

3 June, Trinity Sunday

Today's Gospel (Mt 28.16–20) consists of the concluding verses of Matthew and is a brief summary of both Jesus' mission and that of the disciples which soon will spring into action. The essence of this summary is in the command to baptize "all nations" or *ethnos*, that is, non-Jews and to be "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." At this juncture the disciples certainly knew of Jesus and his frequent references to the Father but had little inkling of the Holy Spirit or *Pneuma*. Throwing in a third person certainly complicates matters. So in order to carry out this baptism the disciples had to know more about these three divine persons. In Matthew's Gospel the last reference to baptism was John the Baptist, nothing at all in between, so the disciples naturally concluded that any baptism would follow the model of John. They must have thought of their early contact with John but knew now that any baptism Jesus had in mind would be different, that is, connected with him as well as the Father and Spirit.

So at the threshold of Jesus' ascension which Matthew doesn't record the disciples are left hanging as what to do. Their mission was of a very general kind open to all sorts of interpretation but again, the only reference point being the baptism of John. What made matters worse was that they weren't present at Jesus' baptism, not even having been called. However, they had knowledge of it as well as that Jesus went into the desert for forty days and nights in between his baptism and when he first summoned them. To a certain extent this period of withdrawal from public view represented where the disciples found themselves right now. However, it would be a mercifully short waiting period until Pentecost. No record exists of what the disciples had thought or discussed among each other then, but by all accounts it must have been very interesting. Again, the only referent point at their disposal was John's baptism.

In addition to Jesus' command to baptize all nations or all non-Jews, he bids them "to observe all that I have commanded you." That means the disciples would have to sit down and recall each and every instance when Jesus actually commanded them, something quite difficult to do unaided on their own. So after the Holy Spirit's descent had been manifested to various people by their ability to understand the disciples, a more important offshoot was the ability for the twelve to get all the facts about Jesus' life straight. Perhaps never have the disciples felt more orphaned as they did right now, this on the heels of the trauma of Jesus' crucifixion. That's why the disciples must have had recourse to the temptations Jesus experienced in the desert after his baptism; at least memory of that time might have offered some consolation.

To make matters worse, if you will, Jesus concludes by saying "I am with you always, to the close of the age." What form this "with you" takes must have baffled the disciples. The only clue is that it has a span of time, the close or *sunteleia* of the age (*aion*). *Aion* refers to a definite period of time, usually extended, and to the disciples that could mean many things. This period of time does have a conclusion or *sunteleia*. That is to say, a consummation which again was not clear to the disciples at this juncture. This word consists of the preposition *sun* (with) prefaced to the root *telos* (end), literally an end-with where *sun* intensifies the sense of end-ness. The disciples must have had in mind Jesus' words in 13.39: "the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels." Thus to them *sunteleia* appears right around the corner. Even if Jesus hung around longer and explained such things as *sunteleia* his followers wouldn't grasp a word he said. In other words, all this ambiguity requires an illumination that must come from within, hence the significance of Pentecost.

10 June, Corpus Christi

Today's Gospel (Mk 14.12-16; 22-26) is an account of the Last Supper which begins with an anonymous man in Jerusalem without whom the succeeding events never would have taken place: "A man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him." This man will "show you a large upper room furnished and ready" for the Passover. We have no clue as to the identity of this man who first led the disciples to the upper room and apparently had known the other man who had prepared it beforehand. Perhaps he may have had an assistant or two who remained equally anonymous. Since there was a mighty throng of pilgrims in Jerusalem, such a place must have been sought after eagerly, even rented out well in advance, so those involved had to keep this upper room a carefully guarded secret. Actually we have definite knowledge that two men were involved: in addition to the man with the water jar there is the householder who either owned or rented out the place. All this took place in the afternoon before Passover evening, for "when it was evening he came with the twelve." By this time all the pilgrims had gathered in their respective places for the solemn event.

Such anonymous persons make their appearances from time to time at key points in a given biblical narrative. For example, a man found Joseph "wandering in the field and asked him, 'What are you seeking'" [Gen 37:15]? This man knew the whereabouts of Joseph's brothers, that is, in Dothan, to which Joseph went and came across them. He must have known them, even casually, and perhaps wondered about the whereabouts of Joseph. However, the brothers sold him into slavery which ultimately turned out not just to their favor but to the entire country of Egypt. So we could say that this man in the wilderness was instrumental in a key point of salvation history.

Another example, albeit of lesser importance but still significant, is Naaman, commander of the army of Syria. He had captured a "little maid from the land of Israel" [2Kg 5.2] who knew how to cure his leprosy "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria!" Eventually Naaman set out to meet Elisha who bade him to wash seven times in the Jordan, thus curing him. So knowledge of Elisha by an unknown little girl saved the mightiest general of the ancient world.

Now the anonymous man (and his possible associates) who prepared the upper room passed off the scene as soon as Jesus and his disciples arrived. Chances are they knew what was about to transpire: the Last Supper followed by Jesus' betrayal, trial and crucifixion. They even could have known, however dimly, that something more was involved and were in the vicinity, if you will, of the place where the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles. This room may have been the same as the Last Supper one though it is not clear. If it was, the disciples knew from recent experience that it was appropriate and contacted that anonymous renter. In addition to the disciples, this man and the one who carried the water jar had been in an ideal situation to know the significance of Jesus' celebration of the Passover and what became known as the Eucharist.

17 June, Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

This is the first Sunday of Ordinary Time since 19 February, a wholly different marking of time not just liturgically but a passage from winter to the threshold of summer. The transition to a time which forms the bulk of the liturgical year is revealed most dramatically the day after Pentecost itself. The only other parallel is the feast of St. Stephen the day after Christmas. However, that second set of days is very short and connected by the notion of martyrdom, of giving witness, as well as the Holy Innocents two days after St. Stephen. Such a juxtaposition of two sets of two different realities offers an opportunity to reveal something that can be overlooked either by familiarity with the liturgical year or just by not paying attention. Of course, the Lord transcends space and time, but we do not and are left to ponder the ways by which the Church teaches us about him. The second contrast which concerns us here comes after a four month interval

of Lent, East and Pentecost. To leave us hanging, as it were, immediately after Pentecost, would be the equivalent of “leaving us as orphans,” something which Jesus did not wish for his disciples. So in order to ease us back into Ordinary Time, the church offers two more Sundays stringing out, if you will, the season from which we had just emerged, Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christi. From there we can make a more graceful exit, better equipped to absorb all that had transpired since mid February. Such is the task for all the remaining Sundays in Ordinary Time, a time of approximately five months which will pass quickly, to be sure. Finally it will be in a need of renewal come the beginning of winter with Advent.

As for this week’s Gospel (Mk 4.26–34), Jesus is seeking to bring home to his listeners the best way possible to describe the kingdom of heaven which he last mentioned in 4.1: “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.” In that instance Jesus is addressing not the people but his disciples, so today we have the second public mention of “kingdom of heaven.” The first is found in 1.15 shortly after John the Baptist was arrested: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Although those listening to Jesus talk about a kingdom must have been a relatively small handful of listeners, word of his message got out and spread rapidly, people were forming all sorts of ideas about what he meant by a kingdom. This power of oral transmission...not necessarily gossip or rumor...often is overlooked or under-appreciated among pre-technical peoples. Chances are they took it as political which forced Jesus to make very clear what he was presented as recounted in today’s Gospel excerpt.

As for the kingdom of God likened to a mustard seed, once it grows “the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” In other words, growth of the tree may be said to be personal but the results of its growth are communal. This comparison can’t but help make one consider Jn 14.2: “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” In other words, the mustard tree which sprang from “the smallest of all the seeds on earth” is analogous to the house of the Father containing an indefinite number of rooms or *mones*. This term refers most often to a room at an inn; it derives from the verb *meno* (to abide, to remain). Thus one gets the idea of the Father’s house (*oikos*) as a huge structure contain a multitude of rooms where people come in and out and get to know each other, not unlike a lodging place. Thus if both comparisons are taken individually or together, they are far as possible from political statements of a kingdom Jesus is promoting.

24 June, St. John the Baptist

Today’s feast takes precedence over the celebration of Sunday in Ordinary Time which shows the importance of John the Baptist. What makes this feast even more interesting is that six months later it stands at the opposite end of the birth of Jesus. In this way John’s words are fulfilled, “He must increase, but I must decrease” [Jn 3.30]. Thus Jesus and John form antipodes, if you will, for both the physical and liturgical ways of telling time. Everything from the birth of Jesus to that of John follows the ascent of the sun which seems contrary to what John said of himself, that is, it is an “increase” from Jesus to John. However, John takes up this “ascent” and transforms it so that it will return from his birth to that of Jesus. John allows Jesus to flow first to him and then from him. And so we have the physical image of the sun’s ascent and descent as secondary to the primacy of Jesus and role of John the Baptist.

