it was because it was formed in and through wisdom, which gave him delight.

Now we see yet another attribute of wisdom: it plays. “Playing before him all the while, playing on the surface of the earth.” The craftsman plays with and on what he makes. Have you ever watched a child play with plastocene clay, and noticed how he or she delights in making various shapes and objects? That’s how wisdom was at creation, playing and delighting at the feet of the Lord.

“And I found delight in the human race.” The creator and his wisdom delight in humanity. How often do we stop to imagine God delighting in us? We sometimes think of him as being stern or avenging or punishing. Do we ever think of him delighting in us? It’s in the Bible, so perhaps it’s time we did!

What are we to make of all of this? The realization that there is no part of creation which is devoid of God’s wisdom. The understanding that wisdom is part of God’s “ways.” The realization that God’s wisdom flows in and through all. The knowledge that wisdom (not chaos) is in the very fabric of being. That God’s wisdom is a source of delight to God, and in turn we are a source of divine delight as well.

God’s wisdom gives us much to think about.

--Posted June 3, 2004

# The Force of Truth

November 7, 2003

## THE FORCE OF TRUTH

By Father Paul Keenan  
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The story of Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple (the Gospel for the Feast of the Dedication of the St. John Lateran basilica in Rome) is one that puzzles people greatly. The image of Jesus, whose entire being is supposed to be Love, being so deeply angry is certainly not an image of Jesus that we tend to favor. We tend to put it aside until a day when we find ourselves losing our temper at someone, and then declaring, “Well, even Jesus got angry!”

As we have seen so many times, when reading the gospels it is sometimes necessary to jump to the spiritual meaning in order to make sense of the literal meaning of a passage. This is one of those times. In order to make sense of the passage, it is good to remember that the message of Jesus was one that departed radically from ordinary ways of thinking. Once we adopt the thinking of Jesus, there are a lot of bits and pieces of our “ordinary” thinking that we have to get rid of. As Jesus said elsewhere, we cannot serve two masters.

Sometimes in life, the transition to new thoughts and ideas comes smoothly and naturally. We see the logic of the new way of thinking, understand its implications and, though the change may be painful, we are prepared to go forward with it. Sometimes, however, the shock of a new idea may be so great that it appears to attack us full force, putting to rout some of our most cherished thoughts and practices.

For example, suppose we have been going along very contentedly with our lives, not thinking a great deal about them, but rather calmly and blissfully pursuing our daily activities. Suddenly, we find ourselves being told that what we have been doing, say, causes great and needless hardship to a certain segment of society. Having become accustomed to seeing ourselves as good people who mind their own business and don't harm anyone, we are now forced to re-evaluate our activity and ourselves. We are devastated, because we want to think of ourselves as good and have others think of us as good, too. If we change, we might appear to be foolish. If we don't, we might not be able to live with ourselves. So either we have to change our ways and bring them into line with the new truth that we see, or we have to fool ourselves into thinking that the dire consequences of our actions really aren't so bad after all.

What has happened is that a truth has knocked us off our pins. And that's what Jesus is doing in the temple story – he is confronting the practitioners of a long-standing custom

with the truth that they are violating the sacredness of the temple. The message does not go down well, as is the case sometimes with truth; and in the final analysis it heightens the opposition to Jesus. It also raises once again the further question of whether Jesus is the Son of God, for it upon that truth that he basis his actions. And there, of course, is the real rub – to accept the truth of what Jesus is saying is to accept the truth of what he is saying about himself. Truth meets error in a manner than can only be abrasive, even violent.

For us, then, this story becomes a lesson in moral courage. When confronted with the fact that sometimes we unawares fall prey to the muddled moral thinking of the times, do we have the courage to face the truth, to accept the violence it does to our accustomed ways, and to act accordingly? Or instead, do we turn a blind eye and pretend that, after all, one must be “reasonable,” for, after all “nobody’s perfect” and one can’t be “holier than God?” That’s the choice we have to make – to stand up for our convictions or to compromise in the name of “getting along.”

--Posted November 7, 2003

# Saving

October 30, 2003

## SAVING

By Father Paul Keenan  
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“This is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it....” These words from the sixth chapter of John, words from one of the possible Gospel readings for All Souls’ Day, give us much to think about both in terms of Our Lord and in terms of our own focus for living.

About Our Lord, these words tell us that his thrust is on saving, not on losing. We Christians often use the word “saving” as though it were a unique religious term with no connection to the word’s ordinary meaning. “Saving” for us means “getting into heaven.” That’s fine, but if we lose the connection to the ordinary meaning of “save,” we can miss an important facet of God’s work of salvation.

We have all known people who were “savers.” Their rooms are full of clippings, pamphlets, trinkets – every form of paraphernalia imaginable. They try very hard to save everything, knowing that someday, somehow, there is value in it. They may not see that value today, but who knows how it might unfold tomorrow?

Apparently, that’s how God is, or at least that’s what Jesus seems to be saying. God’s desire is to save everyone. Remember how many times in the Gospels Jesus was criticized by someone because he went around in the company of sinners? Jesus always looked for the good in everyone, hoping that somehow he could “raise it up” and bring it to the forefront.

When St. Paul tells the Philippians (2:5) to “have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus,” perhaps among the things he meant was that, like Jesus, we should have a “saving” mentality. Not that we should become pack rats, but rather in our souls, in the spirit in which we live our lives and deal with one another. We would then remember that every single person has value in the eyes of God. Not one life is wasted, nor is it a mistake. Everyone can be “raised up” because every life is of value.

--Posted October 30, 2003

# I Want to See

October 23, 2003

## I WANT TO SEE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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“Lord, I want to see.” The poignant words of the blind man Bartimaeus of Jericho ring down through two millennia and touch our hearts profoundly. The request is so simple on the one hand, yet so profound on the other. Coming from his lips it almost sounds doable, yet to all around it seems an impossible request.

St. Mark’s placement of this story at the end of Chapter 10 makes this story a kind of capitulation of the entire chapter. In particular, we recall Jesus’ telling his hearers that if their eye causes them to sin, they should tear it out. Here is a man who is coming to Jesus after a lifetime, we presume, of not being able to see; and he is asking for sight. Yet we have seen in the course of the past several weeks, in addition to whatever literal meaning a passage might have, there is also a spiritual meaning. In an odd sort of way, that fact makes these two parts of the chapter – on the surface opposites – entirely compatible with one another. For the “plucking out” of eyes that Jesus refers to is the development of spiritual, inner, vision. We cannot trust our senses to give us proper information about the deeper meaning of life; and so when Jesus speaks of “plucking out” the eye, he means not believing that what it reports will get us very far in understanding our true purpose for being on earth.

Here, too, with Bartimaeus, the blind man of Jericho asks to see; but the implication is that he is not only to see the physical man Jesus, but also to see Jesus’ and his own respective spiritual identities. He is to see Jesus as Son of God, and he is to see himself as a son of God. His eyes reveal darkness, but his spiritual vision will reveal a whole new world of inner life. This is implied, too, in his throwing off his cloak and running up to Jesus. He is getting rid, not only of the outer clothing, but also of the limitation that a life grounded in matter alone offers.

This little part of Mark’s tenth chapter – our Gospel reading for the Thirtieth Sunday of the Year – may seem fairly insignificant. Yet its importance lies, as real estate agents might say, in “location, location, and location.” It recapitulates the entire chapter and reiterates the theme that we should not rely on our senses alone for information about life, but rather rely on the spiritual vision God so generously provides for us – if we take the time and trouble to accept it.

-- Posted October 23, 2003

# A Room At the Top

October 16, 2003

## A ROOM AT THE TOP

By Father Paul Keenan  
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How many times over the years have you and I heard up-and-coming young people single out an extraordinarily successful person and wish that they could be like him or her. Unfortunately many of them become disillusioned or discouraged as time goes on, and fall far short of their ideal. Often they can be heard wondering why so few people seem to reach the pinnacle of success.

To be sure, there are many reasons why only a few seem to make it to the top. But among those reasons is the reality of responsibility. Seen through the eyes of a beginner, the corner office with the big desk and the name on the door looks like just the place to be. What neophytes often don't realize, however, is that every success carries with it an immense burden. Those who are truly successful learn to grow into a sense of responsibility at every step along the way. That way, they are ready to accept the responsibilities that face them when they reach the top.

That sense of responsibility is an inner thing, an affair of the soul. The person who truly wants to achieve success will not only envision the external "perks" connected with his or her goal, but will also mature in accepting the responsibilities connected with its achievement.

Recently, we commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. Seeing him today, it is clear that his "room at the top" is filled with the burden of illness and the weight of a very alienated and broken world. If we have read the story of his life, we know that he did not begin to take on the burdens of his office twenty-five years ago. In a very real sense, he took them on throughout his entire life. He is able to be the Pope he is because he was steadfast every day of his life.

In the Gospel for the Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, the apostles James and John express their desire to succeed. They want to be at the right and the left hand of Jesus in the Kingdom of Heaven. To them, that would be the greatest thing to achieve. Jesus admires their vision and their youthful exuberance, but he is compelled to remind them that such a lofty ambition brings with it certain burdens. "Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" he asks them. It is clear that just as with earthly goals, heavenly goals require the wisdom that only "the school of hard knocks" can provide.

That leads us to a little speculation as to what heaven is like. Often we think of it as a place of rest, but I wonder. Jesus' remarks suggest that perhaps heaven is a place where people of wisdom and integrity gather to express and reflect the wisdom of God. Having drunk of the cup, they have matured, have learned, have deepened. What a pleasure it will be to live forever in the company of such wonderful people! Looking forward to it with hope, we shoulder our responsibilities, knowing that they are stepping-stones to paradise.

-- Posted on October 16, 2003

# Rich Young Man

October 9, 2003

## RICH YOUNG MAN

By Father Paul Keenan  
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There is a sad note in the question the rich young man asks Jesus in Mark 10: 17-30, the Gospel reading for the Twenty-Eighth Sunday of the Year. He asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He’s inherited material things; and he knows that in order to do that, it may be necessary to devote considerable time to pleasing the person who will hopefully leave an appropriate legacy. He can’t figure out why God isn’t as easily fooled into generosity as many human benefactors are. Like many of us, this young man spends far too much of his time thinking that eternal life is something he has to strive for. We tend to think that if we do this and do that, we will earn eternal life. We believe that if we do enough good deeds, we’ll be considered good enough for eternal life. The fact is, we could never earn eternal life by a sheer accumulation of humanly good deeds. And if we think we are going to impress God by showing him a resume full of our good deeds, we are going to be in for a disappointment. Apparently, our young friend has come to suspect that there’s more to eternal life than the simple piling up of good deeds. He’s done all that, and he’s still not satisfied.

The truth is, eternal life is not something we can earn our way into. In the Gospels, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that eternal life is something that we experience now to a certain degree and that we will experience it fully later. Never does Jesus suggest that we should do good deeds in order to earn it. Rather, he teaches that our good deeds should express the inner goodness we have inside.

But the word “inherit” is not all bad. We inherit something because of a relationship we have with the person who is leaving it for us. It is because of our relationship with our Heavenly Father as his sons and daughters that we can experience eternal life both here and hereafter. As St. John puts it, “We love because he loved us first.”

Sadly, though, the young man goes wrong. And he goes wrong precisely in that, he is unwilling to give up his material possessions in order to commit fully to a relationship with God. He wants to have it both ways, and you can’t have it both ways. He wants to keep the possessions he has inherited and at the same time inherit eternal life.

Someone might reasonably ask, “What’s wrong with that?” Is there some sort of conflict between being, let’s say, well-off and being spiritual? Not necessarily. The problem here has nothing to do with the material world; it has to do with what’s going on inside the

fellow's mind and heart. Unfortunately he is more willing to part with eternal life than he is to part with his possessions. That's the problem. Jesus makes it clear that whoever puts eternal life first will be amply rewarded in this life and in the life to come. So that's not a problem. The problem is – we're often afraid to risk what we have for what is intangible, spiritual. And the other problem is – it's the spiritual that drives the material, not the other way around. Does the car drive the driver, or does the driver drive the car? If you look at car commercials, it seems as though it's the car that drives us. Isn't it supposed to be the other way around? And in fact, it is the other way around. Our material possessions purport to give us comfort; for example, yet so often they bring us discomfort. On the other hand, if we begin with a spiritual sense of comfort, we'll choose to have those things that will express our inner comfort and to reject those things that do not. We will drive our possessions rather than being driven by them.

It's an important detail that the main character in the story is a young person. If we think about the previous Sunday's Gospel, Jesus brought out innocent children as the perfect image of the Kingdom of God. This young man is older than a child; and in the intervening time between his childhood and now, he has lost his innocence. He has taken on the ways of the world. He's a good young man, to be sure; but he has lost that very special inner spark that once made him the perfect image of the Kingdom. The suggestion, I think, is that we should be watchful over the minds and hearts of our young. Society's emphasis on things can easily jade them, keep them from living from the deepest part of themselves, and prevent them from really knowing God.

--Posted October 9, 2003

# A Question About Divorce

October 3, 2003

## A QUESTION ABOUT DIVORCE

By Father Paul Keenan  
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When looking at an answer, it is always important to know precisely what the question is and what it is not. Reading Mark 10, the Gospel for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday of the Year, we read the Pharisees' question to Jesus, and it immediately sounds as though they are asking several other questions as well. They are not – they are asking only one: "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" In his answer, Jesus clearly says no and extends the answer to include the wife divorcing her husband. To the general question that he was asked about marriage and divorce, Jesus gives a clear answer – marriage was meant to be permanent; divorce was not part of God's plan for marriage.

Hearing that question and answer in 2003, many people who are divorced feel slapped in the face. For many of them, divorce was the last thing they ever dreamed of or wanted. In many instances, it was visited upon them rather than being something they chose. In some instances, where they did choose to get a divorce, they didn't do it because they especially wanted to; they just didn't see any other alternative. It sounds to them that Jesus and the Church are condemning them. They feel alienated and excluded from the family. Indeed, many may have erroneously been told by well-meaning people that to be divorced is to be excommunicated from the Catholic Church, which indeed is not true.

In answering a direct question which was deliberately designed to entrap him, Jesus was speaking of the nature of marriage and of that only. He was not condemning people who did their best and ended up divorced anyway. He was not judging such people, throwing them out of the Church, condemning them to hell or any such thing. He was affirming the outlook taken by couples themselves when they stand before an authorized clergyman and pronounce their wedding vows. At that moment, they believe in marital permanence, just as God does. And that's what Jesus was affirming..

If we can just get that through our heads, perhaps we can also come to understand the tremendous sympathy and compassion God has for those who, against their will or out of desperate circumstances, find themselves divorced. Having dealt with many divorced Catholics as a priest, I have often wondered whether there was any pain in human life greater than that of one who is divorced. The pain is enormous; the need for understanding and acceptance is great. If anyone wants to see heroism, look to someone who is fighting back from a divorce. They need friends, people to pray for and with them, and they need God. They deserve our understanding and our prayerful care.

In fact, put the words of Jesus and the pain of divorce together, and you get a sense of how important it is that our society, and especially we who are the Body of Christ, learn to lend support to every aspect of marriage – dating, preparation, and married life itself. Married, single and divorced people will tell you – there is something very wrong when half of the marriages end in failure. That’s not how it’s supposed to be. Jesus’ words were not meant to condemn, but rather to put society back on track as far as family is concerned. In the passage we are discussing, by the way, the only people Jesus condemns are the ones who are trying to trap him. They are the ones to whom he attributes hardness of heart. Interestingly, he says that the hardness of pharisaical hearts was the reason for the Mosaic accommodation for divorce. Though the scriptural commentaries take us in an entirely different direction, is it possible that Jesus could be saying that if those of us who describe ourselves as “religious” had more compassion for the state of married couples and less hardness of heart in general, there would be more support for couples to stay married, which is what they wanted to do in the first place? If we, their fellow Christians, showed more love, would they have a better chance of making their marriages work, better models and better resources for staying in love themselves?

These are intriguing questions, and we must face them head on, if we take Jesus seriously. Marriage is a family matter, and we are all a part of the family.

--Posted October 3, 2003

# True or False

September 26, 2003

## TRUE OR FALSE?

By Father Paul Keenan  
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Have you plucked out your eye lately? Hopefully not, despite the dire admonition of Jesus in the passage from Mark 9 that serves as the Gospel reading for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday of the Year. Yes, it's that dread passage about cutting off your hand, your foot or your eye if it causes you to sin. There are, of course, those who take that passage literally. For them, it's very clear and they know exactly what to do. But those of us who do not think that Jesus meant for it to be taken literally are left in some confusion about it.

As a general rule, if there's a problem with the literal meaning of a passage, it's wise to look for a spiritual meaning and see if that helps. So let's try that approach and see what we get. By a "spiritual meaning" is meant a way of interpreting a passage so that it sheds light on some aspect of the spiritual life or gives us a clue about how to better understand God and our identity as creatures made in his image and likeness.

Let's begin by asking what it means, spiritually speaking, to cut off your hand, your foot or your eye. Remember, we're talking spiritually now, and so we're not talking about cutting those parts off from the body, but rather from the soul. Now, how would we cut them off from the soul without cutting them off from the body? The answer – by refusing to pay any attention to them. Cutting something off spiritually means paying no attention to what it is telling us, taking no heed of the information it is conveying to us.

Why on earth would we do that? Because, in this story as Jesus tells it, the hand, the foot and the eye are involved in sin. In other words, they are giving us false information about what is good for us. They may believe every word they are saying; nonetheless, they are giving us a false report about what is right. Cutting them off, then, means looking for a truth beyond what they are telling us and refusing to listen to the information they give. The message is, "Pay no attention to them. Cut them off from your attention, and look for the truth instead."

Perhaps an analogy will make clearer the import of this message. Several months ago, a major newspaper fired a reporter who allegedly falsified some of his stories, made up interviews and copied news accounts from other sources rather than doing his own investigating. Why did they fire him? Because you can't print the truth in your newspaper if your reporters aren't reporting truthfully. It's the same with our senses, which are considered to be our main reporters about what's going on in our world. Our hand, our

foot and our eye, for example, report back to us about the world we live in. But do they tell us the truth? Not always. Sometimes they tell us that certain things and activities will bring us pleasure and are very good for us, when really they're not. Their knowledge about the world is very limited; and when we (or society at large) try to pretend that we can build a whole philosophy of life around what they tell us, we are sorely mistaken. Just as the newspaper had to start looking around for better reporters, so must we begin looking for better information about how to build a life.

To do that, we cut off the hand, the eye and the foot, not literally but spiritually. It's the equivalent of firing them. And in their stead, we turn to soul, to spirit, to our point of contact with God, for our information as to what life is and is not, and how to live. There, we get much better information about our purpose in life and how to make right decisions. In prayer, we learn how to listen to the wisdom of God so that it can guide us in right paths.

In this passage, then, we are not being told to cut off our limbs. We are being told to reject the information they give us and turn instead to the inner wisdom, found in prayer and in careful reflection upon Scripture, tradition and the teachings of the Church. Having done that, we will be in a much better position to evaluate the information given to us by society, by our senses and by the prevailing forms of thought in our culture.

--Posted September 26, 2003

## Two Sons

September 26, 2003

### TWO SONS

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Scripture scholars have spent a great deal of time and energy trying to figure out the parable of two sons (Matthew 21:31). Part of what complicates their efforts is that there are at least three different textual versions of the story. In the first, the son who says yes to his father but does not follow through on his promise, is called the obedient son by the Pharisees. Clearly, this is either a scribal problem or there is a strange twist to the meaning of the story. In the second and third versions of the text, the son who ultimately does go to the vineyard is called obedient; but the order in which the yes-saying son and the no-saying son appear in the story is different in each case. Some commentators think that the order of appearance makes a difference in the overall impact of the story.

One commentator on this passage says, quite rightly, that it is possible to complicate a parable by thinking too much about it. A parable is known for its direct impact upon the hearer. Leaving aside the strange version which has the Pharisees assert that the son who agrees to go to the vineyard but does not, is the obedient son, the story is a pretty straightforward one. A father asks each of his two sons to work in the vineyard. One says yes but does not go. The other says no, but then thinks better of it and goes. The question is, which son does the father's will?

The point is fairly simple, it seems to me: in the Kingdom of God, actions speak louder than words. The people who are supposed to get the point are the Pharisees, who, while railing against sinners of every kind, have themselves not followed through on the essentials of their religious commitment. The very sinners whom they condemn, Jesus tells them, in many instances have acknowledged their sinfulness and repented. In virtue of this, they - and not the Pharisees who condemn them - are entering the Kingdom of God.

The Pharisees, remember, all along have been grumbling that Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors. Jesus' response is to say, "Well, these people repent of their mistakes and have the humility to change their lives. You don't."

It's a question of heart-felt gratitude for God's goodness in one's life. The sinners Jesus alludes to are the ones who have felt the touch of the Lord's hand personally. Of course they respond to him; he makes himself available to them! Nothing about the harsh and judgmental demeanor of the Pharisees appeals to them in the least. The Pharisees, in

condemning them, leave them as they found them. Jesus entices them to change for the better, by lifting them up with his love. Naturally, they respond to Jesus.

Where do you and I fit into the story? It all depends on whether we allow ourselves to experience personally the love of God in our hearts. Have we brought our sins, our weaknesses, our worries and our failure before the Lord, and allowed him to lift us up with gentleness, kindness and love? He is the friend to whom we can talk, the one who will understand, the one who will give us the courage to change. There is no need for us to become hard-hearted and cynical. The parable of the two sons is an invitation extended by Jesus to us, asking us to allow him to forgive us, to comfort us, and to help us to find our place in the Father's vineyard.

Posted September 26, 2002

# Square One

September 19, 2003

## SQUARE ONE

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Nobody's perfect, that's for sure; and I'm sure what I'm about to describe is something we have all done to someone else at one time or other. Certainly, we have had it done to us. It may be that you've had a bad day, or it may be that something wonderful or unusually significant has happened. Whatever it is, you just need to tell someone about it. Eagerly, you let your tale unfold and as you tell it you simply feel better. You come to the end of the story, waiting for a sympathetic response from your friend. And what does he or she do? You guessed it – change the subject. They really weren't listening at all.

It's an awful feeling, really. You've poured your heart out and no one was listening. If it makes you feel any better, Jesus had that experience, too. He was using the occasion of a journey through Galilee to tell the disciples that he was going to have to suffer, and eventually die and rise. It was a heavy burden on his heart, and he needed to share it with those who were closest to him.

In an audience of twelve, you would think that someone in the group would give Jesus some comfort – a word, a gesture, a hug, or something. To his chagrin, however, Jesus learned that their response to his words was – yes – to change the subject. To add insult to injury, the topic of their choice was – who among them would be first in the Kingdom of Heaven!

Imagine that. Take a moment to really get it. Jesus was sharing with them the news about his own imminent suffering, death and resurrection; and they changed the subject to their own standing in heaven.

How would you feel if you were Jesus? I think I'd be ready to give up.

But that wasn't Jesus. Instead of giving up, he changed the subject once again, this time to meet them exactly where they were. He brought a little child into their midst and told them that if they wanted to be greatest in the Kingdom, they should be kind to such a little child.

Who knows whether the disciples got that message, either? Lord knows, it's tough enough for us to get, so we really can't blame them if they missed it. But what's interesting here is the reaction of Jesus. Many of us, I think, would have gone on a tirade

such as, “Don’t you care about me? I’m pouring my heart out to you, and you don’t even listen. You don’t even care if I live or die.”

Not Jesus. His unselfishness was simply remarkable. Even in his disagreement with their question he remained remarkably calm and patient. He knew that if he became upset with them, he would not be modeling right behavior for them. His behavior would be just as bad as theirs, just as self-centered and self-serving. In avoiding what could have been a very nasty altercation, he did something dramatically positive: he brought a little child into their circle. His lesson was – if you want to be greatest, you’d better be concerned more with others than with your heavenly status! Since they were unable to respond to the pain of someone who was sharing the news of his impending death with them, he took them back to Square One – can you love a little child? Starting there, perhaps he could eventually get them to respond to the pain of an adult.

As we hear this gospel passage on the Twenty-Fifth Sunday of the Year, we can ask Jesus for the grace to share his kindness and understanding when others do not hear what we are trying to say to them. And if need be, we can take ourselves back to Square One by appreciating the simplicity of a child, the beauty of a leaf, the affection of a beloved animal companion. If we can find ourselves at home there, we are on our way to the Kingdom of God.

--Posted September 19, 2003

# Exaltation of the Cross

September 12, 2003

## EXALTATION OF THE CROSS

By Father Paul Keenan  
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There is a wonderful irony in the fact that on the heels of our commemoration of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, we mark the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Both speak of death and life. Both address the joy and sadness of life. Both draw our attention to healing and resurrection.

The Gospel reading for Sunday is from the third chapter of John's Gospel and is part of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. "No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man," Jesus tells Nicodemus. That statement is both a literal statement about Jesus' own identity and a spiritual statement about the necessity of our undergoing a radical transformation of our thoughts. Often enough in reading this passage, we stop when we have reached the former interpretation, and never manage to catch the nuance that, if we heard it, would so enrich our lives.

One does not have to believe in reincarnation (which I do not) to believe that before we existed in our present form as embodied souls, each one of us was an idea in the mind of God. A practical and materially slanted view of reality strongly encourages us to forget that fact. We are, it tells us, the product of human parents; and if you want to know who you are, just take a look at your family tree. Your DNA will say it all. I, on the other hand, believe that everything comes from God and returns to God and that, as grateful as we are to our parents, we (and they, for that matter), would not exist if God did not provide the gift of life. It is as John says in the Prologue to his Gospel: "All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be." (John 1:3.)

If that is true, then there is a hidden meaning in the words of Jesus about coming down from heaven. It seems that Jesus is not only speaking of his own identity, but of ours as well. At the right moment, you and I, ideas in the mind of God, came down from heaven to take our place here on earth. Through baptism we were given the grace to know and to accept our identity as children of God. The problem is, we learned to accept the ideas and mores of a world that does not think the way God thinks. All too often, it limits and even conflicts with the ideas of God. Very subtly and persuasively, this world and its ideas lead us to forget that we are ideas in the mind of God. Instead, we see ourselves, for better or for worse, as products of this world and its ideas.

The words of Jesus are a reminder to Nicodemus and to us that, as proud as we might be at times about our accomplishments in this world, our true identity is as ideas in the mind of God. He is saying to Nicodemus (and to us) that if we seek to fulfill our highest destiny (“to go up to heaven,” as he puts it) we must embrace the thoughts of God and take our place among those thoughts. Earlier in the passage, Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be “born again,” and by this he meant that we must open ourselves to the realization that the people and things that we love and enjoy in this world have their true identity in the eternal, in the mind of God. It’s reminiscent of the expression, “I just can’t contain myself” that we use when we are so happy or so enthusiastic that we feel as though we are about to burst our skin. No matter how great it is or how mighty, the world cannot contain all of the beauty and energy of God. But – here’s the good news – the world can be contained in the magnificent beauty and energy of God. We must, in the words of Jesus “go up to heaven” to experience our true fullness; and in order to do that, we must remember that we “came down from heaven,” that this world is not our home, ultimately speaking, and that we find our true identity in God.

That might sound a bit morbid, a bit “world-hating,” but that’s not what Jesus is saying. When he talks about “going up to heaven” or about being “born again,” he’s not talking only about life after death, he’s also talking about our consciousness, our state of awareness here and now. He’s saying that if we shift our consciousness from being citizens of earth to being citizens of heaven, we will discover our destiny, experience peace of heart and appreciate the true meaning and value of life here on earth. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17.)

Spiritually speaking, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross tells us to remember who we truly are and where we are meant to go. This isn’t just about geography – that one minute we’re here on earth and the next minute we go to heaven. It’s also about consciousness, about thinking and living in a certain way, and we can begin to think in that certain way and to live in that certain way now.

--Posted on September 12, 2003.

# Inner Miracles

September 4, 2003

## INNER MIRACLES

By Father Paul Keenan  
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One of the prominent topics in spirituality today is the question of miracles. Some people, of course, don't believe in miracles at all; they believe that everything has a natural explanation. Others believe in divine intervention into human affairs, but refuse to call it a "miracle" because they think of it as a natural course of events rather than as a special case of God's healing love. Some who do believe in miracles are perplexed as to why certain people seem to experience divine favor while others do not. Others who believe in miracles are very happy to see many interventions of God's love; they love to think of God as showering down his miracles upon us all the time. And still others think that miracles are special occurrences that happened many years ago, but do not happen anymore. One thing is for sure – you can always get an interesting conversation going if you introduce the subject of miracles.

In the first reading for the Twenty-Third Sunday of the Year this year, the prophet Isaiah by implication raises the questions of what is necessary for miracles to occur and, by extension, what may be at work when they do not. The answer is the same in both cases, and the answer is fear. The text is from Isaiah 35, and it is both familiar and beautiful. The flow of the text is important to grasp, for therein lies the heart of Isaiah's philosophy of miracles. In the opening verses of the passage, the Lord tells Isaiah to speak to those whose hearts are frightened and tell them, "Be strong, fear not!" The people of God are afraid, and it appears that the nub of their fear is the question of abandonment by God. They feel thrown to the wolves, prey to all the wild and evil forces in the world. They feel desperate and hopeless.

Now, what is very interesting here is that if you read this passage very carefully, you get the impression that the very thing that seems to put a wedge between God and his people is what also invites divine assistance. That's interesting, because many thinkers who speculate about miracles seem to imply that fear blocks the likelihood of a miracle's taking place. Isaiah seems to imply, on the other hand, that while fear does indeed set up a kind of resistance to divine intervention, it also is the very thing that elicits God's help. God tells them not to fear, and that then "the eyes of the blind will be opened..." and so forth. But it is the fact that they fear that elicits God's response in the first place.

This says something very important both about God and about miracles. About God, because it tells us that when we are paralyzed by fear, God steps in to give us a choice.

He makes it possible for us to choose not to be afraid. And about miracles, because Isaiah's words remind us that miracles are divine, not human deeds. Just because, from a human standpoint our predicament (including our fears about it) seems impossible to overcome, doesn't mean that the divine standpoint doesn't see things differently. God sees possibilities where we see impossibilities, and he rushes in ("Here is your God, he comes with vindication.") to rescue us.

That leads naturally enough to the question, "Why, then, didn't I get my miracle?" Often enough, the problem lies in the fact that we look for miracles to show up on the outside rather than on the inside. But like so much else in life, miracles are an inner matter before they are an outer matter. The first miracle may well be evoking a change in our ability to believe that what we are asking for is even possible. If we get a lifting of our fear or our discouragement or our cynicism, that may be more of a miracle than the external things we are looking for! The question Jesus asks his mother at the wedding feast of Cana is a question that God asks each one of us when we pray to him for his intervention: "What it is to me and to thee?" It's not a rebuff, as we ordinarily assume; for the question really means, "Do you really think it's possible to do something about this?" The main miracle is always the healing of fear and unbelief. Once a person is healed of them, the outer miracle may not even be necessary, because now he or she is off and running with a newfound freedom from inner restraint.

Isaiah's message is an important one for us to think about. When looking for a miracle or some other act of divine intervention, we do well to remember that the first change we should be looking for might be an inner one.

--Posted September 4, 2003

# Every Gift is from God

August 28, 2003

## EVERY GIFT IS FROM GOD

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"All good giving and every perfect gift is from above." (James 1: 17.) Truer, but more unacknowledged, words were never spoken. If we could only take this truth to heart, our lives would be changed forever for the better.

From its place in the first chapter of James, this pivotal verse, it seems, gives rise, in James's mind, to a set of five truths, important points he wishes to make to the early Christians. They are as follows:

1. Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials.
2. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God.
3. But he should ask in faith, not doubting.
4. The brother in lowly circumstances should take pride in his high standing and the rich one in his lowliness.
5. Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

God gives us perseverance. He gives us wisdom. Our faith is in him, not in ourselves. One's circumstances do not make him or her, but one's desires - and not God - can tempt him or her to go astray.

To James, each and every one of those truths, so important for his followers to hear, stems from the fact that everything comes from God. God is the source of all. He gives comfort during trials. He provides wisdom and everything else we need.

It's a wonderful truth, this realization of James that God is the Source of everything. As it did for James, contemplating that truth every day could change our lives.

--Posted August 28, 2003

# Truth and Error

August 21, 2003

## TRUTH AND ERROR

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Remember the movie "Groundhog Day," in which the events of February 2 in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, repeated themselves over and over again for days and days at a stretch? By this time, you may have a similar feeling - it may well seem to you that you have been hearing the same Gospel reading over and over again for the past several Sundays. Indeed, we will have spent a total of five weeks on the sixth chapter of the Gospel of St. John.

Contrary to initial appearances, there is a great deal of movement within this chapter. The first Sunday was the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes and Jesus' statement, "I am the Bread of Life." That set the stage for what was to come. The next three Sundays showed a deepening of the crowd's opposition to Jesus and their complete rejection of his miracle. First, they missed the point of the miracle by assuming he would give them an endless supply of bread; and, when they were told that this was not to be the case, they mocked him and challenged him to perform signs (as if he already hadn't) that proved the authenticity of his message. Then, the attack became nastier and more personal as they pointedly reminded him that they knew who he was, since he had grown up around them. Finally, they completely rejected his message: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

This Sunday, the opposition shifts. Now, the disciples manage to catch the germs of the crowd's disbelief. They openly refuse to continue to walk with Jesus, or at least many of them do. Only the Twelve remain, fueled by Peter's affirmation, "You are the Holy One of God."

Taken together, these five weeks are not only a powerful inquiry into the nature of the Eucharist. They are also an amazing study of mankind's ability to challenge God. We could also say that the sixth chapter of John is a mini-course about the battle of truth against error, reality against illusion, good against evil.

The stages are these: 1. Truth performs a kind action that should be pleasing and helpful. 2. Error misconstrues Truth's action and challenges Truth to present its credentials. 3. Error insists that Truth is not what it says it is because it does not match up with what Error erroneously holds to be true and has always held to be true. 4. Error dogmatically concludes that what Truth offers is categorically impossible. 5. Error appears to have defeated Truth. But it's only an appearance, because there are those who have seen the Truth and accepted it, thus enabling Truth to live on.

What are we to conclude from all this? For one thing, I guess, that it's easier for us to misunderstand God's ways than it is for us to understand them. That could be discouraging, but let's take one other quick look at these passages from John. One way by which we can tell Truth from Error here is by noticing the contrasting demeanors of Jesus and his opponents. Notice - the opponents get nastier and increasingly more hateful as the conversation goes along. Jesus, on the other hand, remains peaceful, loving and open to their challenges and questions. They give every appearance of having an axe to grind, while he remains self-possessed and, paradoxically, self-effacing. They give the impression of ordering him around, while he gives the impression of being at their service. We might say that where Error roars, Truth holds out an olive branch, and that we can tell Error by its bluster and Truth by its modesty.

We can also conclude that Truth is not a product of popularity, nor is it fazed by it. At the end of this discussion, the scoreboard reads 5000 to 12 in favor of the opposing team. Did Jesus lose the game?

The answer is: stay tuned.

--Posted August 21, 2003

# Our Inner Light

August 16, 2003

## OUR INNER LIGHT

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Archdiocese of New York

Here on the East Coast, we have managed to come through "The Blackout of 2003." At this writing, New York, New Jersey and Connecticut have pretty much returned to normal. Other states affected by the massive power failure are not yet quite so fortunate. What have we learned from our experience?

Throughout these days, I have been reminded of the phrase "a light no darkness could extinguish." On newscasts throughout the days of the power failure, we repeatedly heard how well people responded to the crisis. One of the comments that kept being repeated was how caring people were towards one another. It was true. By and large, people put up with massive inconvenience with tremendous patience and good grace. They slept in uncomfortable conditions, not knowing how or when they were going to get home. During these days, people looked in on those who were sick, aged or alone. It was clear that, even though we had lost electrical power, we were well aware of a greater power within us, one that we could draw on to help us meet the challenges that we faced.

It was also a time when we felt some insecurity. What caused the blackout? When would our electricity come on again? How would we get home or to work? When would we be able to do business? How much damage to our lives would there be? These were the questions many of us faced. Try as we might to keep our sunny side up, many of us felt a nagging sense of insecurity. More than ever, we realized how much electricity affected our sense of security, our feeling of being safe and in control of our lives.

We certainly learned that the loss of electrical power has tremendous ramifications for almost every area of our lives. Lose electricity, and life becomes infinitely more complicated.

One thought that kept recurring to me was the realization that if the loss of electrical power could disrupt so many areas of our lives, how much more so when we lose our sense of spiritual power. When we lose our connection to the inner light of God, so many other areas of life go haywire. We lose our sense of purpose. We lose our ability to love and to receive love. We begin to think that what is right is wrong, and what is wrong is right - we lose our moral compass. When we are connected to God, on the other hand,

we have tremendous light and power to draw upon to face the complexities of life with clarity.

In the days ahead, we will spend much time and energy looking into the causes and the effects of our experience during the "Blackout of 2003." Perhaps, along with that, we will take the time to reflect upon the spiritual meaning of these days. How wonderful it will be if we learn the importance of staying connected to the light of God. How differently we might see our lives if we were to draw upon his power to enlighten and to guide us!

--Posted August 16, 2003

# Food for the Soul

August 7, 2003

## FOOD FOR THE SOUL

Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

It's almost impossible to turn on the television or the radio these days without hearing a commercial for a restaurant or a fast-food place or even for the manufacturer of a food product. The general idea behind many of these ads is that if you eat their food, you'll feel better, have more energy and be more successful.

Given that premise, when you hear the first reading for the Nineteenth Sunday of the Year (1 Kgs 19:4-8), you have to wonder what was in the food that the angel gave to Elijah that allowed him to walk forty days and forty night to Mount Horeb. Could you imagine having a bite to eat and then walking for forty days and nights? That's would be a powerful meal, indeed!

That meal was served to Elijah by an angel. In fact, the angel had to insist - twice - that Elijah arise from his slumber and eat. It might remind you of your mother, chiding you when you were a kid, "You must eat those green beans. How are you ever going to grow up to be strong?" Whatever was in those green beans didn't make them taste any better; but, like Elijah, we ate them, albeit under duress, and I guess most of us did grow up to be "big and strong," either despite them or because of them.

However, there are clues that, in Elijah's case, the food in question was not just physical food, but spiritual food as well. The first clue is that Elijah was in the desert, which was a holy place. The second clue - this is a big one - is that Elijah was in deep despair, praying for death. He had just ordered the slaughter of the false prophets of Baal, and was presently afraid for his own life. "This is enough, O LORD! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers," he prayed. It was then that the angel ordered him to get up and eat the hearth cake and to drink from the jug of water. He went to sleep, and the angel awoke him and again ordered him to eat.

Two powerful clues - out in the desert (the place of God) and at a time when his soul needed nourishment, God nourished Elijah sufficiently that he made the lengthy journey

to the mountain of God. The clues tell us that if we want to look for the secret ingredient in that hearth cake, we must look to its spiritual meaning.

You and I may not be afraid for our lives, but there may indeed be "prophets of Baal" (proclaimers of the "wisdom" of the times) whom we have sought to challenge through the power of our faith, and we find ourselves paying the price. Maybe we were the only ones in our group who stood up for a moral principle when everybody else went the other way. Maybe we find ourselves questioning our actions or wondering - like Elijah - if we might not have expressed our opposition differently. Elijah, remember, felt so badly about himself that he prayed to die. The message for us in this story is that, precisely at such times, God will send his messenger to feed and strengthen our lagging spirits. It may come in the form of bread for the body, but it will have the effect of being food for the soul.

Thinking back to home once again, was there ever a time when you felt defeated? Perhaps your mother found you lying in tears on your bed, and she came and brought you a piece of your favorite cake and a glass of milk. That was certainly food for the body; but more importantly, it was food for the soul as well. You felt loved, cared about, and able to go on. Before long, you were back on your feet, playing or doing your homework.

