

Liturgical Reflections 2011

At the beginning of the current liturgical cycle (i.e., First Sunday of Advent, 28 November 2010) an intent was expressed to comment upon the first reading of each Sunday and major feast day instead of the Gospel. That experiment lasted for the Advent season only as well as to the end of the year 2010. From now on, notations will be upon the Gospel, the pattern originally intended. It should be noted that this liturgical cycle returns to the one used in the year 2007. As for the document at hand, ideally it would be better to begin with the new liturgical year which began last November. However, the conventional dating is used because most of us are more familiar with that way of telling time.

1 January, The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God

Although we begin a new calendar year, we obtain a very different sense of time's measurement with today being the Octave of Christmas. That same sense was preceded by four Sundays of the Advent season. Thus liturgical time, regardless of which specific period we're dealing with, stands apart from its chronological counterpart while not interfering with that way of telling time. You get the impression that while the former is indifferent to the passage of time, the latter is not really satisfied with it. Thus a latent struggle exists, if you will, between the two which goes on throughout a given year. Actually it's not chronological time in and by itself but persons who are conscious that another mode of telling time may be usurping their familiar way of dealing with it. The Greek term *kronos* forms the root of "chronological" and thus refers to the succession of events, whereas the other Greek term for time (*kairos*) intimates a particular event and characterizes liturgical time. With *kairos*-time of the Church's liturgy we can move freely without the constrictions of linear progression which is not to say that we can move willy-nilly in haphazard fashion. That's why today's Gospel (Lk 2.16-21) which deals with the angel appearing to the shepherds may seem out of place to those familiar with the Christmas story.

Today's Gospel (Lk 2.16-21) begins with the shepherds saying to each other, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." The verb *dierchomai* reads literally, "to go through." Thus the shepherds say they must go-through (*dia* or 'through' prefaced to the verb) the territory laying between them and the place where they had heard the angel. Not only that, they pass-through Bethlehem itself which must have caused quite a sight to the town's inhabitants. After all, they went "with haste" (vs. 16) which made them all the more suspicious. Why were these men rushing through our town in the middle of the night? Were they going to register for the census decreed by Caesar August (cf. vs. 1), wanting to get to their destination at daybreak so as not be found illegal in the eyes of the Romans? Perhaps some inhabitants decided to follow the shepherds and see what was going on. As for the precise place, no record is given...presumably on the outskirts of Bethlehem.

The shepherds had no difficult in their hasty journey after the angels "went away from them." They required no light as was the case with the Magi and their star; after all, the distance they had to traverse was short compared with them, and they knew the territory very well. The shepherds were not entirely unlike the one who had a hundred sheep and had lost one (cf. Lk 15.3-8). Thus they abandoned the ninety-nine not in search of the lost sheep but in search of the Good Shepherd who now would guide them. The words of this parable "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost" can be put into the mouths of Jesus laying in the manger when he saw the shepherds in his presence.

2 January, Epiphany

As noted in the brief Introduction above, the liturgy can shift from various temporal dimensions without disruption because the Church lives her life on a plane transcending yet within our normal experience of

space and time. Such is the case with today's feast which this year comes right on the heels of the Mother of God. Usually an intervening week or so exists between the two. As for today's Gospel (Mt 2.1-12), it is not unlike yesterday's, the birth of Jesus Christ, with emphasis upon the wise men from the East. Where in the East is unspecified though Persia often is attributed as their homeland. At the time of Jesus' birth the heritage of Greece had been well-established and taken over, as well as enriched, by Roman culture. Traditionally Persia has been in conflict with ancient Greece, home of Western philosophy. Persia represented an autocratic tradition compared with the democratic one of Hellas. And so for these mysterious visitors to enter a Romanized land (at least on the surface), the Greek tradition is left out of the picture. Basically the story centers on the East, that is, as opposed to Western influence as we've come to know it today. At the same time the wise men represent a positive introduction of the East.

The wise men beheld the star which led them to Jerusalem. We have no information about this star, of how it impacted these visitors, yet it must have communicated something about the birth of Jesus. Rightly Herod and "all Jerusalem with him" were troubled, for the visitors could have come into the land as spies not unlike those sent out first by Moses and later by Joshua. Herod could have recalled those incidents, a reverse invasion of Israel, if you will. Already Israel was occupied by Rome, so to have a country come from the opposite direction (east) would have squeezed his small empire. *Tarasso* is the verb for "troubled" which involves being frightened as well as terrified. Herod assembled "all the chief priests and scribes" that they may ask not so much about the wise men but where the "Christ was to be born." They were surprised at their straight-forward answer, "in Bethlehem of Judea" which meant the wise men were privy to a piece of intelligence that had escaped them. Also to their surprise the wise men cited Micah 5.2 about Christ's birth implying that they were more acquainted with the Hebrew scriptures and had divined this event well beforehand. Chances are that Herod had these officials either dismissed or executed for lack of knowledge.

And so after the wise men had cited verses from the prophet Micah Herod "summoned (them) secretly (*latbra*)," this adverb also meaning by stealth, treacherously, which fits in with Herod's character. Note that Herod did this alone, not in the presence of his just-disgraced chief priests and scribes...presumably they were on their way to prison and hence soon to their execution. We have no evidence of their discussion but can assume that once these men were hurried off and the visitors were left with Herod alone, they did their best to retract or to falsify the information at their disposal. One can only imagine the faces of these religious officials as they gazed with horror at the wise men. The same applied to the visitors who knew a similar fate awaited them. Just the fact that Herod bade them to "go search diligently for the child" reveals that nothing substantial came of this encounter. They agreed to this politely and left Herod's presence as quickly as possible. Did Herod send spies after the wise men to see where they would go? Most likely he did, but the star which re-emerged protected them. Perhaps the star blinded the spies or even misled them. No small wonder that the wise men "departed to their own country by another way" after having visited Jesus and his parents.

9 January, Baptism of the Lord

"Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John." Such are the opening words of today's Gospel (Mt 3.13-17). This coming (*paraginomai*) is more a coming beside or around (*para*) a given place which intimates that Jesus made his presence felt in every corner of the Jordan River area even if he weren't in all parts at once. It also intimates that his baptism would spread out from there *para* other lands. Such *paraginomai* follows on the heels of John the Baptist's words about him baptizing "with water for repentance" [3.10] which are compared to him who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" [3.11]. So it is a presence, if you will, of two baptisms being beside (*para*) each other: that of John to that of Jesus and therefore to that of the Holy Spirit.

As soon as Jesus in Galilee heard John speaking about his type of baptism these he knew it was time to meet John. This hearing by Jesus of John's reference to the Holy Spirit and fire required no verbal transmission from the Jordan River area to Galilee, for it was a spiritual acknowledgment that transcended space and time. Before this Jesus had been residing in Galilee with his family, going about his business, yet having an intimation which grew daily in these last months that a major change in his life was about to occur. Did Joseph and Mary know this? No question about it, yet they kept this intimation to themselves. During these last months of Jesus being at home Mary was more sensitive to the memory of what was recorded concerning her husband's dream, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel" [2.23]. Joseph shared the dream he had with Mary about taking her as a wife as well as Isaiah's prophecy. Actually it was impossible to forget such an incident so many years ago which now was on the verge of coming to pass. Thrown into this mix we have Mary's relationship with Elizabeth who conceived John approximately the same time as Jesus thus making both contemporaries.