Our current position to the longest day of the year gives us the unique opportunity of becoming aware of the first half of the year, notably the Lenten–Easter cycle which we concluded a few weeks ago. Prior to this we advanced through the

time after Christmas or what traditionally is called the hidden years of Jesus' life of thirty years prior to his three years of ministry. Now the span from today "downward" to Christmas or more precisely, to Advent, focuses upon the significance and teachings of that three year ministry. While certainly short, the lengthy period of preparation was necessary to lend meaning to these three years.

As for today's Gospel (Lk 1.57-66), Elisabeth was noted by both "neighbors and kinsfolk" as one whom "the Lord had shown great mercy." Both categories of people were on much more intimate terms in ancient societies than nowadays as can be observed from their designations, *perioikos* and *suggenis*: those who dwell around (*peri-*) and those who dwell with (*sug-*). Then we have the verb "rejoiced" with Elisabeth, *sugchairo* or to rejoice with (*sug-*). In other words, both forms of relationships are virtually indistinguishable from each other and thus unite in rejoicing with Elisabeth. This close connection between relatives and non-relatives is borne out further with "And all the these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea." The result? "All who heard them laid them up in their hearts." The Greek reads literally "and placed all those hearing in the heart of theirs," the singular *kardia* belonging to the plurality of possessors. Thus these people foreshadowed, if you will, Mary's reaction to the shepherds: "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart."

As for the mercy shown by God to Elisabeth, *eleos* is the Greek term for the Hebrew verbal root *chanan* of the same attribute. It, in turn, formed the essence of John's name. *Chanan* means to be inclined favorably, to be gracious, and is more acceptable for a name than the well-known *chesed*. To name someone after this difficult-to-define divine quality would be inappropriate, of appropriated too much of the divinity to a human being. Thus *chanan* is quite acceptable.

Apparently both Elizabeth and Zechariah had settled upon a name for their son based upon divine *chanan*, that is, John. Each in their own ways had an intimation that John was the object of *chanan*, most likely stemming all the way back to the leaping of both infants in their mothers' wombs. The inability of Zechariah to speak goes back to his encounter with the angel Gabriel: "And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their time." In other words, Zechariah, although being a holy person, did not share the same faith as Mary to whom the same angel is about to appear. That means he is to remain silent from the inception of John (and Jesus) to their respective births some nine months later.

1 July, Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's fairly long Gospel (Mk 5.21-43) begins with the daughter of Jairus and is interrupted by the woman with a flow of blood after which Jesus enters Jairus' house and cures his daughter. The request this man made to Jesus is interesting: "so that she may be made well and live," the two verbs being *sozo* and *zao*. First comes *sozo* which fundamentally means to save, to rescue followed by *zao*, to live. In the case at hand, both are similar for the girl who "is at the point of death," a phrase which reads literally as "has extremely" or *eschatos echei*, the adverb signifying being at the end (of life).

Jairus must have met Jesus at the shore when he arrived amidst "a great crowd," *ochlos* implying a group of people somewhat like a mob. Surely Jesus saw this gathering *ochlos* well out on the lake; in addition to those on shore, chances are that a flotilla of small boats had accompanied him. Jairus was a prominent individual, head of the local synagogue, so he must have heard about Jesus in greater detail from his previous visits to other synagogues. Apparently the reports were favorable else Jairus would not have gone out to meet Jesus and ask him to cure his daughter's desperate illness. Thus Jairus accompanied Jesus to his house, probably not far away from the lakeside. It was at this point that the same *ochlos*

followed Jesus and “thronged about him,” the verb being *sunthilbo* which consists of the verbal root *thilbo* (to press, squeeze) prefaced with the preposition *sun* (with) and thus intensifies the sense of being crushed in from all sides. It was from the midst of this *ochlos* that the woman with the flow of blood emerged. In other circumstances she may have been shunned as unclean, but the situation at hand clearly was different.

So while Jesus was attempting to make his way forward, he stopped to cure this woman which must have made Jairus feel even more impatient at both Jesus and the woman, given that his daughter was *eschatos* at death, if you will. Jairus must have known her and even may have tried to assist her in her need. However, every dely now must have been agonizing for him during what apparently was a short walk from the shore to the house, all the while being squeezed in by the thronging crowd.

Given the close-knit nature of society of the time, everyone knew about the daughter of Jairus because he was head of the local synagogue. That made it all the more enticing for the people to know the result of Jesus’ visit to her. However, he leaves them hanging: “he strictly charged them that no one should know this.” Of course everyone assumed that Jesus had cured Jairus’ daughter, so despite them, Jesus was not concerned as having wrought the cure but that the girl’s health had been restored. This miracle must have had a lasting impact upon Jairus later when the religious leaders sought to kill Jesus. We hear nothing about him after this incident but can assume that he as local synagogue leader did not consent to their machinations and even may have joined the disciples’ band. His daughter, too, could have joined once she got older and became an important influence within the fledgling band of followers. In addition, the woman who had been cured of her flow of blood may have become a follower of Jesus. In this way, all three were bound together by their mutual healing contact with Jesus and were helpful at filling in details of their story to the disciples.

8 July, Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mk 6.1–6) begins with “He went away from there and came to his own country.” That is, Jesus left “the country of the Gerasenes” [5.1] where he had just cured the daughter of Jairus, including the woman with a flow of blood. Mark thought it important to add in this opening verse, “his disciples followed him.” Of course, they had followed him earlier, but what stands out here is that they continue to do so in territory familiar to Jesus. Perhaps they felt a bit awkward at being with Jesus when he was among people who had known him all their lives. The disciples were strangers here and did not feel at easy which means that Jesus had to introduce them. Although a bit later the locals express sarcasm towards Jesus, the same must have been directed to the disciples who took it equally hard.

Instead of saying that Jesus headed directly for home, right away Mark says that on the Sabbath Jesus “began to teach in the synagogue.” Chances are that Jairus, head of his synagogue, had sent ahead a favorable recommendation which apparently was not received well. After all, many had known Jesus and his family which didn’t impress them in the least. Despite this, nothing bad seemed to have been drudged up about Jesus nor his family, just that his teaching and miracles didn’t fit him with his common lineage. The people may even have felt some alarm at the attention being drawn to their area by reason of Jesus’ increasing popularity. If it continued, the Romans might take a closer look and send in troops.

And so the locals expressed their astonishment, the verb being *ekplesso* or literally, to strike out of, to drive away from. Jesus’ teaching provoked this strong response though we have no details as to the content of this teaching. At the same

time the people acknowledged grudgingly that Jesus was endowed with special gifts, especially when they exclaimed “What mighty works are wrought by his hands!” However, it could be a slight against Jesus, for immediately they exclaim, “Is not this the carpenter?” In other words, the people are making a comparison between what they know of him...his former occupation...and his current occupation, if you will, healing and teaching.

As for summing up the people’s response to Jesus’ arrival in their midst, vs. 3 reads “And they took offense at him.” The verb is *skandalizo* which literally means to stumble. They weren’t the only one’s to be tripped up but the disciples of Jesus who, as noted above, must have been struck at the hostility shown their master which carried over to them.

15 July, Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mk 6.7–13) continues on the heels of last week’s entry with the connective “and,” indicative of the fast-paced character of Mark. It begins with the sentence, “And he called to him the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.” That means six pairs of men, on the surface not an impressive missionary endeavor, even at this relatively early stage when the disciples barely knew Jesus. As for the authority or *exousia*, we have no details of how Jesus imparted it, but it pertained to “unclean spirits.” He could have breathed this *exousia* upon the twelve much as later he breathed upon them the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 20.22), the incident at hand being a preparation for the permanent mission of the church.

The first example of an unclean spirit comes immediately after Jesus had summoned the disciples: “And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit [1.23]. The second example is the Gerasene demoniac (cf. 5.1–20) which goes into considerable detail. Surely the disciples kept that dramatic encounter in mind as a way of exercising their *exousia* so they would know how to comport themselves. Since they were broken up into six pairs, each went their separate ways, but they must have put some planning into their mission. Most likely they were tempted to consult Jesus, but he preferred to leave them decide. It was good practice for later when they went to preach the Gospel after Pentecost under the Holy Spirit’s guidance. Another benefit of this pairing of the twelve was that it gave opportunity for the each man to know each other better which was re-enforced upon their return when they had the additional opportunity of sharing their experiences of having exercised Jesus’ *exousia*. Then again, Jesus must have stayed apart from this sharing, preferring that the disciples work all this out on their own.