When we think of the Body of Christ, we know that it is, indeed, physical food. But the great secret is that it is also spiritual food, the real presence of Christ, body and blood, soul and divinity. It's primary purpose is to lift our spirits, to help us to realize how greatly we are loved. It makes it possible for us to go on, and even to triumph.

Read at both the literal and spiritual levels, the Elijah story helps us to realize how greatly God loves us, and it enables us to recall the great secret that is our salvation and our hope when we are privileged to receive the Eucharist.

--Posted August 7, 2003

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# Bread of Life -- Part I

July 31, 2003

## BREAD OF LIFE -- PART I

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The first four of these August Sundays this year are going to be taken up with a consideration of various responses to the miracle of the loaves and the fishes as recorded in the Gospel of John and read last Sunday. In all, we'll be spending five Sundays on that sixth chapter of John. That's an interesting thing in itself, because the scheduling of these readings gives us a unique opportunity to focus on various kinds of human opposition to the intervention of God into human affairs. The way it plays out, we get the miracle itself, three weeks of deepening opposition to Jesus, and finally the skepticism of certain of his very own disciples as to the mission and identity of Jesus.

It's always good to listen to the readings as though we were hearing them for the first time. If we were to do this, we might well be amazed that one truly generous act on the part of God aroused so much misunderstanding and opposition. It's as though Jesus entered into this particular human situation, and almost no one supported him or even understood him as they responded to what he did. Truly, you would think that Jesus had done some horrible misdeed or committed a heinous crime, instead of performing a wonderful miracle. As we reflect on the Word of God these next four weeks, we get an eye-opening insight into the opposition that human beings can raise to the presence and the work of God.

Why would they do such a thing? This week, we get a beginning glimpse into the differences that can arise between us and God.

What we see, at this introductory level, is a total misunderstanding of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes, and, by extension, a total misunderstanding of the identity and mission of Jesus. The people pursue Jesus, thinking that he is going to provide them with bread on a regular basis. And of course, if they could persuade him to provide bread, perhaps they could also persuade him to provide safety, security, riches, a permanent kingdom - the list goes on and on. It seems to have occurred to them that, by engaging in a little friendly persuasion of Jesus, they could sit back and lean on him for everything for the remainder of their lives.

It's easy for us to become very smug, when reading this, and make all sorts of statements as to how foolish and stubborn these people were. Yet how many times do we attempt to use God or his divine power to build a little empire for ourselves? We ask for this, we ask for that, all without ever taking the time and trouble to build a relationship with the heavenly Father whose kindness we are hoping to engage. We often know more about our deli man or the attendant at our garage than we do about God.

At this level, that is the point that Jesus is trying to make. God is not some sort of bread machine who can be dragged out of the pantry for a few hours and then put back again. From beginning to end, God is the nourishment for our souls; and his desire is not to do everything for us, but to do everything through us.

To illustrate this point, Jesus makes a statement, "I am the bread of life." That one statement, all by itself, will generate even more confusion and opposition. What does it mean, and why would he say something that appeared to be destined to cause more upset?

Think it over, and we'll see what we will see next week.

--Posted July 31, 2003

## Lead Us Not....

July 28, 2003

### LEAD US NOT....

Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

Did it ever occur to Elisha or to Jesus to be selfish?

What an odd question, but it was the first one to pop into my mind when examining the readings for the Seventeenth Sunday of the Year, from 2 Kings 4 and John 6. In both cases, food was brought to the holy man; and in both cases, the quantity of food was scarcely large enough to feed a handful of persons, much less a whole crowd.

Did it ever occur to Elisha or to Jesus to be selfish?

In other words, did it ever occur to them to say, "Well, we're all hungry and we certainly can't feed everybody. So let's graciously accept what's been given, and keep it for ourselves. Let's first send everyone away, and then we'll eat."

There's no evidence in Scripture to say that such a thing occurred to Elisha or to Jesus. But I'll bet if we were in their situation, the temptation would have occurred to us. But to them, it didn't, and that's a large part of the beauty of their respective stories. Interestingly, there is nothing in either story to indicate that Elisha or Jesus partook of the offering at all. Apparently, their first thought - and they credited that thought to God - was to be sure that all of the people ate.

Both readings give us a wonderful insight into the minds of these two remarkable people. If we're looking for people to model, there they are. Not simply because they performed impressive deeds, but for their utter trust in God and for their staunch belief that the most important thing was to feed the people.

As we reflect on our own life purpose, there's something important to think about in those two stories. We may not feed people in the course of our daily lives - or we might. It may be our lot in life to nourish people in other ways through the use of other gifts. Elisha and Jesus help us to keep our focus, that we are here, not for ourselves alone, but to nurture others. And in doing so, we can trust that a significant part of God's plan will assure that our nourishment will be taken care of as well

--Posted July 28, 2003

# Thoughts and Shepherds

July 18, 2003

## THOUGHTS AND SHEPHERDS

Father Paul Keenan  
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The readings for the Sixteenth Sunday of the Year speak of shepherds. The first reading (Jeremiah 23: 1-6) gives us the picture of God scattering the wicked shepherds who have let the sheep scatter. The Lord promises to gather his flock together again. The Gospel reading (Mark 6:30-34) describes Jesus compassion for the crowd, "for they were like sheep without a shepherd."

Today we may have difficulty understanding shepherds, so it might be easier for us to think in terms of our minds and their ideas. It is estimated that about 60,000 - 90,000 ideas run through our minds each day. When we focus our minds and are thinking clearly, we are able to find the ideas that we need and to let go of the ones we don't need. It is very easy, however, to lose our focus. When that happens, our ideas become scattered. We feel overwhelmed, afraid, and sad. At especially busy times, we may feel that we simply cannot control our thoughts. But if we take a deep breath, or go away somewhere quietly and get our focus back, our minds become orderly again and our lives get back on track.

It is the same for our relationship with Christ. He is the Shepherd; and so long as we stay centered in him, our days, our minds and our lives run smoothly. But if we turn to another shepherd, that is when we lose our focus and can get into all sorts of trouble. Many people today, like the people of Jesus' time, are like sheep without a shepherd. Their lives have no focus; their thoughts run at random, and they are lost. The heart of Christ reaches out to lost souls in order to bring them back into focus.

If we are feeling scattered these days for any reason, let us turn our minds and hearts back to the Shepherd, who will guide us and lead us back to inner peace.

--Posted July 18, 2003

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# Our True Work

July 11, 2003

## OUR TRUE WORK

Father Paul Keenan  
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"It's not what you know, it's who you know." We've all heard that bit of wisdom, which, complete with its grammatical inaccuracy, paints a fairly cynical view of how to get along in life. Yet, like many similar aphorisms, some people believe it to be true. We've all known people who rose to the top, not because they had greater competence than others, but because they had "connections." Call it nepotism or patronage, it gets certain people promoted who might otherwise go unnoticed.

While there is nothing at all wrong with having good connections, the downside is that it can sometimes lead to unfair treatment of others as those who are the beneficiaries of patronage seek, in certain situations, to protect their own turf. Perhaps you or someone you know was once treated badly by someone who was an "insider" and who wanted to make it clear that no one else was getting "in" unless he said so. If that has been your experience, take comfort in the readings for the Fifteenth Sunday of the Year. Each of them makes it clear, in its own way, that true success in life comes, not as a result of a human patronage system, but through the beneficence of God, our creator.

As a result of this, we have nothing to fear from any human "insider" who lords his "power" over us. The source of everything we have is God, and God alone. And in the end, our only "job" is to work for him.

In the first reading (Amos 7:12-15), the prophet Amos appears to be in big trouble. Through his message, he has managed to enrage the king, who sends his priest to shoo Amos away. The priest is clearly representing the king, who has clearly told him to get rid of this vagabond prophet. The only problem is, Amos will have none of it. He is as little impressed with the priest as with the king. He declares quite openly that he is working, not for them, but for God and God alone. Thank you very much, he will continue to declare openly the message he has been given.

"In him we also were chosen." This line from the opening chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is taken from our second reading. In a beautiful paean to the love of God

for us in Christ Jesus, Paul notes that we were chosen by God to "exist for the praise of his glory." In other words, our job on earth is to give glory to God. God in Christ Jesus chose us for that job. Whatever earthly work we may have is meant to fulfill our primary work here on earth. We are working for God, and God alone, Paul tells us. We must never give up our "day job."

The gospel reading is from the sixth chapter of Mark, where Jesus sends the apostles out, two by two, to proclaim his message and to heal the sick. Again, it's clear who the boss is, and Jesus gives them definite instructions so as not to get themselves unnecessarily entangled with anyone else. I wonder, since we know that we existed in the mind of God from all eternity, is it too far fetched to imagine our Creator giving similar instructions to us before he sent us here to earth -- that we are to preach repentance, heal the sick and be beholden only to him? Just as it was the job description of the apostles, it is ours as well for our time here on earth.

"It's not what you know, it's who you know." The everyday meaning of that saying might be questionable, but its spiritual meaning is not. When we devote ourselves to knowing God, we know everything we need to know. Above all, we know the one for whom we are working, and we know what we stand for. We know that we have nothing to fear from others who might threaten to harm or destroy us. We have our true mission and our true work from God, which no one else can ever take away.

--Posted July 11, 2003

# Before, After, and Always

July 3, 2003

## BEFORE, AFTER, AND ALWAYS

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In this week's readings for the Fourteenth Sunday of the Year, we get a before, an after and a middle glimpse of the work of a prophet.

The First Reading, from the second chapter of Ezekiel, shows the Lord sending the prophet to the people. Ezekiel noted, "He stood me on my feet." This has a couple of meanings. The first is quite literal: Ezekiel had fallen down at the powerful vision he had received at the end of the first chapter of the book that bears his name. So, quite literally, the Lord stood him up. But the phrase has another significance, too. It connotes that Ezekiel's power as a prophet came directly from the Lord; he was beholden to no one but God. This is important, because Ezekiel was going to have to give a very difficult message; and everyone who received that message needed to be absolutely clear in whose name he was giving it. He was not there to represent a civil or religious leader or group. The people to whom he was speaking did not elect him. He was sent by God, and only by God. He had no allegiance to anyone else. It was God's message that he was presenting, and no one else's.

Ezekiel needed to remember that for himself, too; for he was going to a people who were profoundly obstinate. "Hard of face and obstinate of heart are they to whom I am sending you," the Lord forewarned him. They were a people who would stubbornly resist the ideas that would be presented to them. In fairness, the Lord let Ezekiel know this; but he also told him that he would be with him, and that the prophet was always to identify himself as having come from God.

The Gospel reading, from the sixth chapter of Mark, shows the "after" side of a prophet's story. Here, the prophet is Jesus. In the story, he had already gone to the people and been rejected. To make matters worse, not only did they reject his message - they rejected him as well. After all, they said, they knew this man. He had grown up among them. He most certainly would not be speaking in behalf of God. The effect of their disbelief was so strong, Mark tells us, that Jesus "was able to work no mighty deed there."

It so happens that, this Sunday, the second reading provides an intermediary bridge between the other two. It is a passage from Second Corinthians, in which Paul told the Corinthians about everything that he had endured for the sake of the gospel. "I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses," he told them, "in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me." Because of Christ, he was able to bear every manner of insults and persecution. In fact, he said, he was "content" with them. If they could bring him the indwelling of Christ, he reasoned, what more could he ask?

Each day, we enter into a new prophetic journey as representatives of Christ. Some days are Ezekiel days, in which we look ahead and anticipate great difficulty. Other days are Jesus days, in which we look back and discover that we have not been very successful. But every day can be a Paul day, in which we uplift ourselves with the realization that every day is a day in which we can experience the power of Christ dwelling in us, and be content.

--Posted July 3, 2003

# Thinking Jesus' Way

June 27, 2003

## THINKING JESUS' WAY

Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel reading for the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul gives us an insight into the catechetical style of Jesus. It also gives us a model for how to grow in our own faith. The story is familiar enough. It is St. Matthew's account of Jesus' conversation with the apostles at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16). First, he asks the disciples who people are saying that he is. After some initial answers, he asks for their own opinion; and Peter replies that Jesus is the Messiah.

Though we often don't give it a moment's reflection, Jesus' method of teaching is as important as the answer at which it arrives. It proceeds in two distinctive steps. First, Jesus asks the disciples what the "state of the art" is concerning people's understanding of him. It's a simple enough question, certainly not a trick question or one that requires a great deal of thought. The apostles have been traveling with Jesus. They have visited a number of towns, gossiped in the various town squares, and are highly attuned to what is on people's minds. Their identity as followers of Jesus is well-known, and when they go into a town, people naturally ask them about him and initiate conversations about him. What is he like? Is he a stern teacher? What does he talk about when he's not preaching? Does he seem, well, normal? Without even trying, the apostles know exactly what people are thinking about Jesus. So when Jesus asks them to report the various stories that are circulating about him, the apostles do it quite easily. "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets," they reply.

But now, the tone of the conversation changes drastically. The Teacher shifts their attention away from the chitchat of the marketplace to something much more serious. He asks, "But who do you say that I am?" This is a much more difficult question, because it demands a personal response. No longer is it sufficient to repeat the opinions of others; now it's time for each apostle to speak for himself. What is interesting is that while the first question produced a variety of responses, no one but Peter comes forward to answer the second. Perhaps Peter, in his own impetuous way, answers without giving the others a chance. More likely, however, they are uncomfortable with the deeply personal nature

of the question. There's a huge difference between parroting the responses of others and making a response for oneself.

The catechetical method of Jesus parallels the way we resolve life situations through faith. Let's say a man loses his job. For a good long time, his thoughts will likely echo the so-called "prevailing wisdom" of the times. This includes things like, "the economy's bad; jobs are scarce; money's tight; it's harder to get jobs when you're older; I'm probably overqualified;" and so on. The approach of faith, however, creates another step. It takes into account the prevailing opinions, but it moves away from them. It does that because it operates out of a higher and more reliable source - the wisdom of God. Just because "everybody" says all of those things, doesn't mean they're the ultimate truth. The ultimate truth - coming to one's own philosophy - involves stepping beyond what everyone else says and into God's guidance. As Jesus says to Peter, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father." Relying on God's guidance, our jobless friend can come to the realization that he always has a job - namely, the ability to spread God's love and kindness wherever he goes. Knowing this, he can also come to realize that God will always guide him to every bit of support and help that he needs. Those realizations might well make him change his vision of what kind of job he wants; but in any event, he will find himself guided and supported all along the way. And the new job will come along even more quickly than he thinks.

The Caesarea Philippi story not only tells us about an important event in the life of Jesus and the apostles, it also gives us a guide for our own application of our faith to daily life. By reflecting on its stages, we can come to apply it to our own situation and find ourselves deepened in our experience of God's abundant love.

--Posted June 27, 2003

## God's Presence

June 20, 2003

### GOD'S PRESENCE

Father Paul Keenan  
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Our readings for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ emphasize the personal involvement of God in the covenant between him and us. We Catholics believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. We believe that after the Consecration, what appears to the senses to be bread and wine is really and truly the Body and the Blood of Christ. There is such an intense presence of God to us that he literally sends himself to us.

Wouldn't it be helpful to us if we could accustom ourselves to realizing God's presence in the details of our everyday lives! It is not just in church or on Sunday that God is present. His covenant with us means that he is present at every moment and that he is there for us in all of the particulars of our lives. Literally, there is no aspect of our lives to which God is not present. There is not one thing that he does not care about.

It is a major part of the beauty of the Eucharist that it reminds us how real God's presence is, both in the sacrament itself and in our daily lives. As we celebrate the Eucharist and receive the Body and the Blood of Christ, let us remember that mysterious, loving and wonderful presence of God in every fiber of our being and every hour of our day. We are never alone, for our God is always with us.

--Posted June 20, 2003

# God the Father

June 16, 2003

## GOD THE FATHER

Father Paul Keenan  
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The readings for Sunday, June 15, this year were chosen, not as readings for Father's Day, but as readings for Trinity Sunday. So the frequent mention of the fatherhood of God in the readings is entirely appropriate. Many times nowadays, people are afraid of reflecting on the fatherhood of God; because to some, that would appear to be limiting God to one gender, thus denying the gentler more "feminine" aspects of God.

The truth is, God is neither male nor female, but rather has qualities or attributes that we normally think of as belonging to people of the masculine or the feminine gender. Just as it is appropriate to meditate upon the motherly, nurturing, side of God, so it is appropriate to reflect upon the fatherhood of God.

The thought of reflecting on God as Father presents other difficulties to some who did not have - or do not have - a good relationship with their father. To them, thinking of God as Father conjures up images of a harsh, unforgiving God, whose punishments are many and severe, and who takes great pleasure in watching his children suffer. Sometimes they are so affected by painful memories of their childhood that they find themselves unable to relate to God.

That is why a right sense of the fatherhood of God is so important. It was God the Father who led his people out of their slavery in Egypt, who got them safely across the Red Sea, who gave them commandments so that their lives would not be aimless, who fed them with manna in the desert and who defended them in time of battle. He was present to his people by day and by night and he sent them prophets to guide them when they went astray. The First Reading for Trinity Sunday, from the fourth chapter of Deuteronomy, paints a picture of the faithfulness of God, providing for his children in every circumstance.

This image of God is that of a Father who not only brought his children into being but who uses every available means of caring for them. He is stern when he needs to be, but he is also wise, generous and protective. He loves his people deeply.

Father's Day gives us the opportunity of reflecting, not only on our own fathers and expressing our appreciation as best we can, but also on the fatherhood of God. In doing so, we give great glory to God; and at the same time we increase our sense of how very blessed we are.

--Posted June 16, 2003

## Advocate

June 6, 2003

### ADVOCATE

Father Paul Keenan  
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What exactly do you receive when you receive the Holy Spirit? We know, of course, that you receive a person, the third person of the Blessed Trinity, the Spirit, the bond of infinite love between the Father and the Son. We know, too, that we receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety (faithfulness) and fear of (reverence for) the Lord. Then there are the fruits of the Holy Spirit: charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity, goodness, long-suffering, mildness, faith, modesty, continency and chastity.

One of the most practical ways of referring to the Holy Spirit and his effect upon our lives comes directly from Jesus, who refers to him as "the Advocate." An advocate is like an attorney, someone who pleads our cause in a trial. Our advocate is on our side. We retain him because we are accused of something serious and the situation is beyond our capacity to handle alone. The advocate knows us, knows the law and tries to apply the law on our behalf.

The Spirit truly is our Advocate, and on several levels. In the battle against sin and evil, we may find ourselves accused of wrongdoing and in danger of punishment. When others condemn us, the Advocate pleads on our behalf, calls for leniency, for mercy or, when appropriate, calls for a declaration of our innocence. Just as we call upon an attorney to guide us through the complexities of the legal process, so we call upon the Advocate to guide us through the complexities of life. When life becomes overwhelming, he is there for us.

Our attorney is our advocate, but he is also an advocate of the law. We call him an "officer of the court." Though he does his best to apply the law to our advantage, in the end he must surrender to the law. In the same way, the Advocate is the Spirit of Truth.

In the final analysis, he is the Advocate of Truth. Even though he is our defender, he cannot say that something is right when it is wrong. In the end, the Spirit must be a Spirit of honesty, letting us know when we have done wrong, and helping us as we face the consequences of our actions.

Yet even there, he is still our Advocate, for the Spirit of Truth works on our behalf to help us to become people who observe God's laws. He teaches us the laws of God and guides us with his gifts, his fruits and his grace to enable us to be law-abiding people. An attorney in the legal system may or may not go the extra mile for us in this way, but the Spirit always will. He always subjects us to the Truth of God's Love.

As we celebrate Pentecost, let us thank Jesus for his gift of the Holy Spirit, our advocate. When we say, "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me," or hear Jesus' admonition "Do not be afraid," we can hearken to these words because of our Advocate, the Spirit of Truth.

--Posted June 6, 2003

## World and Spirit

May 30, 2003

### WORLD AND SPIRIT

Father Paul Keenan  
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"I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one." This line from the Priestly Prayer of Jesus in the seventeenth chapter of John (the Gospel for the Seventh Sunday of Easter) tells us much about our mission here in the world. It might surprise us, because we might expect that Jesus would ask the Father to take his disciples out of the world. "The world" in John's gospel represents all that is opposed to the Spirit. It represents the way human beings ordinarily think as opposed to how God thinks. Since Jesus prayed his priestly prayer right before going to his suffering and death, for which "the world" was responsible, we could well imagine that he would want them safely removed from the world and its influences.

But no. Jesus tells the Father directly, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world." Never for a moment, it seems, does Jesus forget his mission. Elsewhere, Jesus says, "The Son of man came, not to condemn the world, but to save it," and "I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly." If he were to have the disciples removed from the world, yes, they would be safe; but how diminished the world would be. The point of their ministry is to share in Jesus' victory over the world, holding the internal values of the Spirit while continuing to live in the world. It is through them, and by extension, through us, that those who live according to the philosophy of "the world" will come to know that there is a better way, the way of the Spirit, the way of "abundant life" that Jesus speaks of.

And so he prays for them - and for us - that we may be kept safe from the influences of the world, even though we are here in it. The old expression, "in the world, but not of it" says it well. It is by seeing our abundant joy in living every day that others will come to know the depth of life that is possible in Christ Jesus.

--Posted May 30, 2003

## Being Human

May 23, 2003

### BEING HUMAN

Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
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The Gospel for the Sixth Sunday of Easter is the familiar command given by Jesus, "Love one another." It is juxtaposed against a reading from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 10) in which Peter is visited by the centurion Cornelius, who was guided in a vision to come and visit Peter. Peter, in the story, has just had the vision in which God told him not to declare foods unclean that God has declared clean. The story is part of the whole discussion in acts about how Christianity was to impact the Gentiles who had never been under the Mosaic Law.

What is so striking, though, about the meeting between Peter and Cornelius is that, when the centurion goes to kneel down in front of Peter, the apostle tells him, "Get up. I myself am also a human being." Considered side by side with Jesus' exhortation to "love one another," this little story tells us something important about love. If we are to love one another, we must be totally honest about ourselves. We must not make ourselves out to be more than we are, and we must not make ourselves out to be less than we are. The Acts of the Apostles makes it clear that when the apostles found themselves being treated as though they were gods, they immediately declared their humanity. All of them, it seems, did this in such a way that they did not put themselves down, but simply and straightforwardly affirmed their humanity.

That sort of honesty is essential with love. Being human is a wonderful privilege. It means we are made in the image and likeness of God. There is no reason to be ashamed of affirming it, and there is no reason to pretend that it is less than wonderful by attempting to raise ourselves above it. Being human is what it is. Peter knows that, accepts it for the privilege it is, and deals with his fellow human beings accordingly.

--Posted May 23, 2003

# Belonging to the Truth

May 15, 2003

## BELONGING TO THE TRUTH

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In the Second Reading for the Fifth Sunday of Easter (1 John 3: 18-24), John uses what might appear to be a strange expression. He says, "Now this is how we shall know that we belong to the truth..." In order to understand what he means, we have to think about various meanings of the word "belong."

Often, we think of belonging as being a possession of someone. We say, "This book belongs to me," meaning that it is ours and that we hold the rights to it. The Truth, Jesus, the Word of God, takes us and claims us as his very own. He makes us a cherished part of his milieu. Often Christians can be heard to speak as though the truth belonged to them; but that is not what John is saying. He is speaking of our belonging to the Lord. Last Sunday, in reflecting on the Good Shepherd motif in John's Gospel, we heard Jesus say, "I know my sheep, and they know me." Belonging to the truth, then, is a real privilege; for it means we are part of the Kingdom of God.

Another meaning of "belong" has to do with membership. "He belongs to the Knights of Columbus," means that he is a member of that organization. He has certain privileges as a member, and there are also certain standards and responsibilities that he is expected to live up to. When John speaks of our belonging to the truth, he is saying that we enjoy a certain membership in the truth. It's reminiscent of Paul's understanding that Christ is the head and we are the members of the Mystical Body (e.g., see Ephesians 4 and 5 and Colossians 3). It also means that we have a responsibility to act in certain ways. We cannot claim membership in the truth and not live up to what the truth implies. Jesus said that the two best synopses of our responsibilities as Christians are "Love God" and "Love your neighbor as yourself."

"Belonging" also implies a certain fitness or rightness of relationship. "Those two people really belong together," we say. It means that they more or less fit like hand in glove. When we think of one, we think of the other. It just seems right that they be together; they really belong. In this sense, when we speak of belonging to the truth, we're saying that there is a certain appropriateness to our belonging to the truth. Something about us bespeaks the truth to which we belong; and when people look at us, they see that we embody the truth. We've known people like that. Perhaps they were our teacher, our parish priest, or someone we once worked for. There was an integrity about them that radiated from the core of their being. That's something for us to strive for as we take seriously our belonging to the truth.

Sometimes "belonging" means being native to. "She belongs to a tribe of aboriginal people who are known for their natural artistic ability." In this sense, belonging to the truth means that we are native to it, that it is part of the very fiber of our being. How appropriate, since the truth to which we belong is the Word through whom the universe was made, and through whom we were made.

One of the roots of the word "belong" is the German word "langen," which means "to long for." People long for their homeland when they are away from it, for they belong there. In the same way, there is in our hearts a deep longing for the truth. If we are around shady people or if we are doing something wrong, our hearts know it - we long for things to be right. We long for the truth, because we belong to it.

One little phrase - yet how richly diverse its manifestation of the nature of our relationship with Christ, with our neighbor and with ourselves. We "belong to the truth." It is something to think about and to rejoice in.

--Posted May 15, 2003

## Shepherd of Souls

May 8, 2003

### SHEPHERD OF SOULS

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The Fourth Sunday of Easter is often called Good Shepherd Sunday, because the Gospel of the day is Jesus' discourse "I am the good shepherd" from the tenth chapter of John's gospel.

Someone once said that the Bible is the most metaphysical book ever written, meaning that, in addition to its literal meaning, it has a profoundly spiritual meaning that describes and explains our spiritual identity as children of God. On a literal level in John 10, Jesus proclaims his role as the savior of his own people as well as those from other parts of the world who will come to him. Unlike some others, he will always be there for them, and will even lay down his life for them.

There are many ways of interpreting Jesus' words on a spiritual level. One way that occurs to me is to think of the passage in terms of the care of our souls. Think for a moment of our souls as being represented by the sheep in the passage. Our ideas and attitudes are the shepherds; they either contribute to the well being of our souls or they contribute to their downfall. It all depends upon which shepherd we choose to follow.

People who contribute to the demise of others try to lure them by pretending to offer them something wonderful, but in the end lead them onto the path of destruction. When danger comes, they are never around to help. When we allow ourselves to be drawn into hatred, needless criticism, slander, lying and so on, it's like casting a shadow on our soul or putting a confining fence around it. It becomes increasingly difficult for us to experience the freedom, open-heartedness and joy that describe the natural milieu of the soul. If the pattern of sin and darkness becomes strong enough, we can feel helpless and alone.

The Good Shepherd cares for the soul. He leads it into thoughts and attitudes that are constructive, loving and uplifting. Should our soul wander onto dangerous paths, he will come and find it and take it to himself. He would even lay down his life in order to save it. This is the "mind of Christ," to use St. Paul's words.

On a daily basis, we have the opportunity of choosing what shepherd to follow. We can choose dark, hateful, negative and divisive thoughts or we can choose uplifting and life-giving thoughts, thoughts that contribute to the well being of others and ourselves. The Good Shepherd invites us to choose him as the guardian of the treasure of our inner life. He echoes the voice of his Heavenly Father through the words of Moses from centuries before: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him." (Deut. 30: 19-20.)

--Posted May 8, 2003

## Incredulous for Joy

May 1, 2003

### INCREDULOUS FOR JOY

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The Gospel reading for the Third Sunday of Easter (Luke 24:35-48) contains an expression that, at first glance, looks like it might have resulted from a mistake in translation. It says, "They [the apostles] were incredulous for joy." What an odd statement. You could understand it if St. Luke had said, "they were credulous for joy," or "they believed because they were so happy." But that's not what he says.

What's up? How can someone be incredulous for joy?

I wonder if it's straying too far off the beaten path to opine that perhaps this is an occasion where a word doesn't mean what it usually means, but rather connotes a whole level of meaning above itself?

In other words, I wonder if St. Luke is saying that the apostles were incredulous, not because they did not believe, but because their experience of Jesus was so immediate and intense that it was not necessary for them to believe - they absolutely knew that Jesus had risen. Seeing the risen Jesus before them created in them a joy of such intensity that they knew with absolutely certainty that the one they were seeing before them was Jesus raised from the dead. Until then, in order to accept the resurrection of Jesus, they would have had to have believed on the basis of the testimony of others. But in point of fact, St. Luke tells us that they did not believe the others. They were incredulous in the usual sense of the word. When Luke speaks of the disciples as "incredulous for joy" at the sight of Jesus, he is saying that they had gone from a condition in which they did not believe to a condition in which it was not necessary for them to believe because the experience of the risen Jesus replaced what would have been the darkness of belief with

the intensity of certain knowledge. It's a little like the experience of the villagers in St. John's story of the Samaritan woman: "We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world." (John 4:42.)

If this seems a bit pedantic, it isn't. For the gospels always invite us to share in the experience they are relating. Here, we are invited to come to a belief in Jesus that is not based on the testimony of anyone else. We are invited to believe in Jesus for ourselves, because we ourselves "know that this is truly the savior of the world."

How can we come to that? It all depends upon where we look. Have we ever experienced a factor in our lives that was dealing us spiritual death - a bad relationship, a financial worry, a stifling job, a health problem, a pattern of sin? Have we brought that concern to prayer and then found ourselves experiencing God's coming to us with healing and peace? If so, we have come to know for ourselves that God is our Savior and Christ is our Life. It's a whole different level of awareness. Or we may have a prayerful experience of the love of Christ that has nothing to do with our concern about any particular life circumstance - suddenly we just know that Jesus profoundly loves us, and somehow that knowledge permeates every area of our lives.

However and whenever it comes, it is an invitation to us to move beyond a blind belief to a personal certainty of God's love grounded in personal experience and manifestation. And from there to reveal its possibility to all we meet.

# One In Heart and Mind

April 28, 2003

## ONE IN HEART AND MIND

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"The community of believers," the Acts of the Apostles tells us, "was of one heart and mind." (Acts. 4:32) That heart and mind, of course, was the heart and mind of the Risen Christ. St. Luke, the author of Acts, takes great pains to tell us that this unity of mind and heart bore fruit in the daily lives of that early community: "great favor," he says, "was accorded them all." He mentions specifically the "great power" exerted by the apostles in their ministry. And he stresses, too, that the inner unity of the believers in Christ Jesus manifested itself in their prosperity. Everyone shared, and no one lacked anything.

The Gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Easter is in juxtaposition to that passage from Acts, for it shows, not only the unity of the apostles with Jesus, but also how breaches in that unity were overcome when they happened. The story is St. John's recounting of "Doubting Thomas" (John 20). The other apostles had experienced the Risen Savior; Thomas had not. Not only had Thomas not shared the experience with them, he out and out refused to believe what they were saying. This was clearly a challenge to the unity of mind and heart that was the hallmark of the early believers.

But watch what happened. One might think that Thomas would have been ostracized for his refusal to believe. But clearly that was not the case. Neither the disciples nor the Lord himself rebuked him or isolated him for his intransigence. The others still allowed him to be one of them, and the Lord met Thomas's condition of touching the wounds in Jesus' hands and side.

All of this brings up the question - how deeply does difference need to touch the mind and heart? Can we still be one in mind and heart with those who disagree with us? Our usual approach is to create barriers and divisions between those with whom we differ. Those barriers, if taken far enough, can lead to feuds, divorces, schisms and wars.

The readings for the Second Sunday of Easter require us to ask whether such is the only way or the best way.

Both the apostles and Jesus embraced the one who disagreed. What would it be like if we were to follow their example?

Posted April 28, 2003

# Easter

April 20, 2003

## EASTER

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St. Paul is someone who can get you to think about things in a totally different way.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul uses the expressions "died with Christ" and "were raised with Christ" in ways that should really wake us up. Unfortunately, most of us pass over those lines without giving them a second thought. Yet in the Second Reading of Easter (Colossians 3:1-4), Paul says something to the people of Colossae that is really very bold: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above."

The question is, how have the Colossians died and been raised with Christ? It's clear that they did not physically die and come back to life. So what Paul is talking about is a spiritual death and resurrection, one that comes from their baptism. Paul is telling them that their baptism should make a difference in their lives, and that this difference has a great deal to do with a change of consciousness. Their baptism, he is telling them, should have marked the death of one form of consciousness and their entry into another.

What in the world does that mean? In the preceding two chapters of the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul makes three things abundantly clear. The first is that accepting Jesus Christ means that one comes to acknowledge that there is a difference between what is visible and what is invisible. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." (Colossians 1:15.) The second is that God the Father has "delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (1: 13-14.) The third is that Paul himself struggles daily to be conscious of the difference (to which his own conversion made him heir) between the visible and the invisible. The intended impact of this is that the Colossians, in their sufferings, are to remember that God has delivered them, that what they experience in terms of suffering is by no means all that there is, and that Paul himself is a model for them of how to maintain their focus on Christ in the face of their sufferings. In other words, they have resources to draw upon other than the bad news the world so often gives them.

The upshot of this for us is that our celebration of Easter implies that we recognize that the Truth about life is not necessarily, or even often, the truth about life that we hear from those around us. Just as Paul warns the Colossians about people who would deceive them as to how to find God, so we are challenged to keep our eye on the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life and not become diverted by fads, fashions or false prophets.

It also means that the Colossians - and we, too - have to avoid giving in to activities that represent doing what "everybody else" does. He tells them, "But now you must put them all away: anger, fury, malice, slander, and obscene language out of your mouths. Stop lying to one another, since you have taken off the old self with its practices." (3: 8 -9.) In other words, there is no room for anything but the mind of Christ.

It all comes down to one simple question: "What is the Truth?" Does acting maliciously in the ways Paul describes represent the Truth about who we are as children of God? Or does keeping our eyes fixed on the Risen Christ and knowing that we are called to rise above those death-dealing activities represent the Truth about ourselves? Is death the Truth, or is life?

That's the central question for us at Easter. We may celebrate Easter, rejoicing that Lent is over; and that is good. We may celebrate Easter, glad in the joyous news of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ; and that is better. But do we choose death-dealing actions or do we choose to act in ways that give life? St. Paul makes it clear that the true celebration of the Resurrection has consequences for our consciousness and for the actions that we choose to perform. We are new creatures, and the message is clear: we are to act accordingly.

--Posted April 20, 2003

that story, we will see virtually every kind of human being there is, whether they be gathered along the roadside, in a crowd, or at the Cross - virtually all of humanity is represented there. We will see people who cheer Jesus and people who jeer at him. We will see people who have been his friends deny and desert him, even betray him. We will see people who torture him and people who comfort him.

Through it all, it is important for us to keep our eyes upon Jesus. He is the constant, the true reality, in the entire picture. Others will make him a hero today and a villain the next. Friends will turn into enemies. Hosannas will fade into calls to "give us Barabbas." Through it all, Jesus, the Son of God, is the constant factor, the one who will overcome all the fickle twists and turns - and who in the end will overcome even death.

In our own lives, we often see much the same thing. It's amazing how people and situations can turn - how radically and how quickly. If we can focus our minds on Jesus and on his calm reliance on his heavenly Father, it can help us to face the storms of life with confidence, equanimity and faith.

-- Posted April 11, 2003

# The Language of God

April 3, 2003

## THE LANGUAGE OF GOD

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"The best thing for you is a little sleep." How many times have we heard this said or how many times have we said it to others in the face of illness. Someone comes down with a bad cold or the flu, and we tell him or her to be sure to get plenty of sleep. We may find ourselves reinforcing this advice during the course of their illness, since sometimes one of the characteristics of such illnesses is that the patient feels better for awhile, then tries to resume normal activity and gets knocked down again. If that happens, we tell them, "Don't forget to rest!"

So in the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11), we understand it when the disciples hear that Lazarus has fallen ill and their first instinct is to say, "If he is asleep, he will be saved." They mean that if Lazarus is truly asleep, as Jesus has told them, he will heal and be fine.

The problem is, that's not what Jesus means. It's another instance of how ordinary human meaning and divine meaning do not always match up, even when the same words are being used. Jesus does not mean that Lazarus is asleep; he means that Lazarus is dead, even though, paradoxically, he tells the disciples, "this illness is not to end in death."

As Captain, Road Prison 36 said so memorably in Cool Hand Luke, "What we've got here is failure to communicate."

It has been a problem all along in the life of Jesus - the Synoptics record example after example of how the disciples, along with the religious leaders of the day, often failed to understand what Jesus was saying. John's gospel is a study in how the Word of God, communicating in ordinary human words, was often misunderstood. Even today, many of us complain that we do not understand the ways of God; and even many of the most familiar scripture passages elude us.

What is needed is familiarity. Yes, that very thing that breeds contempt when overdone is just the thing that will enable us to be more adept at understanding the language of God. The word "familiarity" is related to the word "family." As we grow up in our family, we learn the special words and expressions our family members use, and what they mean when they say certain things. It's like learning a foreign language. The best way to learn a foreign language is to immerse yourself in it. You more or less "catch" it

in much the same way people catch a disease. You have to be around it. Years ago, when I was teaching English as a Second Language to students from many countries, I would notice that every summer, roughly half way through the course, one by one the students would begin to think in English. You could see English take over their brain and become a normal part of their everyday life.

It's the same with understanding God's language. We have to immerse ourselves in it every day. That means doing whatever we need to do to establish an atmosphere of faith. For it's the day to day wrestling with God's vocabulary that makes it possible for us to catch on. It's why catechetical programs for children work best when parents are involved. If the language of faith is spoken at home, the kids will pick it up more easily.

For us adults, it means regular bible reading, meditating, participating in the Eucharist, perhaps joining prayer groups or bible study groups, all the while finding more and more meaning (and sometimes more and more challenge) in the discourse of God. What it really means, of course, is claiming our membership in the family of God. As we grow in our participation in God's family, we gradually pick up the nuances of speech, voice and action that the family uses.

During Lent, hopefully we have been growing in our connection with God, learning more about his meanings, his ways and how his love for us applies to our daily life. Doing this makes Lent a wonderful venture, a true journey into the heart and mind of God.

--Posted April 3, 2003

# From Blindness to Sight

March 27, 2003

## FROM BLINDNESS TO SIGHT

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"If only I had known then what I know now." Sometimes those words are spoken in regret, as when we have had a bad experience and wish we had had the foresight to avoid it. However, there are times when that statement is simply the expression of the fact that it is not until we have done something for a while that we see the implications of it.

How many of us, when we joined the clergy or got married, knew fully what we were getting ourselves into? We were young; we thought we knew what life was about. But how little we knew of either the joys or the sorrows that we would encounter on our chosen path. Now that we've done it for several years, we know.

That doesn't necessarily mean that we regret our choice or wish we had made it differently. Far from it. It simply means we know more today than we did many years ago, precisely because of the experiences we have had in our chosen vocation. Parents who have struggled with a difficult child are often heard to say, "It was well worth every minute of it" when that child reaches a milestone such as graduation or marriage. In a very real sense, our eyes are opened in the day-to-day experiencing of the joys and sorrows of the life we have chosen. Even when what we see with those newly-opened eyes is unpleasant or painful, it can add a positive input into our store of wisdom and into the depth of our person.

In the gospel story of the man born blind (John 9: 1-38, the Gospel reading in churches that use the "A" readings for this Fourth Sunday of Lent), Jesus puts clay and spittle on the eyes of the blind man and sends him to the pool of Siloam. John makes a point of telling us that the meaning of "Siloam" is "sent."

It's a detail we can easily miss, but it's clear from the story that the healing takes place only when the man comes back after washing in the pool. Most of us, I think, assume that the healing took place when Jesus put the clay on his eyes. But that's not what the story says. It says that this man made the journey to the pool, still blind. It was only when he came back home that he could see.