So while over approximately thirty years Jesus "increased in wisdom and in stature" [Lk 2.52], it's imperative to include Mary and Joseph so they could keep pace with their son's development. This mutual increase attained culmination when Jesus made known to his parents the need for him to meet John at the Jordan River. The same can be applied to Elizabeth and her husband concerning their son John. Both sets of parents were so attuned to their sons' missions that they didn't have to communicate it verbally. As for Mary, she must have remained in contact with her "kinswoman" [Lk 1.36] Elizabeth after the birth of John and kept abreast as to his growth and development. Elizabeth knew there was something different about John and instinctively kept away from contact with his cousin Jesus. This was maintained throughout their lives and culminated when John was arrested and thrown into prison. Jesus didn't visit him but sent disciples to speak of the wonders he was doing. Even though John had special knowledge of Jesus, still he had some doubt that needed to be put to rest before his death: "Are you he who is to come are shall we look for another? [11.3]?" Once this doubt had been allayed, John could face his death peacefully. The communication between him and his mother Elizabeth which started when he had leapt for joy in her womb when the pregnant Mary visited her now has reached its fulfillment. The contact between Jesus and John was quite brief, just enough for Jesus to be baptized, followed by separation with John in prison and his beheading shortly afterwards.

16 January, Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last Sunday was the feast of the Epiphany which this year came right on the heels on the Octave of Christmas (1st January). Now we find ourselves right back in the midst of Ordinary Time, the last occasion being before Advent. This is yet another example of how disparate liturgical time is from its chronological counterpart. Despite this proximity of two feasts (it differs from year to year), the Christmas season continues to spread out for the rest of January until 2 February, the Presentation. By then we're on the verge of gearing up for the lenten season. Ordinary Time is more easy for us to adapt to after Christmas compared with right after the transition of the Lenten-Easter-Pentecost cycle because the birth of Jesus takes place in poverty and unpretentious circumstances. Thus the time after his birth is more suited for the "ordinary" time of life.

Today's Gospel (Jn 1.29-34) begins with "The next day he (John the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him." "Next day" is significant in that the previous one was a day of confrontation with envoys from the Pharisees, that is, men sent to question John as to why he was baptizing. That night must have been filled with anxiety, for although John didn't give in to the inquirers, it must have made him question why he had spent so many years in the wilderness and found himself baptizing at the Jordan River. That anxiety and doubt vanished at dawn: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" This was a recognition based upon John in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth, not so much an acknowledgment of Jesus' physical presence: "the babe leaped in her womb" [Lk 1.41]. The verb here is *skirtao* (to leap for joy)

whose significance is brought out by the Septuagint (i.e., the Greek translation of the Old Testament) of Ps 114.4: “The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.” It had been some thirty years since both men had “met” in the wombs of their mothers, and now it was face-to-face. Actually there is no special joy or celebration because their acquaintance began before their physical birth and was long in the making. John calling Jesus “lamb” obviously has sacrificial overtones but with this little divergence into the verb *skirtao* as proper to the bounding of lambs, it reveals his spirit on the bank of the Jordan River. Nothing is said of Jesus’ response; the same applied when he too was in the womb. All action is focused upon John and his response.

Indeed, John was telling the truth when he said “I myself did not know him.” Though both were cousins and lived not far from each other, they had no contact until this moment. Elizabeth and Mary knew they had to maintain this isolation even though they must have had contact in the years since the birth of both their sons. They did it deliberately, a conspiracy of sorts between the two women with the consent of their husbands. Should John have met Jesus, even having played with him, this crucial incident at the Jordan would have lost its value. At the same time the recognition begun in the womb developed and matured thirty years until now. Even then the contact was relatively brief and done for the last time.

So when John says “I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God,” he uttered these words with some tongue-in-cheek. Already John had done this with his *skirtao* even before having been born. It was simply a matter of making what was hidden in the womb public at the banks of the Jordan River.

23 January, Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

The opening words of today’s Gospel (Mt 4.12-23) read “Now when he heard that John had been arrested.” This occurs immediately after Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, the hearing not being transmitted by human means but spiritually. It was not unlike that communication between Jesus and John in the womb, when John leapt (*skirtao*) upon their respective mothers met each other. As for the case at hand, just prior to his desert experience John had baptized Jesus and must have told him that he would stand a good chance of being apprehended in the near future. Should Jesus decide to associate himself with the Baptist, surely he would be arrested. This threat of arrest came true while Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. So when the devil got wind of this, he communicated it to Jesus. That may have been the greatest temptation Jesus experienced, one that passed as unrecorded. The devil had hoped to incite Jesus to forsake the desert in order to free John from jail.

So instead of giving in to this temptation Jesus emerges from his forty days and nights and heads for Nazareth after which quickly he moves to Galilee. This was the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali mentioned in the prophet Isaiah (9.1-2) and quoted in vss. 15-16 which runs differently according to the Hebrew text: “In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness on them has light shined.” Jesus had fresh experience of diabolical temptation and wished to communicate this in terms of freeing people from darkness. Did John get wind of this connection between Jesus in Galilee and Isaiah’s prophecy? Yes, and chances are that his disciples made the connection as recorded in the Gospel.

After this association between Jesus and Isaiah’s prophecy had been made, Jesus began his ministry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” which echoes word-for-word John the Baptist in 3.2. Those familiar with John’s preaching must have been a bit confused...was Jesus John in another guise? That’s why Jesus had to choose his disciples right after he began preaching. They would form the core of

an identity different from John's ministry: different yet founded upon it.

30 January, Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mt 5.1-12) begins with "Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain." The crowds Jesus saw were mentioned in vss. 23-5 of the previous chapter, quite soon after he had begun his ministry and a testimony to his popularity so early on. It was only natural to ascend a high place so Jesus could project his voice much better. As for the beatitudes, they are short sentences, easy to shout out as well as being grasped, a convenience both for Jesus and his listeners.

Despite the meaningfulness of each beatitude, they require considerable spelling-out, if you will, within one's entire lifetime. There are nine in total and apply to different types of persons or to different stages in one person's life: poor in spirit, mourn, meek, hunger and thirst for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted and when men revile you. Actually, all nine are so interrelated that they cannot be separated. It's more a matter of which beatitude you can identify with and take it from there. That means the crowd could be divided into nine sections at the mountain's summit around Jesus...not physically so but spiritually, the only measurement being how each beatitude was accepted. The ninth is the only one which Jesus explains in some detail, the one about persecution. Actually, it's about being reviled as well as persecuted (*oneidizō* and *dioxo*) but "on my account" (*heneken emou*). The eight beatitudes must have come off smoothly and nicely for the listeners, and they must have expected the same for this, the ninth. However, Jesus adds a different twist with addition of *heneken emou* which must have shocked the people just below him. These two small words indicate that Jesus was special, that the eight beatitudes, important as they are in their own right, lead up to this the ninth one and find their fulfillment with special pertinence to him.

One reference to this two-fold attack is 2Chron 36.16: "but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, until there was no remedy." A rather desperate way to conclude that book and one with which some of Jesus' listeners were familiar especially because it had echos concerning their present leadership which was subject to Rome. Right after that utterance comes the exile to Babylon, something that must have been in the mind of Jesus as well as those with him. How this blessedness about revilement and persecution, tied up as it is with political connotations, would be worked out remains to be seen.

"Rejoice and be glad," the latter verb (*agallo*) being an intensification of the former. To cap off the beatitudes, especially the ninth which has direct bearing upon the mission of Jesus, he identifies himself with the prophets who suffered a similar fate. The verb here is *dioxo* as noted in vs. 11, but the other one (*oneidizō*) is lacking.