“So they went out and preached that men should repent,” the verb *metanoeo* being the root for *metanoia* or a change of heart. This is a mission distinct from the one of healing yet one running parallel to it. Surely the disciples had in mind the vivid image of John the Baptist. So other than a relatively vague commission, we have nothing more but can intimate it must have been a time of improvisation for the disciples. How long they were out and about is not recorded. Chances are that each of the six groups didn’t return the same time, but given the relatively small area in which they moved about, word spread quickly among the people and thus each group must have been able to keep track of each other, more or less. The amazingly rapid way news traveled at the time is part of the reason inferred in the words of vs. 14 just after this Gospel excerpt, “King Herod heard of it; for Jesus’ name had become known.” Besides, this report reaching to the king implies that what the disciples had done was effective. Even more than any miracles wrought, their message of repentance stuck in the common report about them. And that report quickly reached the ears of King Herod who equated this message with that of John the Baptist whom recently he had murdered. So what started out as a seemingly small, obscure mission, reached all the way to King Herod’s ears which must have been disconcerting for the

disciples as well as Jesus.

As for what Jesus was doing while the disciples were on their mission, nothing is said. He must have taken this as an opportunity to stand back and wait, all the while hoping that the *exousia* he had entrusted them would bear fruit. Most likely he refrained from teaching and curing, this period of waiting being of equal importance as any manifest work. Just as report quickly had reached King Herod, it wouldn't be surprising that word got back to Jesus as to how each of the six pairs was faring.

22 July, Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mk 6.30-34), short as it is, skips the important episode of the death of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod. And so we have an interlude of sorts between that horrific event and the feeding of the five thousand. As noted in last week's entry, King Herod got wind of the disciples' first solo mission: "King Herod heard of it; for Jesus' name had become known." Surely the twelve must have heard about it prior to their return to Jesus and wondered if they would ever see him again or worse, Herod might do the same to Jesus as he had done to John. All this goes to show how quickly news traveled at the time.

"The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." So commences the Gospel. Surely Jesus was anxious to get first-hand news as to what had happened but as the last paragraph intimated, news traveled more quickly than we give credit. That means he must have been fairly well abreast of his disciples' activities, of how that *exousia* or authority over unclean spirits in vs. 7 was working. Such *exousia* wasn't applied anonymously, if you will. Real people in real circumstances were involved. That means some of those who had been cured might have tagged along with the disciples and formed a larger, informal group. These people must have hovered in the background for the remainder of Jesus' ministry and were part of those assembled with the disciples at Pentecost during which they received the fulness of the Holy Spirit. Since they had experienced first hand the *exousia* of Jesus, they were in a better position than most new Christians to proclaim the Gospel.

So once the six pairs had returned and shared their respective stories, Jesus said "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." In other words, we have no account as to the success or failure of the first mission, let alone Jesus' response. Jesus had chosen a "lonely place" or *eremos topos*, *eremos* not because it was the most conducive place to relax but due to its isolation. However, people quickly discovered it, for "many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." Even there the disciples couldn't continue to share their mission with Jesus; in light of the next miracle, they were kept very busy so had to put it off to a later time. *Eukairia* is the noun for leisure which comprises the noun *kairos*, a specific time or event prefaced by *eu* (good, well)...an opportune time. This interruption must have been painful for all involved despite the greatness of the miracle that was to follow shortly.

In the long run, the feeding of so many people must have inspired the twelve disciples in light of their recent mission. They received further insight as to their master's powers and were eager to see if they could do something similar on their own, that is, when Jesus would send them out on their next solo mission. Of course, this anticipation was tainted by the recent beheading of John the Baptist. Since King Herod himself had gotten wind of the six pairs of disciples, surely he had spies in the vicinity right now, perhaps among the five thousand, who would report back any suspicious behavior.

29 July, Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Chapter Six of John's Gospel is seventy-one verses long with today's excerpt (Jn 6.1-15) being a prelude, if you will, to the heart of the matter, Jesus as bread of life. Note that it occurs when "the Passover, the feast of the Jews was at hand." *Eggus* is the adverb for "at hand" meaning near, proximate. This is John's second mention of Passover, the first one in Chapter Two where Jesus does go to Jerusalem and casts out moneylenders from the temple. That may have given him reason to celebrate the next Passover in the countryside away from those he chastised and who were out for revenge. The third and final Passover comes later or in Jerusalem, the one where Jesus institutes the Eucharist. Thus we have Jesus sandwiched in, if you will, between two Passovers, the one at hand being in the countryside. Nothing is said throughout as to its actual celebration or if it ever were celebrated formally. However, the chapter at hand is essential for grasping the meaning of the new Passover to be instituted next year, a kind of catechesis for it. Jesus deliberately chose not to do this in Jerusalem because the confusion there would detract from the heart of his message. Some place quiet and apart is ideal for such important matters.

As for the five thousand he feeds, those people opted not to go to the holiest celebration of the year but be with Jesus. Even though some may have fallen away, it is to their general credit that they had deprived themselves. Surely the religious and civil (Roman) authorities in Jerusalem were aware of such a great multitude in the countryside not partaking of this holiest of holidays, and it was understandable for them to be suspicious. They must have accosted late stragglers to the city and questioned them in great deal as to what had transpired out there.

As soon as Jesus landed by ship on "the other side of the Sea of Galilee," he "went up on the mountain," most likely to avoid those following him both by land and what must have been a small flotilla of boats on the lake. On that unspecified mountain Jesus "sat down with his disciples." The summit of a mountain is a generally small area, so it was easy to ward off people attempting to ascend the mountain while retaining some privacy. Although no record of a discussion exists, Jesus must have forewarned his disciples of his impending discourse of him being the bread of life. Despite their fairly defensible position, they couldn't keep at bay the people who kept coming, so his remarks must have been shorted than intended.

Jesus turned to Philip and asked him a tongue-in-cheek question: "How are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?" Immediately after John inserts "This he said to test him, for he himself knew what he would do." As expected, Philip fell for the trap; the same applies to Andrew who bursts in a bit later. Instead of either arguing or explaining, Jesus has them bid the people to relax on the grass of the mountain. No other sight was like it, totally covered with people from the summit down to the base and perhaps beyond to the Sea of Galilee. As noted in the first paragraph, such a sight did not go by unnoticed and was reported quickly to Jerusalem. Once Jesus had multiplied the fish and bread, the people covering the mountain exclaimed, "This is indeed is the prophet who is to come into the world!" Because the people were not celebrating Passover *per se*, now any doubt as to the source of divine power and presence was dispelled. Who needed the Passover now?

Despite the great success of having fed so many people, later in Chapter Six some people, including Jesus' disciples, were upset at his apparently cannibalistic remarks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Their disgust must have been aggravated by reason of having missed celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem. Then there was the difficult task of explaining to relatives, friends and authorities why they decided against this to follow Jesus. Chances are that some of those more intimate to Jesus up to this point may have been more instrumental than reported as to assisting in the eventual betrayal and eventual arrest of Jesus.

5 August, Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Jn 6.24–35) follows upon the heels of last week, both concerning Jesus as bread of life and the public response to this claim. It is appropriate to have this important chapter during the middle of summer or some distance from the Lenten–Easter–Pentecost cycle and prior to inauguration of a new liturgical year even further away. In other words, Jesus' words in chapter six are an important reminder of both his identity and mission midway, if you will, between the two major halves of the church's liturgical cycle.

“The people...got into boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.” Such is the response to Jesus after the miracle of feeding the five thousand and the subsequent storm on the Sea of Galilee. Many must have been gravely concerned about Jesus' fate during the night and were eager to see if he and his disciples had made it ashore safely. In addition to having been fed, the crowd wanted to make Jesus king (cf. vs. 15). As noted last week, the multiplication of bread was done during the Passover while focus of attention by most Jews was centered upon Jerusalem for that feast. That seems to be why Jesus was doubly afraid of being made king, an insurrection in the countryside that eventually could make its way to the capitol city and beyond.

A bit later in this Gospel when the crowds catch up with Jesus he says “Do not labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life.” The verb here is *ergazomai* which involves working in the sense of performing labor or service as well as the production of bread itself—planting, growing and harvesting and baking—all intimate and vital to people close to the land. Shortly Jesus continues with “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” *Ergon* is the noun for “work” and derives from *ergazomai*. More often than not, *ergon* applies to difficult physical labor which Jesus switches over from the *ergazomai* of bread to believing in him. The really “laborious” aspect of *ergon* becomes apparently shortly: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Not only is it difficult to conceive of eating Jesus as one would eat bread, it's equally an *ergon* to believe that God had sanctioned it (‘whom he has sent’). In other words, both God and Jesus are considered pretty much in cannibalistic terms. Surely in back of the minds of most people were the paschal lambs which had been slaughtered a few days earlier in Jerusalem. No wonder that the Jews thought “This is a hard (*skleros*) saying (*logos*).” His *logos* or word—as-expression is harsh and unyielding even though Jesus puts it in the context of the manna which had come down from heaven to feed the Israelites in the desert. And that desert was comparable to the environment in which Jesus, his disciples and the crowd found themselves. More specifically, they were not in Jerusalem, center of attention, where the Passover was being celebrated. Like Israel of Moses' time, they had made their exodus from Egypt and were wandering in the desert: “They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one” [Heb 11.16]. If any of those present with Jesus during this time and became followers of him later on, surely they must have recalled these words once they have been written...or even had contributed to them being written eventually in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

12 August, Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

For the third week in a row, today's Gospel (Jn 6.41–51) continues to focus upon Jesus as bread of life. More specifically, verses 36–40 are omitted, and for this reason they are discussed here...an important missing link, if you will. Jesus is very clear as to his role vis-a-vis the Father: “all that the Father gives me will come to me.” So here we have Jesus engaged in teaching (certainly more in depth than in other situations) all the while being attentive to people who

will not listen and go away but will come to him. What this coming exactly means isn't spelled out; it can range from being associated with the twelve disciples and actually accompanying Jesus or returning home. As for the latter, it's left up to the individual how he comports himself once home. Certainly this person will follow closely reports about Jesus, for the memory of him must have been indelible. Later when he is put to death, raised and has ascended into heaven, all these reports must have been confusing. Would this person still come to members of the fledgling Christian community or simply let memory of him slip? We have some five thousand people faced with that situation, those whom Jesus had fed as recorded earlier in this chapter.