Our life experience is very much like that. We enter into commitments - even vocational commitments - feeling that we are sent into them or destined for them. and often act blindly. We may spend many years just doing what there is to do, without having a great deal of wisdom or insight about what we are doing. I think it's one of the reasons many marriages fail - a relationship can go only so long on blind activity before the couple becomes exhausted and frustrated. Clergy of all faiths often experience something similar. Even though we may have studied for many years by way of preparation, once we are ordained we can easily become depleted and even overwhelmed by the everyday doing of the tasks at hand. We may do fine, even very well, for a while; but eventually frustration, exhaustion and dryness will set in. Like the man in the story, we go where we are sent, but are blind nonetheless. How different that is from what we expected. How many times, in our youth, did we long for the day when we would be married or raise a family or start a ministry of our own? "Then," we told ourselves, "we'll have it made." How differently we see it once we have lived with the commitment for a time.

The man born blind does not see until he makes his journey and washes in the pool to which he was "Sent." How disillusioned and saddened he must have felt, obediently making that journey to the pool still a blind man. He had thought that meeting Jesus, he would be cured of his blindness and would be making his journey ecstatic in his newly acquired vision. He had tried everything, done everything he was asked, all in vain. We often think of God's grace and our life experience as being in compartments separate from each other. Yet I wonder if part of the message of this story is that they are not? Could it be that true vision only comes when they are brought together? Our daily experience may lead us to believe that we are wandering aimlessly along the path on which we were sent. But our very obedience and our groping as we go through each day are themselves instruments of grace.

One last reflection. The man born blind was told not simply to go to the pool of Siloam, but to wash in it. We need not only to have the blind and weary moments of our state in life. We also need to wash in our state in life. By that I mean, we must take time to enjoy what is positive, joyous, perceptive and even fun in the life we have chosen. We wash in our marriage when we take regular (dare I say, daily) time to express our love and appreciation for each other. We wash in our family life when we celebrate the birthdays and accomplishments of our children and engage in happy activities with them. We wash in our priesthood when we take time to enjoy the company of other priests, when we encourage them and show them our appreciation, and when we join with them in prayer and pray for them. When we wash in our chosen life, that's when our vision of it develops and deepens.

# Living Water

March 21, 2003

## Living Water

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For the next three weeks of Lent, churches that are preparing adults for Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist have the option of switching from the "B" cycle to the "A" cycle for their liturgical readings. The themes emerging from those "A" readings relate directly to the themes of the sacramental life, and so it is fitting to use them.

This week, for the Third Sunday of Lent, the "A" readings are about water - the Exodus 17 reading about Moses striking the rock to give the people to drink and the Gospel story of the Samaritan Woman (John 4).

While there are many wonderful aspects to these readings, and much for us to reflect upon, I am struck this year by the fact that in both, the prophetic figure (Moses in Exodus and Jesus in John) almost bends over backwards to assist the people. In the Exodus reading, when the people grumble about conditions in the desert and long for their days in Egypt, Moses cries out to the Lord on their behalf. In the reading from John 4, Jesus goes out of his way to approach the woman (highly unusual both because she is a woman and a Samaritan) and to engage her in discussion.

Why is this significant? For one thing, it reminds us that God is on our side. These readings are reminiscent of what Paul said in Romans 8 (last week's second reading): "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Both Moses and God could have told the grumbling people, "Get a life!" and refused to listen, but they did not. Instead, they listened to the people and provided the water that they sought. It's the same with Jesus. Having seen the Samaritan woman, he could have said, "Jewish men don't speak to Samaritan women." Instead, he went out of his way to get her attention and to listen, not only to her need for water, but to her even deeper need for spiritual refreshment. The woman didn't know it when she met Jesus, but she was getting to drink from the Living Water.

In these difficult times, when on top of a variety of personal issues, people are worried about war and the issue of safety, the question of whether God helps us frequently comes to the fore. These readings address this issue directly, and they provide us much food for thought as we face discouragement, worry and a host of other negative emotions. God bends over backwards to help us, and the readings encourage us to look for the signs of his help every day.

## Is God for Us....

March 13, 2003

### IF GOD IS FOR US....

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"If God is for us, who can be against us?" These words from the eighth chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Romans (the second reading for the Second Sunday of Lent) have proven to be a great inspiration to many people. So many people in times of trouble, reflecting on these words of Paul, have taken heart in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances.

Each part of this very brief sentence is worthy of our reflection.

"If God is for us...." For many people, these words are a real stumbling block. They find it difficult to believe that God is for them. For one reason or other, they have bought into an idea of God that portrays him as a terrifying figure, ready to subject his sons and daughters to a raging wrath if his least desire is not fulfilled. Or, failing that, they look back on their lives and wonder why, if God is for them, they have experienced so much abandonment, heartache and plain bad luck. It is hard for them to believe that God is on their side, working on their behalf.

Paul's words can require of us a fair amount of reflection. They are an invitation to a decision - they demand that we do some soul-searching and decide whether we think that God is with us or not. Paul has made that decision. He sees God as blessing us and bringing us freedom, making all things work toward good, even our sufferings. That is the import of the eighth chapter of Romans. "We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." In response to a negative view of God, Paul asks, "How could a God who is all good be hateful to his creatures?" Paul is a man who has endured his fair share of evil treatment, yet he neither blames God nor holds grudges against him. Even our sufferings, he tells us, can bring us closer to God and show us the power of his love.

Our answer to the question, "Who is God?" changes everything. If we see God as someone whom we cannot trust, our relationship with him will tend to deteriorate. When difficulties happen to us, we will tend to blame God for them. We will resent that he did not do something to keep them from happening, and we will end up in a vicious circle of

anger, fear and anxiety. On the other hand, if we follow Paul's lead and see God as being "for us," not against us, we will increasingly come to know the myriad ways in which God helps us, and we will come to live lives that are trusting and faith-based.

"...who can be against us?" I'm not being facetious when I say that the answer to the question is, "Almost anybody." In Paul's mind, it is not the case that if we decide that God is for us, nobody or nothing is ever going to trouble us again. But the point is, when circumstances do trouble us, we'll be inclined to look for God's help from beyond the muddle. We'll not feel alone, but rather know that he is someone to whom we can turn and that he is on our side and will help us. Life is not suddenly going to become picture perfect, but we will come to know that we can count on God to help us, and that we have nothing to fear.

That's why the story of Abraham is a perfect counterpart to Romans 8. Abraham, our father in faith, has a covenant relationship with God. He is totally faithful to God and is blessed with the unexpected birth of his son Isaac. Now God puts him to the test, the Bible tells us, and asks Abraham to "offer him up as a holocaust." This is a very strange and heartbreaking request for God to make, but Abraham makes all the preparations for doing what God asked. In the end, God spares Isaac. But, notice, Abraham does not let the incident weaken or destroy his relationship with God. On the contrary, he trusts that God will make everything work out for the best, even though Abraham does not understand the divine plan. As a result, God blesses him abundantly.

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" One short sentence that makes all the difference in the way we live. What a wonderful theme for this second part of our Lenten journey!

# Heart to Heart

February 27, 2003

## HEART TO HEART

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"I will speak to her heart." These words from the First Reading of the Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time come from the book of Hosea (chapter 2) in the Old Testament. They emphasize the loving nature of our God, who in calling his people back to him, wishes to speak, not just to their minds but to their hearts.

This theme is echoed in the second reading of the Sunday, which is from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. He tells the Christian community at Corinth, that, far from needing a letter of recommendation from them, they are his letter of recommendation. And he reminds them that "the letter brings death, but the Spirit life." In other words, a letter of recommendation written out in a formal way would mean far less than the living presence of Christ in his people.

As we reflect upon these readings, we see that they say something about God and something about us. About God, they tell us that his primary purpose and intention toward us is love, and that we should see him as speaking to our hearts. About us, they tell us that, made in God's image and likeness and formed by him as his people, our primary purpose is to love him and love one another.

What a powerful set of thoughts to meditate upon just prior to the beginning of Lent!

--Posted February 27, 2003

# Raising the Roof

February 21, 2003

## RAISING THE ROOF

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The Gospel for the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary time - the story of the healing of the paralytic by friends who literally raised the roof and lowered him to where Jesus stood - is interesting because of an important difference between it and other stories of healings in the gospels. Often we see that Jesus brought the person to be healed away from the crowd. This signals that in order to completely effect the healing, Jesus wanted to remove the persons from all negativity. The friends and neighbors of those who were to be healed knew them as people who were sick or disabled. Jesus needed to get the people alone where he could, by the power of his love, put them in touch with their wholeness. Where others saw them as deficient in some way, Jesus saw them as whole, and they needed to see themselves as whole, too. That new vision paved the way for Jesus to heal them.

Here, the situation is different, for the healings took place right in the midst of the unbelieving crowd. There are a couple of reasons, I think, for the difference. For one thing, the paralytic was already in the presence of positive, believing people; there was no need to remove him from them in order for a miracle to occur. Secondly, the true nature of this miracle was not physical, but spiritual - the forgiveness of the man's sins. The notion that Jesus could forgive the man's sins was nowhere on the mental radar screen of the crowd - such a notion had never occurred to them. Jesus did not need to remove a negative influence; rather he was breaking totally new ground with them, teaching them something they had never had occasion to think about before.

The story shows us that a miracle may have many effects. It may have a physical effect - here the healing of the paralysis. It may have a spiritual effect - the forgiving of the sins. And it may have the effect of breaking entirely new ground of insight and inspiration - here, giving the people the possibility of a whole new understanding of the essence of Jesus and his work. Breaking through the roof was, therefore, a highly symbolic gesture, indicating that the miracles of Jesus could break through barriers of health, of spirit and of understanding.

The story is a reminder to us that in our spiritual journey, we need to be ready to operate simultaneously at various levels, allowing God's grace to break through many different kinds of barriers in our lives. A person praying for a new job, say, may need to change patterns of working and attitudes toward work before the new job arrives. Above all, the

paralytic's story reminds us that the most important thing is that we be open to the possibility of Jesus' reaching into different aspects of our lives to do a healing work there. For those who believe that life is just one-dimensional, the gospel story is an invitation to see that it is the work of God to open up new dimensions of life, expanding our horizons and raising the roof of our vision.

--Posted on February 21, 2003

# Clean or Unclean?

February 14, 2003

## CLEAN OR UNCLEAN?

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The disease was called "leprosy." Today, it is also known as Hansen's Disease, and, though it does not occur in this country in alarming numbers, it still exists quite strongly in many parts of the world. In Jesus' day and -- as the first reading for the Sixth Sunday of the Year shows us - in Moses' time as well, the disease was ugly, contagious and deadly. Contracting leprosy was devastating in every way. Apart from the physical aspects of the illness, lepers were kept isolated. They could not work. They could not associate with others. Even in religious terms, as our first reading tells us, they were declared to be unclean and had to be set apart from everyone else.

But it was worse than that. In addition to the physical isolation brought about by leprosy, there were spiritual consequences as well. The law prescribed that someone who had contracted leprosy had to appear before a priest and be publicly declared unclean. From that point on, that person was separated from the rest of society. Imagine the humiliation of being brought to a priest and being declared unclean, according to the law of God! It would be bad enough to be declared unclean in the sight of other human beings, but to be declared unclean in the sight of God! The religious rules had a reasonableness to them, of course. They were meant to keep healthy people from becoming ill, and to keep an epidemic from occurring. But when you think of it from the viewpoint of someone whom the priest and law of God declared to be unclean - it had to have been devastating.

When we get to Jesus, and see how readily he associated with lepers and healed them, it is clear that he was giving a very different message about who God considers to be clean and unclean. Jesus appeared to look beyond religious declarations of uncleanness and instead assured the sick that they were not unclean in the sight of God. His very presence among them said that, rather than being considered to be unclean by God, lepers were freely visited by God, and even healed by God. Moreover, in the scope of the overall gospel message, Jesus appeared to redefine uncleanness to include those who interpreted the law for their own convenience, all the while laying harsh burdens upon those in need. And to drive the message home, Jesus sent healed lepers right back to the priests to have the quarantine lifted!

What is important here for Christians is to get a glimpse of the compassionate nature of Jesus. On the one hand, he well understood the reason for the law and indeed went out of his way to respect it and to teach others to do so. On the other hand, he couldn't stand to

have a whole group of people feel that God didn't love them, that God believed that they were unclean. He had the same beliefs about sinners. Where others, speaking on divine authority, shunned and condemned sinners, Jesus associated with them and forgave them, all the while telling them to sin no more. By a unique stroke of genius, Jesus challenged the prevailing image of God while preserving the law of God, and in so doing proclaimed and practiced the love of God.

Where this line of thought touches us today is in the issue of forgiveness. For the person we refuse to forgive is a person we consider to be unclean. When we say we cannot forgive someone, we mean that we regard the person as someone whom God should regard as unclean because of the evil that person has wrought. If our feelings are sufficiently strong, we might even go so far as to say that our adversary deserves to "rot in hell!" I'm quite sure most of us have felt that way about someone at one time or other. But here's where Jesus steps into the picture. When Jesus comes in, he does not necessarily challenge our displeasure about what the other person did. What he does, rather, is challenge our belief that God would so isolate one of his children from the realm of grace. It may take us a while to see it - indeed, we may never see it - but that's what's at work when Jesus asks us to forgive. Again, Jesus is not necessarily telling us that we're wrong to be angry at what has happened to us (although he may nudge us into seeing whether we might have had a part in it). He is telling us that we are wrong in our view of God if we believe that the person who has hurt us is forever separated from the love of God. He is challenging us to put our hurts into the context of a larger picture.

As a result, not only might the other person be healed, but we ourselves might be healed as well.

Wouldn't that be something!

--Posted February 14, 2003

# For This Have I Come

February 6, 2003

## FOR THIS HAVE I COME

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What is life all about, anyway? People have been asking themselves that question down through the centuries of human civilization. Sometimes they have articulated the answers in philosophical or literary works or in works of art or in music. Sometimes people have expressed them in the quality of life they have lived. Sometimes the answers have been positive. At other times they have been gloomy and morose and even despairing. One thing is for sure - every answer is unique.

The readings for the Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time express three distinct answers to the question, "What is my life about?" The first answer comes from Job. The first reading, from the seventh chapter of Job, comes fairly soon after Job's devastation. He has lost everything, and believes that he did nothing whatsoever to bring about his misfortune. His conclusion: "Is not man's life on earth a drudgery?" Truly, that is how it seems to Job. He believes that he did everything right and despite that, he has been ruined. "I shall not see happiness again," he laments.

A second answer comes from Paul. Unlike Job, Paul does not consider himself to be a victim, although he acknowledges that he is under an obligation. For Paul, life is about preaching the gospel; and he sees it as a duty, one that he has been offered and has freely taken on. But having taken it on, there is no choice for him but to do it. And it is not only the gospel he has taken upon himself, it is the spiritual welfare of men and women everywhere. "I have become all things to all," he tells the Corinthians in the ninth chapter of his first letter, "to save at least some." Here is a life of commitment and complete dedication to the gospel of Jesus Christ as the spiritual good for which all hearts are longing. Unlike Job, Paul does not appear to regret the burdens that are placed upon his shoulders. Though there are hardships, Paul does not complain about his lot in life. His is a fairly balanced reckoning of his life. It amounts to saying, "Well, there are good days and bad days, days when I feel like preaching and days when I'm full of zeal. But whether I feel like it on any given day, preach it I must; for that is my purpose."

Our third answer comes from Jesus, from the first chapter of Mark's gospel, the very beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. It is a long day, Mark tells us; and it begins with the calling of disciples and a visit to a synagogue, where Jesus teaches and heals a man who has an unclean spirit. Leaving the synagogue, he heals Simon's mother-in-law; and by evening, he is still healing vast numbers of people. The next day, he is up early to go to a

deserted place to pray. When he is told that everyone is looking for him, he inaugurates a course of traveling and preaching around the villages nearby, declaring, "for this purpose have I come."

Three people, three variations on the theme of "what is life all about?" Perhaps at different times in life, each of those portraits of life's meaning is similar to our own. All of us have had times when, like Job, we have felt that life was nothing but misery. We have had times when, like Paul, we have worked hard and now are feeling the weary weight of our commitments, though we are by no means inclined to thrust them aside. And we have had times when, like Jesus, we were so animated by our work that we felt we could do it forever.

It is good that this particular set of readings is part of Ordinary Time, for it represents very ordinary feelings and all of us have experienced them. It is a kind of triptych of life. When we are feeling such things, it is good for us to know that others before us have felt them too, and that what we are experiencing is a very normal part of life.

--Posted February 6, 2000

# Look to Heaven

February 1, 2003

## LOOK TO HEAVEN

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February 1, 2003, turned out to be one of those "defining days" in our lives. We were going about our normal Saturday activities. Most of us were probably not even thinking about the imminent return of the Columbia space shuttle on Saturday morning. Most of us probably would have learned about it in a thirty-second clip on the network news on Saturday evening.

But in a moment, all of that changed. A huge explosion over Texas, and suddenly our day was changed. No longer was it a normal Saturday; it was now a day we would never forget. As the President of the United States would tell us, "The Columbia is lost. There are no survivors." Watching the events on television or listening to them on the radio on Saturday morning, we knew that already in the pits of our stomachs. None of the seven was coming home from this one. And they had been just a quarter of an hour away. At a time like this, there are a million questions and very few answers. People wanted to know how the families of the astronauts were faring. Teenagers in Israel remembered their hero astronaut Ilan Ramon, who had taken their experiment on weightless crystals up into space with him. They had been receiving his reports from space. An Israeli woman reflected that for days she and her people had been watching one of the few happy news stories available to them -- about their first astronaut in space--and now this. The parents of the astronauts recalled the enthusiasm with which their sons and daughters had taken part in the space program, and how they themselves had enjoyed meeting the team just a few days prior at a dinner.

Others wondered about the value of the space program. Should we be doing this if it's so risky? A great deal of attention was focused on debris discovered over a wide range of land in Texas. Reports of the discovery of remains began to come in, and we wondered exactly what would be found before all of this was over. What about the early concerns about pieces of insulation falling from the craft during liftoff? Was the spacecraft too old? Should it have ever been launched? There was a lot on our minds, and clearly it would be a very long time, if ever, before we would have good answers to our many questions.

Hovering over all of this in the minds of those of us who were challenged to preach the Word of God, was the fact that we were supposed to be commemorating the Presentation of the Lord, the ritual bringing of the infant Jesus to the temple. Most of us had our sermons "in the can" by that time. We were ready to talk about the coming of the Lord to the temple, about his coming into our "temples of the Holy Spirit," about the obedience

of Mary and Joseph to the Law, and about the wonderful old people, Simeon and Anna, whose years of waiting had been rewarded at the sight of the Christ Child. We were about to proclaim Good News on this solemn feast.

What would we do now? How could we ignore the unspeakable tragedy that had shaken us? Yet what could we say, really?

Perhaps the President of the United States, quoting the prophet Isaiah, had set the tone for what we might say. "Lift your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created all these? He who brings out the starry hosts one by one and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing."

The first sentence of that quotation from Isaiah sets our focus. We look with broken hearts at this unspeakable tragedy here on earth, and yet, as people of faith, we lift our eyes and look to heaven. In the midst of their lives - difficult lives, despite and because of the tremendous privilege that was theirs - Mary and Joseph looked to heaven, brought the Christ Child to the temple, and fulfilled the Law of God. Throughout lives of anticipation that must have, on a daily basis, been discouraging and difficult, Simeon and Anna never failed to look to heaven. They knew that before they would see the answer to their prayers on earth, they must first look to heaven and find the answers and the promises there.

Seen in this light, perhaps the Presentation of the Lord speaks to us more clearly that we might imagine - when life on earth is without answers to our questions, look to heaven. Isaiah concludes, "Not one of them is missing." When we look to heaven, we do not necessarily find the immediate tidying up of everything here on earth. But we do find that there is a meaning beyond what we can see and hear, touch and taste and smell, beyond what we can figure out. Like Mary and Joseph, like Anna and Simeon, we may not appear to get the answers to our questions every day or over a great many days. But so long as we can raise our eyes to heaven, we can see beyond what we see on earth. We can believe and we can hope. And that in itself is a mighty answer to take into our world on days that seem so broken. We learn that not one of those heart wrenching, wearying days is ever lost in the sight of God.

If we do not lose heart or hope in the midst of a tragedy such as that of the Columbia, we will have gained a powerful victory. Much that those around us, like ourselves, will see and hear will lead them to depression, discouragement and despair. They will insist that they are just being realists, and much of our culture from the media on down, will affirm that they are right. If we are able to look to heaven in these difficult days, we can be beacons of light, refusing to give in to pessimism and desolation, and keeping alive the fire of hope for ourselves and for our sad companions.

In so doing, we hold the Christ Child in our arms and present him to the world. In us, the Presentation of the Lord happens once more.

--Posted Saturday, February 1, 2003

## Presentation

January 31, 2003

### PRESENTATION

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The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, celebrated on February 2, is a celebration of anticipation and fulfillment. The first reading from Malachi anticipates the coming of the Lord into the temple to purify his people by freeing them from their sins. St. Luke's account of the presentation shows the fulfillment of that promise in the arrival of Jesus into the arms of Mary and Joseph. But there are also the enticing figures of Simeon and Anna, two old people who have awaited this very coming of the Messiah into the temple and into their lives. Both have waited for a very long time without experiencing the fruit of their desire. Yet we have the very definite impression that their expectation was unwavering during that lengthy period. Though they didn't see immediate results, they continued to believe that God would make his promises come true.

This is in sharp contrast to those of us who need purification in our lives. At times we have wavered in our belief that God would come to us. At times we have taken matters into our own hands to provide what it seemed that God would not. In so doing, we have complicated our lives rather than simplifying them and have wandered a circuitous path as opposed to the straight way prepared for - and by - the Lord.

But the point is not for us to be locked into sin, discouragement and guilt. The Second Reading, from Hebrews, speaks of God saving "those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life." The point is not for us to wallow in misery. Rather, it is for us to experience the freedom that God gives us when we turn to him. Just as truly as God came to the physical temple, so he comes into our "temples of the Holy Spirit," where we live, purifies us and enables us to be free.

--Posted January 31, 2003

## Nets

January 23, 2003

### NETS

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The Gospel reading for the Third Sunday in Ordinary time (Mark 1: 14 - 20) continues Mark's account of Jesus' calling of the first disciples. In that relatively brief passage, Mark makes two comments about the fishermen's nets that are worthy of our reflection.

First, Mark tells us that the brothers Simon and Andrew were "casting their nets into the sea." In other words, they were in the process of fishing; they were in the midst of plying their trade. Jesus' coming was an interruption in their lives. Whatever concentration they needed in order to successfully cast their nets was broken by his unexpected presence. Most of us, when we are trying to concentrate on something we are doing - especially at work - often find it annoying to be interrupted by someone else. We're trying to read a technical piece in a professional journal. We're trying to listen closely to a speech or to someone who is telling us something important. Then an interruption comes and disrupts our train of thought. We're momentarily jarred, and we realize that now we must begin our task all over again. It can be very frustrating. It can even be tempting to tell the interruptive person that we are busy and that we will deal with him or her at another time.

However, that is not the response that Simon and Andrew gave to Jesus. Mark tells us, "They abandoned their nets and followed him." Jesus' interruption clearly changed the course of the rest of their lives. Something about his presence seemed to offer them something they could not ignore. When you stop to think about it, it's pretty amazing for a couple of fishermen to drop everything right in the middle of their fishing and go in an entirely different direction.

The second allusion to "nets" in the passage has a very different ring to it. Mark tells us that James and John "were in a boat mending their nets" when Jesus called out to them. It's a very different situation from that of Peter and Andrew, whose nets were being used in the act of fishing. James's and John's nets were damaged - perhaps by a huge catch of fish, perhaps by a storm or a rough sea, who knows? Whatever the cause, they were

forced to make repairs; and they were engaged in doing that when Jesus came to them. Making repairs is often tedious and we can sometimes feel discouraged while doing it. If someone's career has been shattered by a mistake or by someone's wrongdoing, trying to repair the damage can be very disconcerting and stressful. People picking up lives shattered by a tragedy, as many were in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, know how heart wrenching a process it can be. People who have gone through a painful divorce often experience feelings of not wanting to risk love or marriage again. In times of mending, we often feel incapable of risking anything new. We don't have the energy, and we may even feel betrayed.

So what was it about the presence of Jesus when he appeared to James and John, as they were mending their nets, that they put down those nets and followed him?

In this Gospel passage, then, Mark shows us two very different situations, yet the same response. There was something about the presence of Jesus that led people to follow him, whether they were in the midst of their work or whether they were in a "down" period. It's good for us to reflect on that, because it's an important aspect of the mystery that lies at the very heart of the relationship between God and us. Love is not just for the "up" times; it's also at work when we are busy and when we are down.

It's exactly as Mark told us at the start of this passage, using the words of John the Baptist. "The kingdom of God is at hand." It's here, whether we are "in season" or "out of season." And we can always reach out to receive its divine Love.

# Knowing God

January 17, 2003

## KNOWING GOD

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I was perhaps four years old. I had been reading for about a year, I guess; and almost from the time I left the womb, my parents had read to me. But here, sitting in church before Mass with my mother, I discovered a word in my prayer book that I did not know. I had seen it before, and had wanted to ask about it, but just hadn't. I leaned over, tugged at my mother's coat, and said to her, "Mommy, what is this word?" She looked over my shoulder, smiled, and said, "Oh, that is 'God.'"

At that moment, my life changed forever. It wasn't just that I had learned a new word; I had learned a new Person. It was as if everything just opened up in the center of my heart, an explosion of peace and understanding. I knew the name of God. And I knew God.

I thought of that story when I read the words of the First Reading for the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. They're from 1 Samuel, and what triggered my recollection was the following: "At that time Samuel was not familiar with the Lord, because the Lord had not revealed anything to him yet."

Those words, and my memory of my own experience, bring home to me the mysterious fact that our knowledge of God is truly a gift from God, given at his own initiative. We can read the scriptures, philosophically reason to the existence of God, and study theological books and still not know God. When we know God, it is because God has chosen to reveal himself to us. And not just to "us" in general - to me.

When that happens, it changes a person's whole life. That person may choose to enter more deeply into the mystery of God, even dedicate his or her whole life to serving God. Or he or she might choose to go the other way and reject God. Yet from the moment God reveals himself to a human being for the first time, nothing is ever the same. His Presence remains with us, and he never forgets us.

I think all of us, from time to time, succumb to the danger of forgetting how privileged we are to know God, even though we know him now only imperfectly. Our ability to know him is a supreme act of divine love. And, yes, it is personal. It's not as though we just happened to be out on a rainy day and got wet, just like everybody else. We didn't just fall under a divine rainstorm and happen to catch a few drops on our raincoat. No,

when God tells us who he is, it's deeply personal; it's no accident, coincidence or "general mailing."

Remembering that gives us a whole new perspective on our relationship with God and with life. Some spiritual writers today pooh-pooh the notion that each of us is special. But God doesn't. He wants us to know him, and he wants US to know him. That's how he works.

Perhaps as we edge back into Ordinary Time, we would do well to reflect on how special and how honored we are to know God. Such knowledge is God's special gift to us. What an honor, indeed!

--Posted January 17, 2003

# Baptism of the Lord

January 9, 2003

## BAPTISM OF THE LORD

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As we prepare to celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, we may well be struck by the irony that lies within that phrase. Why, indeed, would the Son of God be baptized? And what, indeed does baptism mean in his case, since the Son of God would scarcely be becoming a Christian?

The gospels tell us that John the Baptist, too, was puzzled about Jesus' coming to him for baptism. John's, after all, was a baptism of repentance. What would "the One who is to come" have to repent of? Plus, John had the question, "Why me?" Why would Jesus be coming to him, since, in his own words, "I am not worthy to untie his sandal straps"?

It's just the kind of puzzle that God loves to create for us. G.K. Chesterton once wrote that "the riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of men," and this is clearly an instance of that. Like everything else Jesus did, his baptism was a way of opening our minds beyond the ordinary limitations of our thinking.

There are many answers about Jesus' baptism - the when, the why and the by whom. Perhaps the most important one is just the very puzzling nature of it. The Baptism of the Lord, which for us marks the end of the Christmas season, also marks the beginning of his public life. The gospels tell us that when John the Baptist accompanied his baptism with speaking, he essentially told people to live their present state in life conscientiously - to be honest, to be uncomplaining, to be fair. That's a wonderful message, but it was not the message of Jesus. Jesus' message was more along the lines, "Think differently, live differently, act differently, and don't be afraid to question the norm." His message was more deeply challenging than that of John the Baptist. From the gospels we can tell that Jesus' ministry long remained puzzling to the Baptist. From prison, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus to explain what he was doing. Jesus sent them back with a firm statement about the radical nature of his work - the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and (with a little elbow jab in the direction of his cousin) "blessed is he who is not scandalized in me."

In trying to comprehend what happened that day in the Jordan River, perhaps we would do well not to seek too many answers, but rather to dwell in the mystery of the event. For as we follow the public life of Jesus in subsequent weeks, we will have occasion to see many things that stretch our minds, our imaginations and our hearts, and that challenge

some of our fondest certainties. The Baptism of the Lord is a fit beginning for our journey into the heart of the mystery that is Jesus Christ.

--Posted January 9, 2003

# Your Light Has Come

January 3, 2003

## Abram's Prayer

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The story of Abram and his dialogue with God - Genesis 15, the First Reading for the Feast of the Holy Family - is a much more important Scripture passage than most of us have ever thought to imagine. It represents Abram literally standing up to God and telling him to be practical in making good on his promises.

As the passage opens, God repeats a promise that he has made to Abram time and time again: "Fear not, Abram! I am your shield; I will make your reward very great." Abram loves God and loves to hear his generous promises, but something is bothering him. He is old; Sarah is barren and they can have no children. That very thought saddens Abram. If God were to fulfill all of his promises this very day, Abram would still have no children. He would be lacking the whole relationship between father and son. What good would it be to have everything, but have no son to share it with...or to leave it to as an heir? Moreover, it seemed to Abram that he was destined to have no children - that there was no way around it. There's more than a little anger with God here - sure, God has done a lot and has promised a great deal more, but by the same token he has apparently fated Abram to be childless. The more Abram thinks about it, it just doesn't seem fair.

So he speaks to God and in essence tells him, "What good are all your promises if I have no son? If you really love me, why can't I have a son?" We tend to soft-peddle the question; we don't think too much about it. But if we look long and hard at it, it's a pretty brazen question to put to God. If we ever dared to ask God such a question, we'd be on the lookout for the thunderbolts!

Yet no thunderbolts appear. Instead, God answers Abram's prayer. Sarah becomes pregnant, and Abraham is on his way to becoming the father of Isaac. In the actual story, a great deal happened between the prayer and its realization; but the point is that God does not appear to be turned off by the forcefulness of Abram's prayer.

How interesting that God does not seem to mind being put to the test. There's something about the firmness of Abram's prayer that, you might say, impels God to respond.

It says a great deal about how much God loves Abram, and about how much he loves us as well. Often we are afraid to pray as Abram prayed. We prefer to complain to God, to

whine, to beg. Yet those prayers don't seem to accomplish very much. Perhaps God likes us better when we stand up courageously rather than plead. Prayers salted with passion are perhaps more pleasing to him, maybe because when we are firm, we appear to be acting in his own image and likeness as we are meant to.

Who knows what all the answers are, but the Abram passage gives us a great deal to ponder. At the very least, it can open our eyes to new ways of achieving clarity - knowing what we want, why we want it, and with fortitude and gusto asking God to give it to us.

Posted December 27, 2002

# Abram's Prayer

December 27, 2002

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Father Paul Keenan  
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Yet no thunderbolts appear. Instead, God answers Abram's prayer. Sarah becomes pregnant, and Abraham is on his way to becoming the father of Isaac. In the actual story, a great deal happened between the prayer and its realization; but the point is that God does not appear to be turned off by the forcefulness of Abram's prayer.

How interesting that God does not seem to mind being put to the test. There's something about the firmness of Abram's prayer that, you might say, impels God to respond.

It says a great deal about how much God loves Abram, and about how much he loves us as well. Often we are afraid to pray as Abram prayed. We prefer to complain to God, to whine, to beg. Yet those prayers don't seem to accomplish very much. Perhaps God

likes us better when we stand up courageously rather than plead. Prayers salted with passion are perhaps more pleasing to him, maybe because when we are firm, we appear to be acting in his own image and likeness as we are meant to.

Who knows what all the answers are, but the Abram passage gives us a great deal to ponder. At the very least, it can open our eyes to new ways of achieving clarity - knowing what we want, why we want it, and with fortitude and gusto asking God to give it to us.

Posted December 27, 2002

# Unto Us

December 23, 2002

## UNTO US

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In twenty-five years of priesthood, I've had occasion to notice how the conception and birth of a child affects a married couple. It's different now from what it used to be, I think. In the last few years, it's been increasingly common for couples to express shared responsibility when a little one comes. More often I hear them sharing in the care of the unborn child, being together at the moment of birth, being partners in every sense of the word. Even after the birth of the child, responsibilities are met in very different ways from the way things used to be. It's more usual for the father to assist in changing diapers, taking the night shift - activities which, in days gone by, were considered the exclusive responsibility of the mother. More than even, the birth of a child is a shared event, as indeed it should be.

That's why it's so interesting to hear carefully the words of the prophet Isaiah, foretelling the birth of Christ. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given." (Isaiah 9:6.) When we think of the Nativity, we often think of Mary, Jesus' mother, and Joseph his foster father. We know that he was born to them, given to them especially so that Jesus would have their devoted care.

Isaiah's words give the birth of the Messiah a different emphasis, something special for us to think about. Isaiah says, "To us a child is born, to us a son is given." He suggests that we, the people of God, are to be the nurturing family of the promised one, the one who was to come.

What does that mean? Certainly not that we are going to be looking after a small baby. Rather, it means that we are to spiritually foster the growth of the Christ in the world. We are, spiritually, to care for the Christ Child by seeing that his thoughts and his attitudes grow and spread throughout the world. Just as parents are diligent to keep their small child safe, so are we to be diligent in seeing that the teachings of Christ are communicated faithfully and not distorted. We are to stand guard when we see the teachings of Christ being stifled through persecution in any part of the world. We are, in other words, to be like parents - guarding and watching over the life of the one who has been entrusted to our care.

Often we think, "How awesome it must have been for Mary and Joseph to have been the mother and foster father of Jesus. Indeed, it was. But let's not lose sight of the awesome

privilege and responsibility we have, for the Son has been born to us as well. How happy we are that this very special family member has been entrusted to us. How earnestly we pray for the guidance of the Father that he will help us parent his Son in this twenty-first century world of ours.

May each and every one of you have a Happy and Blessed Christmas.

--Posted December 23, 2002

# John the Rejoicer?

December 13, 2002

## JOHN THE REJOICER?

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When I was in college, I somehow developed the ability to imitate a number of my professors. I don't mean I followed in their footsteps; I mean I mimicked their voices and mannerisms. I started doing it for my own amusement; and as my talent became better known, it provided entertainment for others as well.

One of the funniest moments associated with my mimicking ability involved a professor who was known for his very dry sense of humor. I took him for several classes - he was an excellent teacher - and before long had him down pat.

One day, my mother came home from a luncheon at the college, laughing hysterically. It turned out that she had run into this professor; and in the course of the conversation, he told her (and she could hear me imitating him as he said it), "The trouble with Paul is that he doesn't have a sense of humor."

For some reason, I thought of that story when I started reflecting on the readings for the Third Sunday of Advent. It's called "Gaudete Sunday," meaning the Sunday of rejoicing. The first and second readings are all about rejoicing in the Lord. But the gospel reading (from the first chapter of John) is about as dry as my old professor, and appears to have absolutely nothing to do with rejoicing.

Just as my teacher needed to look again in order to find my sense of humor, I began to wonder if I needed to look again at this passage in order to figure out why it would be used on Gaudete Sunday. Perhaps it had something to do with the statement, "{John the Baptist} was not the light but came to testify to the light." That was something, but it still didn't explain the almost dour nature of the dialogue between the priests, Levites and Pharisees who were sent to interrogate John, and John himself. Why this passage for Gaudete Sunday?

It was then that I began to notice a subtle difference between the interrogators and the Baptist. They came on the offensive; you might almost say they appeared cranky. John, however, was definitely not defensive with them, and clearly kept his composure. We might say that he was calm, cool and collected.

This showed itself in the way John handled their questions; and here is where I think there might have been a twinkle in John's eye as he fielded their ponderous queries. At first they came loaded with questions about John's identity - "Who are you?" "Are you Elijah?" "Are you the Prophet?" Not batting an eye, John answered their questions without giving them an ounce of extra information. He never said directly who he was, but instead kept telling them who he was not. This really flustered them, because they needed to have an answer to take back to those who had sent them. So they demanded once again to know who this man was who was baptizing. Astutely, he did not give them his name. Rather, he threw back at them a line from Isaiah. Apparently he did this to test their perspicacity, because, on the surface, the line merely described what the interrogators could have perceived for themselves - namely, that John was a voice crying in the desert, "Make straight the way of the Lord." Strangely, it doesn't seem as if these interrogators (who should have been scripturally astute) made the connection between John and the future coming of the Messiah. (John must have enjoyed watching the reference go over their heads.)

Now the Pharisees got into the fray. They wanted to know why he was baptizing. (Evidently the group had decided to give up trying to find out who John was.) Watch his response carefully - he never answered their question. Instead, he spoke about baptizing with water and told them that someone would come along whom they did not recognize, and that John was not worthy to untie his sandal strap. To us, centuries later, it all makes sense; but to them, it must have sounded like gobbledygook.

If my hunches about this passage are correct, John the Baptist put a new face on the virtue of rejoicing. Rejoicing sometimes expresses itself in exuberance. At other times, it expresses itself in teasing. John took these deadly serious questioners who were out to report on him, teased them into submission and gave them nothing to report on. Looking back, we realize how profound his answers were; but at the time John was really mocking his adversaries.

Rejoicing in the Lord is often that kind of quiet, self-composed expression of our confidence in God's care for us. Put across in that way, it is often funnier, really, than raucous expression. John's composure gives us an excellent model for keeping our inner joy when dealing with people and situations that are intended to frustrate us.

--Posted December 13, 2002

# Comfort

December 5, 2002

## COMFORT

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As we enter into the Second Week of Advent, we encounter a powerful word. The word is "comfort." The Lord God tells the prophet Isaiah, "Comfort, give comfort to my people." (Isaiah 40: 1.)

There are different shades of meaning to the word "comfort." Sometimes, when we use the word, we speak of a kind of "cozy" condition in which we are provided with every imaginable luxury and convenience. This is not the kind of comfort that Isaiah is promising the people in the name of God. Usually, this kind of comfort is a false comfort in which the illusion of comfort is provided, but actually there's a "catch" to it. Somewhere down the road, the piper has to be paid. For example, a person applying for a particular job may be told that there is a wonderful salary attached to the job, and a great many perks, including lots of time off and the use of an executive resort. It might be tempting to take that job, but a shrewd person will wonder what's really going on. It may be legitimate, but it sounds too good to be true. It's very comfortable, but a prudent person will try to find out whether there's a catch to the offer.

The other meaning of comfort is much more open and above board. It's precisely the kind of comfort God promises. It's not a comfort that conceals unpleasant realities, but rather a comfort that responds to them. God's people have been through a very difficult time in captivity, and he wants to respond by comforting them. His comfort involves letting them know that they are under his protection, that he understands and sympathizes with their plight, and that he will help them. There's no catch to God's offer; rather, he comes forth understanding the pain of his people and directly responding to it in a way that offers them healing and a positive vision. It's comfort with truth, not comfort that hedges on the truth.