As for the teaching on the mountain which begins with the beatitudes, Jesus continues up there for an extended period of time, right to the end of Chapter Seven. It concludes with "he taught them as one who had authority (*exousia*) and not as their scribes." *Exousia* implies having all the correct resources at hand, not artificially contrived nor stolen from somewhere else. That means the scribes, while outwardly legitimate, were as their name suggests, men who wrote down in an unreflective way what they have heard with apparently little concern as to their tradition.

6 February, Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's short Gospel (Mt 5.13-16) seamlessly follows the beatitudes of last Sunday simply because Jesus remains on top of the mountain teaching. Between vs. 12 where he speaks of the prophets having been persecuted and vs. 13 where he calls his listeners the "salt of the earth," barely a pause for reflection exists.

Actually the reflection is to be done much later when this extended teaching..the core of Jesus' message...is complete several chapters later.

The trampling underfoot of salt which has become insipid is in sharp contrast to the beatitude "when men revile you and persecute you" of vs. 11. However, both pertain to rejection. The trampling of tasteless salt deserves its fate whereas those persecuted for Jesus do not. Secondly, Jesus speaks of light being placed upon a stand to illumine the entire house. Both images are in accord with the sequence of Ps 34.8: "O taste and see that Lord is good! Happy is the man who takes refuge in him!" That is to say, first comes taste (salt) followed by seeing (the lamp). The Hebrew word for tasting is *tabam* which also applies to discernment, of making proper judgment. "Blessed be your advice" [1Sam 25.33]. In the example of the Psalm, the act of *tabam*, of putting something in one's mouth, is the prerequisite of *ra'ah*, of obtaining vision.

With this connection between Jesus' words and the Psalm in mind, it could be said that the light set upon a lamp stand glows brighter the sharper the taste becomes...the taste of what Jesus is communicating and putting it into action. The object is neither to see nor to do good works, fine as they may be, but "to give glory to your Father who is in heaven." That divine glory (*doxa*) is set upon the highest possible lamp stand, as it were, and becomes more radiant upon earth the more it is acknowledged. Besides, this emphasis upon the positive value of height ties in well with Jesus seating on top of the mountain preaching to the crowds.

13 February, Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

We have approximately one month until Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, which introduces an entirely new slant upon liturgical time which lasts several months, that is, until the end of several Sundays after Pentecost. The presence of close to two months of Ordinary Time is rather unusual this time of year, for about now we would be gearing up for Lent. And so a greater number of "ordinary" weeks offers an opportunity to see how the Church's various liturgical cycles, a form of marking sacred time, affect our lives.

Today's Gospel (Mt 5.17-37) is quite long, so just one theme appearing at the beginning will be singled out here, and that is embodied within the first verse: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them." The verb *nomizō* (think) is a good one with respect to those whom Jesus is addressing, that is to say, those people on the mount as noted in last Sunday's entry. The verb *nomizō* implies the holding of a custom and reflects the familiar or customary way of thinking which our minds have adopted. From such thoughts arise a "norm" or standard by which we judge and compare everything else. From it is derived Law (*Nomos* or Torah), that which is normative for the proper operation of a society. While *nomizō* may fall in line with that notion, also it can reveal one's prejudices which are set up as a kind of inner law to which all else must conform. As for the Torah/*Nomos*, Jesus did not come to abolish or to loosen it (*kataluo*) it but to fulfil it, *pleroo*.

There is a specific time to this *pleroo* or fulfilment, namely, "until all is accomplished" or literally "until (*panta*) will be or become." What this all is Jesus leaves unspecified, not to leave his audience in the dark but to make them inquire more, of how he stands with respect to the Torah. When hearing of an iota and dot concerning the Law, images of minute observation come to mind, of following the letter than the spirit. While true, on the other hand there is real meaning in these two elements not passing from the Torah. Given that Hebrew is written in consonants and vowels are inserted underneath them (often they are not present), the addition of just one vowel can change the sense of a text dramatically. That means a reader of Torah must be extremely careful when inserting vowels into the string of consonants so as to get the intended meaning. Jesus himself is this process, if you will, as he is inserted within Torah and requires

close reading to make sense of his claims to divinity.

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” [vs. 20]. Another image of zeal without a true understanding of it, an archetypal parody of religion. But when Jesus says that one’s *dikaiosune* (righteousness) must be more intense than these, the Jewish religious leaders, he means one must be alert when reading Torah to properly insert the correct vowels to make sense, else it will be open to mis-interpretation. Here entering the kingdom of heaven is done through the (presumed) image of reading Torah. However, the common sense of reading is not intended, but one that is akin to *lectio divina*.

20 February, Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mt 5.38-48) contains the essence of Jesus’ teaching, rarely practiced, let alone understood, because it’s so difficult: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” The intent here is to break this Gospel down into manageable parts, if you will, to map it out, that the practice of *agape* may be appreciated more clearly. The verb for “love” is the well-known *agapao* (*agape* being the noun); the verb for “pray” is *proseuchomai* which connotes the offering of vows. This sentence doesn’t stop here but hinges upon its continuation in the next verse, “so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” The key words are “so that” or *hopos* which give reason for practicing *agape*: not to be like the Father but to become his sons which is, if you, a biological connection, not an imitative one. And being a son implies having the right as an heir to all that the Father possesses. The location is helpful, if you will: “in heaven” which is the antithesis of the place where both the just and unjust live. So it appears that doing *agape* makes a person a son...while still on earth or compared with the Father in the supposedly remote heaven. Most of the time there are little or absolutely no palpable results of *agapao*; if there were, it would be fairly easy to practice. That’s why locating the Father “in heaven” is important here, not so much as a place radically removed from earth (where the just and unjust both do their thing) but as a different space, if you will, fully present in that realm.

The action of *agapao* is fleshed out by the way the Father operates from heaven: “he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” Both sun and rain are located above the “place” where enemies thrive as well as those whom they assail. Even above them is the Father “in heaven.” Thus it seems he has a two-fold space between him and enemies: the realm of sky and the realm of heaven. The same distance exists for the just as well which at first appears to be indifference but is not the case with use of the verb *agapao*.

The Gospel sums up this equality toward the just and unjust with “you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The adjective is *teleios* which describes that which has reached its end and therefore is finished with nothing to add. *Teleios* bridges the gap between human interactions where enemies creep in and heaven where the Father lives.

27 February, Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In other entries above this year’s celebration of Easter was noted as coming at the latest possible date. When you pass through a larger than usual number of “ordinary” Sundays as we’ve been doing this time around (that is, since after Christmas), a need for renewal grows not just for oneself but for the Church as a whole. There’s an inbuilt instinct to move not just from Ordinary Time but from the fairly recent Advent-Christmas season. This desire for some type of redemptive act finds full expression during Holy Week. Furthermore, awareness of longer days and the coming of spring impart greater urgency to this need for redemption even though we may not be quite able to put our hands on it. We will return to Ordinary Time early in July when summer is in full swing.

The word that jumps out from today's Gospel (Mt 6.24-34) is "anxious" or *merimnao* which also can be applied positively as taking care for the minute details of something and has familiar modern overtones. Jesus applies this over-attention to life as well as corporeal needs yet doesn't spell it out much after urging his listeners to consider the birds of the air. As for the verb *merimnao*, perhaps Jesus was thinking of his long friendship with Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Recall the famous words to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful" [Lk 10.41-2]. Here Jesus takes a concrete example of *merimnao* and in the Gospel passage at hand, gives a broader application. In sum, *merimnao* is opposite to that well-known yet mysterious "one thing is needful" (*henos estin chreia*). Jesus doesn't spell this *henos* out, just to say it's of greater value than being anxious.