As for the giving by the Father, it seems not so much to have been decided beforehand but because the present tense is used, it is a kind of give-and-take between the Father and the individual's freedom. It's up to that individual how to respond to the Father according to that inner illumination which Jesus inferred. Once this coming to Jesus happens, he "will not cast out (that person)." The verb *ekballo* has the preposition *ek* (from) prefaced to it, "to cast from" and is used with the adverb *exo* (outside). Thus we have a double casting out, an *ek* and an *exo*, and Jesus will not do this in response to any person who comes to him through the Father's initiative. The Father himself does not come down to the person; instead, the Holy Spirit's work in him is implied.

Only Jesus is the one who has "come down from heaven." As noted above, this descent is preceded by the Father's intervention through the implied Holy Spirit. Once Jesus has descended (and that goes all the way back to his birth), he "should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up at the last day." *Auto* is the word for "it," neuter, which seems to infer that more than human beings are involved. Similarly, Jesus says he will "raise it (*auto*) up at the last day." In addition to this *auto*, he continues with "I will raise him up at the last day." Thus we have a double raising: "it" and "he" first every created thing followed by all persons who come to Jesus. The "it" is proper to an involuntary raising compared with the voluntary one of the persons involved. That is why Jesus concludes this section with "everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life." *Theoreo* is the verb for seeing which means not seeing with the eyes but a seeing as paying close consideration and contemplating in accord with the (implied) Holy Spirit's illumination. And so *theoreo* consists of first being aware of the Spirit's action followed by allowing oneself to be raised up by Jesus: not now but "at the last day."

Once this gap of five verses has been inserted between last week's Gospel and the one at hand, we can appreciate better the *gogguzo* or murmuring by the Jews in vs. 43, a verb which also means to complain, to whisper among one another. Jesus tells the Jews...and by Jews most likely the religious authorities compared with the people (cf. vs. 22)... "Do not *gogguzo* among yourselves." Such *gogguzo* precludes the Spirit's operation of inner illumination intended to draw people to Jesus and to be raised up "at the last day." Later in vs. 52 this *gogguzo* evolves (better to say, devolves) into dispute or *machomai*, a verb which also means to fight ('The Jews then disputed among themselves'). That *machomai* leaves us in suspense as to the Gospels for the next two Sundays. Once the warning both not to engage in *gogguzo* and *machomai* have been heeded during this season more or less midway between the end of the Lenten-Easter season and the coming of Advent, we as listeners to the Gospel passages between then and now are in a more secure position for being raised up according to vs. 40.

15 August, Assumption

Today's very short Gospel (Lk 11.27-8) comes from the Vigil Mass.

An anonymous woman “raised her voice,” the verb being *epairo* which connotes a stirring up, to cause excitement. The suddenness of such an exclamation is heightened by the woman being in the “crowd” or *ochlos* which applies to a group of people pretty much bordering upon a mob. So for this woman to catch the attention of Jesus from the midst of such a tumult is a tribute not just to her lung-power but more especially to her joy at recognizing Jesus. Such an utterance is perfect and complete from a woman whose identity remains forever unknown and is fully appropriate to the situation. If we knew her name and background, that would detract from her role, brief as it is. Some in the crowd must have known her, but again, this is passed over in her favor. Surely if Mary, the mother of Jesus had been present, she would have concurred with this woman’s anonymity. Then again, perhaps both women knew each other, the woman speaking up for her friend, Mary.

The woman exclaimed, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!” It’s irrelevant whether the woman knew Jesus’ mother; the point is that she realized Mary was *makarios*, a word that similarly means happy. Immediately Jesus responds—we could say that he raised (*epairo*) his voice almost as soon as the woman—with a delightful response. “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” One gets a clear impression that Jesus exclaimed these words literally on the run or while he was pressed in by the *ochlos*, for this same crowd increased as vs. 29 says.

Makarios is a rather weak adjective whose sense can be lost in the brief, intense exchange between the anonymous woman and Jesus. The Hebrew adjective derives from the noun *‘esher* (happiness) which is found in the plural and has the force of an interjection which fits in well here. An example which starts off the Psalter is the very first verse of the first Psalm, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked.” The noun *‘esher* is the root for the relative pronoun *‘asher* (who, which, that) and intimates a kind of transition, of being in motion from one place or state to another. Thus the Hebrew *‘ashrey* for “blessed” or “happy” involves something in motion—intensely so—of unable to be nailed down due to the intense joy involved. In the Psalm verse this exclamation/adjective is followed by two similar sounding words: *‘ysh* and *‘asher*: man and the relative pronoun “who.” The “man” or *‘ysh* “who” or *‘asher* walks therefore carries over the *‘ashrey* into proper behavior and does so with great joy.

So when Jesus responds to the anonymous woman, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it,” he engages in a kind of joy-full dialogue where both he and the woman know the meaning of what it means to be *‘ashrey* or happy. We can intimate that some people within the crowd or *ochlos*, more or less familiar with the Psalm verse due to its use in liturgical expression, got a glimpse into that “secret” Jesus and the woman were sharing. She, like so many appearances of angels to people in the Bible, had a quick but intense encounter with the Holy Spirit. Despite this brevity, the woman had no need to speak further; to do so would be inappropriate. Because she exclaimed that Jesus’ mother was *‘ashrey*, in a way she had participated in that encounter Mary had with the angel Gabriel after which “the angel departed from her (Mary)” [1.38].

As for Jesus’ words concerning *‘ashrey* with respect to the word of God, the woman’s attentive ears, as well as some in the crowd, realized that genuine *‘esher* or happiness lay in keeping the *logos* of God. After all, they as Jews were familiar with the both the Psalms as a liturgical text and other books of scripture. Now the task was to “keep” this *logos*, the fruit of being sensitive to what the Gospel presents as a fleeting communication between Jesus and the anonymous woman. *Shamar* is the Hebrew for “keep” which occurs often in the Psalter, especially in the lengthy Psalm 119. All the reader has to do is be attentive to the numerous occasions *shamar* appears in that psalm’s 176 verses and see how it applies to the Law or Torah of the Lord.

19 August, Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Jn 6.51–58) is the next-to-last one belonging to the lengthy discourse on Jesus as-bread-of-life. Thus as of next week, Chapter Six will have filled a considerable amount of Sundays during the summer season, important between the completion of Pentecost and the beginning of a new liturgical year with Advent.

Chapter six began with Jesus feeding the five thousand which offered him an opportunity to present himself as “living bread which came down from heaven” [vs. 51]. Apart from the strong language he uses, it's understandable that people, including “many of his disciples” [vs. 60], found his words difficult if not impossible to accept. What complicates matters is that Jesus does not offer any means as to how people would actually eat his body and drink his blood. If he chose to do so, he would have to speak in Eucharistic terms as he will at the Last Supper, and that would not be proper now. Something like that needs to be communicated to a small group and digested before being made public. The solution to this matter of eating and drinking, if you will, lies in a person willing to come to him (cf. vs. 35), and that involves risk. It is difficult to articulate the response to God, even generally, for the communication consists not in words but inspiration. As pointed out earlier, this coming is from the Father, not from Jesus, so a person has to be attuned to the summons from an invisible source which, in turn, is directed to the person of Jesus Christ. Somewhere in between hearing the Father and the coming to Jesus is the crucial juncture where a person either understands or does not the words which Jesus is saying about himself.