We can appreciate the difference by recalling what it's like to be with someone who is in pain. Sometimes, for example, in dealing with people in mourning, well-meaning friends will tell them that God doesn't want them to be sad, or that they should snap out of it and get on with life. They're trying to comfort, but they're doing it at the expense of the other person's feelings. Instead, it's much better to let the grieving person share his or her emotions and allow them to feel acknowledged and listened to. That kind of comfort really hits home with them. Far from being negative or superficial, it represents exactly what they need.

That's the kind of comfort God provides. Life is really difficult and painful sometimes. When God comforts, he comes as someone who heals by understanding. That is the best kind of comfort there can be.

# Thanksgiving and Advent

November 27, 2002

## THANKSGIVING AND ADVENT

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What a strange concatenation of feasts -- within just a few days we celebrate Thanksgiving and the First Sunday of Advent. At first glance they seem like such opposites.

But when you stop to think about it, they go hand in hand. Advent is a time of looking forward by looking backward. We look backward into the history of salvation and, through the eyes of those who went before us, we learn to look ahead, as they did, to the coming of the Messiah. We see how they looked forward and we take our cue from them.

Looked at in another way, in order to be able to move ahead, we have to be grateful for what went before us. We need to be grateful for the history of our salvation, and for the blessings that God provided in forming, chastising, and healing his people in preparation for the coming of the Chosen One. We grow in our faith by looking backward in gratitude.

That happens so often in life. Often we try to grow to new stages of life while carrying resentment from the past. It usually doesn't work. We end up carrying the resentment with us from the old into the new. When, instead, we are able to be grateful for our past and for what it has brought us, we are free to move forward into the future we are hoping for.

Gratitude and expectancy go hand in hand.

So it seems that Thanksgiving and Advent aren't really so far apart after all. By being grateful for God's work throughout history, we find ourselves able to grow and deepen as we prepare for the coming of the Savior into our hearts this Christmas.

--Posted November 27, 2002

# When Did We See You

November 22, 2002

## WHEN DID WE SEE YOU?

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"When did we see you?" That question rings out from the Gospel for the Solemnity of Christ the King this year, St. Matthew's account of the final judgment of the "sheep" and the "goats." The judgment, we are told, is based upon seeing Christ in need, and helping him - or not.

It's a question to which the Gospel According to Matthew has been building for some time. Particularly through the past several weeks, Jesus has been driving home the point that if people do not recognize what is right in front of them, they will surely not recognize it when they see it in the future. How, in other words, will we recognize Jesus (Christ the King) at the end of time if we did not and do not recognize him when we saw him or when we see him right in front of us!

The rule of thumb applies directly to one's perception of Jesus, of course. In response to questions about the coming of the end of time, we have observed Jesus telling his questioners that if they did not recognize the Son of Man when he stood before them in the form of Jesus, how would they expect to recognize him when he came as Messiah? In other words, he is telling them to improve their vision of the present moment, and not to be so worried about looking into the future.

But in Matthew's account of the final judgment, Jesus takes the matter a step further, and applies the litmus test to us as well. "When did we see you?" is the common question of both the sheep and the goats. But now, Jesus says that it is not only a question of recognizing him in his own right; it is also a question of recognizing him in the persons of those in need.

It's a challenge that has been latent in the accounts of the daily life of Jesus all along. The message is: "If you don't see me in a sinner, in a leper, in a social outcast, or in someone who asks for help on the Sabbath, how do you expect to see me at all?"

This gospel reading does not ask of us that we shake in our boots over a future Day of Judgment. It asks that we improve our vision here and now, to see in our experience of the present, the face of Christ, and to do whatever we can to respond to his need.

--Posted November 22, 2002

## Advance

November 14, 2002

### ADVANCE

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The Gospel reading for the Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time reminds us of a very important, but often overlooked, fact about human life: life is meant to increase.

The story, from Mt 25:14-30, is the well-known parable of the man who went away on a journey and left different parts of his possessions in the hands of his servants. When he returned, he summoned the servants. Two of them returned his property with an increase; one did not. In the story, the one who yielded no increase was stripped of what he had and it was given to the one who had yielded the greatest increase.

The story is a powerful reminder that in life, it's not about what we have, but rather about whether we advance ourselves and what has been entrusted to us.

This is a parable that all of us would do well to take more seriously. If anything, we generally think of it as a moral imperative to "use our talents." It's really more than that, because it says something very profound about the nature of life. It tells us - and we have it from the lips of Jesus - that the nature of life is to increase and advance. This is not the story of a greedy and covetous materialist who simply wants to get more. Nor is it meant to turn the free and enjoyable use of our talents into a moral burden. It is saying that life is about growth and advancement, and that our task in life is to participate in life's inclination to become more.

If we look at the first account of creation in the Book of Genesis, we get the idea that God, who is Being Itself, deeply desires creation to diversify and grow. At every stage, God thinks of a new phase of creation, creates it, and then declares it to be "good." And he sustains it all on the Sabbath of the seventh day, when he holds everything together in the unity of a day of rest. In creating humankind, he tells his human creatures to "be fertile and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." Increase is at the very heart of being.

That means that we should always be looking to advance ourselves from where we are now to a next stage. That can mean different things at different times in life. If we have been feeling that our lives have fallen into a rut, that might be a signal that we are being called to advance ourselves in some way. It might mean that we need to start visualizing

ourselves in a different line of work, or that we need to expand our horizons in the job we currently have. It might mean listening to a long-ignored desire to develop a particular area of our lives. Perhaps we find ourselves wanting to develop our artistic or cultural awareness. Perhaps we feel a need to get a particular kind of training in order to be able to help people more or to do our job in a more effective way. Maybe we have been ignoring our spiritual advancement and decide to make a retreat or learn to meditate or make time for spiritual reading. We do well when we listen to these desires for expansion, for it is God's wish that we develop as many areas of our lives as we can.

Two things are important here. One, we need to be on the lookout for opportunities to advance ourselves. Two, our intention in advancing is to glorify God and to inspire and enable others to advance themselves.. We're not talking about pushing and biting our way to the top of a corporate ladder. We're talking about yielding to life's natural impulse to grow - doing so in a way that glorifies God, makes us happy and enables others to do likewise.

-- Posted November 14, 2002

# Finding Wisdom

November 7, 2002

## FINDING WISDOM

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### FINDING WISDOM

How easy - or how difficult - is it to be wise?

Ordinarily, when we think of attaining wisdom, we think it is a question of enrolling in the School of Hard Knocks. Certainly that is one way to attain wisdom - most of us can admit to our having learned from our mistakes.

The book of Wisdom tells us that there is another way. "Wisdom makes her own rounds," it tells us, "seeking those who are worthy of her." (Wisdom 6: 12 - 16). The suggestion here is that instead of our having to go around in search of Wisdom, Wisdom takes the initiative to search for us.

That makes sense when you stop to think about it. Many of us have had the experience of practically breaking our heads trying to figure out the solution to a problem, only to find the right answer occurring to us as if by magic. We thought we were searching for the idea; but it seemed like the idea had been searching for us.

If Wisdom is looking for us, what is she looking for? The same passage tells us, "Taking thought of wisdom is the perfection of prudence." This means that what we need to do in order to allow Wisdom to find us is to put our attention upon her. In the well-known passage in St. Luke's Gospel where Jesus tells the story of the wise and the foolish virgins awaiting the bridegroom, it was the wise virgins who brought enough oil and the foolish ones who did not. In other words, the wise attendants were the ones who paid attention to the coming of the bridegroom and the foolish ones were those who did not. Whether we are met by Wisdom depends upon whether we are paying attention to it.

We pay attention to Wisdom by reflecting carefully and with prayer whenever we are called upon to make an important decision. On a more long-term basis, we pay attention to Wisdom by reading the Bible stories of wise people - for example, Abraham, Ruth, Esther, and of course, Jesus himself. We can also read stories of the martyrs, the saints

and other heroes of faith. We can reflect on stories of people today who have acted courageously for the sake of justice, even though it may have caused them suffering to do so. When we do this, we put ourselves in touch with the practice of Wisdom in everyday life.

Of course, we can always benefit by learning from our mistakes and from the bad days of our lives. But we need not wait for those occasions in order to be wise. By placing our attention on Wisdom every day, we make ourselves available to be found.

--Posted November 7, 2002

## Like a Weaned Child

October 31, 2002

### LIKE A WEANED CHILD

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Every so often, when reading the scriptures, you can find yourself really struck by a particular turn of phrase. You may have read the passage many times before, but this time it strikes you in an entirely different way.

That happened to me when I reflected on the Responsorial Psalm for the Thirty-First Sunday of Ordinary Time, Psalm 123. There, the Psalmist tracks his own spiritual growth from pride to humility, and suggests that what has happened to him is a kind of paradigm of the growth Israel might hope for.

What especially struck me, however, was the Psalmist's description of his soul. "My soul like a weaned child. Like a weaned child on its mother's lap, so is my soul within me."

The image is that of a child sitting contentedly in its mother's lap, being intimately connected to its mother in a heartfelt way. The Psalmist suggests that this is what has happened to him. He tells us that though once he was proud, now he has put arrogance aside and instead placed himself in the care of God, just as that child sits happily in the care of its mother.

However, there is more to it than that. In an amazing twist of language, the Psalmist speaks not just of a child, but of a "weaned" child. Now, an unweaned child sits contentedly in its mother's lap as well. But that's not how he describes himself. The word "weaned" is important; he intends for us to give it some attention, for he specifically says that he is describing, not just the details of his personal life, but his very soul.

In fact, one would think that the Psalmist would see the child feeding at its mother's breast to be the model for his soul; but he specifically uses the word "weaned." Why? When a child is weaned, it has reached an important stage of growth in life. No longer is it dependent on its mother for milk; yet it still dependent in most other ways. What do the Psalmist's words say about his own growth and about his soul? He implies that he has reached a stage where he has grown beyond raw dependence, and now can sit, basking

contentedly in God's love. The words imply that his dependence on God does not rob him of his personal identity, but rather enhances it. It does not deny him his maturity, but makes it unfold in a joyful way.

The Psalmist also contrasts his current state with a prior time when he was full of pride. He is telling us that he has shed a false sense of independence from God and, perhaps to his surprise, has discovered that dependence upon God allows for a joyous and wonderful sense of personal identity.

Sometimes, when people talk to us about God, they worry that accepting a relationship with God will mean ending their sense of personal identity. The 123rd Psalm tells us that this is not so, that when we rest in God we both love him and at the same time give ourselves the best gift possible.

# Not Always What They Seem

October 24, 2002

## NOT ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM

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To the naked eye, our Gospel reading for the Thirtieth Sunday of the Year looks like a fairly non-controversial scripture passage, It's from Matthew 22:34 - 40, and the passage gives Jesus' well-known answer to the question, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Jesus' answer: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment.

The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

It all sounds so simple and straightforward. Except for the fact that the question is a setup intended to make Jesus fall into a trap and condemn himself.

The trap arises because Jesus has silenced the Pharisees and the Herodians with his answer to the need to pay tax to Caesar and with his answer to several other challenges put to him by those who would do him harm. What appears to be an innocuous question is anything but harmless. It is intended specifically for the purpose of doing Jesus harm. This passage gives us an opportunity to reflect upon the fact that in life, things are not always as they appear to be. How many of us have learned, the hard way, that people who appeared to be our friends were not really friends? How many of us have discovered that what was presented to us as a "great opportunity" really was a scam? Few people get through life without experiencing some form of disappointment that someone or something in which they trusted has let them down.

What do we do? The conclusion that some people draw is that there is nothing they can believe in, that sooner or later everyone or everything will betray them. They conclude that life is basically evil and deceptive. That's not the conclusion that Jesus draws. Notice how he deals with the trick that is presented to him. Though he refuses to be fooled by the trickery, he answers his questioner by speaking about love. Moreover, he speaks directly, without anger or bitterness. His demeanor matches his message.

Indeed, things are not always as they seem to be. Jesus' very special gift in these situations is that he is perceptive enough to know how to unmask the illusion and answer it with love. In so doing, he deflects the situation to his own purposes and away from the deceptive purposes of his questioner.

How can we learn to do what Jesus does? There's a helpful analogy that can give us a backdrop for dealing with times when someone or something appears to betray us. I have come to think of those times as being like a boat that gets us from one place to another. The bad moments in life always have a gift to provide us. We can turn them to our own purposes, as Jesus does with his interrogator. That does not mean that we have to repeat those incidents or prolong them. With a little experience behind us, we can figure out what it is we are supposed to learn, learn it, and move on. Like Jesus, we can do this by keeping a positive outlook and not allowing the challenges to take over our view of life or to rob us of our joy. We get into the boat, ride it, learn from the ride and get out.

The other important thing is to train ourselves to stand in the truth. When Jesus faces his questioner, he holds up to him the most important truth he can share - love God and love neighbor. He literally silences his opponent with the truth. When difficult times find us, we can refuse to let them rob us of our perspective, our peace of soul and our happiness. We hold up to them the power of loving God and loving neighbor, feast on its capacity to strengthen our inner spirit, and allow its potency to destroy the illusion that this person or situation can harm us. It's a case of holding up the best armor we can possibly have.

Yes, things are not always as they seem. The good news is that this fact of life need not destroy or weaken us. Rather, with the help of God and the example of Jesus, it can lead us the truth that will set us free.

## What's Important?

October 17, 2002

### WHAT'S IMPORTANT?

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Suppose you were told that a storm was approaching and you had five minutes before you had to evacuate your house. What would you take with you? It's an awesome choice, one some of you who are reading this may have had to make at one time or other. In essence, you would have to think quickly about what things were among your most valued possessions.

In a different form, that same exercise is one that Jesus presents to his questioners in Matthew 22: 15-21, the gospel for the Twenty-ninth Sunday of the Year. Some Herodians, sent by Pharisees along with disciples of the Pharisees, come to him asking him whether it is "lawful" (according to the law of God) to pay the census tax to Caesar. This is really a trick question, and the Pharisees must be very proud of themselves for constructing such a trap for Jesus, and especially for using Herodians to do so. Herodians, allies of Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee, favor the use of Roman coins, while the Pharisees do not. The Pharisees despise the tax and Herod Antipas. The Herodians support the tax because it keeps Herod in power and Rome at a distance. If Jesus says the tax is lawful according to God's law, he will annoy the Pharisees. If he says it is not lawful, the Herodians can report him for treason. Either way, they have him.

Jesus is extremely skilled at thinking outside of the box. Here, human logic maintains, on the one hand, that it is unlawful to pay the tax, and, on the other hand, that it is lawful, according to the law of God. He also knows that the whole point of the exercise is to trap him, that the question itself is not the really important thing.

So, instead of letting himself be trapped, he poses the exercise of "what's important to you?" When he asks the Herodians for a coin, they produce one pretty quickly. Apparently, allegiance to the Roman economy is pretty important to them; they have coins all ready to go. Yet their question had been about God's law. In telling them,

"Render to Caesar what is Caesar and to God what is God's," Jesus is saying, "Look, if you're so concerned about giving Caesar his due, that's fine. But why do you use the law of God as a basis for trapping me? In doing that, you dishonor God. Why aren't you as zealous about honoring God as apparently you are in honoring Caesar? Perhaps you think that honoring Caesar is more important than honoring God?"

Suddenly, both they and the Pharisees who sent them are on the defensive. Now they are in the trap. That happens for one simple reason: Jesus never loses his focus, never loses sight of the fact that the only reason he is on earth is to do the will of his heavenly Father.

Instantly, he can see through any attempt to put man above God or any attempt to use God's law for perverse ends. Because his focus is so placed on God, no one can trap him.

What's most important to us? If, like Jesus, our focus is solely on honoring God, we, too will escape the traps that disingenuous people often set for us. With our focus on God, all the apparent contradictions of life will simply melt away in the face of the Truth, the only Truth there is - the Truth that will set us free.

--Posted October 17, 2002

# No Wedding Garment

October 10, 2002

## NO WEDDING GARMENT

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Lately, it seems that almost every time I look at a familiar Scripture passage, it says something different to me from what it said in previous readings.

When I looked over the parable of wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14), the gospel reading for the Twenty-Eighth Sunday of the Year, I began by reading it pretty much as I always have. It speaks of a king who is angry over the rejection, by various kinds of people, of the invitation to his son's wedding. (Some of them even end up killing the king's servants who had brought them the invitation!) The king then destroys the first invitees and their city, and then invites people from the streets, "bad and good alike." When the king reviews the banquet, he sees someone who is not wearing the wedding garment provided for the guests. He questions him, and, upon receiving no reply, orders him to be bound hand and foot and cast into the darkness outside, where there will be "wailing and grinding of teeth."

In the past, I saw that story as a parable of God's judgment. But this year, I had two problems with that reading. One, the image of God implied in that interpretation did not connect with the image of God Jesus spent his life trying to communicate. Two, that interpretation of the story rendered it more an allegory than a parable. An allegory takes a story and assigns meaning to each part. The king represents God; the first-invited represent the Pharisees, and so on.

A parable, on the other hand, is a story taken simply as a story; and there is one point to it, not several sub points. It is clear from the context that this is meant to be a parable. If that's the case, the flow or "feel" of the entire story is intended to create a new realization or awareness, in this case, a new understanding of the kingdom of heaven.

My former reading of this parable would result in the realization that the kingdom of heaven was like a king who was so vengeful and angry that he butchered those who refused his invitation and publicly humiliated and banished one of the new invitees who did not wear the wedding garment he provided.

Care to spend your eternity in that kind of heaven? I don't think so.

What to do? The more I puzzled over it, the more I was drawn to that poor fellow who didn't wear the wedding garment. For the first time, I noticed that his response, when the king challenged him, was to say nothing. So here's the story - he's invited with all the others, he's offered the wedding garment, he refuses and sits down anyway, when he is challenged he refuses to answer, and he is thrown out into the darkness of the night.

"He was reduced to silence." My goodness, that sounds a lot like Jesus in the Passion. Now in St. Matthew's Passion, granted, Jesus has plenty to say, yet there is a place in which it says, "But Jesus remained silent." (Matthew 26:63.) When you stop to think about it, if the parable is about the kingdom of heaven, it is about Jesus; and the story of Jesus is that throughout his life, he refused to put on the mantle of the Pharisees, yet firmly maintained his role in the kingdom of heaven, and was crucified for his efforts. The parable, then, is a story of cruelty, a cruelty that - then and subsequently in human history - has sometimes been associated -- mistakenly - with God. Indeed, when that happens, the true image of God (loving and just) is banished in favor of an image of God that is wicked and false.

But what does this have to do with the kingdom of heaven? The answer is, the kingdom of heaven often has to suffer violence at the hands of cruel and unrelenting people. At times, those people seem to overcome the kingdom. Jesus had affirmed this earlier in St. Matthew's gospel: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent are taking it by force." (Matthew 11:12.)

Though the parable ends on that sour note, the life of Jesus, of course, does not. His resurrection is the answer that the true image of God ("full of kindness and compassion") is the one that triumphs and prevails. It is the light no darkness can extinguish.

There's a lesson there for us. Reading the parable in this new way, we get a feel for what it means to be very self-centered and cruel. Is that our image of God? If so, we're encouraged to change it. Does cruelty in any way describe how we deal with others, or with ourselves? If so, it's a mantle we must vow never again to wear, even if it means we are banished from the company of so-called "important" people. Are we feeling discouraged because we are victims of the cruelty of others? Know that this is part of life for those in the kingdom of heaven, and that the present sadness will give way to victory if only we persevere.

Keep your eyes fixed on the guest without the wedding garment. He may appear to be the loser in this story, but he is, indeed, the hero.

# A Tale of Two Vineyards

October 3, 2002

## A TALE OF TWO VINEYARDS

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Was Jesus creative in his reading of Scripture? The readings for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time give us a unique look at how Jesus took an Old Testament story and reflected on it in his own unique way.

The story is found in the First Reading, from the fifth chapter of the prophet Isaiah. It tells of a man who plants a vineyard, takes extremely good care of it and is dismayed in the end to find that it yields wild grapes instead of good ones. In his bitter disappointment, he commits his vineyard to ruin.

Jesus, in the twenty-first chapter of St. Matthew's gospel, takes that story and gives it a very different twist. In Jesus' parable, the vineyard itself is fine and fertile, but the tenants who care for it are wicked, indeed, murderous. They are so fuzzy in their thinking that they believe that by killing the landowner's son, they will get his inheritance! In Jesus' story, the landowner leaves the land intact and replaces the tenants with new workers who will care for the land in the proper way.

Why does Jesus change the parable so drastically? Historically, we know that the point of Jesus' parable was to warn the Pharisees that unless they took better care of God's people, they would be replaced in the Kingdom by others who would. It's the same general point as Jesus' earlier warning to them that sinners and prostitutes were entering the Kingdom before them.

When we look to apply the readings to our own lives, perhaps there's another reason why Jesus alters Isaiah's tale. Remember, in Isaiah's version, the land is bad; and in Jesus' version, the land is good, but the tenants are bad.

The juxtaposition of the two stories reminds me of what happens as people grow to maturity. Often, in their early childhood and adolescence and on into early adulthood, people are told that they are no good and sometimes are treated as though they were of little value. This can happen in various ways, for example through various forms of what we now recognize as abuse: physical, sexual, and psychological. The truth, of course, is that they are good and that it is their supposed caregivers and not they, who are the evildoers. To the degree that healing is able to take place, it involves a process of coming to see themselves as good, not bad, and coming to recognize that the people they trusted did not treat them properly. As healing progresses, it involves removing the bad influences and replacing them with people who show love and respect, including and especially the presence of God. Like the land in Jesus' story (not Isaiah's) they are good, and (as in Jesus' story, not Isaiah's) the key is to get rid of the malevolent people and their influence, and to replace them instead with those who will love them. "You shall know the truth," Jesus once said, "and the truth will make you free."

By juxtaposing the two stories of the vineyard, we can map out a plan for personal spiritual growth, for seeing ourselves as Jesus sees us, for removing evil influences from our lives, and for accepting genuine love in new and healing ways.

## Two Sons

September 26, 2002

### TWO SONS

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Scripture scholars have spent a great deal of time and energy trying to figure out the parable of two sons (Matthew 21:31). Part of what complicates their efforts is that there are at least three different textual versions of the story. In the first, the son who says yes to his father but does not follow through on his promise, is called the obedient son by the Pharisees. Clearly, this is either a scribal problem or there is a strange twist to the meaning of the story. In the second and third versions of the text, the son who ultimately does go to the vineyard is called obedient; but the order in which the yes-saying son and the no-saying son appear in the story is different in each case. Some commentators think that the order of appearance makes a difference in the overall impact of the story.

One commentator on this passage says, quite rightly, that it is possible to complicate a parable by thinking too much about it. A parable is known for its direct impact upon the hearer. Leaving aside the strange version which has the Pharisees assert that the son who agrees to go to the vineyard but does not, is the obedient son, the story is a pretty straightforward one. A father asks each of his two sons to work in the vineyard. One says yes but does not go. The other says no, but then thinks better of it and goes. The question is, which son does the father's will?

The point is fairly simple, it seems to me: in the Kingdom of God, actions speak louder than words. The people who are supposed to get the point are the Pharisees, who, while railing against sinners of every kind, have themselves not followed through on the essentials of their religious commitment. The very sinners whom they condemn, Jesus tells them, in many instances have acknowledged their sinfulness and repented. In virtue of this, they - and not the Pharisees who condemn them - are entering the Kingdom of God.

The Pharisees, remember, all along have been grumbling that Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors. Jesus' response is to say, "Well, these people repent of their mistakes and have the humility to change their lives. You don't."

It's a question of heart-felt gratitude for God's goodness in one's life. The sinners Jesus alludes to are the ones who have felt the touch of the Lord's hand personally. Of course they respond to him; he makes himself available to them! Nothing about the harsh and judgmental demeanor of the Pharisees appeals to them in the least. The Pharisees, in condemning them, leave them as they found them. Jesus entices them to change for the better, by lifting them up with his love. Naturally, they respond to Jesus.

Where do you and I fit into the story? It all depends on whether we allow ourselves to experience personally the love of God in our hearts. Have we brought our sins, our weaknesses, our worries and our failure before the Lord, and allowed him to lift us up with gentleness, kindness and love? He is the friend to whom we can talk, the one who will understand, the one who will give us the courage to change. There is no need for us to become hard-hearted and cynical. The parable of the two sons is an invitation extended by Jesus to us, asking us to allow him to forgive us, to comfort us, and to help us to find our place in the Father's vineyard.

## All About the Money

September 19, 2002

### ALL ABOUT THE MONEY?

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The Gospel reading for the Twenty-fifth Sunday of the Year is St. Matthew's account of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. Some of them work all day, others for half a day, and still others for only an hour. Yet, in the end, all receive the same wage.

It's a fascinating parable, both in itself and because of its position in Matthew's gospel. It comes following a series of passages about the sacrifice that is involved in entering the Kingdom of God. The rich young man cannot leave his possessions behind to follow Jesus, even though he has kept all of the commandments since childhood. Jesus declares outright that it is harder for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, and he affirms that any sacrifice for the Kingdom of God will be abundantly rewarded. Following the story of the workers is Jesus' statement about his own suffering and death. In response to the request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee that they be allowed top seating in the Kingdom of God, Jesus replies that those who want to rank first must serve others.

In the middle of all of this is the story of the workers in the vineyard. It provides an interesting counterpoint to the other stories. With the possible exception of the remark about abundant recompense, the other passages stress the sacrifices that have to be made in order to follow Jesus. Even Jesus has to make them. This passage, by way of contrast, talks about the Kingdom of Heaven as like a very generous landowner who pays his workers equally, without regard for the number of hours they have worked.

The point of the story is that, though the shift in thinking is radical when one follows Jesus, making the shift is a happy thing with happy consequences. The point of the story is not the money; it's the thinking. Ironically, the landowner is likely one of the rich

people who, according to Jesus, would have difficulty entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Yet the difference with this man is that his thinking is considerate and generous. He asks no one to work more than a full day. He takes into consideration that those who had not found work by mid-day or by the last hour of the day would have considerable need of money. He departs from the usual method of paying according to the number of hours worked, and instead shifts to a pay scale based on kindness and understanding.

To get the point, we might insert ourselves into any of a number of places in the story. We might be the owner who refuses to be bound by custom and instead sets his wage according to the needs of others, without cheating those who came first. We might be the original work crew, whose vision is governed by the usual way of doing things, and who can't understand, for the life of them, how things could be done differently. They are the ones who feel unhappy and cheated. Or, we might see ourselves as those who drift about in the marketplace without finding work, who eventually are given it, and are rewarded generously.

That last group of people is especially interesting, for there are so many today who are drifting about the marketplace looking for what to do in life. Perhaps it is because of a lack of work. Perhaps it is because of an illness, an addiction or a painful history. For them (and "they" are each of us at some point or other in our lives), the moral of the story is the call of God. Each of us is called to "work in the vineyard" of the Kingdom, meaning that each of us has a function to fulfill in life. By the very fact that we exist, God has a place for us in his Kingdom, work for us to do. The landowner's question, "Why do you stand here idle all day?" expresses God's desire that none of us perceive ourselves as leading useless, burdened, impossible lives. Remember Therese, who became a missionary by praying for missionaries from her sickbed? In God's view there are to be no useless workers, no unemployed laborers, no victims of circumstances unable to make a mark upon the earth. If today, we find ourselves drifting about in the marketplace, feeling idle and useless and unemployed, there is always work in God's Kingdom for us to do. We can pray for ourselves or others. We can be kind to someone in need. We can share a fun activity with someone. We can visit someone in the hospital. Who knows, perhaps in the course of doing that today, we will find our life's work. God is an excellent employer. And, as a friend of mine likes to say, the wages are great and the benefits are outstanding.

# A Match That Never Goes Out

September 12, 2002

## A MATCH THAT NEVER GOES OUT

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"Misery," said Thomas Huxley, "is a match that never goes out."

Looking back at the anniversary remembrances of September 11, 2001, and re-visiting some of the pain and turmoil that have touched our lives during a difficult year, we may be inclined to agree with that assessment. It may seem to some that the match of misery, lit so explosively on that September day a year ago, not only has not gone out, but indeed has set a virtual forest fire.

How strange, by way of contrast, to read the words of the Book of Sirach from the first reading for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday of the Year: "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight." The quote suggests something slightly different from what Huxley picked up on. It suggests, not only that misery can stay with us for a long time; it further suggests that misery sometimes stays because we welcome it.

When we stop to think about it, the two bits of wisdom are not always mutually inclusive. Each can be true without including the other. In the face of the terrible losses many have experienced in the past year, the persistence of misery is perfectly understandable. Indeed, there would be something wrong with us if grief and sadness were not present. The pain of loss is a normal part of the process of healing; it enables us to come to terms with the loss, and to value properly what we have lost. No one can accurately tell us how much we should grieve or how long our period of mourning should be. It's different for everybody.

Yet in our lives we have, at one time or other, known people who seem to have allowed their grieving - with its sadness, its anger and so forth - to become a permanent and relentless feature of their world view. No ray of sunshine ever seems to penetrate the gloom and darkness in their soul. Someone can be so wounded by a loss or by a betrayal or a tragedy that he or she becomes permanently down on life. They take it out on life, on their friends and family, on their co-workers, on their profession, their religion, and, indeed, on themselves.

It is interesting that the wisdom writer mentions the word "sinner" when he speaks of them. It's a generic way of saying that there is something seriously wrong with such an attitude, when we let a loss bring us almost completely down. Made in the image and likeness of God, we always have reason to bask in God's love, even when we are feeling down or downcast. We don't have to be feeling good to enjoy the benefits of God's love, but there is something wrong when we become so dejected that we no longer experience that his love is there for us, or even believe it. What St. Paul says to the Romans in the second reading is true on an emotional level: "Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." On the days when perhaps we feel emotionally dead, we are the Lord's, just as really as on the days when we feel great.

Lyrics of hymns often provide us solace at times when we might have difficulty experiencing the love of God. One such example is the eighteenth-century hymn often known as "The Old 122nd". A stanza goes:

"Does sadness fill my mind? A solace here I find,  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
Or fades my earthly bliss? My comfort still is this,  
May Jesus Christ be praised!"

Made in his image and likeness, we are forever entitled to be the beneficiaries of God's love.

It, not misery, is the match that never goes out.

## God's Reasoning

September 6, 2002

### GOD'S REASONING

Father Paul Keenan  
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The readings for the Twenty-Third Sunday of the Year follow directly in theme from the readings of the previous Sunday. Then, we saw Jesus directly rebuke the error made by Peter, that Jesus should not have to suffer and die. It was a direct and unmistakable rebuke. We saw that when it came to error, Jesus' approach was to confront it head on and to speak the truth in its place.

This Sunday, we get the same message, but this time it is applied to us. Our readings are directed to the idea that it is our responsibility to confront error, and that if we do not, we will be held accountable.

The reasoning behind the readings from both Sundays is that there is only one truth, and that is the Truth of God. Human beings generally do not start from that truth and reason to its conclusion in particular situations. We prefer to start at the bottom, in our situation, and to draw a general conclusion from that. Instead of saying, "God's love is all in all and protects me in this situation," we say, "This is an awful situation and there is no way out."

Both statements cannot be true.

In our lives as followers of Christ, it is important that we reason from the top down, deductively. The first premise is always about God's love, and the conclusion is always that however impossible our situation appears to be, it is nonetheless filled with the power of God's love, and therefore is not impossible.

And with that line of reasoning, in the words of the first reading, "You shall save yourself."

--Posted September 6, 2002

## Making You Free

August 29, 2002

### MAKING YOU FREE

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What do you do when someone says something to you that you know to be totally false? Ideally, I suppose, most of us would like to believe that we would jump right in and correct the error. But in fact, would we? To do so might require a level of courage that we would like to think we have, but whether we actually have that degree of fearlessness might be another question entirely.

It's not a bad question for us to think about, for there's a lot of error out there, and we have become so accustomed to hearing it that we sometimes don't even recognize it. For example, how many times have you heard statements like these spoken as though they were gospel truth? "Well, if it doesn't work out, we can always get a divorce." "In order to get ahead in this organization, you're going to have to step on somebody." "You can't control the content and language of radio and television programs without violating freedom of speech." "If you mention the name of God in school, you are violating the rights of people who do not believe in God." "Everybody cheats. It's no big deal." "Once you're past fifty, it's all downhill." "What do you expect? All my life I've had bad luck." "I'm just meant to be poor, that's all."

These and many more statements such as these pass through people's lips every single day. Every one of them is a lie, and yet whole societies adopt them and base their decisions upon them. And people wonder why the world is full of problems and newscasts are so negative.

In the Gospel reading for the Twenty-Second Sunday of the Year (Matthew 16:21-27), Jesus gives us a perfect example of what to do when confronted with a lie. Matthew says that Jesus has been telling the apostles that he must suffer and be put to death, and that he will be raised up on the third day. Peter is horrified that Jesus, whom he has just identified as the Messiah, is to suffer so terribly; and, with every good intention in the world, he utters a prayer that Jesus be spared this seemingly horrible fate. Notice, Peter does not have any intention of doing anything wrong. Not at all - he is speaking out of love for Jesus. The problem is, what he says goes directly against the very reason that Jesus, the Son of God, is in the world. To pray that Jesus not suffer is equivalent to praying that he not fulfill his mission.

Jesus' response to this is to rebuke Peter quickly and directly. "Get behind me, Satan, for the way you think is not God's way, but man's." It is clear that Jesus is furious. He sees the lie in Peter's statement, and he refuses to give it any power.

What kind of power could it have, we wonder? Suppose Jesus had used the "nice guy" approach and had not directly rebuked Peter's statement. "Aw, Peter, I really appreciate your sympathy, and I know it's not fair, but it's what I have to do." Sounds pretty harmless, doesn't it? But think about it for a second. Isn't it just that sort of statement that leads to feelings of being treated unfairly, which in turn leads to feelings of resentment, which in turn leads to slacking off in the performance of one's duties? Jesus knows that the very best thing he can do is directly and immediately to rebuke Peter's statement. If he gave it any sympathy at all, it could be disastrous for his work.

Now we can understand why Jesus calls Peter "Satan." He had just changed the apostle's name from Simon to Peter, and now he calls him "Satan." Clearly, Jesus realizes who is really behind the apostle's fine-sounding but profoundly malignant prayer and wish: not Peter, but Satan, the father of lies. That's how lies often work - they put themselves in the mouths of good people who unwittingly become the spokespersons for untruth. Thus, the Savior gives us a valuable teaching: no matter who says it, if it's untrue, it's untrue and to be rebuked. Always rebuke the work of the father of lies.

Jesus once told his disciples, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." His rebuke was certainly unpleasant for Peter to experience, but it was necessary in order to free Peter from the hypnosis of untruth. In order to be an effective apostle and leader of the Church, Peter had to walk in the truth and learn to avoid being taken in by falsehood.

It's true of us as well, whose mission is to be "ambassadors for Christ." Falsity is very subtle and can slip itself into the gaps between our thoughts with no problem at all - unless we are on the lookout. We would do well to ask the Lord to guide us in the way of truth, for he is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

--Posted August 29, 2001

## Personal Faith

August 21, 2002

### PERSONAL FAITH

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There's a great deal to be said for a personal approach to education. When I was getting ready to go to college, I chose what was then - it has grown considerably since then - a small Catholic college. The idea was that in a small school, students and teachers would have more opportunity to interact, and the education would therefore be more personal. The approach worked pretty well, or at least well enough that, on many occasions, it seemed to work against me. Instead of being able to hide in the back of a huge class or to parrot a standard response in reply to a professor's question, I was really forced to think. In the small classes, you were a sitting duck for the teacher's questions. Plus, your replies had to be thoughtful and not pat answers. Try to give a pat answer and you would be nailed to the wall.

If that was the teaching approach of the Jesuits in those days, they apparently came by it honestly. It was the approach of Jesus as well, as we see in the Gospel reading for the twenty-first Sunday of the year - Matthew 16:13-20. In this scene, there are no huge throngs, just the apostles and Jesus. And Jesus is in the mood for asking questions. The first question seems simple enough: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The apostles answer easily: "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." No problem there - the question concerns only what people are saying. In their travels with Jesus, the apostles clearly discussed their Master with people in the public square. They have the pulse of what the average citizen thought about what Jesus did and said, and about what Jesus was doing and

saying. It was an easy question - all they have to do is to report what the common viewpoint is about Jesus.

But Jesus does not let them stay there. The second question is a tough one. "But who do you say that I am?" Just as in my college days, you can feel the atmosphere shift. The apostles' heads go down and their gaze falls upon the ground. Now, they're really challenged. They can't just rely on what "everybody else" is saying; they have to come up with an answer for themselves. Jesus is asking them about their own personal faith, their unique grasp of what he and his ministry are all about. Only Peter speaks-- "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Thankfully, his answer is correct. Now everyone can relax.

Just as my professors in college wanted me to really know what I was studying, so Jesus wants the disciples really to know him and his message. If my fellow students and I were to let learning be a lifetime matter, we had to be able to think through what we were taught and to appropriate it unto ourselves. It's the same with Jesus. He wants us, not just to parrot the answers of our faith; he wants us to really grasp what his mission is. Because it is meant to be our mission as well, one of healing and teaching and proclaiming the love of God - and engaging in that Love ourselves. When we run into a problem in life, we need to know firsthand that God is there and that he is waiting to apply his love to our situation. If that's merely a matter of rote faith to us, we will likely not be able to apply the divine solution to our need. It would be like going to the doctor and having him, say, take our blood pressure and then reach for a medical textbook to find out what it meant. Not too impressive, and not very good medicine. By the same token, when life challenges us, our lively knowing of God's presence and love makes all the difference in the world.

We need the doctrine, that's for sure. Jesus did not skimp on teachings. But besides the doctrine, we need personally to understand the immense depths of God's love as it works in our daily life.

--Posted August 21, 2002

## A Question of Faith

August 13, 2002

### A Question of Faith

Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel for the Twentieth Sunday of the Year gives us a great deal to think about. It is St. Matthew's account of the Canaanite woman who approached Jesus for a healing for her daughter...only to meet with the Lord's refusal!

I think we're all a bit shocked when we read this passage. How, we wonder, could Jesus refuse to heal a child? Especially on what appears to be a technicality - the woman's nationality?

Eventually, of course, Jesus yields; but our questions remain nonetheless.

As I do with so much of Scripture, I like to look at a spiritual understanding of this passage. We can say, of course, that Jesus is testing the woman's faith; and that's true. But I wonder if there might be something more to the encounter than that.

I imagine the woman on her way to meet Jesus, and I am quite certain that she wondered what his response to her request would be. It is hard to imagine that she wouldn't have understood that she was asking something out of the ordinary. If she were anything like most of us, I am sure she must have had her doubts about whether Jesus would grant her request. Those feelings of doubt and uncertainty might well have colored the tone of voice with which she made the request, the look in her eye, the way in which she

presented herself. It certainly does with us when we pray. A good deal of time, we pray hoping that God will smile on us and grant our request. But deep down, we wonder.

Jesus does not want us to think of himself or the Heavenly Father in that way. He does not want us to come with doubt, but with certainty. I wonder if that's why he didn't initially grant the woman's request, just as I wonder if sometimes the reason we feel our prayers aren't answered is that we come with doubt. Jesus question looks like a rebuff, but it is really an invitation to the woman to strengthen her faith and improve her prayer. Eventually he will agree to heal the daughter, but first he must heal the mother who requests the healing. What looks like a denial of the mother's prayer is really Jesus' way of healing her.

She accepts his challenge and is healed. Now, the way is cleared for the healing of her daughter.

I think this puzzling reading is really about the barriers to the answering of prayer that we place between ourselves and God. Once we get the idea that God wants to answer our prayers and does not want us to come with tepid or weak faith, we are healed and then are free to be channels of God's grace.