Jesus is famous for lack of details, of giving general outlines sometimes within a poetic context and letting each generation take it from there. That's the appeal to his words: they strike that unique middle ground which appeals to all sorts of people, allowing them to read into his words just the right amount that's necessary to flesh them out. Those who press the limit of Jesus' poetic expression traditionally have been called heretics. The technical definition of that word is applicable for the case at hand, as one who picks and chooses without considering the consequences. One heretical interpretation would be to read into the injunction of not to be anxious (along with the examples given) as a secret technique for meditation. While some elements from meditation can apply, they are not part of a hidden teaching Jesus was giving to his disciples apart from what we have in the Gospels.

What saves any genuine reader of Jesus' words from heresy as a tendency to pick-and-choose is his reference to the Father. There can be something almost galling about his mention, of having gone on eloquently about not being anxious, for example, and then attributing it to reliance upon him. That indirect approach is the real appeal to what Jesus says throughout the Gospels and one to keep in mind constantly without being ashamed or fearful that yes, the Father sometimes can be annoying as someone else in the background watching everything that goes on and as one to whom Jesus is responsible.

As for this Father, in the Gospel at hand Jesus says that he "knows you need them all," that is life's necessities. But the galling part is "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" after which the Father will give these necessities. One gets the impression that anxiety or *merimnao* is preferable to acknowledging the Father. While admittedly this can be difficult, it's better to confront and acknowledge in order not to become a "heretic." Indeed, one can define a heretic as fond of *merimnao*.

6 March, Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

At last, the final Sunday in Ordinary Time with Ash Wednesday beginning this week.

Today's Gospel (Mt 7.21-7) presents a fine introduction to this season of repentance, of preparing ourselves for its arrival three days from today, coming as it does after a lengthy exposition of Jesus' teaching on the mountain. Actually the period of Lent could be used as time to both ponder and unravel what Jesus had taught in the past few chapters. The Gospel begins with Jesus cautioning those crying out "Lord" to him, that all who do so won't enter the kingdom of heaven. This image makes sense because the Gospel at hand is a continuation of Jesus on the mountain after he had begun with the beatitudes. A throng of people were pressing in upon him as he sat there on the summit. The key to entering the kingdom of heaven is doing the Father's will who is in heaven. Although Jesus had mentioned the Father several times, was attempting to get the crowd acquainted with him, this endeavor took time to register. Yes, they as Jews were familiar with their tradition of calling God their father, but the identity Jesus had with him, the essence of what he was attempting to communicate, was quite extraordinary. How Jesus managed to get down from the smallness of the mountain summit is anyone's guess. Chances are the

disciples acted as a bodyguard.

And so after speaking of the possible rejection of those who cry out “Lord,” Jesus brings his relationship with the Father into greater focus: “Everyone who hears these words of mind and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock.” *Phronimos* is the word for “wise” which implies being discreet as well as prudent. It stands in contrast to a person who is *moros* (foolish) or dull, stupid. Taking this analogy a bit further, a listener there on the mountain has heard what Jesus spoke about going back to the beginning of Chapter Five. That’s a lot of material to absorb and to sort out. In addition to capturing as much as possible, a careful listener would ask as many others as possible who were crowded about him what they retained. By so doing in a relatively short span of time, one person could have captured quite a lot. If he were literate...and that was the exception...he could have rushed home and jotted down at least an outline which later he could flesh out. Such is how a person who is *phronimos* would comport himself. This approach indeed resembles a carpenter constructing a house with special care as to choosing its foundation, an image Jesus uses with regard to his teaching.

It’s no small wonder that Chapter Seven—and that includes everything since the beginning of Chapter Five as noted above—has the crowds as being “astonished at his teaching.” *Ekeplasso* is the verb here meaning to be beside oneself with wonder, intensified as it is by the preposition *ek* (from) prefaced to the verb *plasso*, to strike.

13 March, First Sunday of Lent

Although Lent begins officially with Ash Wednesday, its spiritual sense, if you will, doesn’t commence until today, the First Sunday. The four days between now and Ash Wednesday acclimatize us to the five Sundays of Lent which are to follow. After such an extended period of Ordinary Time, there’s a deep sense of satisfaction of at last having entered a distinct liturgical time which will renew the Church as it proceeds through the calendar year. The present Lenten cycle, connected with that of Easter and Pentecost, will occupy our attention for the next 115 days. That is to say, the very tail end of the Lenten-Easter-Pentecost cycle ends with the feast of the Immaculate Heart of the Virgin Mary.

Today’s Gospel (Mt 4.1-11) has been the traditional way to inaugurate Lent, namely, Jesus’ temptation in the desert which comes on the heels of his baptism by John, thus providing the link between two distinct liturgical seasons (i.e., Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter). While in the desert for forty days and nights Jesus encounters three temptations by the devil, two of which deal with power. In the first encounter the devil tries to get Jesus to worship him and in the second, to have the glory of all the earth’s kingdoms. Thus the desire to have and retain control over other persons is the most difficult temptation to overcome, more so than being hungry (the first temptation). While all three temptations may have taken at once or during a very brief period, that means Jesus was all by himself 99.99% of the time.

This brings up the question, what did he do all that time in the desert? Move about or stay in one place? Perhaps he did move around at night and enjoyed the starry heavens while taking shelter from the sun during the day. Still, this touches upon a universal experience, of how to comport oneself when alone and deprived of any means of communication or simply things to do. The only way to find out is to go out and see if you can cope with isolation, which, in fact, many did; hence one impetus to the birth or monasticism. As for Jesus, he was led by the Spirit and presumably was dropped off there by the Spirit. When the Spirit got to a suitably isolated place within the wilderness, the two departed and perhaps exchanged some words which forever will remain unrecorded. Right afterwards or within the same verse Jesus “was tempted by the devil.” One gets the sense that as soon as the Spirit dropped off Jesus, the devil was there waiting for him as at a bus stop in order to collect him. That implies that the temptations noted earlier happened in quick succession when Jesus had entered the wilderness and was left with virtually the

full time to reflect back upon their significance or how the latter two applied to the desire for power and control.

Then there comes a time (not recorded) when Jesus realized enough, time to return. Perhaps Jesus did have contact now and then with a trusted friend, for he seems to have left the wilderness “when he heard that John had been arrested” [vs. 12] and thus returned to Galilee.

20 March, Second Sunday of Lent

Following ancient tradition for this, the Second Sunday of the Lenten season, the Church presents us with the Transfiguration (Mt 17.1-9). Thus within the course of one week two opposites of a single spectrum are revealed which is the over-arching theme of Lent-Easter-Pentecost: temptation and glorification. Encapsulating this week is important not just for now but for other times of the liturgical year.

“After six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother and led them up a high mountain apart.” Note the six days as representative of the six days of creation. Apparently the time frame at hand has in mind the concluding verse of Chapter Sixteen, “Truly, I say to you there are some standing here who not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.” Applying the sense of taste to death is bestowing upon this, the termination of life, an intimate and thorough contact, that all persons will absorb...consume...death within themselves. Jesus says that some will not undergo this absorption but doesn’t single out the people before him which must have left his audience confused and wondering what he meant. The same applies to his disciples. That’s why a full six days is required to unpack the sense of his words which must have been disconcerting. It seems that Jesus hadn’t offered them any help but left them fend for themselves, a not untypical tactic he uses backed up by the claim that the Holy Spirit is required to clarify everything for them. As for the disciples at hand, Jesus takes only three of the twelve to the “high mountain.” Are they (not the other nine) those who won’t taste death while the nine will? That group must have been on edge all the while Jesus and the three were absent. Perhaps they wouldn’t return but ascend into heaven as had been the case with the prophet Elijah who, after all, appeared to Jesus.