It's easy from the distance of a lengthy tradition to realize that eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood is made real at the Last Supper, but that event lies in the future and is confined to the twelve disciples, nobody else. Furthermore, it occurs during the confusion and crowds present for the Passover, so most people weren't paying attention even to someone like Jesus who by now had gained some renown. Jesus out in the wilderness with the five thousand at the time of Passover and away from Jerusalem (cf. vs. 6) hints at him being the Paschal lamb, another insight we appreciate from hindsight. Perhaps what Jesus had in mind by his words in Chapter Six is for people to “come” to him and his disciples between the present delivery of his words and the actual Last Supper. At that Passover to come, most were celebrating it in the traditional fashion while others might be close by to the upper room watching from a distance, as it were, what Jesus and the twelve were doing. Such is part of that coming to Jesus he had spoken of. Nothing is said of this but we can pretty much surmise that some of the five thousand must have been close by. Although Jesus was soon to be abandoned by his disciples, plenty of other people affected by his healing and teaching must have been at the periphery of events all the while watching and hoping.

Although the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus took place not long after the Last Supper, there remains Pentecost when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit after which they began their preaching ministry. So any coming to Jesus, eating his body and drinking his blood is left up to the disciples to interpret.

Jesus intimates the role of the Holy Spirit in next Sunday's Gospel, for example, “it is the spirit that gives life” though that is only an intimation of things to come. Other than that (and vs. 63) Chapter Six has no mention of the Spirit. And so one can read this chapter as a partial fulfilment of the post-Pentecost era or era of the Church when the Holy Spirit comes into the picture in a more manifest way. John's account given in Chapter Six thus became a guide for future generations as how to receive the Eucharist in light of the not-yet fully revealed Spirit.

26 August, Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jn 6.60–69 brings to completion several Sundays of Gospel readings from Chapter Six. It might be helpful to consider that lengthy chapter as an extended “summer reading” project in between the Lenten–Easter–Pentecost cycle of the past and the Advent–Christmas one of the future.

In response to those who considered Jesus’ words about eating his body and drinking his blood as *skleros logos* or literally as “hard word,” he does nothing to mitigate his language. In fact, Jesus speaks even more forcefully, and most listeners by now thought he had lost his mind or was outright arrogant. “What if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before?” Earlier Jesus spoke of his descent in terms of being the “bread of life”...but what is this talk about ascending? Where exactly is this “place” to which he claims to have been “before” (*to proteron*)? As for those people trying their best to follow Jesus, they are caught in between his descent in terms of manna (easy to understand by reason of familiarity with scripture) and his ascent which for some intimates that Jesus might be Elijah in disguise. Perhaps that is why later when Jesus was on the cross some who may have been present with him now thought he was calling upon Elijah (cf. Mk 15.35).

As for those who actually heard what Jesus said, an event not unlike Elijah’s ascent took place, namely, his ascension into heaven (cf. Acts 1.9). Simultaneously two men—specifically they are called men, not angels, to verify the flesh-and-blood nature of all this—said “why do you stand looking into heaven?” In the Gospel at hand we can intimate these two men present with Jesus, albeit invisibly, rebuking the crowd. Great as Jesus’ ascension into heaven is, it pales in comparison with what the two men say next: “(he) will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Nothing is said about the disciples continuing their conversation with the two men. Their task was over as quickly as it began, for they followed, if you will, in Jesus’ train as he ascended. Compare these two men with the two angels whom Mary met at Jesus’ tomb in Jn 20.11+. They had no part in Jesus’ ascension because their function as angels...messengers...was different and thus had no need to ascend with him and the two men.

With this intimation of Christ’s ascension in mind, we can see that the conclusion of Chapter Six and the confusion it wrought can be resolved only in what follows the disciples in Acts, namely, “they went up to the upper room.” That is the place where the disciples and others gathered for the next fifty days or until the day of Pentecost with the Holy Spirit’s descent which at last permanently loosened that *skleros logos* of vs. 60.

A quick note about Peter. In today’s Gospel he recorded as the only person who said to Jesus “You have the words (the *logoi*, which are not *skleroi*) of eternal life.” Immediately after the Spirit’s descent on Pentecost it is Peter who addressed the assembled crowd. During this first proclamation about Jesus, his mission and divinity, he must have had in mind the words of Chapter Six and those listening to Jesus. The advantage Peter had over Jesus, if you will, was that he was addressing people as one filled with the Holy Spirit (It can’t be said that Jesus is so ‘filled’ by reason of his relationship with the Father and Spirit). At Pentecost not only is the *logos* which had been *skleros* now loosened, it is unified by reason of many people hearing the disciples speak in their own language. And so the story of Chapter Six, in addition to its strong Eucharistic tones, is one of making the proclamation at Pentecost fit and sound for the future of the Church, for proclamation of Jesus Christ necessarily precedes the Eucharist. Thus the preaching...the *logos*...cannot be *skleros* throughout the Church’s history.

2 September, Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

For the past five Sundays or close to two solid months we had Gospels taken from Chapter Six of St John. Now we move from an extended stay on that event to after Mark's account of Jesus feeding of the five thousand (Mk 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23).

Assuming that Mark's account is similar to that of John or more precisely when Jesus was in the wilderness with some five thousand people during Passover, it is no small wonder that "the Pharisees came to him with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem." That is to say, word quickly spread back to Jerusalem that Jesus was somewhere out in the wilderness with a large group of people instead of celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem. They did not bring up this delicate subject directly to Jesus but decided to question him as to why his disciples ate food with defiled hands. They may have had in mind as well the people who recently had been fed. The religious leaders were well aware of the high moral standard set by Jesus for his followers and knew they couldn't fault him for that. And so they tried finding fault with his disciples on some technicality in order to arrest him as a rebel-rouser.

To this Jesus responded harshly quoting from Isaiah (29.13). To show the difference, first we have the original text from Isaiah with some notations followed by that from Mark's Gospel (i.e. to make them follow temporally), again with some brief notations:

Isaiah: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote."

Note the two verbs representative of closeness: *nagash* (to draw near, to approach) and *kavad* (to honor (from which is derived *kavod*, honor or glory)). Both are situated in the mouth and thus are associated with speaking. In contrast to this is the heart being remote (*rachaq*), despite its centrality or closeness as well as the fear (*yare'*) that is supposed to spring from it. The verb *lamad* (to learn), often associated with familiarity of the Torah, is perverted to a human commandment.

Mark: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold fast the tradition of men."

Here we have a contrast between honor (*timao* which connotes reverence) and the heart being far (*porro*) from the Lord. Worship (*sebomai*) is done in vain (*maten*, adverb) where human precepts are confused with divine doctrines, *entalma* vs. *didaskalia*. The noun *entole* or commandment is similar to divine *didaskalia* which contrasts with human tradition (*paradosis*). Also note the contrast between leaving and holding fast (*aphiemi* and *kratao*), that is between God and human tradition.

No resolution seems to have come of this encounter between Jesus and the religious authorities from Jerusalem, for "from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon" [vs. 24]. Easily one can imagine the Pharisees making their way back to Jerusalem but refrained from making public what Jesus had said of them through the mouth of Isaiah. Instead of remaining close to Jerusalem and hence within easy grasp of the Jews as well as the Romans, Jesus heads for places where at least for now, they cannot lay hold of him. Although nothing is said of some of the five thousand who had been fed, chances are some may have followed Jesus to Tyre and Sidon. From there even more may have drifted away as Jesus continued his travels. At least they were privy to the exchange between the Pharisees, scribes and Jesus.

9 September, Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mk 7.31-37) is straight-forward in its account of Jesus with the man who had "an impediment in his speech (*mogilalos*)," literally as barely (*mogis-*) able to speak. Jesus did not heal this man in public but "privately" or *kat' idian* (by himself). Upon being cured, Jesus charged those about him not to broadcast this cure though the man could now speak "plainly" or *orthos* (literally, in a straight-forward fashion). However, Jesus said nothing to the man about whether to speak of his cure or not. We don't know if he joined those about him in praising Jesus or went his own way. Still, in his private life he had to deal with these people who after a while must have been somewhat burdensome with all their questions, etc. Gradually his fame faded away, and he had to go ahead with living his own life. Even if he hadn't followed Jesus, surely he must have kept informed of his ministry as well as later events.

More important than the ability to speak is the ability to hear, for Jesus cured the man of deafness as well. With his tongue and ears now restored, it was up to the man to know how to comport himself. The interesting part with this cure as with most others is that once Jesus restores a person, he departs immediately. That leaves the person with the challenge of how to handle the cure and make good of it. Surely most must have put their cure to good use, if you will, but there might have been others who did not and fell more or less back into the situation they were in before they had met Jesus. Never do we hear of those so cured later on, how they were faring or what happened with the rest of their lives. That is the question remaining unanswered and for each cured person to resolve.