--Posted August 13, 2002

## "Appearances are Deceiving"

**August 1, 2002**

### **"APPEARANCES ARE DECEIVING"**

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After looking at the readings for the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, just for fun I put the expression "appearances are deceiving" into an Internet search engine. I came up with page after page on the Web affirming that proposition in one way or other. A weather page related that sometimes the severest-looking cloud formations were harbingers of gentle weather, and that the gentlest-looking could be truly severe. A web site about dogs said that what passes for canine disobedience may actually be a health problem. On yet another site, a teenager volunteering in a community service project told how frightened she was at first of the elderly and physically-challenged people she was sent to help. Gradually, she came to know them and love them as persons in their own right.

Over and over again, we experience that our senses and first impressions can deceive us. And yet, repeatedly, we use them as though they were the best sources of information about what is real, what is right, who we are and what we should do. If someone tries to frighten us, we either cower and let them bully us or we turn aggressive and try to frighten them back. Or if we are told that people in our family have always behaved in such and such a way, we may passively conform to "our fate" or may engage in almost violent rebellion.

When I was a kid, I used to walk to school; and on the way, there was a little terrier who, when I reached his yard, would bark ferociously and act as if he were going to bite me. I was absolutely terrified of that dog, and on my walk to school I was consumed with fear of that tiny little dog. If only I had known that I could challenge the story my senses were telling me - if only I had known how to calm and even befriend that little dog, as I would today - I would have been much better off.

It's the same with people. There are people who try to bully us by their size, their loud tone of voice, or by their wealth or position. When we let that happen, we give in to what our senses (our "common sense," we often say) are telling us. But appearances are deceiving. If instead, we projected love and calm, we might get down to the real person inside the bluster and defuse a lot of the problem.

Appearances are deceiving, and we do well to question a great deal of what our senses tell us. But that's not enough of an answer. The reason our senses often deceive us is that their contact with reality is very, very limited. They tell us a little bit about the material aspect of reality, but nothing of the spiritual dimension. Relying on our senses alone, we could easily come to believe that life was all about matter and possessions, and that wealth and power came from having lots of both. But that's not reality. God is reality and the author of creation, and it is in coming to look beyond the grasp of our senses to an experience and understanding of God that we come to know what reality truly is, who we truly are (made in God's image and likeness) and how to act in accordance with our true purpose.

When Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fishes (Matthew 14: 13-21), people were trying to tell him that those few morsels would never feed an entire crowd. They were relying on their senses, being "sensible." Jesus knew that Infinite Love could create possibilities far beyond what the senses could ever imagine.

But there's more to the story than that. Jesus' miracle was not about providing food - that would be centering everything in matter again. The real secret to the miracle comes from the First Reading in Isaiah 55: "I will renew with you the everlasting covenant." We're not made for money or power or "stuff" - at the very core of our being, we are in union with God. Every day, God is calling us beyond the material story of life the senses tell us, by asking us to turn our attention to his story - the story of Everlasting Love. If we can grasp that, indeed experience it, we will see that, yes, God will provide all our needs, as Isaiah says. But more importantly, we will experience a boundless Joy and an energizing Love that will warm us from the very depths of our hearts and souls.

Appearances are deceiving, yes. By coming to know that, we can come to discover - and to bask in - the Love we were made for.

## Solomon's Riches

July 29, 2002

### SOLOMON'S RICHES

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What does true wealth consist in? It's a very interesting question asked and answered in the First Reading of the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. The story tells of a conversation between God and Solomon, in the course of which God tells Solomon to ask for anything he wants.

Many of us, I imagine, would be tempted to ask for riches or power or a big house or car - after all, this is a blank check from God. Solomon, the story goes, has a different idea. Instead of asking for material things, he asks for an understanding heart. God applauds his answer, for it shows that Solomon knows the true secret of prosperity - that wealth is spiritual. As Jesus said, if we store up for ourselves treasures in heaven, we will enjoy the secret of wealth and abundant life. That's what it's really all about. The treasures that we were made for can be summarized in the being of God. His Wisdom, his Love, his Truth, his Beauty, his Joy - these are the treasures that we should invest in. They are abundant, and they are ours now, just for the taking. Made in God's image and likeness, we are his sons and daughters and are meant to share in his riches.

The Bible's story of Solomon also says that Solomon was extremely wealthy and powerful. What was different about Solomon was that, as much as he enjoyed his

prosperity, he had that understanding heart, that heart full of wisdom. His heart knew that God was his source and that everything came from God and was to be used for God's glory.

It's a wonderful story for us to reflect on, for all of us need to be reminded of what has true value in life. True wealth comes from the inside out, and we are truly wealthy when we understand from the bottom of our heart that our dearest treasure is our life in God.

## Our Imperishable Crop

July 18, 2002

### OUR IMPERISHABLE CROP

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With everything that is going on in the world today, how appropriate it is that we hear, on the Sixteen Sunday of Ordinary Time this year, the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13:24 - 43). It is the story of a man who plants a crop, only to have his enemy come by night and plant weeds. His advisors want to do the "sensible" thing and tear up the weeds. However, the man disregards their advice, noting that if they do that, they will ruin the crop. Later on in the same reading, we see Jesus explaining that this is an eschatological parable, one that speaks about the judgment at the end of the world.

None of us, certainly, is in a position to say that these are the end times; although indeed there are people who proclaim that to be true. Jesus said that only the Father knew when that time would come. Yet, reading this parable, we can certainly say that a lot of the falling apart that is taking place in our world today is a kind of cleansing, a kind of purification of elements of our society that are not good. On so many levels, we are in a time of cleansing. This can be very uncomfortable, confusing and even painful. At times, it may seem to us that the wheat is being pulled up with the weeds. Yet this is only the appearance; the reality is that through all of this our spiritual crop, consisting of things that are eternal and imperishable, will survive.

When it seems as though things that we have worked hard for are falling apart, Jesus calls us to remember that our true crop - the fruits of our work in the Kingdom of God - are not falling apart. The Gospels are replete with reminders that our true wealth, our true yield, is spiritual - it is Love, Truth, Beauty and so on that are the true and lasting results of our labors. Perhaps the shell of our labors will fall away, but those imperishable things will never fall away. Over and over again, Jesus reminded his followers that though heaven and earth would pass away, his words would not pass away.

This realization can give us the courage to go on, to overcome the discouragement, even the cynicism that threatens to trouble so many people in today's world. Working in the Kingdom of God, we are working for things that last, not for things that perish. That understand can turn one's life around.

## Thoughts and Centipedes

July 11, 2002

### THOUGHTS AND CENTIPEDES

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"How do you know which leg goes first, and which goes second and so on? You have a hundred legs to move every time you need to walk."

It is said that a frog once asked this question of a centipede, who was perfectly contented moving along with his hundred legs, keeping them all in line, UNTIL the frog posed that question. At that point, the story goes, the centipede had to think about how he moved his legs. He stopped in the ditch, distracted; and for the life of him, he couldn't figure out how to put one leg in front of the other.

Questions, including those that life poses in the form of challenges, can do that to us. We may be going along very nicely, our routine comfortably in place, when someone or something comes along and makes us think. Then we can no longer take things for granted. We have to go back to basic principles. Like the centipede, we may find ourselves dazed and confused for awhile.

Sometimes that confusion is good. In the Gospel reading for the Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary time (from the thirteenth chapter of St. Matthew's gospel), Jesus tells the

disciples that he speaks in parables in order to awaken people from the patterns of thought and action to which they have become accustomed. All through his earthly life, Jesus was plagued by the differences between his way of thinking and the ways in which people had become accustomed to thinking. Parts of the Sermon on the Mount, for example, sound so strange to our ears because they say things that go directly opposite to the ways in which we usually think. People, for example, don't usually look up to the meek; but Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek." To hear the message of Jesus is to have to go back and re-think some of our most cherished beliefs about life, about right and wrong and about our purpose.

Another example - we usually say that it is important that our actions match our words. In other words, we tend to believe that when we say something, we should follow through with action. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus takes a different slant. It seems to be more the case that his words are meant to match his actions. The first thing we see him doing in his public life is engaging in a very active ministry of preaching and healing in Galilee.

Matthew makes a great point of his extensive ministry of healing the sick. Only then do we get the Sermon on the Mount. First he is active; then he sits down to speak. That seems to imply that his words are meant to explain his healing actions. That's important. Since the actions are works of healing, it follows that the words (which explain them) are meant to be healing, too. Doctrine is important because it is meant to heal. In his teaching and preaching, Jesus is healing ideas that have gone awry. And in healing people's ideas, he is healing the people, too. If they'll listen.

Matthew's gospel is one great reminder that if we want to be healed, we must change our thoughts. The expression "following Jesus" can rightly be taken to mean following (understanding and accepting) his line of thought. When someone asks, "Do you follow me?" he or she implies, "Do you understand what I mean?" Throughout his life on earth, Jesus showed that it really did matter how people thought about the nature of God, about their own nature and about the needs of others. He knew that our thoughts could make or break us.

## Little Ones

July 3, 2002

### LITTLE ONES

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Not long ago, a friend told me a wonderful story about something that had happened in a Sunday School class in her church. The topic was God's abundance, and the teacher decided to ask the students how they described their relationship with God. After a number of replies, one of the students shot up his hand and exclaimed, "I am the son of the man who owns everything!" That's a pretty bright insight, and leave it to a child to come up with something so simple and so wise. Somehow, this young fellow had come to realize that God is the creator of all and the source of all, and that he would lavish his abundance on his child. Many of us go years before arriving at such an insight.

That's what Jesus means in St. Matthew's Gospel (11:25-30) - the Gospel for the Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time - when he thanks his Heavenly Father for revealing his truths to "little ones" rather than to "the wise and the learned." Jesus knows that people who are wise and learned often get that way by developing certain habits of thinking, feeling and experiencing. While those patterns provide a frame of reference that is useful for facing challenges and solving problems, they can easily blind us to new insights into reality.

Jesus knows firsthand what he is talking about. Throughout his public life, he met constant opposition from people who could genuinely be described as "the wise and the learned." For example, how many times did he heal someone, only to be told that he "shouldn't" have performed that miracle because it was the Sabbath? Even his disciples failed at new insight. Just prior to the multiplication of the loaves and the fish, the disciples were perplexed at the prospect of (1) feeding such a huge crowd and (2) feeding them with five loaves and two fish. Once again it took the wisdom of a small boy, who simply handed his lunch over to Jesus and let Jesus do the rest.

Using human logic instead of divine logic can eventually become very tiring. When the problems of life beset us, we can find that our usual way of doing things wears us out. Perhaps this is why Jesus extends the invitation, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest," so soon after having spoken about the "little ones." To those who are weary from trying to sort out the perplexities of life, the Savior calls out with an invitation to come to him and rest. There with him, we can learn to transform our human logic with divine logic, the logic of the heart and soul. There, we can learn to see life differently, to remember that all does not depend on us; and that the logic of the Savior can help us to see life as perhaps we have never seen it before.

Recently, I heard from a man who had finally found a job after several weeks of unemployment. After he had been let go from his previous job, he became nearly frantic as job opportunity after job opportunity dissolved into nothingness. "I was so exhausted and discouraged," he recounted, "that I didn't think I could go on." While praying one morning, it occurred to him that he already had one of the best jobs around - by the very fact that he was alive, he was working for God. That insight changed his entire life. He began to view his life as a way of bringing God's love to others. When he went on interviews, he looked for opportunities to console and help the people he met. "My job search became interesting and exciting," he recalled. When at last he accepted an offer, he reported, he took his new attitude into his new position. It changed the entire course of his work life.

Such an insight is very simple, but it requires openness to living in a different way, to seeing life differently from before. Can we hear the Lord's call to come and rest? Can we allow him to work the full potential of his love in us?

--Posted July 3, 2002

## His Way...or Ours?

June 28, 2002

### HIS WAY...OR OURS?

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There are passages in the New Testament that, to be honest, can send chills up and down our spine. Such a passage is Matthew 10:37-42, the Gospel reading for the Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time. In this passage, Jesus says that whoever loves a parent or a child more than him is not worthy of him; that we should take up our cross; that whoever finds his life will lose it. Yet, hard sayings though they are, passages such as these, by virtue of their very toughness, help us to understand what is true in life and what is false; what is real and what is unreal; who we truly are and who we are not.

The key to these passages - indeed, the key to following Jesus - is to know that God is all in all, and that we are his sons and daughters. He is the source of every good thing that comes our way.

Distinguish that belief from how we mortals ordinarily think. All too often, there is a disconnect in our minds between God and our daily lives. We tend to parcel out an hour a week, if that, for God; and the rest of the time we try to handle the various challenges and responsibilities of life. More and more people these days are caring for elderly parents; more and more parents are housing sons and daughters who once left home.

Those day to day stresses and strains are bad enough. We're looking for a little comfort and solace, yet here is Jesus telling us that if we do find our lives, we will lose them.

What does he mean? The fact is, life is much simpler when we let God give it to us - that is Jesus' point. The God who created the world, and who created us, stands by us every single day. The world of problems, assaults, pain and - let's face it - sin is a world that wears us out when we try to face it alone. But we don't need to. God has a plan for each and every one of us. He is all in all; and just as we want the best for our children, so he wants the best for us. When we turn to God at the beginning of the day and ask for his guidance and help, we will receive it. That's the point that Jesus is making. He isn't asking us not to love our loved ones or expecting us to live gloomy, miserable lives. Quite the opposite. He's asking us to let him give us our lives, to let him spread them out before us as an artist spreads a painting across a canvas. Then, two things happen. First, we begin to see our parents, our children, our co-workers and so forth as gifts from God, rather than as problems we have to deal with. And second, we receive God's guidance as to how best to help them. Wait, there's a bonus - by giving our lives over to God, we receive them back, blessed and abundant.

Jesus' statements are an invitation to us to try God's way of thinking and living instead of trying to manage everything by ourselves. When we do that, things just seem easier - with Jesus, our yoke is easy and our burden is light.

## Hidden

June 21, 2002

### HIDDEN

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One of the advantages of the cycle of liturgical readings is that you get the opportunity to read one particular Gospel every three years. That means that you have the chance to see how differently a Gospel touches you at different points in your life.

For myself, I'm finding that this year, reading the Gospel of Matthew, I am especially taken with the emphasis on the profound difference between the inner and the outer-directed person in the message of Jesus. It seems that over and over again, in very different ways, Jesus tries to get his hearers to be inner-directed people. The Sermon on the Mount is all about that; and when he talks about praying, he gives the Our Father as an exemplary prayer, one that is directed more to God than to accumulating things for ourselves.

In the Gospel reading for the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus continues this theme by reminding his disciples that "nothing is concealed that will not be revealed." In the past, I used to read this line as meaning that our hidden sins will be brought to light -

a rather scary proposition! Looking at it now, it strikes me that Jesus is really saying that so much of our relationship with him and his Father is secret - it is not what people perceive with their everyday knowing and their five senses. It is done in the heart and in the soul. Because it is so hidden, our inner life with God - and even the possibility of such an inner life - remains foreign to everyday intelligence. When we are in trouble, we tend to look for outward solutions rather than inward ones, because God seems so very far away.

Jesus is saying that just because our relationship with him is spiritual, doesn't mean that he is far away. Just the opposite - it means that he is present, ready to be revealed, waiting for us to share him with others, but present in a way that eludes our ordinary knowledge. This is the secret of Jesus' healing ministry: he heals by taking people beyond the body all the way to the soul.

This means that, as a teacher, Jesus had to instruct his disciples - as he instructs us - how to know with their soul. They were well versed - as are we - in the workings of ordinary knowledge. As a teacher, he had to educate them in a whole new way of knowing, inner knowing, through which they could sense the presence of God and the ways of God.

A simple example - when we hear a symphony, we can hear it as a concordant piece of music. Or we can hear in it the beauty of God. Our senses tell us one thing; our soul tells us another. When we look at a mountain, we may see how high it is, how snowy it is way up top, and so on. Or we can see the majesty of God. The senses give us one form of knowledge. The soul gives us quite another.

It's the same with the course of our lives. We can see our days as a kind of monotonous or at best unrelated bunch of events. Or we can see our days as filled with the presence of God. What a difference!

"Nothing is concealed which will not be revealed." Our soul's knowledge is inner, hidden, but so eager to come out. For the depths of the soul are what we were made for, not the shallowness of everyday knowing.

As we meet our Lord this week, let us ask him to make us aware of that inner knowing. And let us ask him for the grace to know him above all, and to share his presence with all we meet.

## **Flying on Eagles' Wings**

**June 14, 2002**

### **Flying on Eagles' Wings**

Father Paul Keenan  
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In the fifth chapter of the Book of Exodus, God reminds his people how he "bore them up on eagles' wings" in bringing them out of Egypt to freedom. That reminds us of the wonderful song, "Eagles' Wings" which is sung in so many churches and has become such a part of our liturgical music in recent times.

God speaks of bearing his people up on eagles' wings as a reminder to them -- us -- that our salvation is through His efforts, not through our own. When we have a problem, or when we are trying to defeat the results of sin or evil in our lives, we often run here and there in search of a solution to our problem. What God is telling his people is that this is not a necessary or even an effective approach. If we would simply turn to him, he would bear us up on eagles' wings, enable us to fly high and free toward the new life he has in mind for us. In essence, our Promised Land is not property that we have a deed to. Rather, it is an inner place, an inner land, where the Joy, Peace, Beauty and Truth of God dwell. Turning inward toward God, we find the solution to our problems...and much,

much more. The image of flying on the wings of eagles gives us a wonderful sense of what this means. It's not about solving problems like algebra problems we used to solve in our school days. Rather, God tells us, it's like coming into a whole new country -- called the Kingdom of God -- where the inhabitants fly high on the richness of their life in God.

## Love, Not Sacrifice

June 7, 2002

### Love, Not Sacrifice

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Perhaps it's because it's time for the married couples' retreat I have been giving in June for several years now, but the Mass readings for the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time strike me as particularly appropriate for marriage. Both the first and third readings contain the statement that what God wants from us is love/mercy and not sacrifice. As I say, it may be because of the retreat, but it strikes me that understanding the meaning of that statement is helped by a reflection on marriage.

We all know people who are married and whose marriage has become pretty stale. It's not necessarily anyone's fault, for there can be many reasons that the spark can go out of a marriage. But when two people stay together out of sacrifice, it's clear that something important is missing. There's a big difference between a marriage that is filled with love and one that exists on sacrifice.

It's the same with our relationship with God. Our readings tell us that God does not want a relationship with us that is based solely on duty, routine and reluctance. The covenant God established with his people is meant to be vibrant and alive. Jesus speaks of it in terms of friendship.

Interestingly enough, the way to revitalize a marriage and the way to revitalize our relationship with God is the same. In both cases, it's a question of learning to see God differently. In general, people's belief about God is that he wants us to sacrifice. We seem to think that God delights in our offering sacrifices to him and that he loves to see us struggle and suffer in life. But the God who created us and who created everything that exists is not someone who enjoys watching his creatures suffer. He certainly takes no delight in having us stay with him out of boredom or a sense of obligation. The Psalmist tells us, "The Lord takes delight in his people" (Psalm 149:4). That certainly doesn't describe someone who thrives on seeing us suffer.

As we learn to see God differently, we learn to see life differently and we learn to see ourselves in a different light. Changing our view of God leads us to be open to new depths of insight, to new zest for living. That, in turn, affects our marriage and, in fact, all of the ways in which we participate in life.

## The Presence of God

June 3, 2002

### The Presence of God

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The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, which we celebrated last Sunday, teaches us something truly wonderful about God and about ourselves.

About God, it teaches us that God loves to nourish the souls of his people. In the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, after Jesus has multiplied the loaves and fishes, he is followed by people who are looking for him to go on providing bread for them. Jesus is very clear that this is not to be his mission or his ministry. "I am the Bread of Life," he tells them; and he makes it very clear that what he is here to do is to nourish their souls.

We are made in the image and likeness of God. What we say about God not only describes God; it tells us a great deal about ourselves as well. If it is part of the nature of

God to nourish the souls of his people, it is part of our nature to see to the nourishment of our own souls and the souls of others.

How can we do this? Let me suggest several ways. Having just celebrated the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, frequent reception of his body and blood in the Eucharist - where we receive him body and blood, soul and divinity - is certainly the best way. Preparatory to this, the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be a great help as well.

Another way is through prayer. Lately, I have discovered taking time to reflect on the various names or attributes of God to be an outstanding way both of getting in touch with God and of bringing his peace into my soul. Some of those names are...Love, Goodness, Beauty, Truth, Infinite Spirit, and so on. Taking time to reflect upon these and other attributes of God, slowly, reverently, one at a time, enables us to be in his presence in a deeply powerful way.

The Lord's prayer is another excellent way of getting in touch with God. Not saying it quickly, but taking time to say each sentence of it with pauses and time for reflection. It is a wonderful prayer.

And, of course, there is also the beauty of Nature and the joy of friends. Jesus himself used natural symbols, such as vine and branches, bread and wine, to describe himself. The beauty of the skies, the graceful flight of birds, the change of seasons - all of these are powerful gifts from God. As for friends, Jesus told his disciples, "I call you friends. I do not call you servants any longer. Instead, I call you friends." He used the relation of friend to friend to describe his relationship with us.

There are so many ways in which we can experience the presence of God. For this, let us praise God and rejoice!

## God's Qualities

May 28, 2002

### GOD'S QUALITIES

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Having just celebrated Trinity Sunday, a question or theme might be lurking in our minds-how can we come to know God?

One way I have found helpful is to set the mind on various attributes or names of God. Apropos of Trinity Sunday, a person might reflect on the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit, allowing each of those names to sink deeply into his or her mind and heart. The names of God can be a powerful way of focusing on God in the midst of a busy day.

The first reading for Trinity Sunday (from Exodus 34), provides us with another way of coming into contact with God in the midst of our busy lives. In that reading, the Lord gives five descriptions of himself to Moses. Reflecting on these attributes of God can put

us in touch with his divine spirit at any time and in any place. The Lord calls himself, "a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity." Let's take a look at each of these qualities of God.

1. Merciful. It is not long ago that the Church celebrated Divine Mercy Sunday. On that occasion, we called to mind the mercy of God. As sinners, we can sometimes be afraid to turn to God, fearing God's wrath and punishment. Instead, God describes himself as merciful. The word "mercy" has roots in a Medieval Latin word meaning "reward." Just when we begin to be afraid of God, he turns to us with open welcoming arms, as the father welcomes the prodigal son. The word "merciful" reminds us that we can always feel safe in the presence of God.

2. Gracious. We've all had the experience of being received into someone's presence in a perfunctory manner, in a way that seems uncaring and rather cold. By the same token, we've also had the experience of being warmly and lovingly received into someone's home. We know the difference between the two receptions. The former makes us feel awful; the latter makes us feel wonderful. God describes himself as "gracious" - as one who takes delight in having us with him and in making us feel at home with him.

3. Slow to anger. Somewhere along the way, the God of the Old Testament picked up a reputation for being angry and vengeful. Yet here he clearly describes himself as "slow to anger." In other words, if for some reason we've been afraid to talk to him or to approach him, he is telling us that there is no reason for us to be afraid. He is not a quick temper, ready to blow at a moment's notice. Instead, he tells us, he is very slow to anger. Anger, he assures us, will not be his first line of recourse with us.

4. Rich in kindness. Here, God describes himself not just as "kind," but as "rich in kindness." The idea of "rich" is an intriguing one. At times when we might feel that there are gaps or lacks in our lives, we can remember that God is not only kind, but "rich" in kindness. Getting our minds off of our lack and onto God's richness can do wonders for jump-starting our ability, as people made in his image and likeness, to manifest abundance instead of lack in our lives.

5. {Rich in} fidelity. Not only is God rich in kindness, he is rich in fidelity as well. God is abundantly faithful to us. Where others might make their fortunes and forget about us, God never forgets. His richness extends to us, just for the asking.

This little passage from Exodus gives us plenty of room for reflection. Made in God's image and likeness, we share in his qualities. When we reflect upon the names of qualities of God, not only are we thinking about who he is, but about who we are as well.

## **Pentecost**

**May 19, 2002**

### **PENTECOST**

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Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. This means that in a way it is our birthday, too, spiritually. Where we have felt in our lives that we were all alone, at the mercy of others, at the mercy of the world, at the mercy of a life that seems so much larger than we are, the news is good. The news is that we are children of God, that God gifts us with the bounty of his love in so many ways. Through wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and respect for God, we learn who we are, that God loves us and protects us, and that life is not bigger than we are, after all.

That's the good news of Pentecost. It is as good as it was 2000 years ago, and it gets better each and every day. Blessed Pentecost. May this feast be a source of personal good news for you.

## **The World**

**May 10, 2002**

### **THE WORLD**

Father Paul Keenan  
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In the Gospel for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Jesus speaks about revealing the Father's name to those whom he has taken out of the world. That's a strange expression, and worth doing some reflection about.

What does Jesus mean by "taking people out of the world"? Most of us who try to follow him feel very much immersed in the world; and, after all, wasn't the whole point of the Incarnation to redeem the world?

I think that when Jesus uses the expression "the world," especially in St. John's gospel, he's speaking about a mind set, and contrasting it with the mind set of the Kingdom of God. If you think according to the world, you think one way; if you think according to the Kingdom of God, you think another way. That, I believe, is the message.

Thinking the way the world thinks, is exemplified in the various accounts of the temptations of Jesus in the desert. The worldly mentality would want the power, the ability to change stones in to bread, and the protection of angels in a spectacular show of daring-do. The mentality of the Kingdom of God is that, by resting in the love of the heavenly Father we already have everything we need, and always will.

Or take some of the stories where people object to Jesus' healing someone. The mentality of the world is that there is a set way of doing things and that any variation on that is in violation of it. The mentality of the Kingdom of God is that, yes, there are ways of doing things, but sometimes there are exceptions or expansions upon it when circumstances demand. It is not part of the Kingdom of God to deny healing to people or to set up obstacles; to do so was not the way of Jesus.

Thinking as the world thinks can catch us unawares, because it is so prevalent. Nicodemus, in John's Gospel has trouble understanding what Jesus means by being "born again." The crowd whom Jesus fed with multiplied loaves and fishes thought that he was going to supply them with bread every day; he, instead, wanted to indicate that he was the Bread of Life to nourish their souls.

Learning to think in this new way takes some getting used to. As Jesus told the disciples, the basic component of it lies in revealing the name of the Father to us. By reflecting on the nature of God, we learn who we are as people made in his image and likeness, and we learn the power of Word and Spirit to expand our understanding and enrich our participation in life here on earth.

## Sanctifying God?

May 3, 2002

### SANCTIFYING GOD?

Father Paul Keenan  
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The second reading in the Sunday Mass readings often gets short shrift when it comes to preaching or reflecting on the Word of God. This time, when I was reflecting on the readings for preaching, the opening words of the second reading from 1 Peter 3 (for the Sixth Sunday of Easter) jumped out at me: "Sanctify Christ as Lord of your hearts."

I was puzzled - how can Peter speak of "sanctifying" Christ? How can we sanctify one who is obviously so holy?

Perhaps it was a question of translation. But when I looked at other translations, there was the same word each time - "sanctify."

What about the Greek? Same thing - there it was, a form of "hagiazō," which means... "to sanctify."

So I was stuck with my problem - how can we sanctify God?

I began to look for other uses of the word, especially in the Old Testament. The expression comes up in a number of places, most interestingly (to me, at least) in Numbers 20: 12-13, the passage that speaks of Moses bringing water from the rock. Because he struck the rock twice with his rod, he was chastised by God and told that he would not see the promised land. God said that it was because of Moses' failure to "sanctify" him before the people that he was being punished. Apparently, I thought, God wants to be sanctified.

I got some help from the New American Bible translation of the passage in Numbers: "But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you were not faithful to me in showing forth my sanctity before the Israelites, you shall not lead this community into the land I will give them.'" The writer goes on to say: "These are the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites contended against the LORD, and where he revealed his sanctity among them"

The suggestion in this translation is that there is a link between our sanctifying God and God's revealing his sanctity to us. Perhaps it is something akin to what St. John told us: "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

Another clue is found right in the Lord's prayer, in the words "hallowed be thy name." Obviously, the name of God is already sacred, but clearly the intent here is that we recognize it as sacred and keep it as sacred. We make God's name holy by recognizing its holiness and using it in holy ways.

That's the answer. "Sanctifying God" is not so much a question of our making God something he was not. Instead, it is a question of our acknowledging the holiness of God as he reveals it to us, and then treating God with the utmost respect and reverence.

To go back to the Second Reading - "sanctifying Christ" doesn't mean making him something he was not, but rather acknowledging his holiness and allowing a sense of it to fill our every word and action.

In this sense, it is in "sanctifying Christ" that we sanctify ourselves. We become holy by acknowledging the holiness of God, by developing within ourselves a sense of reverence and respect for God and for Jesus Christ, his Son. The words "reverence" and "respect" both have their roots in words meaning "seeing anew." Acknowledging and paying attention to the holiness of God, we see God, our neighbor our world and ourselves in a new way.

## **Not Troubled, Not Afraid**

**April 26, 2002**

### **NOT TROUBLED, NOT AFRAID**

Father Paul Keenan  
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"Do not let your hearts be troubled." Those words of Jesus from St. John's Gospel have comforted many of us in our time of need. They comforted the disciples who were gathered with Jesus on the night before he died, and they comfort us two thousand years later.

When we are worried and upset, the last thing we think about is expansion or expansiveness. We often feel so stuck in our problem that we can't imagine ever breaking free. Yet Jesus says, "There are many rooms in my Father's house...I am going to prepare a place for you."

Instead of having them focus on the place where they are stuck, Jesus has them focus on the "many mansions," the many opportunities that lie ahead.

These opportunities, he tells them, are not just "in general"; they are "for you." He is going, he says, to prepare a place for them. In the context of John's Gospel, that means not only a place in heaven, but an inner place, a place of comfort and peace right now in the depths of our hearts and souls.

In these troubled times we can take great comfort in these wonderful words of Jesus, "Do not be afraid."

## **A Tough Job**

**April 18, 2002**

### **A TOUGH JOB**

Father Paul Keenan  
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I smiled recently when I re-read the passage from John's Gospel (Chapter 10: 1-10), in which Jesus talks about his being the sheepgate. My smile had nothing to do with the Savior's metaphor, but rather with a childhood memory. Jesus told his disciples that the thief and the robber enters the field, not through the gate, but by climbing over the fence somewhere else. I think I climbed a fence a grand total of once in my boyhood, and there was a good reason for that. My mother had just bought me a really good pair of pants to wear for some special occasion. I put them on, but then decided to go out to play. It was then, of course, that I developed the inspiration to climb a wire fence in our backyard.

You can probably guess - the end of the story was the end of the pants, and the end of my career as a fence climber. Talk about making ends meet.

Of course, I wasn't supposed to be climbing the fence in the first place - even if I had been appropriately dressed for the activity, it would still have been off limits. I had absolutely no business being in the neighbors' yard and had no real reason to go there. I was simply being mischievous, and I pretty much knew what I was doing. I decided it would be fun to get into mischief, and even better if I didn't get caught doing it. Of course, I reckoned, I could always say, truthfully, that I didn't intend to ruin my new trousers. Somehow, the way everything played out, my claiming to have had the purest of intentions didn't help. It was a tough sell, and the customer, my mother, wasn't buying.

My mother, although she was the "Cranky Shepherd" in this scenario, was really the Good Shepherd. If I had fallen from the fence and cut or hurt myself badly (come to think of it, I should have arranged a scrape or two), she would have been the first to say, "Forget about the pants, let's take care of you," and made sure I was washed and dried and bandaged and comforted.

That's what the Good Shepherd, Jesus, does. We human beings can get into the craziest messes, sometimes just for the "fun" of it. Usually, those adventures don't work out much better than my fence-climbing experience did. When that happens, Jesus is there, to console us and to help us. He cares about us. That was the point he wanted to make to his people.

One important footnote, though. I mentioned that my fence-climbing adventure was the last fence-climbing of my boyhood. When Jesus comes to us as the Good Shepherd, he expects us to return to our senses. He expects us to reform. He puts a lot of faith in us, even though we may not have given him good reason to do so. He just does. It is his hope that we will catch on to that faith, and that we will be more drawn to that than to the allure of misadventure.

He has a tough job, the Good Shepherd. Will we ever try to make it easier?

## Questions

**April 12, 2002**

### QUESTIONS

Father Paul Keenan  
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Lately, I've been noticing how many times in the Bible God asks questions. After the fall of Adam and Eve, God asks them, "Where are you?" After Job makes his lengthy complaint against him, God asks him a series of questions about nature and about the war against good and evil. Before the multiplication of the loaves and the fish, he asks, "Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?" And in the gospel story for the Third Sunday of Easter - the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus - Jesus asks, "What are you discussing as you walk along?"

The number of divine questions may be surprising to us, because we normally think of God as giving answers, not asking questions. But when we stop to think about it, questions are precisely what we have when a moment of crisis touches our lives. What happened? What can we do? Why did it happen? What can prevent it from happening again? Has the event changed our beliefs? These questions can be troubling and disturbing. But when we realize that in the Bible, God often asks questions before giving answers, we may come to realize that our very questions may be a sign that God is near. That's interesting, because when we're questioning, we may be led to believe that God is far away from us. But no - the questions may be a sign that God is near and that answers are on the way.

That's what happened with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus questioned them twice, then showed them the true meaning of the scriptures about him. Then he went home with them, broke bread, and showed himself to them in the breaking of the bread. That event changed their lives. And it all began with a question.

So the next time you have questions, remember - those questions may not be a sign of being far away from God. Look more closely - God may be nearer than you thought.

## Awe

**April 5, 2002**

### **Awe**

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"Awe came upon everyone." What an interesting expression. We find it in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2 - the first reading for the Second Sunday of Easter this year. The word "awe" in this context speaks volumes. "Awe," of course, means "reverence" and "wonder" and "amazement" all in one. It denotes a condition of consciousness in which people are taken up out of their everyday awareness into sheer amazement at something higher and more wonderful.

That's an aspect of our spiritual life that we don't often think about. We think about praying for things. We think about being one with God. But we don't think about being raised up out of our usual level of consciousness.

And yet, we should. Developing our spiritual lives means coming into closer union with God. St. Paul speaks of "putting on the mind of Christ." Doing that should imply changing the way in which we ordinarily think. Ordinarily, we think of having to do everything for ourselves; of so often being overwhelmed by the challenges of life; of facing one problem after another with great limitations in our resources for dealing with things.

Being in "awe" means - seeing the wonder of things. Gerard Manley Hopkins, the priest-poet spoke of "the dearest freshness deep down things." Instead of seeing one problem after another, we sit in amazement at how the hand of God is with us, helping us to deal with things, restoring to us an energy and a joy in living that we had lost or forgotten. No longer are we left to rely upon ourselves - we realize that we are working and living in union with God. It is an entirely transformed way of thinking.

"Awe came upon everyone." Those few words say a great deal. By focusing upon them, we can watch them come true in our own lives as well. What an awesome experience life can be.

## **Easter Belief**

**April 2, 2002**

### **Easter Belief**

Father Paul Keenan  
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Happy Easter! As we read the Easter stories in the various gospels in our liturgical readings these days, one of the amazing things in them is the movement from disbelief to belief about the resurrection of Jesus. Many of us imagine that the disciples and friends of Jesus experienced a kind of instantaneous explosion of belief much like we have in

celebrating the Easter season. In fact, in most cases, it seems to have taken them a little time to adjust to the reality that Jesus had risen from the dead.

There are a couple of things for us to think about in that. One is to notice that the Lord is more than willing to reach out and help his followers to realize the fact of his resurrection. He calls them by name, he approaches them on the road and walks with them, he eats food in their presence so that they can see that he is not just a ghost, he even cooks them breakfast! His passion at this point in his life is clearly to announce to them the good news that he is no longer among the dead, but among the living. He is more than willing to reach out to them in their disbelief and help them believe.

Another thing for us to think about in these readings is the movement itself from unbelief to belief. Looking at world events today as well as happenings in their personal lives, many people wonder at the power of evil in our world. They wonder how this jibes with the resurrection and the power of the Risen Christ to overcome evil and death in the world. The struggle to believe in the power of the Resurrection to overcome doubt and to yield to faith is every bit as real today as it was two thousand years ago. It appears that we are not necessarily endowed with an "automatic" belief; rather, belief can be something of a struggle or a challenge, something we come to rather than just "happening."

Put those two thoughts together, and what results is an understanding of how God and we work together in belief. It seems that believing happens when both parties - God and human beings - reach out to each other. Jesus reaches out, and people open their minds and hearts to accepting the Resurrection as a reality and not merely a story. When belief happens, it is because of communication and union between God and us. Belief is not merely an event; it is a relationship between the divine and the human. The words of "doubting Thomas" - "My Lord and my God!" reflect the beauty and the immensity of that union.

Looking at our world in these post-Easter days can indeed be discouraging, unless we remember our call to extend ourselves beyond the limitations of our knowledge and to allow ourselves, not simply to accept the Resurrection as an anecdote or a "myth" (in the ordinary sense of that word), but rather as a call to relationship on a deeply personal basis with God. Once we make that transition, we find our sense of purpose and possibility renewed. We go forward to face our world, not with the discouragement of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, but with our hearts burning with in us, alive with faith, hope and love.

--Posted on April 1, 2002

## **Holy Week**

**March 22, 2002**

### **HOLY WEEK**

Father Paul Keenan  
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As we enter into Holy Week, it's good for us to review the meaning of these days that mean so much for our faith.

It all begins on Palm Sunday, when we recall the triumphal entry of Jesus Christ into

Jerusalem. People flock to their churches to receive blessed palms and to enter into a procession recalling Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the words, "Hosannah in the Highest," echoing in his ears.

During Holy Week - on Tuesday here in the Archdiocese of New York - Catholics gather at their cathedral church for the Chrism Mass. At this Mass, the bishop blesses the oils used throughout the diocese during the year. They are the oil of Chrism the oil of the sick and the oil of catechumens. These blessed oils represent a special sealing, a special outward witness of God's loving kindness toward us. The oils blessed at the cathedral are carried to each parish church in the diocese to be used at services throughout the year. Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday are known as the Sacred Triduum, the three days dedicated particularly to commemorating the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.

Holy Thursday recalls the Last Supper, in the course of which Jesus instituted the Eucharist, the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. During the service, the leader of worship washes the feet of various members of the congregation. This is reminiscent of Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. It reminds us of our call to service - in Jesus' words, "Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must serve the rest." Each Christian follows Jesus' call to service and rededicates himself or herself to the service of others.

At the end of the Holy Thursday service, the Eucharist is carried in solemn procession, and is reposed in a special area for devotion. At the end of the evening, the church is stripped of all decoration and ornamentation, the altar is made bare and the church is placed in darkness. This is in preparation for Good Friday and the remembrance of the death of Jesus.

Good Friday is the most solemn and somber day of the year, the day on which Jesus was crucified. Many churches hold a three hours' service of prayers and readings at noon, commemorating the three hours' agony of Christ on the Cross. The traditional Good Friday service includes prayers for all of humankind as well as the reading of the Passion of Christ and the veneration of the cross by the faithful. In the Catholic Church, there is no Mass on Good Friday (but rather what traditionally was known as the Mass of the Presanctified), and Communion received this day has been consecrated on Holy Thursday and reserved for reception on Good Friday. It is also traditional to pray the Stations of the Cross, marking the procession of Christ from his condemnation to his burial. Again, the church is darkened and made bare in recognition of the death of Christ.

After sunset on Holy Saturday, Catholics and some other Christian churches celebrate the Easter Vigil. This colorful ceremony is marked by the lighting of the new fire and the paschal candle, and the blessing of the baptismal font and Easter water. In many churches, people are received into the Church through the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. This beautiful, upbeat ceremony marks our renewal through the resurrection of Christ.

Holy Week is a beautiful time for us to ponder deeply the mysteries of life and to reflect upon the power of Christ's passion, death and resurrection to touch our lives and make us new.

## **True Feelings**

**March 14, 2002**

### **TRUE FEELINGS**

Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

One of the wonderful things about Jesus as we find him in the gospels is his way of accepting people as they are. That doesn't mean he doesn't transform them, but it means that he is able to understand their thoughts and reactions in a kind and caring way.