This opening verse of today’s Gospel concludes with the word “apart” or *kat’ idian* which reads literally as “according to one’s own.” Obviously it applies to Peter, James and John yet can expand to include the mountain itself as “apart” from other mountains by reason of what happened there. Nothing was said during their ascent. Perhaps the three thought that Jesus was going to recapitulate his earlier discourse on the beatitudes, go into more detail about that teaching, but that took place upon another mountain not described as “high” (cf. 5.1). The three disciples considered the height which distinguished this unnamed peak would be similar to the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai which turned out to be not inaccurate. And so without further ado, Jesus “was transfigured before them,” the verb being *metamorphoo*. The verb is the root to *morphe* or form prefaced with the preposition *meta*, after. This renders something as follows: the physical form of Jesus moved to a state or condition “after” the one fully visible to the disciples. This is an impossibility from the physical point of view, presenting a paradox of a *morphe* leaving itself while going into (*meta* or after) something which is outside it. One possible image is of an object at rest which suddenly accelerates to a lightning speed. Just after this instant acceleration one sees the object both as stationary and fanning out, as it were, in the direction to which it is moving. That’s why right after his *metamorphoo* the text reads “and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.”

In this paradox there appeared Moses and Elijah, not surprising to the three disciples. A sacred space had opened up in this *meta-morphe* or after-form so anything was possible. After an indefinite period of time when a “bright cloud overshadowed” the disciples and the voice saying “this is my beloved Son,” the Jesus before the *meta-morphe* touched them. This gesture is significant because it indicated that Jesus had returned to his proper human form. It was mentioned above that Jesus and the disciples were silent upon

ascending the mountain. Things were different on the descent: “Tell no one the vision until the Son of man is raised from the dead.” There follows a discussion about this which brings up Elijah (he had just conversed with Moses and Jesus) whom Jesus says had been mistreated during his lifetime. The same will apply to Jesus later on and already had regarding John the Baptist. All this was too much for three disciples. Imagine what would be the case if all twelve witnessed the Transfiguration. Finally there remained the awkward meeting of the nine disciples awaiting the return of Jesus and the three. They must have been relieved that all four hadn’t ascended into heaven like Elijah but would continue their ministry. Nevertheless, it must have been very difficult to retain silence (“Tell no one”), yet the three seemed to have summoned the strength for this.

27 March, Third Sunday of Lent

Today’s Gospel (Jn 4.5-42, the long form) takes place in “a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there.” The context of this verse is Gen 33.19-20: “And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem’s father, he (Jacob) bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent. There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel.” This proper name translates as God, the God of Israel. Obviously the location is important for the dialogue Jesus is to have with the Samaritan woman with regard to that water springing up to eternal life. Surely Jesus other wells were in the area, but deliberately Jesus settled upon this one due to its title and association with the patriarch Jacob. Just prior to having dug this well Jacob confronted his brother, Esau, whom he cheated out of his inheritance. Actually, the erection of this altar is in commemoration of the reconciliation of these two brothers who had been at odds with each other.

Because of the association of this well with Jacob and Jesus near which was erected the altar “God, the God of Israel,” a comparison may be made between the Esau and the Samaritan woman. However, no mention of the altar is made in the Gospel though it’s implied.

Esau is noted for the forfeiture of his birthright as first-born to his elder brother, Isaac, though both were born as twins (cf. Gen 25.24). He approached his blind father with a pottage made of game shortly after Jacob had pretended to be Esau; despite Isaac having recognized him, Esau did not receive the blessing of the first-born. In fact, Isaac had a harsh response to Esau: “Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall be your dwelling, and away from the dew of heaven on high” [Gen 27.39]. As a result, Esau planned to kill his brother to get revenge. Considerable time had passed, including Jacob’s wrestling with an angel and his stay with Laban some twenty years in an effort to procure Rachel as a wife. During that time both brothers had no contact, though Jacob always was looking over his shoulder out of fear of the chance that Esau might come after him. Thus it was a relief when at last Esau approached Jacob who said “to see your face is like seeing the face of God” [Gen 33.10]. True to a certain extent, Jacob having wrestled with the angel, the mark of which must have remained visible on Jacob’s face.

The anonymous Samaritan woman stands in sharp contrast to the impulsive Esau whom Jacob had outwitted. She is fully aware of Jacob’s reputation handed down by his association with the well though there is no mention of the altar of “God, the God of Israel,” perhaps long-gone except for a stone cairn. “Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us the well” [vs. 12]? This was in response to Jesus having asked her for a drink of water. Nothing is said about Jesus actually having receiving water which is besides the point of the encounter between him and the woman. Shortly the conversation changes to a specific place of worshiping God: “The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father” [vs. 23]. That stands in contrast to the altar of El-Elohe-Israel which was a specific place of worship. Neither that place (associated with ‘this mountain’) nor Jerusalem will be required for “true worshipers” who “will worship the Father in spirit and truth” [vs. 23]. Although Esau finally reconciled with his deceptive brother, Genesis has no record as to whether or not he had worshiped God, focusing only upon Jacob’s devotion. One wonders whether Esau may have worshiped at El-Elohe-Israel;

chances are not, that he gave allegiance instead to the gods of Edom, having taken wives from the Canaanites, a prohibition which Abraham strongly forbade for his son, Isaac (cf. Gen 24.1-9, etc.). After all, Gen 36.1 identifies Esau with Edom and mentions him as taking wives from the forbidden Canaanites.

As for the Samaritan woman, once her conversation with Jesus came to an end, the disciples came along with people from the city of Sychar. Despite Jesus having revealed himself to her, we are left hanging as to the woman's final response: "Can this be the Christ" [vs. 29]? However, the Sycharians had no problem: "we know that this is indeed the savior of the world" [vs. 42] and got this knowledge from her testimony. As for the woman's future, chances are she remained at home and returned, as was her custom, to Jacob's well but with a renewed sense of purpose to her life. She may even have left Sychar and became a follower of Jesus' early band of disciples after his death and resurrection as well as having collaborated with John in writing his account of this episode.

3 April, Fourth Sunday of Lent

"As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth." Such begins today's Gospel (Jn 9.1-41, long form) though the exact spot of where this incident had happened is not given. Later reference to the pool of Siloam suggests it wasn't far from the Jerusalem temple, even within the city itself, so the beggar could have been one among a swarm of them, hardly worth noticing. Shortly afterwards the disciples asked Jesus whether the blind man or his parents had sinned, the reason for his affliction. This takes place within the context of the possibility that Jesus doesn't seem to have paid attention to this fellow, being more intent upon continuing his journey. However, the disciples had taken more notice of this particular blind man, sensing that they could use him as an opportunity to pose a question that had been plaguing them for some time. Sin was perceived as a punishment, even for physical defects, so the context isn't surprising. That's why the Pharisees equated blindness with moral deficiency or alienation from God: "You were born in utter sin" [vs. 34]. *Hamartia* is the word for sin, the same for guilt as noted below with regard to the Pharisees (cf. vs. 41). Most likely without intending it, Jesus turned his near-miss with the blind man into an opportunity. That is to say, he used the man's physical affliction as an analogy for spiritual blindness. Furthermore, Jesus' being in the world is a time of light, a very brief span ("as long as I am") which must be utilized: "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." And so this shortness of light imparts a certain urgency to the situation before darkness descends for good.