16 September, Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mk 8.27-35) begins with Jesus headed to the villages of Caesarea and Philippi after having cured the blind man in Bethsaida. With this recent cure possibly in the back of Jesus' mind insofar as it concerns the larger issue between being blind and being clear-sighted of spirit, he decides to ask his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" Asking what others think of him is better than asking the disciples directly which is what Jesus really wants. It gives them a chance to formulate their response as well as knowing what others think of Jesus. As for the former, people are claiming Jesus to be either John the Baptist, Elijah or "one of the prophets." This last category reveals that the people had a general idea of the prophet's role in the history of Israel, but Elijah stood out by reason of his miracles. The other prophets weren't known for cures and the like, so they aren't as prominent or better, beloved, in the collective memory of people.

Once Peter had confessed Jesus to be the Christ, he decided it was time for the disciples to know his inevitable future, namely, that the religious leaders will put him to death. Note that Jesus says this "plainly" or literally as "spoke the word in confidence" or spoke the *logos* in confidence. *Parresia* is a noun which fundamentally means freedom of speech as belonging to the citizen of a Greek city-state. When a citizen speaks with *parresia*, he has no fear of recrimination. St. Paul adapts this to the Christian's relationship with God: "Since we have such a hope, we are very bold" [2Cor 3.12] which is to say, we have much *parresia*. The *parresia* with which Jesus began to speak of his demise shocked the disciples, obviously, which made Peter remonstrate with him. In other words, Peter demonstrated *parresia* of his own first in acknowledging Jesus as the Christ and shortly afterwards by rebuking him. Apparently the other disciples did not have this *parresia* which is why Jesus sets Peter as their leader.

Immediately after this sharp interchange, Jesus changes direction and summons the multitude who apparently had been accompanying him all along. The impression is that Jesus and the twelve were walking ahead alone followed by an

indeterminate number of people. To these people Jesus reveals something of what awaits him, namely, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Indeed, the people had been following Jesus, but this was a wholly different type of following: it was one not of self-denial but one where they sought self-fulfilment. While speaking these words Peter must have continued smarting at his rebuke all the more. Jesus was being fairly straight-forward with his followers about his future, the very thing for which Peter had rebuked him. In conclusion it should be noted that the crowd behind Jesus and his band had witnessed the blind man being cured, so they were invited, albeit indirectly, to open their eyes to these rather disconcerting words.

23 September, Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In a sense, last Sunday’s Gospel is a variation on today’s (Mk 9.30–37) where Jesus speaks of his impending betrayal and death after which Peter protests and Jesus rebukes him sharply. Then Chapter Nine commences with the transfiguration followed by a cure of an epileptic child. So when Jesus says “The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men” he concludes this sentence by saying “after three days he will rise,” words which were lacking in the first excerpt. So all the way from the words of last Sunday’s Gospel to now we have no mention of this inevitable conclusion, but surely the disciples must have been pondering it despite the wondrous experience of the transfiguration.

At least by now the disciples had learned not to question Jesus: “But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him.” *Rhema* is the noun for “saying” which refers to a word that is spoken and means “an utterance” applicable, for example to Scripture which the Holy Spirit brings to our attention compared with a *Logos* which often is applied to Jesus Christ as expression of the Father. So here we have Jesus as *Logos* giving a *rhema*.

Jesus and the disciples continue their walk to Capernaum during which he asks “What were you discussing on the way?” *Dialogizomai* is the verb which is more forceful than discussing; it means arguing in an intense fashion. While walking along the group must have spread out on the road as opposed to being bunched together such as in pairs. Chances are Jesus was alone leading the way and got bits and pieces of this *dialogizomai* not far behind him. As his relationship with the disciples grew and while they persisted in their ignorance, long periods of silence, especially on the road, must have been common. Given Peter’s recent rebuke, he could have been alone at the end of the line, having learned not to speak of such matters and fearful of yet another rebuke. It turned out that the *dialogizomai* consisted not about what Jesus had said of his death and resurrection but of each disciple’s role, as who would be first. Possibly Peter, James and John being taken by Jesus to the mountaintop as witnesses to his transfiguration had something to do with this *dialogizomai*, an accurate description of what appears as petty but is common to most people.

Only upon entering a house...and to whom that house belonged remains unspecified...does Jesus gather the twelve and sets a child before them, someone who has not yet reached the age for *dialogizomai*. Still that doesn’t affect the group, for vs. 38 continues with John being upset that he had seen a man casting out demons in Jesus’ name which is pretty much in line with the wrangling over who would be first among the disciples. All this indicates the human oblivion to Jesus as *Logos* when he had just uttered a *rhema* as to his future. They could grasp neither expression and would be unable to do so until the Holy Spirit’s descent at Pentecost.

30 September, Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

A few Sundays ago we finished a series of Gospels from Chapter Six of John’s account as it pertained to Jesus as bread of

life. It was situated mid-summer or between the end of the Lenten-Easter-Pentecost cycle and the beginning of a new liturgical year with Advent. Now Sundays of Ordinary Time follow accounts of Jesus dealing with his disciples and his ministry and will continue along this line until shortly before the First Sunday of Advent when the Gospels start talking about “last things.” In other words, now our time is spent with the mundane, daily details of Jesus’ ministry, not more exalted theological reflections. At the same time we are moving through a mode of time, the so-called “ordinary” one, which is other than the secular.

Today’s Gospel (Mk 9.38-43, 45, 47-48) takes place immediately after the disciples were arguing among themselves about who would be greatest in Jesus’ kingdom. Despite Jesus having set a child in their midst as an example to follow, John doesn’t even seem to have paid attention. He complains about a man not belonging to their group who had cast out demons. Arguably this could merit serious attention, but Jesus brushes it off with “he that is not against us is for us.” Surely the disciples were angry at this response but didn’t show it else they merit a rebuke not unlike Peter’s a few Sundays ago. Despite what seemed like a genuine problem, especially concerning how it might confuse people, Jesus puts focus back on the disciples who are bringing this matter to his attention: “better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell.”

As for the man acting in the name of Jesus, we have no further information of him. He must have followed Jesus long enough to see what he was doing and perhaps even have had some association with the disciples. However, John, who brought the matter to Jesus’ attention, doesn’t identify him. He may have known him and deliberately chose to shun him. There appears no attempt to magically reproduce any miracle of Jesus, but the unidentified man seems to be acting in good faith. What happened to him later on is again unknown, but we can’t help but speculate as to this.

Jesus quickly sees that the man is doing a “mighty work,” the word *dunamis* being used which here lacks any adjective. *Dunamis* implies authority to effect power as well as the action itself. One possible reason this unknown man had cast out a demon was to test the disciples. As in the earlier case of the woman with a flow of blood, Jesus perceived “in himself that *dunamis* had gone forth from him” [5.30]. In the case at hand, surely Jesus must have experience the same thing. The genuineness of this man contrasts with Simon the magician in Acts who saw the apostles performing miracles and said “Give me also this *dunamis* that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit” [8.19].

Although today’s Gospel doesn’t include the concluding verse to Chapter Nine, it is quoted here because it sums up the message of Jesus perfectly: “Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.”

7 October, Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

In today’s Gospel (Mk 10.2-16) the Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce to which he responds by quoting Gn 2.24: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” The Genesis text reads: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Note that the Hebrew original uses the presence tense, “leaves,” *hazav* being a fairly strong verb suggestive of immediate withdrawal, even desertion. At the time there was no father nor mother, just the first man and the first woman, so reflection upon the power of mutual attraction between the sexes came later. The Genesis text continues further with “cleaves” or *davaq*, that is, a man *davaq* to his wife who is an image of himself since she was taken from his side. The verb *davaq* is as strong in its glue-like attraction as *hazav* is in its immediate abandonment, so no stronger a contrast could be presented here. You could say its strength defies the downward motion of gravity and does so with the

greatest of ease. The same could be said of *hazav* as well.

For perhaps the best non-biblical exposition on the dynamism of *hazav-davaq*, refer to Bernard of Clairvaux's **Song Commentary**, Sermo #83. Two short sentences in the Latin sum it up (5.12): *Magna res amor; sed sunt in eo gradus. Sponsa in summo stat.* That is, "Love is a great reality; but there are degrees to it. The bride stands at the highest." The words *in summo* imply that the bride stands *in...within...the summit of the highest goal one could ever dream of attaining.* In order to protect this *hazav-davaq*, Jesus condemns divorce but does so privately, to his disciples in a house, and the identity of the person to whom this house belongs goes unidentified. Compare this talk of the most intimate type of relationship which is done in private compared with the open statement to the Pharisees just beforehand.

Immediately after having expressed his view on marriage, we have the incident where children are brought to Jesus. They are not to be hindered, for "to such belongs the kingdom of God." Since children are the fruit of the just mentioned *hazav-davaq* rooted in the Genesis account, they too will eventually experience the same abandonment and cleaving. Chances are that some of these children recalled their encounter with Jesus, his blessing never his blessing having left their memories, and became members in the early church, even disciples to other nations.