In the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Lent -- the story of the raising of Lazarus -- we see how kind and understanding Jesus is to his sisters, Martha and Mary. When they react angrily at the fact that he did not come immediately when he heard that Lazarus was ill, the sisters greet him with, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died."

Most of us, I suspect, would bristle at such a greeting, but Jesus accepts it for what it is -- an expression of people who are grieving over the loss of a loved one. His response is to share with them his own grieving -- "Jesus wept," John tells us.

Sometimes, in our anger and sorrow over the events of life, we are afraid to bring our true feelings to God. We're afraid that if we do, he will condemn us -- we're afraid that somehow we "shouldn't" talk that way to God.

The Lazarus story tells us differently. God wants to hear our true feelings. He wants us to speak candidly and frankly to him, so that he can listen and give us the guidance and grace we need.

## Hear and Observe

March 7, 2002

### HEAR AND OBSERVE

Father Paul Keenan  
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During the season of Lent, we have the opportunity to hear Scripture readings pertaining to the development of the Law of God and the history of the people's response and lack of response to it. The readings give a message that is consistent with one that has been given all through Lent in various ways. That message is that God wants us to live in depth, rather than superficially.

It is interesting that when Moses gives the Law to the people, he uses two words that ordinarily have very definite "sensory" meanings. One word is "hear" -- the people are to hear the Word of God. The other is "observe" -- they are to observe it.

On one level, the words "hear" and "observe" are words that pertain to the senses. The idea at this level is that the Law of God is to be proclaimed and experienced. People are to know what the law says. St. Paul says something similar in his letters: "How are they to know unless they have heard?" By the same token, the people are to "observe" the law. "Observe" means "to see." At this level, the people are to be cognizant of what the law says.

However, each of these words has another meaning. To "hear" and to "observe" also mean "to take to heart" and "to put into practice." It is not enough that we should hear God's word (or see it); we must willingly do it, put it into practice and make it our own way of life.

Both of these elements are necessary, and are God's desire.

As we proceed through Lent, hopefully we are becoming more familiar with God and his ways. Hopefully, too, we are fulfilling the second part of the challenge, which is to take God's ways to heart, to take God into our hearts, and to make his ways our own.

## **The Power of Kindness**

**March 1, 2002**

### **THE POWER OF KINDNESS**

Father Paul Keenan  
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"The whole world is against me." At one time or other, I suppose, everyone has felt this way. Most of the time it's not really as bad as it seems, but there are situations in which people have reason to feel that everyone is down on them. Sometimes it's their fault; sometimes it's not. Regardless, it's a pretty miserable feeling.

Reading the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in St. John's gospel (John 4: 5-42 - the gospel for the Third Sunday of Lent this year), I am so struck by the fact that at the beginning of the story and at the end, people were not very nice to her. Now, apparently she bore some responsibility for the way others thought of her. Nonetheless, it seems they were pretty unkind to her. There she was, all alone, drawing water in the heat of the day, long after others had gone to the well. It appears she was an outcast. At the end of the story, people still weren't very nice to her. They told her, "We believe for ourselves now, and not because of you." It's just not a very nice thing to say.

In between, someone was kind to her - very kind - and that was Jesus. She was surprised, of course, that this Jewish man would speak to her, "a Samaritan and a woman."

Technically, he wasn't supposed to do that. Not only did he address her, he even asked her to give him some water! I have the feeling that her surprise stemmed not so much from his breach of etiquette as from the fact that he spoke kindly to her. In her experience, people didn't do that very often at all.

She was cagey with this man. She had learned to be like that with people. "I have no husband," she tried to tell him when he asked her to bring her spouse to the well. And her astonishment knew no bounds when he told her that indeed she did not have a husband, but rather five, and that the man she was with currently was not her husband. Notice - she certainly did - that Jesus did not say these things with any unkindness, just factually. Had he been unkind or taken an accusatory tone, she might well have run away. Instead, she ran away only to go back to her village and tell other people that she had seen the Messiah. "He told me everything I've ever done," she proclaimed.

The kindness of Jesus turned this woman's life around. Given the fact that her fellow townspeople were still unkind to her at the end of the story, I wonder what became of her. Did she go back to being aloof and alone? I doubt it. How could she have forgotten that the Messiah, who could have been just like all the others, instead treated her kindly? Not just anybody, mind you, but the Messiah!

I am sure she felt very special, indeed.

## **Journey and Vision**

**February 22, 2002**

### **JOURNEY AND VISION**

Father Paul Keenan  
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In recent years, we have come to speak of Lent as a journey, a pilgrimage. Indeed, we are trying to go from one place to another. Our forty days are a journey from where we were, personally, a week or so ago to a goal or a destination we hope to achieve by Easter.

This is true no matter whether our goal is to be more abstemious or to watch our language or to pray more or to learn more about our faith or to spend volunteer time helping people in need. We're hoping that by the end we will be better people, more at peace and closer to God. We're going from Point A to Point B.

By this point in Lent, though, the journey may begin to appear a little rocky. Old habits die hard, of course; and some of the familiar patterns we were hoping to get rid of may be finding their way back into our lives once again. Resisting them is hard, and it's all too easy for us to become discouraged and to lose sight of Point B.

The first reading for the Second Sunday of Lent this year can be very consoling for us. God tells Abram to leave his kinsfolk and his familiar surroundings and go on a journey. Abram is well along in years when he receives this summons. If he was anything like most of us, he probably wished that God would just leave him alone, thanks so much. How many of us said the words, "Oh boy! It's Ash Wednesday. How wonderful"? Fess up - you're among friends.

For that reason, God continues his discourse, promising Abram that good things are ahead. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you," he tells him. "I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (Genesis 12). Even though starting a journey is hard, we are being invited to abundant blessings.

As we move forward on our Lenten journey, we can focus on the blessings. We can keep in touch with why we're doing what we're doing, and be grateful for the vision of the blessings that lie ahead.

## **What's the Matter with Matter?**

**February 15, 2002**

### **WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH MATTER?**

Father Paul Keenan  
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We begin the First Sunday of Lent this year with two stories of temptation: the story of the fall of Adam and Eve and the story of the temptations which Jesus successfully resisted in the desert. In between is the passage from Romans 5, which shows us how the two temptations form a diptych of death and life, judgment and acquittal, sin and grace.

The first account of creation (Genesis 1) says nothing about sin. It shows God creating the universe over seven days, and at each stage declaring that his creation is "good." This second account (Sunday's first reading) begins with God forming the first man from matter, and then creating a garden for the man, then creating trees from the matter and woman from the rib of the man. In this second account, in distinction from the first, there is a focus on the "matter" aspect of creation and therefore of being. Interestingly enough, it is in the second account of creation, and not the first, that the story of sin and the fall of man appears. This parallels exactly the temptation story about Jesus, whom the devil tempts by drawing him to material wants - food, safety and protection and power.

What is the lesson here? Is it that matter is somehow bad or evil? That's not the conclusion that follows from the stories. What follows from the stories is the conclusion that matter in and of itself is not bad, but incomplete. To be complete, matter must be ordered to spirit, to God. When we treat matter as an end unto itself, we disorder the universe. When we order matter to spirit, to God, we order the universe as it was meant to be ordered, indeed, as it was ordered by God.

It comes back to a question Jesus asked at one point in his ministry: "What good does it do for someone to gain the whole world and to suffer the loss of his soul?" It is when we allow matter to dominate us that we sin. And we sin, because (to paraphrase another saying of Jesus) we render to matter things which do not belong to matter and do not render to God things which actually do belong to God. We give to matter a power, an allure, that God never gave it. It's on a par with idolatry - making matter a god instead of ordering it to the one true God.

It comes down to a question of knowledge, really - whether we train our minds on truth or whether we train them on illusion, succumbing to the belief that matter has a power over us that exceeds or overcomes the power of God. The line from Genesis 2 is telling: "Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals." The word "cunning" comes from Old and Middle English roots meaning "to know." Temptation means tricking us into believing something when we really know better - getting us to know something when we really know something else. Temptation means getting us to believe in an illusion rather than in what is real. It means making illusion seem real to us.

As we look to determine what we ought to be doing during this time of Lent, we can ask ourselves, "Are we giving more power to matter than it deserves to have over us?" Such a reflection might lead us to be more prudent in our use of food, drink and entertainment. Another question might be, "Are we taking unnecessary risks with our health and well-being?" Are we so intent on being "cool," "with it" or even "successful" that we sacrifice our health and well-being, and that of others, to that cause? Still another question: "Do I so much want prestige and honor that I will worship anyone or anything

in order to get it?"

If this line of reflection seems too self-centered, try this other one instead: where do I see people being oppressed by those who honor matter over spirit? The God of the Old Testament pointed out to his people that he far preferred that they ask that question rather than engage in practices of fasting. It might be a refreshing thing for us to think about during Lent.

What's "wrong" with matter is not matter itself but the power we allow it to have over us. We can enjoy matter and use it well when we realize that it is spirit that truly empowers us - that our true power comes from God. When we know who we are as people made in God's image and likeness and govern ourselves accordingly, how much more deeply enjoyable our own lives will be, and how much more we can contribute to the inner freedom of others.

## **Letting Your Light Shine**

**February 8, 2002**

### **LETTING YOUR LIGHT SHINE**

Father Paul Keenan

Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

There's a wonderful juxtaposition between the readings of the Fifth Sunday of the Year and Ash Wednesday, which occurs this year on February 13. In the readings, we are told to let our light shine before all, and not to hide our light under a bushel basket. We are reminded that we are salt for the earth, and by using our gifts for the good of others, we keep our salt fresh. The first reading, from Isaiah 58, tells us of the importance of doing good for others, being honest and not turning our back upon our own. The gist of both readings is twofold: (1) removing any blocks to letting our inner light shine forth, and (2) engaging in activities that naturally tend to let the light flow out from us.

How appropriate those readings are for the beginning of Lent. During this penitential season, the same two directions are emphasized: (1) removing any attitude of mind or heart that keeps us from letting Christ shine forth from us, and (2) actually developing attitudes and patterns of action that enable us to put on the mind and heart of Christ and thus make his presence felt by all who meet us.

Anyone who is looking for positive suggestions as to how to do this would do well to look at the web site of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org). On that site are listed suggestions for prayer, readings from the liturgy, readings from Church documents - all of which could truly make this Lent a profoundly spiritual experience. In addition there is a wonderful essay on the various kinds of fasting we could engage in during Lent - not just fasting from food, but fasting from violence, ignorance and other forms of evil. Lent is a wonderful time to get in touch with your inner light, and to let it shine forth more and more among all.

The Isaiah reading mentions a couple of benefits from letting our light shine forth. The first is that we will be healed. Often, during Lent, people are looking for healing of some sort, physical or internal. We tend to think that after we are healed we will be able to let our light shine. Isaiah tells the story differently. He says that our healing comes WHEN we let the light shine forth.

The other benefit mentioned by Isaiah is in our relationship with God. Again, we often think that once our relationship with God improves, we will have the time or the wherewithal to be more effective with others. Isaiah says the opposite. He tells the people that when they let their light shine forth, then their relationship with God will improve. Isn't it interesting how different this approach is from what we ordinarily imagine?

So there, in a nutshell, is the program for Lent. Let your light shine...and watch the improvements happen.

May this be the beginning of a blessed Lenten season for us all.

**Humble**

**February 1, 2002**

**HUMBLE**

Father Paul Keenan

Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

The readings for the Fourth Sunday of the Year emphasize the words "humble," "meek," and "lowly" to describe a people who are favored by the Lord. The readings also used terms like "bowed down" and "lowly." The second reading, from St. Paul to the Corinthians (I Cor 1: 26-31) speaks of God choosing the weak things of the world to confound the strong. The gospel, St. Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

"Humility" to us often has a negative or pejorative meaning. We know it's a virtue, but we often speak of it as though it were a liability. We make heroes out of people who are forthcoming, bold of manner and speech - "go-getters." The humble we think of as being reserved, shy, or self-deprecating. Yet when we stop to think about it, the key people of the Old Testament --people like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ruth, and the Maccabees, were anything but reserved or self-deprecating. The same is true of New Testament people, like Jesus himself, Mary, his mother, and St. Paul. Perhaps there is more to humility than we normally realize.

Let's look at the beatitudes - "the meek shall inherit the earth." Zephaniah in the first reading says, "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth." What's it all about? Did you know that the word "humble" comes from roots that mean "of the earth"? So something about being humble, means being "of the earth." We use a similar expression when we speak of someone being "down to earth" instead of being "uppity." Down to earth people are very comfortable being where they are, who they are. They know themselves and have no need or desire to be someone they're not. They are approachable and open. Another way of saying it is that they are "grounded."

Fine, but where does inheriting the earth come in? It connects directly to something Jesus once said, "To those who have, more will be given." People who are not ashamed of being of the earth, and who are comfortable being who they are, will be given more and more territory, more and more scope for influence. It makes sense; why would God give more to someone who is uncomfortable with less? How could such a person ever manage more?

The "humble of the earth" are those who will inherit the earth; they are the ones who "seek the Lord." In their earthly dealings, they are not seeking to make themselves the center of attention. Rather, they seek to find true and lasting peace in the Lord as they walk confidently on the earth.

Looked at in this way, humility seems pretty good, after all.

# Capernaum

**January 25, 2002**  
**Capernaum**

Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

Isn't it amazing how one apparently simple Bible verse can speak volumes? Take a look at Chapter 4, verse 13 of St. Matthew's Gospel, as it appears in the text for the Third Sunday of the Year. "He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea." Pretty ordinary fare: not the sort of bible passage that homilies and treatises of commentary are made of.

Yet think about it for a moment. What a momentous event it was when Jesus left his village of Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum. It was a big, bold step in his public life and in his ministry. Entering Capernaum and making it his home, Jesus entered upon a busy fishing village which was along the Via Maris trade route. Capernaum was the major fishing village of Galilee. In addition, there was a customs post, and Roman military personnel were housed there. Any of us who have grown up in small communities and have moved to larger, more bustling ones, can have a sense of how different living in Capernaum must have been for Jesus. Leaving Nazareth and taking up residence there was no small step.

Yet the move to Capernaum was not just physically more expansive; it was spiritually expansive as well. For it was here in Capernaum that Jesus was to perform so many of his miracles: healing the centurion's servant, healing Peter's mother-in-law, healing the man whose friends brought him in through the roof, raising the daughter of Jairus from the dead, curing the woman with the issue of blood, healing the man with the withered hand. He revealed himself there as the "bread of life" and preached in the town's synagogue. Capernaum was a spiritually abundant and expansive place for Jesus, throughout the course of his ministry.

Yet sadly, Jesus was to condemn this town. "If the miracles worked in you had taken place in Sodom, it would be standing today," he declared (Matthew 11:23). Despite the success of Capernaum's fishing industry, of its merchant trade, and of its artisans, the imagination of the townspeople did not stretch to embrace the message of Jesus. And it all began with one simple sentence. "He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea." It seems so insignificant a sentence to us today. Yet what a volume is written there!

--posted January 25, 2002

## **God's Promotion**

**January 18, 2002**

### **God's Promotion**

Father Paul Keenan

Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

Everybody likes to get a promotion. After a lengthy period of hard work, it's nice to be rewarded with new and larger responsibilities. It's scary, as is any change, really. But the exhilaration of taking on new responsibilities and of expanding one's horizons in a new capacity is thrilling.

The first reading for the Second Sunday of the Year (from Isaiah 49) speaks of the Lord giving his people a promotion. "It is not enough for you to be my servant," he tells his people. "I will give you as a light to all the nations."

That is an awesome promise, the promise that you will be a light to all the nations. It's a reminder for us that God always operates a level above us who work day in and day out on the human level. We may feel that we are mere servants as we go about our day to day business, doing the best we can, or even struggling along. But God sees us differently: he sees our daily work, our day to day effort, as an example, a light, for others.

I think of the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Removed from his family and his people through the treachery of his brothers, Joseph spent his life sagely working as a servant/administrator in Egypt. Yet God's plan for him was, indeed, to be a light to his own people -- a plan that was worked out very much behind the scenes and hidden for a very long time. The tradition about the other Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, is that he was a just man, working day by day as a carpenter in a small village and in doing so, helping the Son of God to mature in his life as a human being. Again, a very hidden agenda, lurking yet very much alive, under the guise of a simple workaday life.

Often we may feel that we, our life and our work are very ordinary. That can discourage us. But wait -- perhaps a promotion is in store for you. Through that very ordinariness, you may be shining the light of God.

--Posted January 18, 2002

## God Receiving?

January 10, 2002

**God Receiving?**

Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

The Gospel for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord shows John the Baptist making a most interesting observation. Jesus has just approached John, asking to be baptized. John is quite taken aback at Jesus' request, and says to him, "It is I who should be baptized by you, and here you come asking me for baptism."

John's statement puts us in mind of the many times in the gospels that Jesus asks something of someone. It's always astonishing to the person, because by rights it seems that, indeed, it should be the other way around. To name some of them - Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a drink; he asks that the five loaves and two fish be brought to him; he asks the rich young man to give up his possessions; numerous times he asks people to leave everything and follow him; certain miracle stories include Jesus' request that the person come apart to be with him; he asks Zacchaeus to let him stay at the tax collector's house; on the cross he asks for something to quench his thirst; and, yes, here he is asking John the Baptist for baptism.

It seems strange that Jesus would want something of us. We think of him not as a receiver, but as a giver. Perhaps there are a couple of reasons. When we give something, we create a void. Doing that provides a space for receiving. It reminds us that we are not self-sufficient, and gives us a little vulnerability that, in turn, puts us in a position to be receivers.

For another thing, receiving establishes a partnership. If someone is giving to us, that is a kind of relationship, but it is certainly not a partnership. If someone both gives to us and receives from us, we're partners in giving and receiving. That's a very special bond to establish. It seems that Jesus is asking us to be partners with him in sharing the abundance the Heavenly Father has put into the universe. That's a very special aspect of the covenant relationship between God and us.

The Baptist is genuinely surprised that Jesus would want something of him. Often, so are we. It's a very special kind of love that honors people enough to ask them for assistance. When the one who is asking is the Son of God, we can feel very complimented, indeed.

## What's In A Name?

January 4, 2002

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

On the first Sunday of this New Year, we celebrate the Three Kings -- a feast otherwise known as Epiphany and even Little Christmas.

Many cultures observe the coming of the Magi -- the Three Kings -- with greater fervor and gusto than just about any other day of the year. Perhaps it is because the Wise Men brought gifts. Perhaps it is because they followed a star in the heavens and modeled for us the call to discern and follow God's guidance. Or perhaps it is because, by listening to that guidance, they saved the Christ Child's life.

The feast is called Epiphany, a word which in our culture has come to mean "self-discovery," but which actually means "shining forth." The epiphany in question is really a theophany, a shining forth of God. Mysteriously, but very really, his divinity as Son of God shone forth in the humanity of the infant Jesus. The feast of the Epiphany reminds us, by extension, to let our light as sons and daughters of God shine forth in our earthly lives each day.

But why Little Christmas? Perhaps it goes back to the old saw about the tree that falls in the forest needing someone to hear it fall. Truly, Christ was born on Christmas Day -- Big Christmas. But with the coming of the Magi, he is born in a special way in the conscious awareness of human beings. At Christmas, we celebrated his birth. At Little Christmas, we celebrate the fact that we recognize it. Cognitively, this feast completes -- fulfills -- the meaning of Christmas.

What's in a name? Three Kings, Epiphany, Little Christmas -- this thrice-named feast is rich not only in nomenclature, but also in essence. By pondering the names of this feast, we come to know, in diverse and ever-deeper ways, the true meaning of Christmas.

-- Posted January 4, 2002

## **Holy Family**

**December 28, 2001**

**Holy Family**

Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

How fitting it is that as we end the calendar year, continue our celebration of Christmas and prepare to begin a new year, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. More than anyone besides his Heavenly Father, Mary and Joseph were influential in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. They were the first teachers of his religious and spiritual life, as well as the first teachers of his life in his society and culture. We don't, of course, have day to day accounts of what went on in their life; but the accounts we do have tell us that Mary and Joseph were extremely conscientious about their responsibilities as parents. They were even willing to take a long journey to Egypt when the safety of their son was at stake. The Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to the family as "The Domestic Church," the Church at home. Like Mary and Joseph, parents are the first and primary teachers of faith and of culture. Studies show that where parents reinforce at home the work of the school, the results are significantly better. When parents reinforce religious instruction, pray with their children and observe the customs and teachings of the Church in the home, the children learn their true importance.

Parents need our prayers and support. Family life is not simple -- living is not simple these days. But the same principles that guided Mary and Joseph in their bringing up of Jesus can guide parents today. Prayer, instruction and moral and religious guidance in the home are essential. The scriptures tell us that Mary and Joseph had their moments of sorrow as parents, and yet they continued to do their best with the help of God.

The Church turns to them, both as models and for their intercessory help. We pray today for parents, asking God to give their noble and challenging work his every grace and blessing.

## **Reading the Christmas Story**

**December 20, 2001**

## **Reading the Christmas Story**

Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

When I was in high school, part of our English training was in learning how to read more effectively. We were taught a method called SQ3R -- Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review. First, we would skim the material to get a rough idea of it. Second, we would ask ourselves what questions we had after skimming -- what would the material mean to us? Thirdly, we would read it carefully. Then we would go back to our questions and answer them. Finally, we would review the whole chapter or book.

This is a good method for celebrating these days before and during Christmas. In its selection of readings for the week before Christmas, the Church invites us to preview the Christmas story, and then to ask ourselves what we think that story means for us this year. Then we hear the story proclaimed on Christmas and we allow ourselves to look for the meaning the story brings to us this year especially. Finally, we can review the whole story each week, as we celebrate the Sundays and Holy Days of the Christmas Season.

Reflecting in this way enables us to deepen our appreciation of Christmas, so that it does not become merely a surface event, but one that we enter into with all our hearts.

Enjoy the Christmas story this year. Merry and Blessed Christmas!

Posted 12/20/2001 11:40:26 AM

**[A Different Answer](#)**

**December 17, 2001**

## **A DIFFERENT ANSWER**

Father Paul Keenan  
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Do you ever get frustrated because you think your prayers are not being answered, or at least not as quickly or in quite the same way as you had hoped? If so, the Gospel story for the Third Sunday of Advent this year (Matthew 11: 2-11) will be of interest to you. John the Baptist is in prison for proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus and for urging people to repent. It is obvious that his prison time is giving him time to reflect on his life and his mission, for he sends his disciples to ask Jesus a pointed question: "Are you the one who is to come?" that is, the Messiah. He desperately needs to know, and he wants to hear it directly from Jesus, yes or no. Instead of answering him directly, however, Jesus points out that the blind are being made to see, the deaf are being made to hear, lepers are being cleansed, and so on. I wonder if John was satisfied with that answer. He certainly did not get the direct affirmation or denial that he was looking for. Instead, he received what appeared to be a status report on Jesus' activities! He asked question, it seemed, and received an answer to another.

Yet, in fact, Jesus' answer to John is actually better than the affirmation or denial that John asked for. A simple yes or no would not have had the richness of tone and color that Jesus' description of the results of his ministry conveyed. Moreover, the answer of Jesus truly enables John to make up his mind for himself -- it conveys the message, "See for yourself whether I am the Messiah." That's really what's important, anyway -- not that Jesus tell John that he is the Messiah, but that John be convinced of it for himself. It's reminiscent of the time Jesus asked the disciples who people were saying he was, and then asked them who they themselves said that he was. He wanted them to believe for themselves, and therefore to be committed to their answer. His answer to John enables the Baptizer to come to his own conviction about the identity of Jesus, much more powerfully than the simple yes or no he asked for.

Similarly, when you and I feel that we are not receiving the answer to prayer that we asked for, we might look and see whether other things that are happening in our life might be giving us a better answer, even preparing us to receive what we asked for. People, for example, will ask God for help with a financial problem, only to find that more and more people are spontaneously expressing appreciation for them. That's nice, but it doesn't pay the bills; and these people sometimes become very angry and disillusioned with God. Yet God is trying to prepare them for financial abundance by making them see the largesse of his abundance overall, and his willingness to share it with them. Once they see this, any financial manifestation they receive will be more likely to last rather than simply to come and go, for they will be convinced personally of

God's willingness to help and to share. God's way of answering, though not what we expected, is actually a better answer overall.

**Welcome**

**December 7, 2001**

## **WELCOME**

Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

As we enter the second week of Advent, one of the words that strikes home from the Sunday readings is "Welcome." What a beautiful word that is. How good we feel when, as strangers, we come to someone's town or house and we are welcomed as though we were a member of the family. How good it feels for us to welcome a stranger, or even a friend, into our own home.

"Welcome" is a word that puts everyone at ease. It breaks down all barriers, heals all apprehensions. It sets in place the expectation of a wonderful and happy visit. It is a word that unlocks the door to all sorts of wonderful things.

During this time of year, we prepare to welcome the Christ Child, the Messiah. As we say, "Come, Lord Jesus," we open up our hearts so as to be able to receive all of the wonderful graces the Lord wants to give us. Our first reading from Isaiah names some of them, ones we know as the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom and understanding, counsel and fortitude, knowledge and piety and fear of (reverence for) the Lord. Saying "welcome" to the Lord, we prepare our hearts to receive these gifts which can help us so much in our everyday lives.

"Welcome." It is a joyous word that can lift our spirits, open our hearts and enlighten our minds. As we welcome Jesus Christ into our lives, we find ourselves ready, willing and able to recognize his presence when he comes in various ways every day.

**Observing the New**

**November 30, 2001**

## **OBSERVING THE NEW**

Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

As we enter into this holy time of Advent, we notice a marked difference between our focus of last week and that of this week. Last week, in celebrating the Solemnity of Christ the King, the Church drew our attention to things that have to do with last moments: appreciation, examination, regret, summarization, even bittersweet sentimentality. Our "last moments": - the night before a child's first day of school, the day before a daughter's wedding, last moments of a loved one's life - are just those poignant kinds of moments. On the last Sunday of the Church's year, our attention was drawn to those moments of closure and anticipated change.

Now it is different. The opening of the new Church year on the First Sunday of Advent brings us, not to endings, but to beginnings. Instead of calling upon Christ as the Omega in whom all things are fulfilled, we herald him as the Alpha, in whom all things are begun and from whom all things spring. We speak now of one who is to come, and we look forward to the coming of the savior. The tone is one of anticipation, of newness, of expectancy.

That is one of the gifts the Church gives us during this time - the gifts of newness. This year especially, we know what it is to end, to complete, to experience "last days." What we need now is to honor the new, to look at the world with new vision and with hopeful eyes. For those who find that a difficult thing to do this year, it so happens that one of the advantages of community is that sometimes the community, while allowing us to be ourselves, helps us to do what we cannot do in and of ourselves.

Advent helps us to look anew at our world and at our place in it. What we see may indeed surprise and inspire us.

**Thankfulness**

**November 21, 2001**

## **THANKFULNESS**

Father Paul Keenan  
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Within the space of a few days, we will mark the celebrations both of Thanksgiving and of the Solemnity of Christ the King. There is a common theme to both of these celebrations, for both of them are rooted in gratefulness. With Thanksgiving Day, this is fairly obvious, but perhaps not so with the Solemnity of Christ the King.

Yet there it is, in the second reading for the day, from the letter of St. Paul to the Colossians: "Brothers and sisters: Let us give thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light. He delivered us from the power of darkness."

This means we end the Church year on a note of thankfulness. In a year that has been fraught with tragedy, this is quite remarkable. Yet how appropriate it is to give thanks to God, for even in this time of great darkness there have been many blessings.

And so, let us then give thanks to God, even as we pray for courage and strength. It is a wonderful way to end our Church year, and even moreso a powerful way to begin the new one.

**Perseverance**

**November 16, 2001**

## **PERSEVERANCE**

Father Paul Keenan  
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Recently, a friend, a person of considerable spiritual depth, suggested to me that recent events, such as the World Trade Center tragedy, the crash of American Airlines Flight 587 and other difficult events of recent weeks, could indicate that the world was coming to an end. To be honest, I haven't heard much of that, but I am quite sure that people of less perspicacity than my friend are saying similar things. Even apart from that, there are certainly enough scary things in the news to keep us on edge for quite some time. In the past several weeks, I've had the opportunity to talk to people all over the country about the things that have been going on, and I must say there are a good number of fearful people around.

The words of the Gospel for the Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, from the twenty-first chapter of St. Luke's gospel, are perfect for addressing all of these fears. Jesus tells us that, indeed, there will be times of upheaval, and that there will always be people who predict that these signal the end of the world. Jesus says flatly not to believe them and not to allow ourselves to be driven to any such fears. He does, however, say that there will be times of turmoil, and he urges us to be vigilant and persevering. "By your perseverance," he says, "you will save your lives."

In other words, this is not a time to be afraid; rather, it's a time to be vigilant, a time to persist in our belief in God and in the ability of good to triumph over evil and all obstacles. Instead of giving way to fear, it's time to turn our fears into courage and to bring the full weight of our convictions to the fore

**The Difference**

**November 9, 2001**

## **THE DIFFERENCE**

Father Paul Keenan  
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In the Gospel for the Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, a group of Sadducees asks Jesus a question that is really a puzzle. What if a woman, in succession, married each of seven brothers after each previous husband/brother died? Whose wife would she be in the afterlife?

Instead of just answering the question, Jesus goes straight for an assumption that the riddlers have set into their puzzle. They assume that things in the next life will be the same as they were in this life.

Jesus tells them that it's an incorrect assumption. He tells them that in the next life, there will be no need for the woman, the brothers or anyone else to be married at all. In the next life, he says, they'll be more like angels. In the next life, he tells them, we will relate to each other differently from the way we relate now. Marriage is wonderful for now, but in the next life, things will be different because we will be different.

That gives us something to think about. When we're talking about life and death, Jesus says, don't assume that the next life will be just the same as this one. We'll be different, relate in a different way, and have different priorities from what we have here on earth. Things that are important now may not have the same importance then.

As good citizens of this world, on our journey to the fullness of everlasting life, we need to be attentive to our responsibilities here on earth. But at the same time, we must remember that we are preparing for transformation. There is more to life than what we see now. Like that group of Sadducees, we can become so wrapped up in problems and in various forms of idle speculation that we can forget that we are on our way to something infinitely more important. Think, for example, how quickly most of our priorities shifted after the tragedy of September 11. Things that seemed to be of utmost importance suddenly paled in comparison with issues such as love, safety, and service.

That group of Sadducees filled their heads with puzzles when they might have been better off thinking about their life purpose and their ultimate identity as children of the God of the living. We, too, can spend our time worrying about things that are of lesser importance than the eternal values (such as love, safety and service, as it so happens) that we were made for.

When we do, however, look to those lasting values, we often find that our work on earth takes on heightened significance. We have a better handle on what we are doing and why we are doing it. We have a refined sense of purpose, and we tend to work in a more focused way toward fulfilling that purpose.

That's the message Jesus wants to get across to those Sadducees - and to us. Remember why we were made. Focus on it, and we can watch our lives here on earth brighten.

# Big or Small?

October 31, 2001

## BIG OR SMALL?

Father Paul Keenan  
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What is big and what is small? It's amazing to look down at the street from a huge skyscraper and see how small everyone and everything looks. When you go back down to street level, everything resumes its ordinary dimensions. We've all had a similar experience in the light of the World Trade Center tragedy. On September 10, certain things seemed so important which, one day later, were scarcely on our minds.

The Book of Wisdom, in the eleventh chapter, makes a remarkable statement about God's care for the universe. To us, the earth seems huge; it's where we live. To God, the author of Wisdom says, "the whole universe is as a grain from a balance or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth." Next to God, the universe looks pretty small and insignificant. However, the passage goes on to say that the universe is the object of his infinite love. He loves us so much, it says, that he even forgives our sins. Should we ever be tempted to take God's care and concern for us for granted, or to wonder about it, this passage can help us to put things into their proper perspective.

On the Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, the Church makes very concrete this lesson about God's love by telling us the story of Jesus' encounter with the tax collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1- 10). Zacchaeus was extremely small, so much so that he had to climb a sycamore tree in order to be able to see Jesus when Jesus arrived in town. It is likely that people made fun of Zacchaeus and dismissed him because of his short stature. Jesus did not. He called Zacchaeus to come out of the tree, stood him in front of him and changed the entire course of his life. Whereas everyone else considered Zacchaeus to be insignificant, Jesus did not. He took him seriously, as seriously as God, according to the Book of Wisdom, takes you and me and the rest of the universe.

The message, then, is that, no matter how insignificant we sometimes feel, and no matter how often we wonder whether God hears us, we are very beloved by God. The fact that he's "bigger than we are," so to speak, works to our advantage, not to our disadvantage. For God is infinitely on our side.

# It Is What You Know

October 26, 2001

## It Is What You Know

Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

We all know the saying, "It's not what you know, it's who you know." How many times have we wondered at the way certain people seems to have a knack for getting to the "right" places and being among the "right people." If we're feeling envious of them, thinking that we are just as qualified as they, we might find ourselves using that time-worn expression to justify their success and our feelings of inadequacy.

The Gospel for the Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time could easily put a stop to our using that so-called truism. The story is that of the Pharisee and the publican, from St. Luke's Gospel, chapter eighteen. It's a familiar tale - the Pharisee brags about how lucky he is not to be like other people. He manages to slip in several references to his good deeds in his prayer. The poor publican says simply, "Oh Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus says that the prayer of the publican is heard, while that of the Pharisee is not.

If it's true that it's not what you know but who you know, both of these gentlemen in Jesus' story knew God, and that, one would think, should have taken both of them pretty far. But Jesus says that it didn't. They both know God, but only the publican knows that he needs God's help. The Pharisee thinks he needs the help of no one. He thinks he has it made, based on his social status and his record of good deeds.

The publican, on the other hand, knows that he is a sinner and that he needs the forgiveness of God and the help of God. His knowing that is what draws God's attention.

The moral of the story is that true spiritual success in life is not about who we know. It's not about how impressive our credentials might be. It's about knowing enough to realize that we can't make it without God.

It all has to do with understanding our being, our essence. Our true identity is not based upon a list of celebrities we can muster. Nor is it based upon our resume. It is based upon the fact that we are created in God's image and likeness, and on our acknowledging that we can do nothing without him. The fact is, there's no "in crowd" or list of

achievements that can impress God. All that matters to him is that we acknowledge him and that we love him. Doing that opens the door for us to experience his love.

And that is what truly matters in life.

# Missionaries

October 19, 2001

## MISSIONARIES

Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

The month of October is moving along quickly, and October 21 is World Mission Sunday, which is the next to last Sunday of the month of October each year. In our churches, there is a collection which contributes to the support of the missions worldwide.

An equally important aspect of World Mission Sunday is the reminder as to how the missions affect the lives of all of us. Often, we speak of missionaries as people -- usually priests, brothers and sisters -- who travel to other lands to spread the message of Christ. Yet we are missionaries in our own right. Whatever we do at home, at work, or in our leisure activities to bring the word and the spirit of Christ to others - that is truly missionary work. Parents and teachers who teach children to pray and to know Jesus in their daily lives are missionaries. People who visit the lonely and the sick in prisons, nursing homes and at home - they are missionaries as well. The word "missionary" comes from the Latin and means "one who is sent." We are missionaries when we let people know how much God loves them.

An important aspect of our missionary work is our prayer. St. Therese of Lisieux, the patroness of the missions, never went to other lands as she had hoped to do: her health would not permit it. Yet she prayed constantly for missionaries and the missions. That shows us how important prayer is. We may think that there is little we can do for the missionaries who spread the name of Jesus, but there is. Time after time they tell us that, in their moments of discouragement, knowing that people around the world are praying for them helps them to persevere. No matter who we are or where we are, we can offer our prayers for those wonderful men and women, asking God to bless them and those they serve.

During this part of the Month of October, let's remember both to support the missions and to be missionaries in action and in prayer. It is a wonderful calling. And it is ours.

# Resistance

October 10, 2001

## RESISTANCE

Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

Have you ever wanted to make a change, yet found yourself somehow resisting it? The Scripture readings for the Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time show how God can work with our resistance to allow wonderful new life to happen.

The first reading, from 2 Kings, tells the story of Naaman, who was cured of leprosy by washing in the river. Now, before his healing, Naaman was very resistant to doing what he needed to do. He absolutely refused to go down and wash himself seven times in the river. He simply would not do it. He was embarrassed doing it, and could not bring himself to believe that it would work. It took the urging of his colleagues to get him to agree to do it.

The second reading, from 2 Timothy, picks up on that theme and reminds us that even if we lose faith, God never loses faith. It is the power of God's faith in us that keeps us moving and believing at times when we don't feel that we have very much faith at all.

The Gospel is St. Luke's story of the ten lepers healed by Jesus, only one of whom comes back to give thanks. Notice that none of the nine who did not give thanks lost his or her miracle and had their leprosy return. (Again, the theme that God is faithful even when we are not). Nonetheless, this one thankful person gave the miracle its perfect completion by expressing gratitude to the one who performed it.

What we have, then, is the anatomy of a miracle - its beginning, its middle and its end. Each reading expresses the fact that there might be resistance on our part at any of the three stages - resistance about doing what is needed, resistance along the way, and resistance in being grateful for what has happened. The moral is that despite our resistance, God continues to work with us and heal us and help us.

Resistance is a normal part of our lives. When we are urged to do something new, we often dig in our heels and try to convince ourselves that it's more comfortable to keep our old ways of thinking and doing. God works with us to break down our resistance and to help us to embrace the newness that we long for. It's a wonderful partnership between God and us. It's something to be thankful for.

# Self, Centered, or Self-Centered?

September 27, 2001

## SELF, CENTERED, OR SELF-CENTERED?

Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

Several friends of mine are avid proponents of what is called "centering prayer." At a particular time of day, they close the door and go off quietly to engage in a very powerful ritual of meditation, through which they center themselves in God. What is particularly interesting about this form of prayer is that, though its practitioners make a deliberate effort to separate themselves from the hustle and bustle of their everyday world, their centering prayer puts them in touch with the very heart of the universe. Far from locking them within themselves, this prayer frees them from their personal boundaries and allows them to expand their horizons to embrace the very heart of Being itself. Somehow, my friends believe, in finding the true center of themselves, they find the heart of God and of the universe as well.

How different this is from the prayer of the rich man in the story told by St. Luke (16:19-31, the Gospel for the Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time). The story tells us that during his lifetime on earth, the rich man in the story had no concern for anyone but himself. He was so self-absorbed that he totally failed to notice that there was a beggar at his gate, his body riddled with sores. Jesus says that in the afterlife the poor man was in the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man was in torment in the netherworld. What is so striking is that, from his place of torment, the rich man continued to be as self-absorbed as he was on earth, when he lived in complete comfort. He even begged Abraham to have the poor man come and give him water. Apparently, self-absorption ran in the family; for he asked Abraham to go and warn his brothers about what fate awaited them unless they changed.

Notice the difference between the poor man's prayer and the centering prayer of my friends. His prayer kept him utterly focused on himself, while theirs relinquishes the ego and thus allows their attention to embrace the heart of the entire world.

Which, do we think, is the better prayer? Which, do we think, is the better way to live?

# Caring for the World

September 21, 2001

## CARING FOR THE WORLD

Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

It's amazing to look at the readings for the twenty-fifth Sunday of the year and see how much they speak to our hearts during these difficult days.

The first reading, from the prophet Amos, speaks of the Lord's love for the poor and says that he will remember the offenses of those who have done evil to the poor and downtrodden. This passage is not about revenge. The focus here is on the Lord's deep care and concern for those who are in need, and on his dislike of anything that causes people to suffer. These are good words to think about especially when we face questions like the one posed to me by a young man, walking on the street after the World Trade Center tragedy. "What does God think about all this?" he asked. Amos gives us the answer.

The second reading, from Paul's first letter to Timothy, invites God's people to prayer and supplication. "It is my wish, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument." Paul's call to prayer is appropriate for us as well. We turn to God in our sadness over the tragic events of September 11, and we ask his guidance and help in the days ahead.