After having cured the beggar there begins a long dialogue with the man, his parents and Pharisees as to how he received his sight. Though blind from birth, this fellow turned out to have clearer vision than the Pharisees whose eyes were closed to the truth. So finally after the blind beggar had been rejected...and this was nothing new to him, having been maltreated all his life...Jesus sought him out and asked if he believed in the Son of man (cf. vs. 35). This searching out means that Jesus had to go through a multitude of beggars, no mean task, until he hit upon the right man. Word quickly got out that Jesus had cured one of their own; hence all after him. The man didn't know of whom Jesus spoke yet was willing to acknowledge him. While this exchange was going on, the blind man has to be excused since just recently he saw for the very first time. "You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you" [vs. 37]. Actually, it's a bit surprising that the man didn't recognize Jesus right away since the sense of hearing is much more acute in a person deprived of sight. Perhaps the new-found interaction between hearing and seeing, taken for granted in healthy people, was difficult to coordinate for the very first time, hence the man's ignorance of Jesus.

In light of the strong opinions the Pharisees had over the cure of the blind man, Jesus implies that they truly are blind: "and that those who see may become blind" [vs. 39]. Causing people with sight to lose it was terrifying, especially as it pertains to matters of the Spirit which seems to be the issue at hand. Surely the blind man with newly restored sight appreciated this and perhaps later pled with all his heart with the Pharisees not to lose their sight, that they do not end up like him. However, once the Pharisees got wind

of this remark—for they were close by, ready to pounce on anything Jesus would say—Jesus equated their physical ability to see with guilt. Actually the word for guilt is *hamartia* or sin. And so the story at hand revolves around the issue of sin, guilt, blindness and sight...all intricately woven together.

By way of interest, Chapter Ten seems to begin immediately after this incident and deals with the image of sheep hearing their shepherd's voice. Thus there is a transition from a discussion having revolved around the sense of sight to that concerning the sense of hearing.

10 April, Fifth Sunday of Lent

Today's Gospel (Jn 11.1-45) is about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, of special importance, coming as it does one week before Palm Sunday and less than two weeks before his crucifixion. This lengthy passage can be summed up in vs. 5 which reads in all simplicity and directness: "Now Jesus loved (*agapao*; from which *agape* is derived) Martha and her sister and Lazarus." That is, all three were especially dear to him largely because he didn't have to assume the role of teacher, etc...in other words, Jesus could simply be himself. For Jesus to have *agape* with these three means that Jesus had ready access to them and they to him based solely on friendship. They lived close to Jerusalem, so Jesus could drop in unexpected and uninvited at any time. Such *agape* between Jesus, Martha, Mary and Lazarus is echoed later by the Jews who said "See how he loves him" [vs. 36]! The verb here is not *agapao* but *phileo*. In many ways the latter is more tender since it connotes friendship and long association which the Jews, despite their hostility, readily acknowledged.

Despite the threat of being stoned and the report of Lazarus' illness, Jesus decided to remain "in the place where he was" for two extra days after which he intended not to visit Lazarus but return to Judea over the objection of his disciples. They contended that the Jews were out to stone their master to which he responded, "If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble because he sees the light of this world" [vs. 9]. Jesus equates walking safely not so much with the light of day but with that of the world; presumably the person doing this will not be stoned.

But instead of returning to Judea as proposed, Jesus gets word (apparently not from the disciples) that Lazarus has died, so he decides to "awake him out of sleep" [vs. 11]. That means the whereabouts of Jesus was known to everyone, friend and foe alike. Jesus equates sleep with death and refers to his impending crucifixion yet soon tells the disciples "plainly" that indeed Lazarus has died. The Greek adverb is *parresia* which originally applied to the freedom and confidence a member of a Greek city state had to speak in the public assembly. Something of this can be detected in Jesus' words at this stage of his relationship with Jesus, namely, that he and they both had *parresia* to speak with each other without fear of ridicule or embarrassment. Although this Gospel takes place with Jesus about to return to dangerous Judea, Thomas felt the same would apply when they went to see Lazarus: "Let us also go that we may die with him" [vs. 16]. Since Bethany was about two miles from Jerusalem (cf. vs. 18), danger from the Jews was everywhere at this late stage in Jesus' ministry; actually quite a few of them came to console Mary and Martha.

Thus when Jesus arrives at Bethany we see an interaction between two groups of people who had a close relationship with him, the disciples and Martha, Mary and Lazarus. The latter three fall into a special category, friends, whereas the disciples aren't labeled such because they were entrusted with a mission. Perhaps the disciples had only a cursory acquaintance with these three, chiefly through their master, and did not appreciate his close association with them. They may have felt a tinge of jealousy because the three seemed to have no need of teaching nor of rebuking, so often the case with the twelve. However, at one point Martha slides a bit over to the side of the disciples when Jesus tells her that he is the resurrection and the life to which she consents more as a subject than as a friend. Of the three, Martha with her

practicality is more in line with the disciples than Mary and Lazarus. At the same time, Lazarus isn't recorded as ever having uttered a word except, so we have little knowledge of him.

As for the future of Martha, Mary and Lazarus after Jesus' Resurrection, Pentecost and Ascension, we know nothing. However, given the *agapao* between them and Jesus (which as above, the Jews saw as *phileo*), they must have followed the disciples...one could almost say the disciples followed them...and much involved with the beginnings of the church. Lazarus stood out insofar as he had died once and will die later; in other words, he experienced death twice and could speak with some authority about Jesus' resurrection. Yet the two sisters and their brother probably stuck together and struck up the same relationship with the Holy Spirit as they had enjoyed with Jesus. In this way they were able to instruct both the disciples and new church members in how to comport themselves.

17 April, Palm Sunday

The Gospel presented here (Mt 21.1-11) pertains to the procession with the palms, not the reading of the Passion, and begins with Jesus' arrival on the Mount of Olives which overlooks Jerusalem. Nothing is said of what Jesus thought upon beholding the city with the temple squarely in front of him except an immediate command to his disciples to get an "ass tied and a colt with her." This was to fulfill the words of Is 62.11 and Zech 9.9 which read respectively, "Behold the Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before him.'" And "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass."

The first verse of the Hebrew text has "behold" twice (*hineh*) and the second, "lo" which also reads as *hineh*. This word is one of exclamation, of seeing in one glance all that is about to unfold. All three *hinehs* give an idea into the mind of Jesus as he ascended the Mount of Olives and beheld Jerusalem spread out before him. The Isaiah verse has the first *hineh* with respect to the Lord already having proclaimed (*shamah*) to the ends of the earth, that is, having caused these ends to have heard (*shamah*) him and therefore welcome him. This has a certain irony, Jerusalem considered the center of the Chosen People, the place where you would expect to welcome Jesus first. Now it is up to Jerusalem to play catch-up and comply to the salvation now coming, the *yeshab* or "Jesus" about to ride into the city. Obviously that is expecting too much. The second *hineh* of Isaiah pertains to both his reward and recompense or *sakar* (alternately as wages) and *pebulah* (also wages). Both terms are similar, the former pertaining more to wages for having been hired and the latter to wages for work accomplished. Both *sakar* and *pebulah* have not yet been distributed, for the former is still "with" the Lord whereas the latter is "before" him. In other words, the image is not unlike a master or paymaster about to dispense not so much a reward but payment for work justly done. This, of course, is against the backdrop of the nations which had complied.

As for the quote from Zechariah, the paymaster image suggested in Isaiah is transformed into a king who is both triumphant and victorious or *tsadyq* and *noshab*. The former more properly pertains to righteousness (the adjective for this noun) and the latter is derived from the verbal root *yashab* (to save), the same root for *yeshab* of the Isaiah verse, salvation/Jesus.