14 October, Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In today's Gospel (Mk 10.17-30) a man asks Jesus about what is necessary to inherit eternal life, the verb being *kleronomeso* which implies that the person asking had a right to eternal life much as a son has a right to his inheritance from his father. After some give and take between Jesus and the questioner Jesus comes to love him (*agapao*) but tests the man's ability to do likewise by selling everything and then to follow him. Note that the man did not respond with words; his facial expression spoke more loudly, that he was incapable of *agapao*, which certainly did not mean he was a bad person.

After this initially promising encounter which ended in sadness, Jesus "looked around and said to his disciples." That is to say, his disciples were present right then and there during the encounter which took place while on the road (cf. vs. 17). They got bits and pieces of this conversation as they walked along, admittedly anxious to hear if they were about to be joined by a newcomer. Some may have not even been within ear-shot and wrote the man off as someone nosy. All the disciples seemed to be aware that the number of disciples had been determined by Jesus and hoped, somewhat perversely, that this man would go away. This tacit perverseness was heightened by the *agape* explicitly shown by Jesus noted in the paragraph above. As the group continued on and it became evident by the man's facial expression that he couldn't follow Jesus, the disciples must have been relieved, albeit secretly. It was an incident where it's best not to utter things that are known tacitly. The man who seemed to offer so much just stood there while the distance between them grew larger by each footstep. Surely some if not all the disciples looked back a bit furtively at the one to whom Jesus showed *agape*. That makes the simple words of vs. 22 all the more tragic: "and he went away."

As for the looking by Jesus, he did this while on the road where all the disciples probably weren't clustered around him but behind on the road to one degree or another. So when Jesus says how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, perhaps the man who had just encountered him got wind of them, being close by. Note that the disciples "were amazed at his words," *thaumazo* being the verb. This is a frequent expression in Mark and the other Gospels and is all the more striking because it is the first time used with regard to a rich man.

The *thauazo* just noted is taken to a new level when Jesus elaborates upon riches vs. the kingdom of heaven, that is, when the disciples “were exceedingly astonished” at his example of a camel going through the eye of a needle. *Ekplessomai* is the verb with the preposition *ek* prefaced to the root which intensifies the meaning...something like being struck (*plesso*)–from. From this point Jesus returns to the opening of this Gospel passage by saying that people cannot inherit eternal life; that depends upon God. Note that it concludes with Jesus mentioning those who left all personal relationships for his sake “who will not receive a hundredfold now...and persecutions.” He does not use the word *kleronomeso* as with the man above but the simple verb *lambano* (to receive) which has nothing to do with inheritance. And so prior to this striking incident the disciples may have thought in terms of *kleronomeso*, even more so than others by reason of their affiliation with Jesus but no more. They were put on notice that they were not special, difficult to accept and certainly not discussed among themselves although it was in the forefront of each and every disciple’s mind.

21 October, Twenty–Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last Sunday’s Gospel dealt with the man who asked what he had to do in order to inherit eternal life. As noted there, the discussion possibly took place on the road (“As he was setting out on his journey,” 10.17) and continued there until the man got his answer and stopped in his tracks, thereby allowing Jesus and his band to continue. Vs. 32 says that this road was “going up to Jerusalem” which later is celebrated as Palm Sunday. Thus you’d expect a series of sober, serious discussions which turned out to be peppered with trivial, childish matters.

Today’s Gospel (Mk 10.35–45) takes up where that man left off: “And James and John came forward to him.” That is, these two had been somewhat behind Jesus and had overtaken the man who just fall behind, having passed him quite dejected without knowing the reason. Even though the two asked a stupid question (“We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you”), they deserve credit for their boldness, especially in light of this broken man. This boldness may have come from a certain delight in the man not following Jesus and therefore not posing a threat to their relationship with him and the other disciples. After all, the disciples could boast that unlike this man, they responded to Jesus’ command to him, “Go, sell what you have and give to the poor...and come, follow me.” Wonderful as that may have been, the disciples are now about to fall flat on their faces by their petty bickering.

Jesus responds to James and John in terms of being baptized, something he guarantees will happen to them. The only reference they had of baptism was the incident with John the Baptist at the Jordan. They hadn’t been called yet but certainly knew the details since it was so important to Jesus’ mission. Perhaps even John himself may have filled them in on the event. The possibility of receiving baptism must have excited James and John, for that event saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus with the voice (of the Father) coming from heaven. If that happened to Jesus, why not us, so they reasoned. Even better, those around them will be filled with awe.

The other disciples got wind of this discussion and were indignant or *aganakteo*, this verb applied to feeling irritation as well as anger. They had been behind Jesus after the man had left Jesus and moved forward but not until James and John had reached Jesus first. So when Jesus “called them to him” (vs. 42), he must have been up front and called them from behind strung out on the road, interrupting his upward ascent to Jerusalem. Jesus certainly was pondering his death soon to come away and had to deal with these petty matters after the disciples had been with him some three years. It was discouraging indeed but not unexpected. Jesus concludes with an intimation of his death which on this journey the disciples were so far removed and wrapped up in their own pettiness that they didn’t comprehend what he said: “The

Son of man also came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

As for the journey mentioned back in vs. 17, it was as noted to Jerusalem. However, vs. 46 says that what transpired during the past two Sundays was not on that road strictly speaking but only up to Jericho.

28 October, Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mk 10.46–52) commences with the words “And they came to Jericho.” In other words, the incidents of the last two Sundays had taken place on the road to that town which, in turn, was a major stop en route to Jerusalem and at this time crowded with pilgrims for Passover. As soon as Jesus and his band arrive at Jericho, they depart, for vs. 46 says “and as he was leaving.” Then again, perhaps they didn’t intend to stay there, just long enough to resupply for the ascent to Jerusalem. Since Passover was approaching, plenty of pilgrims must have accompanied Jesus. That means the man who asked about eternal life back in vs. 17 was not the only person to have questioned him. He could have been representative of quite a few others who posed the same question. The interaction with so many pilgrims must have increased once Jesus reached Jericho. Many of the inhabitants could have come out to meet him and used the opportunity to inquire what he thought about the famous incident of Joshua and the fall of that town. Jesus certainly knew more than anyone else and wanted to keep quiet about it, hence part of the reason why he breezed right through the city. Also that town may have been out of supplies due to the usual large throng of people.

Just outside Jericho blind Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was drawing near. The giveaway seems to have been the “great multitude” or *ochlos* accompanying him. Bartimaeus had plied his craft long enough to distinguish between the various types of pilgrims. What got his attention were people like the man noted in the last paragraph, those who approached Jesus for some cure or favor. Bartimaeus heard about Jesus from earlier reports during his long years of sitting by the roadside, so his curiosity was aroused. Those who rebuked (cf. vs. 48) his loud cries weren’t so much desirous to shut him up as to keep him away from their own pressing in upon Jesus. Bartimaeus could have been with other beggars or not far from them. If he were allowed to approach Jesus, so thought some from the *ochlos*, he’d bring along a whole bunch of similar undesirables. It was easy to thrust away people deprived of sight since they couldn’t defend themselves well.

Jesus stopped not so much because of the loud entries of Bartimaeus but because he wanted to make a point among those who were accompanying him up to Jerusalem for the Passover. Now here was someone who couldn’t make the ascent, sitting by the road in complete blindness. So once Jesus cured Bartimaeus, he said “Go your way.” That is to say, go home or do not come with me to Jerusalem. His cure came took quickly before the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus for him to comprehend their meaning. Nevertheless, Bartimaeus seemed not to have heeded Jesus’ words, for “he followed him on the way,” that is, the way up to Jerusalem. *Hupago* is the verb for “go (your own) way” which fundamentally means to lead or to bring under whereas “he followed him on the way” uses the noun *hodos*. As for Bartimaeus, he must have followed...*hupago*...at some distance on the *hodos* so as not to rouse the attention of Jesus nor of his disciples. We don’t hear from Bartimaeus from this point onward but can only intimate what the momentous events about to transpire must have meant to him. With his newly restored sense of sight, Bartimaeus saw things that were not revealed to others and perhaps became an especially effective disciple in the following years, returning to Jericho as an evangelist.

4 November, Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mk 12.28-34) jumps ahead considerably from the past few Sundays. Accounts from the past two had taken place before Jesus entered Jerusalem whereas now he is within the city after his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. Thus the present context is the temple where the scribes are disputing with each other. The verb is *suzeteo* meaning more accurately to seek (*zeteo*) together (*suz-* or *sum-*). What's helpful about this verb is that it counters a popular misunderstanding of Jewish scribes and others like them. Often a negative, even sinister picture is built up about these officials, of how always they are snipping the heels of Jesus waiting to trip him up. Though true in many instances, the "disputing," so typical of scribal activity, is just another negative sign of how they operate. Such is not the case in reality. Religious disputing in the sense of *suzeteo* is essential to the practice of Judaism and something Jesus must have relished.