In a reading from the sixteenth chapter of St. Luke's gospel, Jesus raises an important issue: the issue of trustworthiness. If we stop to think about it, perhaps in a special, though profoundly tragic, way, we have been asked to remember that we are entrusted with the world -- its present and future. It has been heartening in the past two weeks to see how often people have been stepping up to the challenge - helping each other, mourning for those who died or are missing, helping those who are working at Ground Zero, providing assistance for relatives who looking for lost loved ones. Jesus' remarks about trustworthiness encourage us to continue to be responsible in our care for the world that has been entrusted to us. Life is precious; the world is precious. Our Lord reminds us that we determine the future of the world, a future Paul (in the second reading) describes as "{leading} a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity." That's a tall order when there is so much chaos and turmoil around us, but it's exactly what we need to be doing.

Our Scripture readings urge us to assume our care for the world justly, prayerfully and responsibly. They give us the direction we need to find our way through these difficult times.

# Hating?

September 6, 2001

## HATING?

Father Paul Keenan  
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A preacher, looking ahead to the readings for the Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time this year, might well respond with a sigh and a groan. The gospel reading is from Luke 14, and it's the part where Jesus says we must come to him "hating" our parents, spouse, children, siblings and even our own life, and that if we don't come that way, we can't be disciples. Preaching is kind of fun when we are on the "God is Love" passages, or are talking about miracles or the Good Shepherd. But when it comes to passages like this one, we kind of cringe and say to ourselves, "How on earth am I going to explain this?" After breaking my head on this passage for awhile (and for a few years, by the way), I wondered if I might not be making it harder than it truly is. After all, the gospels are supposed to be "good news." This year, it occurred to me that if I didn't complicate the passage so much, there actually may be a great deal of good news in it.

Instead of seeing this business about "hating" as some kind of bizarre command, what if we were to take it as Jesus' way of simply acknowledging that relationships within our families and with ourselves are often extremely trying and difficult, but that in the midst of that difficulty lies a call to discipleship?

As a matter of fact, there is a lot of tension and bad feeling in most families. It happens to be a fairly normal, though not very pleasant, part of family life. What is more, marriages are breaking up at an alarming rate. Are we to conclude that marriage and family life are just plain "bad news," and that there's not much we can do about it?

It seems to me that Jesus has a different answer. As I read this very difficult passage, it seems to me that he is saying that when our relationships are strained and we wonder how our marriage is ever going to last, right there is a call to discipleship. It's something to pray about, it's something to minister to, it's something to bring to God to help us do what we cannot do by ourselves. Jesus is saying, it seems to me, that even in the grimmest of circumstances, there's never reason to lose hope. He always holds out a call to us, and is always ready to join us in finding a resolution.

But I think he's saying something else as well. He's saying that one of the conditions of discipleship is that the disciple be familiar with the pain and heartache of life. We are to come to discipleship - all of us - not as people who are above the fray of daily stress and strain, but as people who live right in the midst of it. A disciple must know firsthand

what it means to have tried and failed, what it means to carry a heavy heart because of the insensitive or downright evil actions of someone. The disciple brings to those painful situations the light of divine understanding, and the hope of forgiveness and reconciliation. At the very least, the disciple brings God's promise of the daily strength to go on in the face of difficult trials, always knowing that the Promised Land of peace and love is near.

The bottom line is that the nagging heartache we may feel because life can be difficult, need not separate us from God's love, and may indeed be an opportunity to let God's light shine in the darkness.

In this very difficult passage, there is a great deal of good news and inspiration, indeed.

# Feeling Good?

August 28, 2001

## FEELING GOOD?

Father Paul Keenan  
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The readings for the Twenty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time emphasize the theme of humility. It's a subject that makes many of us uneasy in an age that heralds self-expression and "feeling good about" ourselves.

However, recently, I was caught by surprise when an author friend of mine pointed out in one of her books that, for all the talking we do about feeling good about ourselves, it's amazing how much we can accomplish on days when we don't. Most of us who made it through school, for example, didn't feel great and confident every single day, especially on big test days. We made it nonetheless, and got our diplomas. I don't know too many husbands and wives or very many parents who go through each day feeling great. Yet they manage to live happy married lives and raise their kids successfully.

Regardless of what society tells us, we can be tremendous successes without having to feel wonderful. Now, that doesn't mean we shouldn't aim at living the life we'd love, or that there is some kind of virtue in feeling bad about ourselves. I'm simply saying that, however you define success in life, "feeling good" is not, after all, the touchstone of achieving it.

Which raises an interesting question. If we can achieve so much without necessarily feeling good about ourselves, what makes us do so? It's a question of motivation, really - learning what motivates us; and it's different for everybody. People are motivated by praise, by fear, by criticism, by serving others, by all sorts of things. We need to learn what motivates us, and, realizing that it's been the thing that has brought us through to achievement, use it now to motivate ourselves for a life we'd really love. Once we have identified what works for us, we can use it to achieve a better life.

Strangely, that brings us back to humility. Humility means realizing honestly our limitations and our achievements. It means realizing that there are many days when we don't feel good or positive, but go ahead with our work anyway. Humility means knowing that we are not perfect, but that God loves us anyway and helps us to do what we're here on earth to do.

# Waiting

August 10, 2001

## WAITING

Father Paul Keenan  
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Most of us hate to wait. In a fast-paced, highly efficient age, most of us want everything right away. We get nervous and edgy waiting in line. We have questions and we want them answered right away. We ask people to do us a favor and we want it done yesterday. Waiting does not come naturally to us these days.

In the Gospel for the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time from the twelfth chapter of Luke's Gospel, Jesus suggests a different concept of waiting. What if we while we waited, we maintained the belief that what we were waiting for were already here? Talking about waiting for his second coming, Jesus tells his disciples to act as if it already happened. He gives the example of the coming of a bridegroom to his wedding feast. If the servants act as though the bridegroom could come at any moment, they will behave very differently than if they acted as though his coming were a long time off.

To many, Jesus' advice sounds strange, even misguided. How can I wait as though what I'm waiting for were already here, when I know full well that it isn't? That's the difference between God's way of thinking and ours. We get impatient because we believe we don't have what we need. God looks at us as already perfect, and through the power of his belief makes us so.

Let's take an example we can understand. A piano teacher, let's say, can look at her pupil as totally lacking in skill and competence. Or she can see the concert pianist in the pupil and strive to bring her out? They are two different ways of waiting. Which one do you think will be the more effective?

Jesus' concept of waiting carries over into our marriage, our parenting, our relationships with our subordinates and co-workers. It touches every area of our lives. And it comes down to something so very simple: can we allow ourselves to see as God sees? Can we refuse to let evident imperfection blind us to the reality of the perfection we seek?

# Our Daily Bread

July 30, 2001

## OUR DAILY BREAD

Father Paul Keenan  
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One of the many wonderful things about the Lord's Prayer is that you can take any part of it and find the whole prayer contained in that part. In that respect it's like a hologram: every part contains the essence of the entire prayer.

That means that we can take a part of the Lord's Prayer and meditate on it, and in doing so, capture the very heart of the prayer. Everyone reading this will, I am sure, have his or her favorite part or phrase from Jesus' prayer. Mine is: "Give us this day our daily bread."

I particularly love that phrase because it enables me to focus on God's goodness in my life each day. Before I started praying this phrase from the Lord's Prayer, I found myself praying and then waiting open-endedly for something to happen. When I started praying "Give us this day our daily bread," I found myself focusing more and more on God's goodness as it appeared each day. Whereas before I felt that God was not answering me, now I see that God is answering my prayers in a million ways each and every day. His love shines through in people, in nature, in the weather, in little acts and words of kindness, in music, and so on. I find that each day becomes a radiant and abundant expression God's love. That's much better than spending a long day waiting to see if there's going to be an answer.

"Give us this day our daily bread." What a wonderful way to honor God and the day that he has given us!

Posted 7/30/2001 11:21:55 AM

# Because We Can

July 23, 2001

## BECAUSE WE CAN

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The readings for the Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time tell us a great deal about God's vision of prosperity. In the first reading, when Abraham is approached by traveling strangers, he invites them to sit down and rest and asks Sarah for some bread. Now, there is no bread; but Sarah makes it and feeds the strangers. In return, she is promised the birth of a child.

The Gospel is the story of Mary and Martha, the famous story in which Jesus visits the sisters and Mary sits at Jesus feet while Martha does all the preparation. From the story, it is clear that Martha's attitude is different from that of Sarah in the previous story. Sarah has no bread, but makes it. Martha, on the contrary, has run out of energy and patience -- unlike Sarah, she is focused on lack rather than on opportunity. She becomes irritable -- many of us can relate to her reaction quite readily. We do the same thing all the time.

These stories remind us that God has so constructed our minds so that we get more and more of what they focus on. Sarah focuses, not on lack, but on opportunity. Martha focuses not on opportunity, but on lack. Each of them gets more of what she pays attention to.

Abraham and Sarah give because they know that they can. And they know that they can because they know that they share in God's propensity to use apparent lack as an opportunity to do or make something new.

St. Paul, in the second reading, tells us what this positive, creative attitude really means: "It is Christ in you, the hope for glory." When faced with a lack or a negative situation, we overcome because we know we can.

And we can, because we have Christ within.

Posted 7/23/2001 8:03:00 AM

# Simplicity

July 11, 2001

## SIMPLICITY

Father Paul Keenan  
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When it comes to religion, people want things to be kept simple, or so they often say. They get nervous if things get too complex or appear to go too far above their heads. When their lives grow complex and there are so many things to occupy their attention, people want the important lessons of life kept simple.

This is not a new desire, by the way. Moses faced it when giving the Law of God to the people. He showed them how God honored their request for simplicity in giving them the commandments. He assured them that they would not have to climb lofty heights to obey God's commands. Nor would they have to travel long distances to find them. For the commands of God, Moses assured them, were written right within their hearts.

When asked to make the law even simpler, Jesus broke it down to loving God with all our ability and to loving our neighbor as ourselves. What could be simpler?

When we are feeling frazzled and stressed by life, we would do well to take a quiet moment to reflect upon God's law. It is meant as a guide for us in our living. It is meant to help us to get our priorities straight.

And it's so very, very simple.

# A Lesson In Sainthood

June 29, 2001

## A LESSON IN SAINTHOOD

Father Paul Keenan  
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For those who are dogging their way through a hot summer, life can seem less than ideal on a daily basis. Often they find themselves being less patient with others, more likely to fly off the handle with little provocation. It can be discouraging for them to see themselves behaving in this way, especially if they are inclined to be attentive to their moral well being.

The Gospel for the Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, a passage from the ninth chapter of Luke's Gospel, might help these discouraged souls to feel better. If it's any consolation, the apostles had their bouts of crankiness, too.

The story goes that Jesus and his disciples were trying to pass through Samaria to get to Jerusalem. The Samaritans were not about to let them pass through their territory. Tired from their journey, and knowing that they had more traveling ahead of them, the Samaritans' lack of hospitality particularly annoyed two of them. In their pique, they came upon the "perfect solution" to their problem. Since the Samaritans were being so intransigent, why not call down fire from heaven on their town and destroy it? After all, they reasoned, this was exactly what the Samaritans deserved.

St. Luke sums up Jesus' reaction in one line: "Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they journeyed to another village."

Clearly, these two were not good models of apostolic behavior on that particular day. There was no alternative but for Jesus to give them a good talking to. Discouraging for them...yes. But remember who these two went on to become. These two testy apostles were none other than James, who became the great apostle of social justice, and John who became the great apostle of love.

So when we find ourselves slipping into impatience on these hot summer days and we wish we had "the patience of a saint," it can help us to remember that we are in good company. The saints had their moments too, and by God's grace became saints nonetheless.

There's hope for us.

# Blessing

June 14, 2001

## BLESSING

Father Paul Keenan  
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This year, our celebration of the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ is marked by the reading of the story of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves from the Gospel according to Luke. Throughout the Bible, there is created the strong impression that God loves to show us how to go from need to realization. You might almost conclude that it was God's favorite thing to do.

What is so striking about many of the want-to-abundance passages in the Bible is that an essential part of the process is the pronouncement of a blessing. In the passage from Luke, Jesus takes the proffered five loaves and two fish and says a blessing over them. Heretofore, the consensus has been that these meager provisions will never be sufficient to feed the multitude. Suddenly, when Jesus says his blessing over them, they prove to be more than enough, with twelve baskets of fragments left over.

We come to the Eucharist, each day or each week, often out of need. We are sick, or have loved ones who are ill. We are concerned about our monetary resources, our job, our reputation, our safety, our future, our emotional and spiritual well-being. What we must learn to understand is that these needs are not the closed doors that they appear to be. Rather, Jesus tells us that they are opportunities for God to manifest his abundant life in our situation. That is the very reason for blessing them. When Jesus blesses the five loaves and two fishes, he is blessing the opportunity for his heavenly Father to show the abundance of his love.

On this feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, let us remember to bless our needs, for they are the doorway of opportunity that leads us to the abundant presence of the love of Christ.

# Keeping the Word

June 1, 2001

## KEEPING THE WORD

Father Paul Keenan  
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Throughout John's Gospel, we find Jesus using the expression "keep my Word." Usually, when we read that we interpret it as meaning to comply with the Word, to follow the laws set up by Jesus, to do God's will. That is certainly one of the things that Jesus has in mind, no question about it.

However, as is so often the case in the Fourth Gospel, there is another level of meaning that can be applied to the phrase "keep my Word." When I hear it, I think of a word like "keepsake," which connotes something precious. I believe that when Jesus says, "Keep my Word," he is not only telling us to follow his Word, but to treasure it and to protect it from damage or harm. He is asking us to treat it as something precious. If we have a precious jewel in our possession, we take great pains to treat it with care and respect, to make sure someone doesn't harm it or steal it. We keep it safe.

How do we do that with God's Word? First and foremost, we give it time and attention. We take time to reflect on God's Word and to take inspiration from it for our daily lives. Another way to treasure it is to treat it as something sacred, to eschew all attempts to mock it, to put it down, or to treat it with disdain. Whenever someone treats God's name or Word with disrespect, we stand up for it, defend it and insist that people treat it with reverence and respect.

It's a good thing for us to reflect upon as we celebrate Pentecost. One of the signs of the Spirit in our lives is that we come to have more regard for God's Word. It speaks to us at a deeper level. It becomes a living thing that fuels our lives with grace and energy and the gifts of the Spirit. The more we "keep" God's Word, the more we find ourselves spiritually alive, conscious of God's presence and intervention in our lives.

Keeping God's Word is more than following it like a rulebook. In its deepest sense, it means capturing its Spirit, putting on the mind and heart of Christ, and sensing his presence in our lives every day.

# In

May 25, 2001

## IN

Father Paul Keenan  
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When I was in high school, my freshman year English teacher, Sister Rita, a wonderful nun who is still alive and well in Kansas, taught us that it was not correct to define a word by using the word itself in the definition. With that in mind, it's almost funny to go to the dictionary and see how the professional lexicographers struggle to define the word "in." They try and try to keep from using "in" in the definition, but they just can't help using words like "inner," "within," "inclusion" and "inside." "In" is one of those words whose definition we know so intimately (now, I've gone and done it, too) that we struggle to find other words to clarify its meaning.

The Seventh Sunday of Easter could well be called "In Sunday." The seventeenth chapter of John's gospel, from which the Sunday's gospel is taken, is replete with uses of the word "in." It is the word Jesus uses to describe his relationship with his Father and with us. He prays that all those who believe will "be one in us," as "you, Father (are) in me and I in you." And he prays that "the love with which you loved me may be in them, and (that) I (may be) in them."

The word "in" is the one Jesus uses to describe the mysterious relationship between himself and his heavenly Father, and between himself and those who believe. His use of the word "in" reveals to us a couple of aspects of those relationships. On the one hand, it tells us that it is an "inner" as opposed to an external relationship. It is fundamentally a matter of the heart and soul, rather than a matter of simply getting something done for someone on the outside. There are caring, depth and intimacy in the relationship. On the other hand, Jesus' use of the word "in" tells us that the relationship between him and the Father, and between them and us, is mysterious. Like the word "in" itself, it cannot easily be defined or conceptualized. It is mystery, meaning that it is so rich and abundant that it cannot fully be fathomed.

Why is this so? Given what Jesus says, it is possible for us to conclude that the word "in" is another name for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, the bond of Love between the Father and the Son, is the "in" that Jesus refers to when he says that the Father is "in" him and that he is "in" the Father. That gives us a powerful insight into their relationship. When someone is in our heart as opposed, say, to being merely on our calendar, he or she is part of us, part of our family, our very being.

They are "in" us. That is how Jesus and the Father are related, and it is the Spirit who makes them not just externally related to one another, but "in"-timately related.

And so for us. Jesus says that God is not meant to be an outsider, and that we are not meant to be outsiders in our relationship with him. Rather we are "in" him and he is "in" us. Again, it is the Spirit that saves us from being outsiders and makes us an intimate part of the family of God.

Isn't it amazing what you can find in one little word?

# Looking Up in the Sky

May 18, 2001

## LOOKING UP IN THE SKY

Father Paul Keenan  
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Next Thursday, the Church celebrates Ascension Thursday, Jesus' going up to heaven forty days after his Resurrection. The Scriptures tell us that, after Jesus had ascended into heaven, an angel asked the disciples, "Why are you standing looking up in the sky?" The answer to that question seems obvious. But the angel's question was really a challenge to the disciples to get busy about the task Jesus had given to them. He had told them to spread the Good News throughout the world. The angel's words were a reminder to them that this was no time to be gazing up into the heavens. It was time to be busy about the great task the Lord had given to them.

There's something for us, too, in the angel's question. We can spend a great deal of time "intending" to do what we know we should do, but not actually doing it. We theorize about it, explain why it's a good thing to do, recommend that others do it, without actually doing it ourselves. Each of us is here to make the day, the week, the world better for God than if we had not been here. We are here to touch others with Christ's love, to make them better than if they had never met us. The angel's words remind us that success lies only in the doing. Like the disciples, we must be about the grand mission Christ has given us, to touch hearts and make the world a better place in his name.

# Many Hardships

May 11, 2001

## MANY HARDSHIPS

Father Paul Keenan  
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"It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22). These words of Paul and Barnabas, recorded for our reflection on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, remind us of an important aspect of living adult Christian lives. We bask in the glory of the resurrection, we take the risen Lord as the one in whom we live and move and have our being, we exult with Easter joy. Yet there are many times in our lives when what we have to do is not easy or pleasant, and in fact, is downright painful. Paul and Barnabas had a very realistic approach to the faith. They knew that there were good days and bad days, and that even the bad days were a part of the plan of salvation. Sometimes, life is simply not easy. When we are tempted to get discouraged and to give up, we can remember the words of Paul and Barnabas. When we are in pain, or are short-tempered or feel pressured, or are worried, we can remember that those so-called "negative" emotions need not keep us from the Kingdom of God. They are part of it, and with God's help they can give us tremendous inner strength and wisdom.

In this Fifth Week of Easter, we can pray for the wisdom and courage of Paul and Barnabas. When life becomes difficult, we can remember that it is all part of our journey to God.

# Safety

May 4, 2001

## SAFETY

Father Paul Keenan  
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Safety is practically the number one concern of most people. They buy security systems for their houses, put deadbolt locks on the doors of their apartments, alarms on their cars and The Club on their steering wheels. They will tell you that they're afraid to go out at night or to open the door to a stranger.

Often enough, what sells under the title of "security" should really be labeled as "anti-fear." Calling it "security" makes it marketable and attractive to the consumer. But the real issue is not security, exactly - it's getting rid of fear.

The truth is, there is more to safety and security than this. Because of the way the human mind works, getting rid of fear is actually a futile enterprise. The mind is so constructed that when it focuses on something, that something multiplies. So if we focus on fear and make eliminating fear our conscious concern, we will likely get more and more fear. When we buy the various security devices that are available to us today, we may, indeed, feel a little better; but we are still afraid. The various gizmos may manage to keep intruders away, but they do not eliminate the worst intruder of all - the fear that drives us to buy them.

In the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Jesus gives us something better to think about, something that makes true safety and security possible. "My sheep," he says, "hear my voice....No one can snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-29) In other words, Jesus is asking us to focus, not on fear and insecurity, but on the fact that he holds us in the palm of his hand and allows no one or nothing to harm us. If we can remember that fact and concentrate on it, we will be successful in dealing with our fears. What Jesus is offering is not a product or a device. Instead, he is offering us peace and security from deep inside.

When we accept this, we will still lock our doors and do what is sensible to protect ourselves from harm. But our security will not just be on the outside; we will be secure and happy on the inside as well. Don't be fooled by devices that promise you security: they can only take you so far. The safety and security you truly want comes, not from them, but from knowing that you are held forever in the hand of God.

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## Another Look

April 27, 2001

### ANOTHER LOOK

Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel Reading for the Third Sunday of Easter this year is St. John's account of the miraculous catch of fishes. (John 21:1-19). The disciples have been fishing all night and have caught nothing. As they prepare to quit, they encounter the Risen Jesus who tells them to go back and try again. This time, they catch an enormous number of fish.

St. John's Gospel reflects an important aspect of the mission of Jesus: to teach us to think in a different way. Throughout the Fourth Gospel there is an ongoing battle between human logic and divine. We see it early on in the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus: Nicodemus simply cannot understand what Jesus means about being "born again." He thinks he is going to have to return to his mother's womb, a notion that, indeed, seems nonsensical to him. Even earlier than that, the prologue to John's Gospel laments, "(the Word) came unto his own and his own received him not" (John 1:11). Later, Jesus proclaims himself to be "the Bread of Life" and people think that he is asking them to eat human flesh. John is very insistent that there is a tremendous gulf between the way in which human being think and the way in which God thinks.

How can we bridge this gap and learn to think as God thinks? The story of the miraculous draught of fishes gives us a clue. Just as Peter has to go back out into the waters where he has fished all night with no results, so do we have to go back and review our experiences, even though they may seem like failures or setbacks, and see our situation anew.

For example, we may have had a tremendous setback in our lives. We may be tempted to think of it as a tragedy, and in many ways it surely is. But later, looking back, we may come to realize that our painful loss really opened the door to a new direction in life. My friend, Antoinette Bosco, has just written two more books, one called "Shaken Faith" and the other "Choosing Mercy." After a painful marriage and divorce, Toni experienced the murder of a son and daughter-in-law and the suicide of another son. She decided to make of her life a legacy for her children. She has created a life as an author, a columnist, a public speaker and a fierce opponent of capital punishment. Had she stayed on the human level, Toni might have become a bitter woman. Instead, she took another look - this time through God's eyes - and that has made all the difference.

Jesus invites, not only the disciples, not only Toni Bosco, but you and me as well, to take another look at the things we write off as losses, failures and tragedies. When we look once again through his eyes, what a wonderful draught -not of fish, but of grace - we may find.

# Easter Mercy

April 20, 2001

## EASTER MERCY

Father Paul Keenan  
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Archdiocese of New York

This year, I've noticed that there are places in the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection in which Jesus has to open people's minds and hearts. One is the story in St. Luke's Gospel (24:35-48) in which Jesus appears to the disciples, who are terrified because they think they are seeing a ghost. Here, Luke tells us, Jesus has to open their minds to the meaning of the scriptures about his suffering, death and resurrection, in order to answer the questions in their hearts. In other words, he fills their minds with new thoughts in order to heal their hearts.

Another such instance is in St. John's Gospel (20:19-31), where Jesus invites Thomas the apostle to place his hands in Jesus' hands and side to quell his doubts, but counsels the apostle, "blessed are they who have not seen, but believe." Jesus wants Thomas to be rid of his own doubts of mind and heart, but he also wants to rid him of the idea that faith depends upon experiencing immediate physical results. Once again, he is opening someone's mind and heart. It is telling that in this same passage, Jesus teaches the apostles to engage in the ministry of reconciliation, in which people's minds and hearts are touched by the forgiveness of God. In essence, he is asking the disciples to extend to others the favor he has granted them - the enlightening of minds and hearts by eliminating old ideas and approaches and replacing them with ones more in tune with divine truth and love.

The Second Sunday of Easter is often known as Divine Mercy Sunday. It is a day to reflect upon God's mercy in our lives. The two passages I have mentioned (the Johannine passage is the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter) gives us an excellent understanding of the nature of divine mercy. In human terms, we think of mercy as letting someone off the hook when we could really have let them have it. God's mercy is different. God's mercy goes right inside the person, showing them new patterns of thought, feeling and action and inviting them to let the divine patterns replace the old, human, ones. Salvation is not merely about being let off the hook by God, so that he doesn't condemn us - that's why the terms "salvation" and "sanctification" are so closely related. In the fullness of divine mercy, salvation implies letting ourselves be transformed by God and thoroughly sanctified in body, mind, heart and soul. God doesn't just want to save us from damnation; he wants us to live full and happy lives in the life-giving ambiance of his grace.

# He Is Risen

April 15, 2001

## HE IS RISEN

Father Paul Keenan  
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"The Lord is risen. The Lord is truly risen. Alleluia." From the earliest days of Christianity, these words have marked the joy of Christians in the resurrection of the Savior. Christians throughout the world at this holy time celebrate Christ's triumph over sin and death.

Through Christ, this triumph can be ours as well. When we die to sinful actions and to attitudes of mind and heart that separate us from one another and from God, we are able to rise into a glorious new way of life. Here there is profound joy, because we experience how deeply God loves us and how deeply we can love others and ourselves.

Dying and rising in this sense is like crossing a threshold: there is no turning back. We cannot be in the living room and in the dining room at the same time - we have to choose to be in one or the other. Similarly, our decision to die to our sinful ways and to live the new life of Christ is a firm choice. Though we will slip from time to time, we must make a firm choice to live our lives according to the teachings of Christ. When we do that, we will truly experience a life of grace.

This Easter, we can choose to live in Christ and to die to old attitudes and patterns of action that hold us back. Then, not only will we rejoice in the resurrection of Christ; we will also rejoice in our own.

Posted 4/15/2001 10:02:45 AM

# God's Mercy

April 2, 2001

## GOD'S MERCY

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The Gospel readings of the middle three Sundays of Lent this year have to do with God's mercy. On the Third Sunday, we read of the fig tree that produced no fruit but was spared destruction by a caring and skillful gardener. On the Fourth Sunday, we heard the parable of the prodigal son, who spent his inheritance foolishly but came home to a forgiving and infinitely kind father. On the Fifth Sunday, the gospel was the story of the woman caught in adultery whose life was spared by Jesus.

Why all this emphasis on God's mercy at this time in Lent? It has everything to do with the nature of the Lenten season. During Lent, we ask God to help us examine our patterns of thought, word and activity in order to see which of them we want to keep and which we want to get rid of. In addition, we ask, are there any new patterns we might adopt?

As we come to this time in Lent, it's entirely possible that we're feeling a little down, a little ashamed of what we're finding. We may even feel that it's going to be difficult, or even impossible, to root out some of our old behaviors: they're pretty well entrenched. That's precisely why the Church gives us these gospels of mercy at this time. We are reminded that there is no need for us to be discouraged. Instead, we might consider focusing on God's consistent message of his mercy toward us. During this period of Lent, God reminds us that he has no interest in condemning us, but has every interest in helping us and saving us. The fig tree, the prodigal son and the woman caught in adultery help us to remember that no matter how impossible our situation may seem to be, God is always there to step in and help us.

As we prepare this week to hear the Passion of Christ next Sunday and to enter into the Sacred Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday) during Holy Week, we can count on the mercy of God to lift us up and sustain us and to fill us with a powerful sense of his untiring love for us.

# Of Fig Trees and God's Mercy

March 16, 2001

## OF FIG TREES AND GOD'S MERCY

Father Paul Keenan  
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As we continue our journey in Lent, we move to three Gospel stories that tell of God's mercy toward us. We have just completed a two-week cycle that turned our eyes toward Jesus - his temptations in the desert and his transfiguration. Meditating on these passages, we learned how Jesus set his priorities in life and how that impacted upon his life in a positive way, down the road.

Now, we begin a three-week cycle focusing on God's mercy. What is in store for us, if, like Jesus, we set our life priorities as he did - with top priority being given to our relationship with our Heavenly Father?

On the Third Sunday of Lent this year, we hear the parable of the fig tree. Jesus tells of a fig tree that was destined for destruction, since it was not bearing fruit. A gardener suggests to the owner that, instead of destroying the tree, they wait a year. During that time, the gardener will try everything he knows, in the hope of saving the tree. If that doesn't work, he tells the owner, it can be destroyed.

What's the message here for us? The message is that God is on our side. In the course of our lives, we may have said some things or done some things or thought or felt some things that have been harmful to ourselves and to others. Instead of bearing good fruit in people's lives, we have had a negative influence upon them. A human judge, working on strictly "business " logic, might call us "worthless," "useless," or "counterproductive." We may have reached a point where we are not exactly proud of ourselves, and have come to think of ourselves as worthless.

The question is, what does God think? The parable tells us that God doesn't give up. Where others, especially our enemies, may be lobbying to destroy us, God sees things differently. Like the gardener in the story, God does two things. First, he spares us. Second, he promises to work with us and for us - to do everything possible to get us to turn our lives around and to see ourselves bearing good fruit in the world.

Returning to the focus of the first two weeks of Lent, what might be the results in our lives, were we to make God the top priority in our lives as Jesus did in his? This week's answer: no matter who may condemn us, God will spare us and will work actively with us and in us to get our lives to where they ought to be.

God, we see, is a bearer of second chances.

# Transfigured

March 9, 2001

## Transfigured

Father Paul Keenan  
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On the First Sunday of Lent this year, our attention was focused on St. Luke's account of the temptations of Jesus in the desert. In my own thoughts and reflections this year, I took the temptation story to be an invitation to spend the season of Lent deciding what we would decide we wanted in our lives and what we decided could no longer be part of them. Each time the devil asked Jesus to make something a part of his life, Jesus said no, and referred back to the Heavenly Father, who was the touchstone of what Jesus wanted in his life. Similarly, when we set boundaries and re-establish limits in our lives, we decide what to keep, what to include and what to add. Lent is a good time to do that, to do what Jesus did, and to learn to set our boundaries in the world as children of God

On the Second Sunday of Lent, we focus on the Transfiguration of Jesus. The Church does something wonderful for us here, for it shows us the inspiration and the encouragement that can be ours when we set our sights on God. The glory of Jesus is revealed on the mountain. In our own lives, as we make our decisions based upon our decision to evaluate everything according to whether or not it brings us closer to God, we begin to find moments of inspiration, times of sheer peace. Just as for Jesus, the Transfiguration strengthened him for the trials that lay ahead, so do our moments of grace (when we sense God's deep love for us) strengthen us to face the challenges that life inevitably brings.

The message this week for the Second Sunday of Lent is one of hope. As we journey through Lent, deepening our sense of what changes we are being led to make, let us look for moments of special grace. In them, we learn how deeply God loves us.

# Lent 2001

March 2, 2001

## Lent 2001

Father Paul Keenan  
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As we begin the season of Lent, it's a good idea for us to have an overview of what we are to be considering during this holy time.

The Gospel readings of the Sundays of Lent this year (the C cycle) give us two Sundays in which to consider the life of Our Lord and three in which to consider God's marvelous mercy. Then, on Palm Sunday, the two themes converge in St. Luke's account of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lenten readings this year give us, first, St. Luke's account of the temptations of Jesus in the desert. Like us, Jesus spent forty days in prayer and fasting; at the end, he was tempted. The temptations mark a refusal on the part of Jesus to exempt himself from the human condition in virtue of his being the Son of God. They also mark his refusal to rely on anyone or anything apart from his Heavenly Father as his source of life and abundance. Next Sunday, we shall read St. Luke's account of the transfiguration, in which Jesus' glory was revealed, and which marks a turning point in his movement toward the Passion. During these two weeks, we see the loyalty and faithfulness of Jesus; we see his suffering and his glory.

The following three weeks emphasize how important the notion of divine mercy was in the message of Jesus during his life on earth. First, we hear the parable of the fig tree that was saved from destruction by the intercession of a gardener. Then, we hear the parable of the Prodigal Son, whose father forgives him and restores his fortunes. Finally, we read the story of the woman caught in adultery whose life was spared by the mercy of Jesus. All three readings encourage us to return to God and to count on release, forgiveness and welcome.

The themes of the previous five weeks converge on Palm Sunday, when we revisit the Passion of Jesus. Once again, we see the loyal love of Jesus for his Father, even unto death; and we recall that he died for us, opening to us the possibility of experiencing the mercy and kindness of God.

In the second reading for the First Sunday of Lent, from Romans 10, Paul reminds us that "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." The structure of the Gospel readings of the

Sundays of Lent, 2001, enable us to grow in our belief in Jesus, and in our desire to share our appreciation of him enthusiastically with others.

Posted 3/2/2001 11:01:28 AM

# As Easy as One Two...

February 16, 2001

## As Easy as One Two...

Father Paul Keenan  
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"Who do people say that I am?" It was not a trick question - Jesus really wanted the apostles to tell him what people were saying about him. They had been with him in his travels, and he wanted them to tell him what they had learned. Eagerly, they told him: "Some say you're John the Baptist. Others say you're Elijah. Still others say you're one of the other prophets come back to life."

In asking them this question, Jesus was opening the disciples to the first level of faith - the social level, the public level, the level we get from other people. It's the same for us as for the disciples. We learned about Jesus as children, in our families, in our schooling or catechetical classes, by hearing about him via radio, television, books and magazines, the movies. From those around us, we formed an impression of Jesus.

But there's a second level, and Jesus refused to let the apostles off the hook on this one. Once they had told him about his public image, he asked them another question. "Who do you say that I am?" The apostles mulled over that one, and it was Peter who finally proclaimed, "You are the Messiah."

That second question is a tough one, for it asks us to go beyond what everybody else is saying about Jesus, and to decide who he is for us, personally. Like the apostles the common fund of knowledge can tell us a number of conflicting things. Some say Jesus is the Messiah. Others say the Messiah is yet to come. Still others say that Jesus was the Son of God. Other say he was just a holy man. But who is he for us? That's the question.

In our belief about Jesus, as in so many other aspects of life, we reach a level of maturity when we step forward and weigh in for ourselves. That means establishing a personal relationship with him and allowing the tenets of our faith to come alive inside of us as we reflect upon and answer his question, "Who do you say that I am?" If we fail to do that, we lose an essential dimension of faith, and we fail to really come alive in it.

"Who do people say that I am?" The first level of faith gets us started on our journey.  
"Who do you say that I am?" The second level of faith brings us home.

# Needs

February 12, 2001

## Needs

Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel reading for the Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Luke 6:17, 20-26), is Luke's version of the beatitudes, slightly different from Matthew's and including a list of "woes" alongside the "blesseds."

When it comes right down to it, the heart of Jesus' message here seems to be about whether or not we believe that we need God. The "woes" are directed to people who are satisfied with their lives; the "blesseds" are directed to people who are in need. The former feel they have no need to turn to anyone, including God, for help; their lives are fine. The latter know that they need the assistance of others, especially of God.

We often think of need in negative terms, as the absence of something, or a lack, sometimes an embarrassing one. In fact, our needs have a positive dimension: they are a doorway to our discovering our need for God. When we recognize that we need something, it is an opportunity to go to our heavenly Father and put ourselves in his loving hands. We may then receive help directly, or we may be guided to talk to someone or to take a particular course of action.

Sometimes, we may get a surprise. We may find, when we turn to God, that our real need is different from what at first we thought it was. For example, it's possible that our real need was to turn to God and to develop our relationship with him. Even though we may not, say, have our health restored as we asked, we find ourselves to be much happier than we were before, because we have found God in our lives.

Needs are doorways to God. When we take our needs to him, we can count on his loving care and guidance. To quote the classic movie, "Casablanca": "This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

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# Doomed

February 2, 2001

## DOOMED

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"I am doomed!" These are the words of the prophet Isaiah in the first reading from the Mass of the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Isaiah 6: 1-8). The occasion for this utterance is Isaiah's vision of the Lord seated on a throne with angels all around calling out the Lord's praises. Isaiah could not begin to imagine that he was having such a vision, because he considered himself to be "a man of unclean lips" - someone exceedingly unworthy of seeing God. As the story continues, an angel of the Lord comes and touches Isaiah's lips with a burning coal, enabling the prophet to respond affirmatively to God's call, "Whom shall I send?"

Isaiah's story has implications for us as we make our journey of faith. It reminds us how awesome it is to be in the presence of God. Strange but true: we can take God's presence for granted. Attending weekly Mass, saying daily prayers, can become routine; and we can lose the sense of how special it is to be in God's presence. The story of the call of Isaiah reminds us that when we pray, we are talking to God our creator, the Lord of the universe. Remembering the majesty of God need not make us fearful of him, but it is good for us to remember how privileged we are to receive his attention and his love.

The experience of Isaiah reminds us, too, that painful moments can be opportunities to refurbish our sense of values, to change our patterns and to renew our hearts. It was a painful experience for Isaiah to have a vision of God, and it was painful for him to have his lips seared with the angel's coal. Yet each of those experiences changed his life and made him a staunch spokesman for God. How many times have we heard stories of people whose distressing times were the very occasion of their turning their lives over to God and allowing him to use their gifts and talents for the benefit of all? Isaiah's story prompts us to hear God's call in the midst of pain or tragedy.

Doomed? Though he feared that he was doomed, Isaiah was actually blessed. God came to him, not to condemn him, but to give him an opportunity to be his special representative here on earth. In times when we feel doomed, for whatever reason, Isaiah's example helps us to remember to listen for the call of God.

# Absorbing the Qualities of Love

January 30, 2001

## Absorbing the Qualities of Love

Father Paul Keenan  
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This Sunday, we read the beautiful section from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians for our second reading at Mass. It's the wonderful passage that gives the qualities of love. "Love is patient, love is kind, love does not put on airs," and so forth.

It's a beautiful reading, but the practicality of it can escape our notice. I find that this passage can help us to put more love into our lives, and to help us to develop some of the really fine qualities we want to see there. It works that way, because the passage, in and of itself, creates an atmosphere of love, peace, humility, and so forth. Just by being in the presence of that passage -- reading it aloud, hearing it read, praying about it - we can absorb its beauty within ourselves, just as we inhale the air we breathe.

Want to test this? Read the passage (it's 1 Corinthians 13, verses 4 -7, especially) just as it is. Then, after a few minutes of silence, read it again. This time, at every point where you see the word "love," substitute the word "I." "I am patient." "I am kind." "I do not put on airs." Take a moment to let that sink in.

You may be tempted to say, "Oh, that's crazy. I'm none of those things." Let the thought pass. The point of the exercise is to get you used to saying these things about yourself. By putting yourself lovingly in the presence of these ideals of love, you will gradually absorb them and find your life more loving.

# You're Rockin ' The Boat

January 19, 2001

## YOU'RE ROCKIN' THE BOAT

Father Paul Keenan  
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St. Mark's Gospel tells us that at one point, the crowd wanting to hear Jesus and to be healed by him was so great that he asked that a fishing boat be made ready for him so that he could deal with the crowd, yet avoid being crushed by them. One can only imagine the desperation with which those people approached Jesus, pressing in on all sides in the hope that they could touch him and be healed.

If we are in any position of responsibility in life, we may have people coming to us desperate for our help. Others will make demands upon our time, our money, our patience, our gifts. It is very difficult to avoid being drowned in the sea of needs that are often presented to us.

Like Jesus, we can learn to withdraw, even in the midst of helping people. We can learn to keep an inner center of calm and peace in the midst of great turmoil all around us. It's a skill to be learned and developed, and it often takes some time to do so. There are times when, as with Jesus, everyone demands our immediate attention, and will allow us no space. If it was important for Jesus to create that space for himself, how much more so is it for us.

How can we do it? We may not have access to a fishing boat, but we can create within ourselves a place of quiet and peace that we can retreat to when "everybody is looking for us." Perhaps, in meditation, we can imagine ourselves with Jesus in that fishing boat with the crowd surging around him. With him there, in that place of peace, we can center ourselves and experience the energy and grace that we need to deal with everyone and everything.