After this insertion between Jesus' command to his disciples to bring him an ass and colt, he used them for riding into Jerusalem. Nothing is said as to which Jesus took, this being what's called poetic parallelism, the use of two words to indicate one animal. Be that as it may, consider two views: the ass and colt were young and needed to stay together. If one were taken, the other would not want to go. Then again, the riderless ass/colt could be taken as representing what we see in some military processions of a fallen leader. The major difference was that Jesus was on the other animal. Thus the reality of one person...savior...victorious and fallen one week before Good Friday. As for the crowd, they spread their

garments on the road before Jesus as well as having cut branches from the trees. Seeing Jesus on one animal and the other riderless must have left them confused even among their shouting Hosanna out of joy. Thus they had mixed feelings as to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, feelings which would dispart quickly but understandably, given the unusual sight before them. Although they were confused, the "ends of the earth" which already had received Jesus' proclamation or hearing (*shamah*) knew full well what was going on. It was a matter of bringing this hearing into a new environment...Jerusalem itself...where it would play itself out quickly within one week. A further complication for the crowd was that Jesus was riding into Jerusalem both humble (*hany*) as well as triumphant (i.e., righteous) and victorious (i.e., as salvation). Combining these elements—humble in the sense of being afflicted (*hanah*, the verbal root), triumphant (*tsadyq*, righteous) and victorious (*yashah*, to bestow salvation/Jesus) in the one person of Jesus was simply too much for the people or anyone else for that matter, disciples included, to grasp at the present.

24 April, Easter Sunday

Today's Gospel (Mt 28.1-10) is the one for the Vigil Mass which technically is celebrated in the pre-dawn hours of Easter Sunday. The Mass is geared to end as the sun is rising, symbolic of the Resurrection. That's why the words "toward the dawn of the first day" have special meaning here, the verb being *epiphosko* or to dawn. More accurately, the preposition *epi* (upon) prefaced to a verb pertaining to light comes off as something like to light-upon, the dawn lighting upon the darkness from which it is emerging. This, in turn, suggests a backward gesture of sorts compared with the forward one of advancing to full daylight. During this pre-dawn period "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher." They left in total darkness expecting to see the sepulcher as soon as it became visible. That means they intended to arrive in full darkness and take their place nearby. Though it can be assumed both women were hoping to see Jesus, nothing is said as to their expectations, simply that they went to the tomb very early in the morning. As for that pre-dawn hour, they were very familiar with Jesus' habits of praying to his Father which must have involved getting up before everyone else and going off by himself. Would something similar happen now? Only people who are on a familiar basis such as these two women can know with certainty. Martha, Mary and Lazarus are among them; Mary Magdalene and Mary must have been acquainted with these three who as a group form a unique relationship with Jesus to which not even the disciples have access.

When the two Marys approached the tomb, "there was a great earthquake (*seismos*)" after which an angel descended from heaven and rolled back the stone to Jesus' tomb. To top it off, the angel sat on the stone as if to rest after the example of Jacob who alone was strong enough to roll back the stone over the well (cf. Gen 29.10). As if to personalize the earthquake, the text says that "the guards trembled," *seio* being the verb which is the root for *seismos*. However, the angel told the women not to fear...not to *seio*...but invited them to see where Jesus had laid. By this time some light may have come over the horizon, otherwise the women could not have taken in this remarkable sight.

No further conversation between the angel, Mary Magdalene and Mary is reported nor was there need for it. Such is always the case with divine intervention through angelic intermediaries: focus is upon their message (that's the root of 'angel,' *aggelos*), not striking up a conversation but to communicate as briefly and tersely as possible. Some of this terseness the two women pass on to the disciples, if you will, after which they as *aggeloi* pass off the scene, leaving full stage to the disciples who take the essence of *aggelos* as messenger and transform it into *euaggelion* or good news. And so we have a seamless movement from the Mary Magdalene and Mary to the angel to the disciples to the Church.

As for the two women, surely legends abound as to their later lives and what role if any they played in the fledgling church. Yet if we keep in mind their role of friendship and familiarity with Jesus as was the case with Martha, Mary and Lazarus, we can assume that they did the say with the Holy Spirit and church

members. They weren't on the front line preaching and teaching but held back slightly so others could begin to appreciate the contemplative side of Jesus Christ, if you will, even at this very early stage of development. If it were not for these five persons (only one of whom was a man, Lazarus), the early church as well as its development in later centuries would be that much poorer.

1 May, Second Sunday of Easter

“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews.” The Greek text reads literally “the one of the Sabbaths.” Such begins this Sunday's Gospel (Jn 20.19-31) which has a close correlation between all three elements just mentioned. They serve to intensify the fear all the disciples experienced on “that day” or the same day when the resurrection took place. These words act as dramatic background or provide the context for Jesus who “came and stood among them” or literally “into the midst” (*eis to meson*). During that momentous day Jesus had risen before Mary Magdalene came to the tomb “while it was still dark” (vs. 1), and now we find him “into the disciples' midst,” the time being after sunset. That means an entire day had passed between the two events when the disciples and others like Mary had pondered over their meeting of Jesus shortly after his resurrection, that is, before daybreak. Even though the text says that the disciples had shut the doors, chances are they kept them shut through most of the day or at least kept guard over who might be approaching.

During this evening visitation, Jesus extended his peace twice in rapid succession before breathing on them the Holy Spirit after which Thomas arrived and doubted what his fellow disciples had communicated to them. The incident ends like this, keeping us in suspense, for a full eight days with no apparent resolution. Presumably Thomas argued with the disciples as well as people like Mary Magdalene about their testimony, all this again transpiring behind closed door and most likely under the cover of night. Then a full week later Thomas returned during which Jesus “stood into the midst” (*eis to meson*) a second time. Jesus invited Thomas to place his hands into his wounds after which Thomas confessed his belief. It seems that this standing into the midst is critical at this stage to reveal the significance of Jesus' resurrection and sets the pattern for his relationship for the future Church. More specifically, this “into the midst” applies to the Holy Spirit who, unlike the resurrected Jesus, is more diffuse and penetrating, the pattern of which is inaugurated at Pentecost.

John adds a commentary based on this experience: “that believing you may have life in his name.” Although the preposition *en* is used for “in,” it would not be far afield to put it as “into (*eis*) his name after the pattern of “into the midst.” Such belief originates in an intimate experience and sets the tone for future generations. As for this life, it is in Jesus' name or keeping in mind the Hebrew name, faith in the one who saves and who is anointed which is more in keeping with the dynamic communication of divine life presented in the Gospel.

8 May, Third Sunday of Easter

Today's Gospel (Lk 24.13-35) recounts the incident on the road to Emmaus when Jesus engages two of his followers in a conversation, he being unknown to them during most of it. One is named Cleopas and the other's name isn't given; they weren't of the twelve disciples but apparently are very close to them as well as to Jesus. “But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” The verb *kerateo* for “were kept” is in the passive indicating that a power greater than a human one was at work. Their preoccupation with the recent events about Jesus contributed to this blindness...wholly understandable...and they wanted to put as much distance between them and Jerusalem as humanly possible. Their hindrance as far as vision (reference is to physical eyes) pertains to knowledge or more specifically, *epigignosko*, which literally translates knowing-upon (*epi* prefaced to the verb). In other words the two men did not know...did not recognize-upon Jesus...or have knowledge that would enable them to situate how his death as foretold by the prophets. In addition

to this ignorance, the disciples as well as other followers of Jesus had to wait some fifty days until Pentecost when the Holy Spirit would reveal in full the significance of Jesus' life and mission. To be sure, Cleopas and his friend were present at that event or surely very close to it.