So in the context at hand, one scribe who had been engaged in this *suzeteo* with Jesus asked "Which commandment is the first of all?" Obviously everyone knew the answer which was not a trap for Jesus. It was meant as a lead-in for further discussion or *suzeteo* on the Torah. The adjective "first" must have rung a bell among the participants because like first in the first day of creation, and so forth, it meant the discussion would unfurl in a manner designed to offer further insights.

Jesus responds to the question by citing from Deuteronomy as to first loving God and then one's neighbor, the verb *agapao* (*agape*) being used in both occasions. The scribe speaking with Jesus...*suzeteo* with him...acknowledges this which brought the discussion to an end, for "after that no one dared to ask him any question." In other words, Jesus brought the *suzeteo* to a rapid close. That moment must have been quite awkward for the scribes because they were accustomed to "dispute" for hours on end. The abrupt conclusion doesn't mean Jesus got the better of them (he did in many ways) but left them to continue their *suzeteo* which is what he would wish them to do. When Jesus told the scribe that he wasn't far from the kingdom of God, that must have offered a new point of depart for discussion among his peers which went unrecorded. And so it's helpful for us is to intuit this being acted out among the scribes in a positive fashion while Jesus walked away but remained in the temple teaching as Mark's account continues. It should be noted, however, that shortly after Jesus cautions about the scribes "who like to go about in long robes" or in the garb associated with professional religious disputers. While true, given the long tradition of *suzeteo* in Judaism this observation doesn't apply to all scribes.

11 November, Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last week's Gospel had Jesus engaged in a dispute with the Jewish scribes within the temple just before the Passover. There it was pointed out that the verb for "dispute" is *suzeteo* meaning to seek (*zeteo*) together (*suz-* or *zum-*). Now (Mk 12.38-44) Jesus begins with "beware of the scribes" or more specifically those who like to assume a showy appearance, not necessarily those who enjoy the age-old Jewish tradition of *suzeteo* which we see in yeshivas today.

This week's Gospel takes place before Chapter Thirteen where Jesus discourses on "those days" [13.24] which, in turn, is a prelude to his passion and death. That means we are getting ready for the end of the liturgical year in a few weeks time. Subsequent Gospel excerpts will accentuate that theme right up to Advent and through that season as well. As noted elsewhere in these Reflections, there's a seamless transition between the weeks prior to Advent and the Sundays of that season. If a blind person were to walk into church during these weeks, he wouldn't be able to discern the two seasons...the two liturgical years...from each other. That's how closely they are bound.

Interestingly Jesus takes a seat “opposite the treasury” and observes the “multitude” (*ochlos*) making contributes to the treasury. Because Passover was close, this was a special time to gather alms. Besides, there were plenty of other people milling about. Among such an *ochlos* Jesus observed a widow who contributed “out of her poverty.” Surely there must have been plenty of such poor persons but Jesus sensed something special about this woman. The text says that the widow “put in everything she had, her whole living” where *bios* is the word for “living” which means life, physical life. Such was the heart-felt but hidden gesture Jesus picked up while others didn’t even notice. However, there was present another person who did notice, and that was Judas. He had control over the disciples’ money and kept it as if it were his own. Surely later when Judas betrayed Jesus he must have thought of that widow or even saw her as he exited Jerusalem to hang himself. The widow may have picked up on his recent betrayal and tried to stop him. Even if she did, it was too late.

As for the widow, like so many other anonymous persons in the Gospels we don’t know what happened to her. Perhaps later one of the disciples made it a point to take her aside and tell her what his master had observed. If so, this widow must have shaken it off and went her way. However, her curiosity had been roused as to Jesus and must have followed closely the events of the next week or so, even becoming a disciple after Pentecost.

18 November, Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

In earlier entries it had been mentioned that we are moving closer to the end of the liturgical year and the threshold of a new one with the First Sunday of Advent. Today’s Gospel (Mk 13.24–32) is the first one to speak openly of The Last Things characterized by heavenly bodies being shaken from their places. Ancients put great stock in them, using stars, planets and the moon for determining future events as well as for more practical applications such as when to plant and to harvest crops. Thus for the heavenly bodies to be disturbed meant society’s very structure was shaken to its core. Note that with the exception of the sun and the occasional rare eclipse, observation of these bodies took place at night when most people were sleeping. Society had to rely upon “astronomers” or perhaps better, those interested in divining the future.

“And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory.” Those so beholding him are not mentioned specifically...obviously people are involved, but it could include the heavenly luminaries. The “powers” in the heavens or *dunamis* will give way to Christ’s *dunamis*. So if these beings had been essential for the workings of an ancient society, so the new order of *dunamis* will be essential for the new creation. In order for this new society to take root, the angels will play an essential role, that is, they will “gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” Note the verb *episunago* which has the verbal root *ago* (to lead) is prefaced with two prepositions, *epi* and *sun* (‘upon’ and ‘with’). It applies to the “elect” or *eklektos* which means such persons—both the identity and number are not mentioned—had been determined beforehand. Any attempt to decipher both is futile, for this would belong to the old order which will be overthrown, the one being governed by heavenly bodies. While the new order is essentially established through the Church, the temptation to speculate remains.

To counter this speculation is perhaps why immediately Jesus shifts gears to “From the fig tree learn its lesson” and “lesson” is *parabole* or parable. Everyone of the time was familiar with such a tree as a sign, that is, when its leaves herald the advent of spring. Obviously people could feel the waning of winter and coming of spring, and even before the fig tree put out its shoots they knew it was getting close for that to occur.

Jesus continues by saying that the present generation of people will witness these events when they come to pass. However, he says that his words “will not pass away” despite the heavens and earth doing so. Note that Jesus adds “earth” meaning the very foundation upon which the heavenly beings have their impact. Thus Jesus’ *logoi* are the new creation around which society is to be ordered, not what’s in the night sky. The existing generation will be privileged to see both orders or better, the former being transformed into the latter. Ultimately the question of today’s Gospel is making a shift from observation of the night sky to observation of the *logoi* which have their source in the *Logos* himself. In other words, a shift from observing *dunamis* to these *logoi* where the temptation to focus on the former is stronger than first perceived. The scribes mentioned in last Sunday’s Gospel had the capacity for such observation, those who like today’s Jews poured over the words of the Torah which they rightly consider as more magnificent than creation itself. For example, Mt 13.52 says “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” Such a scribe—and there must have been more than what the Gospels present in a negative light—could take from the old treasure of astronomical reckoning and transfer it to the new reckoning based on Jesus’ *logoi*.

25 November, Christ the King

Today’s short Gospel (Jn 18.33–7) is within the larger context of Christ’s passion, just before he was condemned to death by Pilate. Pilate, being the designated Roman ruler, wanted to maintain control over Jerusalem and Israel, so naturally he was sensitive to anyone claiming kingship over that area. Concerning this, Jesus says famously “My kingship (*basileia*) is not of this world (*ek tou kosmou toutou*.)” Use of “this” with respect to “world” suggests another world or *kosmos*, if you will, and the same applies to who is king over it. Someone standing nearby must have heard this brief exchange and recorded it. They are insignificant words if you take them uttered within the larger context of the impending celebration of Passover. Pilate was more concerned with maintaining order now than at other times of the year. The same applied to the Jewish authorities.

Kosmos literally means a decoration or embellishment and more commonly applies to order in the sense of government. To understand *kosmos* in the situation at hand, one has to refer back to the recent use of the term during the Last Supper only several hours earlier. Jesus had gathered a considerable following, so chances are his talk about his relationship with the *kosmos* reached Pilate’s ears. Thus use of this term can be misunderstood easily and due to this fact, the chief references are as follows:

14.17: Even the Spirit of truth, whom the *world* cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.

Vs. 19: Yet a little while, and the *world* will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also.

Vs. 22: Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us and not to the *world*?”

Vs. 27: Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the *world* gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Vs. 30: I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this *world* is coming. He has no power over me;

Vs. 31: But I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the *world* may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go hence.

15.18: If the *world* hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

Vs. 19: If you were of the *world*, the *world* would love its own; but because you are not of the *world*, but I chose you out of the *world*, therefore the *world* hates you.

16.8: And when he comes, he will convince the *world* concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.

Vs. 28: I came from the Father and have come into the *world*; again, I am leaving the *world* and going to the Father.

Vs. 33: I have said this to you that in me you may have peace. In the *world* you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the *world*.

17.5: and now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory which I had with you before the *world* was made.

Vs. 6: I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the *world*; yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

Vs. 11: And now I am no more in the *world*, but they are in the *world*, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name which you have given me, that they may be one even as we are one.

Vs. 13: But now I am coming to you; and these things I speak in the *world* that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.

Vs. 15: I do not pray that you should take them out of the *world*, but that you should keep them from the evil one.

Vs. 25: O righteous Father, the *world* has not known you, but I have known you; and these know that you have sent me.

+ The End +