It's a nice meditation, which can also serve us well in times when we may feel inclined to fly off the handle and to say things that later we might wish we hadn't said. Turning our imagination back to the boat, we can give ourselves that pause, that beat, that can make the difference between losing control and staying calm and focused.

When everything is threatening to rock the boat we're in, we can remember to turn our thoughts back to Jesus, and to find with him the strength and courage we need in order to go on.

# Raising the Roof

January 12, 2001

## Raising the Roof

Father Paul Keenan  
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Isn't it funny how you can read a passage of scripture over and over again and suddenly something in it jumps out at you that gives you an entirely new sense of it.

Recently, I was reading the part of St. Mark's Gospel in which Jesus heals the paralytic whose friends have lowered him through the roof. Jesus forgives his sins, which causes a stir among some; and then he heals his paralysis as well.

What jumped out at me this time was St. Mark's statement that when doing this miracle, Jesus was "at home." Think about that for minute. This means that the roof that those people so blissfully cut a hole in belonged to Jesus. If someone or some act of nature has come along and put a whole in your roof, you know that it's not something that makes you happy. In fact, it's very upsetting. What if it rains? What if the winds blow? A hold in the roof is pretty upsetting.

Not for Jesus, it seems. Maybe, having been a carpenter, it didn't matter to him so much. Nonetheless, I'm amazed at how he refused to be flustered and kept his attention focused entirely on the man in need. He didn't react to the roof. He didn't scold the people who put a hole in it. He went right on with his preaching, without missing a beat.

Jesus simply refused to allow himself to be inconvenienced by a hole in the roof. Remember that, the next time you worry about praying to Jesus and are tempted to say that he has too many other things to think about, things more important than your concerns. You can't inconvenience Jesus. He is steadfastly and firmly there for you and for me. He's not about to let anything stop him from lavishing his love and his grace upon us.

# Hope and Homage

January 3, 2001

## Hope and Homage

Father Paul Keenan  
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Epiphany is a feast of hope and homage. The Magi followed a star in the hope of seeing the Christ Child. In so doing, they followed a deeply held conviction that they were being guided to something remarkable. They were not Jews, awaiting the Messiah. They were astrologers from the East, following a star in the hope that the star would lead them to "the newborn King of the Jews." According to St. Matthew's Gospel, the Magi knew that the star they were following was "his star." Their journey was one of hope that at length they would find him.

The astrologers' journey was not one born of simple curiosity. They specifically told Herod that they were hoping to pay homage to the newborn king. Their journey was meant to be an act of reverence; that is why they carried gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Matthew contrasts the Magi with Herod, who also wants to find the child, though not to pay him homage, but to destroy him.

In this story of the first Epiphany, we have a meeting of kings: the astrologers, popularly known as the "Three Kings" and King Herod. Both sets of kings hope to meet the newborn king. The difference in their hopes is the difference between homage and hatred. The hope of the Magi is to reverence Jesus; the hope of Herod is to kill him.

In life, there are people who hope for reverence and there are those who hope for destruction. Sometimes both will claim to be acting in the name of God, just as both the Magi and Herod wanted to see Jesus. The Feast of the Epiphany teaches us that when hope is authentic, it is rooted in reverence, in homage. Following our inner guidance is a virtue only when it is rooted in reverence: that's the lesson of the Magi.

What are your hopes for the New Year? Whatever they be, let them be grounded in a desire to bring a greater sense of reverence into our world

# Reruns

December 28, 2000

## Reruns

Father Paul Keenan  
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It is customary in television circles to rerun certain programs or even series during the summer months instead of presenting new programs. I suppose the theory is that with people on vacation during the summer, it doesn't make sense to go to the effort and expense of producing new programs. Since it also wouldn't be productive to simply shut down the station or network, they have to run something; and so reruns it is.

That's fine if the program or series is really good. There are certain old movies I could watch (and have watched) over and over again, and even a few comedies and documentaries that withstand repetition. It's not fine if the original program is lacking in quality; in that case, rerunning it is simply a question of filling a slot that would otherwise go empty. Better to make a mistake twice than to endure dead air, or so the theory goes.

As we prepare to start a New Year and a new millennium, the question of reruns appears, not so much for television as for life. Are we going to rerun old programs held over from last year, or are we going to find better ways of behaving and of interacting with one another? As we approach the New Year, it's a good idea for us to review the old programs - our ways of praying, working, socializing, of being with family and friends. Will 2001 be a year of reruns for us, or will we take the time and trouble to make needed changes in our attitudes and in our actions?

Plunging ahead into a New Year without reflection is like randomly rerunning old programs because we think we don't have anything better to present. Last year's mistakes, repeated, will be next year's mistakes. The problem is, they may do even more damage the second time around.

Most likely, upon reflection, we do have something better to present in one or more aspects of our lives. The New Year gives us time to think about that, to pray about it. May you and I put our best foot forward in the New Year. May we be very careful about our reruns, and select only the best. May we be very creative in selecting our new behaviors, careful to assure that they reflect our status as people made in the image and likeness of God.

Posted 12/28/2000 2:03:32 PM

# Rejoice

December 15, 2000

## Rejoice

Father Paul Keenan  
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Perhaps it seems funny that the Third Sunday of Advent is called "Rejoice Sunday." At this point in the year, you may feel like doing almost anything but rejoicing. The holidays can be a very stressful time for many people. Loved ones who are absent this year are missed. There is a daunting amount of cleaning, planning, shopping, writing to do - how will we ever get done? And where will the energy come from in which to do it all? Or the money?

Yet the Third Sunday of Advent is "Rejoice Sunday" nonetheless. The Church asks us to rejoice because our period of waiting to celebrate the coming of the Savior is coming to an end.

There's a great deal of wisdom in all of this because, oddly enough, one of the best times to rejoice is when we are in the midst of sorrow. As wonderful as it may be to rejoice in happy times, our rejoicing means more to us in times of sadness and frustration. During those times, we literally have to force ourselves to think about the blessings in our lives; but when we do, we find that those blessings have a special importance as we attempt to move through our sadness to inner healing and peace.

Rejoicing doesn't necessarily mean breaking into a chorus of "Oh What a Beautiful Morning." Rejoicing can often be a very quiet thing, like a drop of water quietly falling on a rock. It can be a tiny but powerful oasis in a desert of turmoil.

Rejoice. That's the Church's theme for the third week of Advent. It's a theme full of wisdom, that will serve us well if we listen.

# Radio Wisdom

December 6, 2000

## Radio Wisdom

Father Paul Keenan  
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I know a man who spends his entire life repairing and selling antique radios. He has a small shop in a small town and it is full of these wonderful radios (with a few tube televisions thrown in for good measure). What is amazing in this day and age with our boom boxes and stereos, is the amount of time it takes for those old radios to warm up. Nowadays, we expect to hear our program the second we turn the knob. But not so with these old clunkers-you turn the knob and what you get is...silence. For some models, it takes a good two, three, minutes for the tubes to warm up sufficiently to generate the sound.

That seems odd to us today, and we grow impatient waiting for our news or music to commence. Yet four, five and six decades ago, those two or three minutes seemed like nothing at all. It gave us time to pause what we were doing and to take time before beginning to listen to our program. Instead of rushing headlong into our show, we had time to prepare ourselves to listen.

In the same way during this season, of Advent, the Church is asking us to pause and reflect before beginning our celebration of Christmas. We have finished Ordinary Time, but we need some time out before celebrating the coming of our Savior. During this time, we reflect on what it was like for our ancestors to wait for the Messiah. We sing beautiful hymns like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and wondrous antiphons such as the O Antiphons, to give ourselves a "tuning up" for our celebration of the coming of the Christ Child. We ask ourselves what we could do, personally, to make our hearts readier to receive the newborn King.

This season of Advent is a glorious time. As we light each candle of the Advent wreath, we grow in anticipation of Christmas. Perhaps we can feel our hearts becoming lighter with each passing week as we prepare for the coming of Christ.

# Giving Thanks

November 20, 2000

## Giving Thanks

Father Paul Keenan  
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Perhaps it's because of everything that's been going on in our nation and in the world these past few weeks, but the universal reaction of everybody I talk to is that they can't believe that it's Thanksgiving time already. I feel the same way; but here we are, nonetheless. In fact, because of everything that has been happening, I am very glad it's Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving Day brings us back to something very fundamental within ourselves that often the press of personal and world events can make us forget.

When people ask me about "soulful living," I sometimes go back to the act of giving thanks to describe it. In fact, I believe that thanksgiving is the key to the soul. When we give thanks, especially in the midst of difficult circumstances, we do two things. First, we acknowledge that the frustration we are experiencing is not the whole story of life. Second, we open the door to the deeper level of God's abiding presence within us where we feel God's abundant love, and where we can often find the answers to many of the things that trouble us.

When we're upset by troubles in life, it's like we're wearing blinders. All we can see is what's in front of us; our range of vision is narrowed. When, in the midst of all this, we stop to give thanks for the blessings that we genuinely see in life, it opens our vision, gives us something more to live for. In the classic Christmas movie "It's a Wonderful Life," George Bailey hits such a low point that he wants to end his life. The angel Clarence helps him to realize that without his presence in the world, the lives of others would have been very different. George sees a reason to be grateful for his presence on earth; and that, in turn, leads him back into the arms of his family and friends, in whose love he finds the solution to his difficulties.

It's not just true in a movie - we can experience the miracle power of thanksgiving as well. When, in the midst of our troubles, we wonder where God is, the answer may be: he's waiting for us to say thanks.

# Insignificant?

November 14, 2000

## Insignificant?

Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
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How do you measure the value of a life? Is the life of a rich person more valuable than that of a poor person? Is the man or woman with the best sales record a more valuable human being than somebody who just can't seem to make it? Is an intelligent person to be valued more than a person who just can't seem to think clearly? Is a person whose health is good of greater value than one who is chronically ill?

When I was in college, we were made to study logic; and I must say, it was a requirement that has proven to be highly valuable. In logic, we learned to distinguish between "substance" and "accidents." The "substance" of something is its permanent underlying essence. The "accidents" are everything else about it - qualities, quantities, clothing, position, place and so on.

If all of us learned no more from logic than how to distinguish "substance" and "accidents," we would have a great lesson at our disposal. Many of the problems in life stem from the fact that we tend to treat people as though their qualities and circumstances were the essential thing about them. As a result, we tend to measure people by their income, their avoirdupois, their health, their congeniality - and we miss the human being who is inside.

Jesus knew better than that. His logic about people was the same as the logic I learned in school, namely that we don't get our significance from what we have. But Jesus didn't learn it by studying a logic book, as I did. His logic was divine - it came from his relationship to the Father and the Spirit. When he saw a group of religious leaders parading themselves around in public as though they were better than anyone else, he called them to task. When we saw a poor widow put into the temple treasury the two cents that amounted to her entire savings, he eschewed those who called her insignificant and hailed her as the greatest of all. He reminded them that the widow's significance did not depend on how much she had or even upon how much she gave; it came from the bottom of her heart, where she was a human being made in God's image and likeness.

Wouldn't it be a much better world if we remembered that?

# "My Dad's the Pilot"

November 7, 2000

## "My Dad's the Pilot"

Father Paul Keenan  
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Someone recently e-mailed me a story about a young boy who was on a crowded airplane which had become disabled and was on its way to an unscheduled landing at a nearby airport. All the other passengers were agitated and upset, but the boy remained calm, continuing to draw quietly. Finally, someone asked him how he could remain so calm while others were upset. "Well," he replied, "my Dad's the pilot."

In the gospels, Jesus asked us to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with our entire mind and with all our strength. That may seem to be a lofty and impossible ideal. Like the airplane in the story, our lives may be bounced around by turbulence, become disabled and go off course. It may be difficult for us to love God as wholly as Jesus asks. Yet the little boy's words can be ours as well: "My Dad's the pilot." God is truly the pilot of our lives. We don't always know where life is taking us. Our flight plan may have expired, and we may find ourselves on a new and different course from the one we planned. God is the pilot. He is our Father who loves us. When we acknowledge that and surrender, we are free to love him in the whole-hearted way that Jesus asks of us.

There's another aspect to the teaching of Jesus. Not only does he ask us to love God wholly, he also asks us to love our neighbor as ourselves. The little boy's story comes in there, too. Because he is so calm within himself, others notice - his peace of soul extends itself to the others, who are not experiencing peace. By the same token, when we are at peace within ourselves, we are in the best position to be of service to others.

When we acknowledge, "My Dad's the pilot," we can best fulfill Jesus' commandments - and we feel best within ourselves as well.

# Reserved Seats?

October 25, 2000

## Reserved Seats?

Father Paul Keenan  
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When people in their various gathering places talk about religious things, one of the subjects that often comes up is predestination. For many, it's a topic that causes a considerable amount of resentment. Why should some people be favored with salvation and not others? If salvation is guaranteed to some, does it make any difference whether the rest of us live good lives or lives of debauchery? People become concerned that God is unfair, and that they will not be able to get into heaven.

There's a passage in St. Mark's Gospel (Mk 10: 35-45) in which Jesus appears to be supporting the idea of predestination, but a closer reading shows that he is doing just the opposite. The matter comes up when the apostles James and John approach Jesus and ask that the two of them be placed, one on Jesus' right hand and one on Jesus' left hand in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus' answer to them is very interesting. He tells the two that "sitting at my right hand or my left is not mine to give. It is for those for whom it has been reserved." At first glance, that sounds like predestination. Jesus appears to be telling the apostles that those seats are already taken.

We might expect that the next subject of discussion would be "Well, then, who are the lucky ones who have those seats reserved for them?" Before that question can be asked, however, the other ten apostles become indignant at James and John for trying to be first. Intervening, Jesus tells them that if they want to aspire to greatness, they must be servants of all. "The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life for the ransom of many," he tells them.

Usually, we read this passage as though its two parts were completely separate. Jesus said that the highest seats were already reserved, the apostles had to learn that service was paramount. However, the passage is a unit, one complete moral instruction. Let's go back to that unasked question, "If the highest places in heaven are reserved, for whom are they reserved?" Jesus' answer is, "They are reserved for those who do not put themselves first, but who instead give their lives in service to all." There is no question of predestination here - there are no names on the seats, so to speak. Rather those who do sit there will be the ones who were servants of all.

It's Jesus' gentle way of doing something he so often has to do, namely, showing us that a question we ask as though it were the most normal thing in the world, is really the wrong

question to be asking. "Don't be asking, 'Who's first?'" Jesus tells the apostles. "Instead ask, 'How can I serve?'" Changing the question transforms not only the answer, but also the apostles' whole approach to life - and ours.

Posted 10/25/2000 10:59:20 AM

# Who's Driving the Bus?

October 18, 2000

## WHO'S DRIVING THE BUS?

Father Paul Keenan  
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During my school days, the favored means of transportation for getting to school was the familiar yellow school bus. Each day it would pull up in front of the house, pick me up, and drive on to the other kids' houses and on to school. The route was well defined, and each of us had a definite pick-up time.

One day there was a variation in the route. For some reason, the bus driver decided that instead of taking us to school, he would do something different. He decided to drop us off at a drive-in where we could get something to eat. He wasn't authorized to do that, and got himself into a great deal of trouble for doing so. He dropped us off very late for school, and a number of parents called to complain.

Our bus driver was very foolish to do such a thing; and, looking back, it's a wonder he didn't lose his job. Nevertheless, his diversion provided me with food for thought. Many times since those high school days, it has seemed to me that the bus I was riding, proverbially speaking, had changed direction and drifted far from its supposed route. Sometimes I thought I had been driving the bus, and I was genuinely surprised to see it going in a different direction. At other times, I thought someone else was supposed to have been driving it, and I was upset and disappointed at the course it took with him or her at the wheel. "If I could just get a hold of that steering wheel," I told myself, "I could get things back on track." Then, there would ensue a struggle for the wheel that could have endangered us all.

The best idea is to let God be the bus driver. Doing that doesn't mean that at times the bus won't take some mighty strange turns. We have the route all planned (the words "route" and "routine" are related, after all) and suddenly we find ourselves in a strange neighborhood, not exactly knowing which way to turn. Sometimes the new route is scenic. At other times, it is bumpy and full of strangers in every sense of the word. Of course, we can try to wrestle the wheel away from God and get things back "on track." But if we're wise, we'll remember that God takes us to places for a reason - to learn something, to help someone else, to get free of a limitation or a bad habit. Wherever he takes us, there's a reason for our being there. If we ask him, he will show us why we're where we are.

Remember the old movie, "It's A Wonderful Life"? At one point in the movie, George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) becomes so desperate that he wishes he had never been born. With the help of an angel named Clarence, George comes to realize that if he had not been born, many, many people would not have been helped and a great deal of evil would not have been prevented.

Whenever we feel that life is taking us on a strange ride, we can remember to let God drive the bus. He'll take us to some interesting places, remove us from some places where we should not be, and show us what we can do for the people whom we meet along the way.

# God's Generosity

October 13, 2000

## God's Generosity

Father Paul Keenan  
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The Gospel of Luke is sometimes referred to as "the Gospel of prayer" because in it there is so much emphasis on prayer, particularly the prayer of Jesus. In that Gospel, St. Luke does something very interesting with his juxtaposition of the Lord's Prayer and Jesus' teaching about prayer. When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, he gives them the Our Father. Then he talks to them about persistence in prayer, telling them the story of a man asking his neighbor for a loaf of bread in the middle of the night. Though the neighbor shoos him off, the man finally gets the bread because of his persistence in asking. Jesus tells the disciples that they, too, should be persistent in prayer; and that God will more than happily reward them if they persist in asking for what they want, especially for the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' instruction is very interesting because it encourages the disciples to make use of the precious gift he has given them in the Lord's Prayer. His entire discourse urges them strongly to use that prayer as much as they need to. That says a lot about Jesus and his Father. Ordinarily when we give someone a precious gift, we worry about whether they will know how to use it, and we urge them to caution. For example, if a mother gives her teenage daughter a ring that is a family heirloom, she'll instruct her as to how to use it and tell her to be very careful not to mar it or lose it. If a parent gives a son or daughter a fortune when they reach the age of maturity, that father or mother will most likely warn them not to spend, spend, spend, but to use the money wisely.

Jesus, on the other hand, gives his disciples the gift of a wonderful prayer; yet far from warning them to be careful with it, he tells them instead to make use of it without hesitation. That is because God's love and generosity are infinite. He loves to give abundantly and loves to be asked.

Fortunately, Jesus did not restrict that gift to the disciples. He gives it to us as well. We, too, are urged to take advantage of God's generosity every day. And the best part is, he wants to give to us!

# The Invitation

September 22, 2000

## THE INVITATION

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There are many stories in the Gospels about Jesus eating with tax collectors and people known publicly to be sinners. Often, he is shown to be a guest in the homes of these people, breaking bread with them and enjoying their hospitality. Generally when that happens, some person or group of persons raises an objection to Jesus' doing this. "Why," they ask, "does he want to associate himself with tax collectors and sinners?"

Interestingly enough, one never sees in the Gospels any invitations being extended to those who complain. Had tax collectors and sinners invited them to their homes, they most certainly would have refused. But we never see any such invitations being issued. And yet, by contrast, they are issued in great abundance to Jesus.

This fact says something important about Jesus. He was the sort of person whom people wanted to be around. His manner drew people to him. And once they met him, they wanted to stay with him. St. Luke mentions the names of several women, Mary Magdalene among them, who were healed by Jesus and who then went about with him as he traveled with the Twelve. St. Luke tells us that these women contributed to the support of Jesus in his work. Again, Jesus so touched their hearts that they wanted only to be with him.

This is the Lord who loves us, who calls us and wants us to be with him. When we see how others longed to be in his company, we experience the warm and tender heart that extends itself to us, wanting to be in ours. This is no aloof and distant God - this is a warm and loving heart whose passion is to be with us.

When we pray to him, perhaps it will help us to remember that gracious and affectionate heart. He wants to be with us. Let's remember to invite him.

# Acts of Kindness

September 15, 2000

## Acts of Kindness

Father Paul Keenan  
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Just the other day I received a copy of a book called "Get Well Wishes." A woman named June Cotner wrote it. June is a writer who lives in Seattle and she decided to write this book because she realized how people need comfort when they are sick. She asked a number of people to submit poems or inspirational thoughts for the book. I'm sure "Get Well Wishes" will bring hope and inspiration to many.

The book reminded me of how very small our acts of kindness can be, and how much they mean at a difficult point in life. It's not about giving expensive gifts or performing arduous feats. It's a matter of picking up the phone or paying a visit. It's saying a kind word or sending a thoughtful card on which you have taken time to write a loving message. Sometimes it's about having the consideration not to smother our loved ones with words and presents and visits. Sometimes, the best gift we can give them is leaving them alone, so long as we also let them know that we do care for them.

I wish I had a nickel for every time a parent has shown me a homemade get well card or birthday card given to them by one of their children. You would think the kids had given them the world. Again, it's the simple things that are often the best.

Jesus had the same idea himself. His miracles were acts of kindness performed on behalf of others - healing someone who has been sick for almost forty years, feeding a starving crowd, consoling his followers who did not yet know that he had risen from the dead. Acts of kindness were a major part of Jesus' life.

Let's remember to take time for the small things, the acts of kindness which seem so unimportant, but which can mean the world to someone we love.

# Remembering

September 8, 2000

## Remembering

Father Paul Keenan  
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People love to be remembered. Whenever I have the opportunity to return to a parish in which I once served, people are always delighted to find that I remember who they are. I'm the same way - I'm happy when they remember me. That instant of recognition makes all the difference in the world.

Throughout the Old Testament, we find the people of God asking that God remember them. And there are places where we find God lamenting that his people have forgotten him. It seems that God likes to be remembered as much as we do.

When Jesus was crucified, the Good Thief had one request of him: "Remember me when you enter into your kingdom."

When Jesus was getting ready to leave this earth, he asked that his disciples remember him and his message. Telling them to go forth to all nations, he instructed the apostles, "Teach them to observe all the commands I gave you." He did not want his life and his message to be forgotten.

The Eucharistic Prayer at Mass is full of references to remembrance. We remember God's love throughout the ages, we remember Jesus' institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, we remember the saints, the Church throughout the world, the Pope and the Bishops, and those who have died. The entire prayer from beginning to end is a prayer of remembrance as well as of consecration.

The Church's calendar is an act of remembrance. How many of the saints would we remember if we did not celebrate their feasts each year? Knowing how difficult it is to remember important birthdays and anniversaries of people in our immediate circle, I can well imagine that without the Church's remembrance, most of us would forget those who have gone before us in faithfulness, often to the point of death.

An old song says, "You promised that you'd forget me not, but you forgot to remember." With our busy lives, it's all too common for us to forget to remember God, our traditions, our history, and each other. Remembering is an act of respect and love.

Let's take time to remember.

# Laborers in the Vineyard

August 23, 2000

## Laborers in the Vineyard

Father Paul Keenan  
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One of the better-known parables of Jesus is the story of the owner of the vineyard who went out to the town square to hire laborers. He went out at various times of the day; and when he settled his accounts at the end of the day, he gave those who had worked only an hour the same wage as those who had worked all day in the heat. The latter complained that the owner should have given them a greater wage because they had worked more; but the owner stood his ground.

There are many interpretations and explanations of this parable. Whatever else it may say, it tells us a great deal about the compassion of God.

Most of us, on hearing the parable, are on the side of the men who had worked all day and felt slighted because they thought that they would receive more money in return for their labors. It makes sense to us that they should receive more than those who had worked only for an hour. We're ready to go to bat for them. If we were in their shoes, we would feel the same way.

The owner of the vineyard has a different view of the matter. If he were to give the last group of workers only one hour's pay, how would they ever be able to support themselves and their families? One hour's wages wouldn't go very far to providing food, clothing and shelter for themselves and their loved ones. They may as well not have worked at all. Indeed, they must already have been strapped, since apparently they did not have regular jobs. The master understood their situation; and, instead of giving them merely an hour's wages, paid them for the entire day. It was an act of sheer generosity, based on his feeling for their situation.

This story tells us much about God. It is a story of God's infinite care for our situations and circumstances and his compassion for our needs. Like the first set of workers, we may not always understand God's ways or agree with them. What we are asked to understand is that God's intentions always go in the direction of being considerate of our needs and those of other people. If we can approach our crises with that mindset, perhaps we will see blessings and graces that might otherwise escape our notice.

Posted 8/23/2000 3:18:43 PM

# Living with Depth

August 18, 2000

## Living With Depth

Father Paul Keenan  
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A defining moment in the life of a family is the moment when one of the kids turns to the parents and says, "I want a puppy." To the child, the only thing that matters is getting the puppy. But to you, the parents, there's a lot more involved. Most likely, you'll give your son or daughter the standard lecture. "You have to remember that a puppy is a lot of work. It needs food and water. It needs to be taken out. It needs to be bathed. It's going to be your responsibility." And you're right. Taking care of an animal is a great responsibility. Besides all of the things I mentioned, there's the whole question of relating to the animal, being kind to it, playing with it, talking to it, developing a relationship. It can be a wonderful experience for a kid, but getting there involves a level of maturity. It's one thing to get the dog. It's another to really take care of it and make it part of the family. It involves a deeper level of understanding.

Life is forever calling us to deeper levels, too. You probably know people who seem to live their whole lives on a very superficial plane. Seldom, if ever, do they talk about anything in depth. You feel uncomfortable around people like that - you really want something more.

St. John's Gospel tells the story of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and the fishes. The very next day, the crowd follows Jesus, wanting him to do it again. Jesus has to tell them that the point of the miracle was not to give them bread, it was to nourish their souls. They were living and thinking on the physical plane, but Jesus was calling them to something more.

We are made in the image and likeness of God. When societal attitudes and the casual manner of people around us tempt us to take a superficial approach to life, we need to remember that all-important fact. Made in God's image and likeness, we are called to be people of the spirit, people whose reverence for life and for other people demonstrates an awareness that easy answers and quick fixes will not always, or even very often, fill the bill. Just as we would ask our children to take responsibility for a new pet, the Lord asks us, his children, to be people of depth and responsibility in the way we live our lives.

Posted 8/18/2000 11:17:33 AM

# Two Reasons Not to Worry

August 14, 2000

## Two Reasons Not To Worry

Father Paul Keenan  
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The recent celebration of the feast of St. Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr, brought home the importance of looking within for the strength and guidance we need in difficult situations. Few of us, hopefully, will ever have the experience of being literally roasted on a gridiron by those who oppose our faith, as St. Lawrence was. However, as we meet the trials and tribulations of life, we can have the same inner strength that this zealous saint showed for the love of Christ.

The traditional story about St. Lawrence is that, while he was enduring his painful torture, he said to his captors, "Please turn me over now. I think I'm done on this side." I find it hard to imagine being able to maintain a sense of humor and such great composure in the face of searing pain. It can only happen when someone knows that there is much more to life than the physical level. Everything around us tries to make us believe that what we see is all we get. As a result, when things go badly for us, we immediately assume it's the end of the world. But when, instead, we make our true home inside ourselves, at the level of our soul, we realize that physical distress and failure are not the end of the world. In fact, they are often entry points to our drawing on our spiritual realm for sustenance and support.

Practical people will often ridicule that point of view, saying that it means running away from our responsibilities in the "real" world. People who say such things forget the fact that when God designed the soul, he gave it a two-fold dimension. We are more familiar with the one dimension - the one that turns inward for divine sustenance and strength. We forget that there is a second dimension to the soul - an outer dimension, in virtue of which God imbued the soul with a desire to return to the external world to bring his presence to that important dimension of life. Notice this in the case of St. Lawrence. On the one hand, he was buoyed by the inner grace of God; on the other hand, he was able to bring that inner grace to the pain of his torture. Thanks to the way God made it, the soul insists upon turning inward to find him, and it also insists upon turning outward to show his love to the world.

Knowing this gives us two reasons not to worry. One, we needn't worry that when tragic things happen to us, it's the end of the world. We can look within and be sustained by the love of God. Two, we needn't worry that so doing will remove us from our participation

in things here on earth. God has so designed the soul that it longs to bring him right back to "terra firma," where all whose lives we touch can see his love.

Having two more reasons not to worry is a fine thing, indeed.

# The Potter's Hand

August 3, 2000

## The Potter's Hand

Father Paul Keenan  
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One day, God told the prophet Jeremiah to visit a potter, and to expect to receive a message there. When Jeremiah arrived at the potter's house, he watched with fascination as the potter worked his wheel. With the skill of a craftsman, he made something; but in the process found that it wasn't to his liking. So he destroyed his creation and proceeded to use the clay to make something else.

The Lord used Jeremiah's visit to the potter to teach him and his people a lesson about how he, the Lord, would deal with the People of God if they strayed from him. It's a valuable lesson - he is the potter and we are the clay. Like the potter, he can mold us and shape us; and it's up to us to relax into his hands and allow him to do his handiwork.

It's a nice story to read but a difficult one to practice. Most of us prefer to do things our own way rather than to follow the Lord's plan. Whenever I think of Jeremiah's story, I remember a conversation I had several years ago. Someone was meeting me at the train station to take me to a retreat house where I was to give a talk. As we were driving to the retreat house, my friend began to talk about this story from Jeremiah and how it had affected her life. "I don't always understand what's happening in my life," she admitted. "But when I remember that the Lord is holding me in his hands and shaping me into the person I was meant to be, then I find a deep inner peace.

"It's been true my whole life," she went on. "Sometimes I forget that I'm the clay. When that happens - when I try to be the potter - things don't turn out so well. Just as the potter has to reshape the clay completely, so the Lord has to step in and undo what I have done. But the good news is that he then begins to make things better than I could have ever imagined."

Some people bristle at this. "Doesn't the Lord want us to be potters, too?" they ask. "Doesn't he expect us to work to make the world better?" Of course, but that's the second step. Before the potter can shape the clay artfully, he or she has to become a potter. Until the potter is formed, no beautiful objects can be made.

It's the same with us. Our work in the world will truly be the most sanctifying work it can be when we have allowed the Lord to mold us. If his hand does not transform us, chances are that our work is not going to show him forth very effectively.

We can do our best work in the world only when we submit to the hand of the Potter.

Posted 8/3/2000 5:15:25 PM

# Good Seed, Bad Seed

July 26, 2000

## Good Seed, Bad Seed

Father Paul Keenan  
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"A sower went out to sow his seed." That's the start of a very well-known parable of Jesus about a farmer who goes out to sow seeds in his field. As the parable goes, only a small percentage of the seed falls on good soil; but it produces an extremely abundant yield of crop.

In our reflections on this parable, we often stress the seed that falls on good ground. We love results and numbers and bottom lines, and the successful seed appeals to us.

What about the rest? The story says that, far and away, most of the seed the farmer sows does not result in successful crop. From the story, it appears that only about a third, perhaps, of the farmer's work is successful.

There's a lesson there about farming and about life. The sower in the story scatters seed all over, and without the seed that falls on rocky ground or succumbs to thorns, there would not be the seed that falls on good soil and produces abundant crops. The unsuccessful seed in the story is just as much a part of the farming process as the successful.

In life, we tend to focus on our successes and to be ashamed of our failures. In fact, we may beat up on ourselves for having failed so much. We may not think that there are many successes on our scoreboard.

The less than fully successful efforts we make are as important a part of life as our successful ones. The efforts we make at reconciliation that do not result in success, the prayers we say that seem to go unanswered, the efforts we make at work which do not result in profits, the tries that we make at adjusting our medication that do not result in improving our health - these are a very important part of life. The successes may give us more satisfaction in the short run. But the failures give us virtue - patience, wisdom, depth of spirit.

Just as seed that has failed to produce fruit is part of the process of farming, so experiences that are not successful are an important part of life. Let's not hide them; let's understand them and help us to live more fully.

Posted 7/26/2000 5:01:25 PM

# Taking the Road

July 6, 2000

## Taking the Road

Father Paul Keenan  
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Remember the Gospel story in which Jesus heals a couple of men who are possessed, and sends the demons into a herd of pigs, who go tumbling down the hill to their death?

Recently, I was reflecting on that story, and something struck me about it. Like most people, my previous musings had led me to spend most of my time reflecting on the pigs and their demise, so I missed another aspect of the story that, this time, really intrigued me.

St. Matthew tells us that the two possessed men were so dangerous and so notorious that people avoided going down the road. They were afraid for their safety and for their lives, so steered clear of it. Why didn't Jesus? Certainly, Jesus must have known that there was danger on that path. Everybody in town knew it? What made him decide to take that road rather than to avoid it?

It's natural to think here of Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken." But the two stories are very different. In Frost's poem, the poet chooses between two roads that are equally lovely; why he chooses one over the other he doesn't quite know. In the case of Jesus, he clearly chooses a "road not taken" by most people. But the road is not taken because it is dangerous, unlike the situation with Frost. Jesus directly takes the road less traveled even though he knows it is unsafe.

Jesus can do this because of his trust in his heavenly Father and his relationship with him. "I and the Father are one," Jesus once told his disciples. Jesus' disciple, John, would tell people, "Perfect love drives out fear," a statement which is at the heart of Jesus' life. Jesus chooses to take the dangerous path knowing that he has nothing to fear, because he has his Father's protection.

There are times in life when we, too, must look danger in the eye. As we fulfill our God-given mission on earth, we will meet risky, perilous times. People will tell us not to take that road, and certainly will avoid taking it themselves. If we're convinced that it's a road that God wants us to travel, we can take that road without fear. That's the message of Jesus: we can rely on God's loving protection. As it worked for Jesus, so will it work for us.

# Don't Be My Guest

June 28, 2000

## Don't Be My Guest

Father Paul Keenan  
Office of Communications  
Archdiocese of New York

Someone I know is constantly having guests from Europe to her house. Four or five of them will come, stay for a few weeks, then go home. Before long, another bunch will arrive, and the routine goes on and on. When my friend goes home to visit, they care for her in the same way. Hospitality is a lot of effort, but it is one of the best virtues going. Taking in guests and making them feel at home should be among the works of mercy, spiritual and corporal.

The Bible shows us many instances in which by taking in strangers, people have entertained angels. One of the recurrent themes of scripture is that God often sends his angels in disguise to bring us a message or to give us an opportunity to find his special guidance and direction. We never know who the guests in our lives really are, or what divinely guided message they might bring.

Sometimes, however, we treat God as though he were a guest in our lives. We busy ourselves about a lot of other things, and occasionally let him in for a visit. That's fine, if it means that we make God feel welcome and give him love and respect. But is God really meant to be a guest, someone who is not usually part of the household?

The ideal is to make God a permanent part of our household, part of our daily life and routine, an ongoing and important object of our attention. This is true, whether by "household" we mean our home, or whether we mean our soul, our spiritual life. When God is a family member, there is more peace, more love. We pay more attention to our morals and treat other people with more respect. We have a brighter outlook and look upon our setbacks as challenges and opportunities for God's grace. His presence gives our homes and our souls a deeper focus.

We may be the guests of others during this summer season. We may have guests in our own home. Let's not make God one of them. Instead, let's make attention to him, to his Word, to prayer a permanent part of our lives. What a difference we'll see.

# Marriage Work

June 7, 2000

## Marriage Works

Father Paul Keenan  
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It's the time of year when wedding bells ring, and when married couples often come to God in a day of recollection or a retreat to renew their commitment to God and to one another. Having the privilege of giving three of these in the course of the month of June, I am very happy to see so many couples working on their marriages.

It's especially heartening because the rumor going around the culture is that marriage doesn't work. Families today know full well about the 50% divorce rate. They have divorced people among their circles of friends. They are exposed to articles, talk shows and sitcoms that reinforce the notion that having a peaceful married life is next to impossible. There's not a great deal of support for marriage in society at large.

But the truth is, marriage does work and can work. It takes time and attention and the willingness to hang in there through some difficult times, but people do it and it can be done.

The simplest way, I think, to have a successful marriage is to do two things. First, be on each other's side, not on each other's back. When a husband and wife truly want the best for each other, they are likely to make their marriage work. When a couple is not committed consistently to wanting the best for each other, they can attend workshops and practice communication skills, but something very important will be missing.

Second, invite God into the marriage. God can do what we cannot. He can find ways for us to get through the tough times when we have lost heart. Couples who take time to pray together at the start or the end of the day, who go to church together each week, are drawing on the power of God to keep their marriage alive. And it's important to pray for the marriage and to ask God's help in making it prosper.

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# One Vine, Many Branches

May 24, 2000

## One Vine, Many Branches

Father Paul Keenan  
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When you take the gospels all together, it seems as if one of the most difficult problems people had in Jesus' day was trying to figure out who he really was. All told, there seemed to be a number of levels on which people saw Jesus. Perhaps the same is true of us as well, as we try to sort out our lives and their purpose on earth.

The first level is biographical. This is the level of Jesus' personal history. He was the son of God, a member of the House of David, son of Mary and foster son of Joseph the carpenter, a relative of Elizabeth and Zachary and of John the Baptist. He was born in Bethlehem and lived in Nazareth until he began his public life at around age thirty. That is the first level of knowledge about Jesus: the public knowledge of his early life.

The second level is that of his achievements. Jesus was known to be a powerful preacher and miracle worker who favored the company of known sinners and hailed their conversion to a life of goodness. At the same time, he was known to be hard on the religious leaders of the day. His preaching in parables was a source of confusion to some, as was his propensity to heal people on the sabbath and to challenge those who held this to be a violation of Jewish law. He was beloved of the people to whom he preached, for his preaching was in a spirit of true authority. He preached a gospel of love while at the same time tightening up many aspects of the law that had fallen into lax observance. He was put to death on a cross and rose from the dead three days later.

These were the levels at which people knew Jesus. But there was a third level, which went beyond his biography and his achievements. It was a level, not of life story or of public conversation, but of his deep inner revelation of himself to others. These are reflected in the Gospel of John in the "I am" statements. When we see Jesus saying, "I am the Bread of Life," "I am the Good Shepherd," "I am the door of the sheepgate," "I am the Resurrection and the Life," "I am the Vine and my Father is the Vinedresser....and you are the branches," we are seeing him reveal himself at a level deeper than his history and his works. This is the deep intimate level of his inmost being. There is a level of Jesus that goes deeper than what he does or who his family is.

That's good to remember about ourselves too. Sometimes we can get so impressed by who we are related to or know or by what we have achieved, that we stop there, never looking at the deepest level of ourselves. We do that with others too, hanging on to them

because of their family or business connections or because of the power of their works. When we do that, we shortchange ourselves and others, too.

Like Jesus, and with Jesus, let's not miss the best part - the spiritual, soulful part, our finest part. People will forget our name or our family name may be tarnished. As with Jesus, people will misunderstand our works or miss the point of them, even turning them against us. It is our inner life, our life in God, that will last.

# Good Shepard

May 18, 2000

## Good Shepherd

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Lately, we have been hearing much about the Good Shepherd. In Sunday and weekday Mass readings, we hear Jesus describing himself as the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and they know him. It's a beautiful passage, and I sometimes wonder if it might not be the source of a beautiful affirmation that would help our lives.

What if we, acknowledging that we are the image of Christ in the lives of those we meet, were to say of ourselves, "I am a good shepherd." What would that mean? It would mean that we assumed an attitude of genuine care and concern about the well-being of others. It would mean that we would be careful about how we treated others, that we would not take for granted. the people who are in our lives.

As good shepherds, we would also take care of the opportunities that come into our lives, especially opportunities to touch the hearts of other people. We would take care of our talents and gifts, realizing that they are gifts from God to be used for the good of others. We would keep our minds and hearts attuned to what is noble and good, eschewing things and actions which are beneath our dignity as sons and daughters of God.

As we affirm that we are good shepherds, we increase and grow in our participation in the life of Christ. And, at a very deep level, we come to understand the heart of Christ more.

May his words, "I am the Good Shepherd" be an invitation to us to grow in the wisdom and compassion and gentleness of heart that are Christ's.

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