After having spoken some time with the two men, Jesus had to rebuke them with "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" Calling them both foolish and slow of heart, though it pertains more to a human lack of understanding, does relate to their having been kept from *epigignosko*. The adjective for "foolish" is *anoetos* or lacking the power of *noeo* which means to perceive or notice and often relates to perceiving with the eyes. Thus *anoetos* is not unlike the just mentioned eyes (of the mind and spirit) that couldn't recognize Jesus. *Bradus* or slow connotes tardiness and here pertains to the heart, *kardia*. Thus the two chief mental and spiritual faculties signified by *noeo* (to perceive) and *kardia* have failed to cooperate that they may understand Jesus' crucifixion. The same failure in grasping what Jesus said the evening before at the Last Supper would apply, of course. All that was swept away in an instant.

When the three reached the village, Cleopas and his anonymous companion asked Jesus to stay overnight at an inn. It was at the breaking and blessing of bread when "their eyes were opened and they recognized him." That is to say, at this meal the men had their eyes opened (i.e., the ones that were 'kept' from being opened) and had *epigignosko* or knowledge-upon with respect to Jesus, not beforehand. Though this setting of a meal was instrumental in their recognition of Jesus, they had an intimation beforehand on the road but were not quite certain it was he: "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road while he opened to us the scriptures?" That is to say, those hearts which were slow or *bradus* to believe the prophets nevertheless burned while Jesus was opening the scriptures. The verb here is *dianoigo* with the preposition *dia* (through) as a preface which suggests an opening-through, a thorough opening of scripture. Despite Jesus himself doing this, the Holy Spirit was required to bring such opening-through to perfection. Jesus began it and the Spirit completed it... rather, still operates in the church to effect such opening-through.

Despite the fact that by now it was night, the two men "rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem." Making their way in the dead of night was no problem, for that burning within their heart provided sufficient illumination and in a way foreshadowed the light bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Then they came across the eleven disciples; despite the very late hour, they were together with others, clearly unable to sleep. The two men informed them about Simon's experience at the tomb after which the two told their story. By the time both parties exchanged their accounts it must have been close to dawn when Jesus stood among them. That is, Jesus stood among them in a very heated discussion filled with more questions and conjectures than answers. To an observer, it would appear quite humorous and most likely to Jesus himself. So the events from the Last Supper to the crucifixion to this encounter with Jesus was one of highly compressed time with no awareness of day or night.

15 May, Fourth Sunday of Easter

Around this time of the Easter season we begin moving away from the Resurrection and start paying attention to Christ's Ascension which is followed nine days later by Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit. Although each Sunday of the liturgical year is a commemoration of the Resurrection, this fifty day period, because it catches up in that movement toward the Ascension and Pentecost, gets to the heart of that life-giving force which animates the Church. We will have the Sundays of Ordinary Time from early July through late November to reflect upon it.

Today's Gospel (Jn 10.1-10) doesn't apply directly to the Resurrection as in the previous Sundays of Easter but speak of Jesus as a point of entry for salvation, Jesus using the image of a gate to the sheepfold. The

first verse has the preposition *eis* (into) used twice as to entering the sheepfold door: *eiserchomai* (to enter) and *eis* with respect to the sheepfold itself; in other words, an entrance into. As for entering a way other than the one Jesus prescribes, the verb is *anabaino*, to go upon, the image being not unlike taking a leap over the fence. The verbal root *erchomai* applies to a coming or going whereas *baino* applies more to walking or taking steps and thus figures in nicely with the image of bounding over the gate. As for the entering itself, Jesus first speaks of those who *eiserchomai* the door and then of the shepherd himself. At this point of entry stands the gatekeeper whose identity is left up to Jesus' listeners but is crucial to the whole picture, for it is this person who recognizes both parties. The door to the sheepfold presumably is very narrow, allowing the sheep to pass by one by one, not the herd in its entirety. That means they have to line up to enter as well as to exit...to accomplish the *eiserchomai eis* or entering into.

Jesus is using this example as a figure or *paroimia* which is a parable or saying. The root of this Greek term is *oimos* or way, path, road with the preposition *para* (beside). In other words, a *paroimia* is something uttered beside or alongside the road or alongside the common way of perceiving things with the intention of fleshing it out. The people didn't grasp this *paroimia*, for their understanding or *oimos* was too rigid or too straight, not allowing it to be bent or adapted. Due to this mental and spiritual blockage, Jesus says that he is the door of the sheep with emphasis upon the door as a guard to what lays behind it. Before this door come thieves and robbers wanting to enter while the sheep on the other side or within the sheepfold do not listen to them. They have Jesus-as-door blocking this din outside. As for Jesus as this door, he says that it, rather he, is the one who "came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Not only does he mention having life (*zoe*: also as substance, existence compared with *bios* or biological life) but having it abundantly, that is, more abundantly than when they were outside the door in among the thieves and robbers.

22 May, Fifth Sunday of Easter

Today's Gospel (Jn 14.1-12) is a step further removed from Easter *per se* and closer towards the Ascension and Pentecost noted in last week's entry simply because by now we've exhausted the accounts of that event. Not that reflection upon it is ever exhausted but given our embodiment within space and time, we are compelled to move forward. The Gospel at hand is temporally very close to the Resurrection and preceded, of course, by the Crucifixion. For this very reason the text merits attention from the vantage point of looking back upon the Resurrection from a light other than this same Gospel which had been used during Holy Week or before the Resurrection.

Jesus begins with an exhortation to his disciples that their hearts be not troubled or shaken (*tarasso*) and to exchange this inner discord with belief in God and "also in me" which puts Jesus on the same divine plane. At this juncture it was understandable for the disciples not to grasp this. Then Jesus gives the example of a house (*oikia*) belonging to the Father which contains "many rooms" or many *mone*, this term applicable to a place for stopping (*meno* being the verbal root, to remain). Although *mone* connotes abiding, in another sense it conveys the idea of being a temporary lay-over; so within one house there are numerous *mone* or places to stay temporarily. Jesus says this is true; if not, he asks "would I go to prepare a place for you?" *Topos* is the word for "place," a specific location which also can mean an opportunity or occasion. Thus *topos* embraces both space and temporal duration where various possibilities are available. The singular *topos* differs from the plural *mone* and requires Jesus to get it ready compared with the already prepared *mone*. With regard to *topos*, Jesus says that he will prepare it (*etoimazo*) first, come again and take the disciples to himself, the verb being *paralambano*. The preposition *para* means to be beside or alongside and thus infers a taking (*lambano* being the verbal root) which situates the disciples alongside-with Jesus relative to the *topos* at hand. With these actions Jesus will perform in the future or after his Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost, the distinction between *mone* and *topos* becomes clearer, that is to say, the latter appears more as a large courtyard that is enclosed. Around this enclosure are the *mone* not on just one floor but

innumerable floors towering above.

With Jesus using three terms—*oikia*, *mone*, *topos*—it is no small wonder that Thomas said “we do not know where (or to which one of the three) you are going; how can we know the way” or the way you just spoke with us about? To this question Jesus responds that he is the way (*hodos*: also as a path or journey) as well as the truth and life. A way is temporary, if you will, leading as it does from point A to point B after which you leave it. However, you don’t leave the truth and life.

Jesus continues his response to Thomas’ question by enhancing his words about being the way: “no one comes to the Father but by me” or by me, the way. Thus knowledge of Jesus as a means to go from point A to point B does not assume a linear form; rather, it is knowledge first of Jesus and then of the Father, *ginosko* being the verb and applies to learning and understanding. Such knowledge involves two persons, Jesus as way (truth and life) and the Father as destination to whom belongs that *oikia* (house) with the innumerable stopping places (*mone*) built around that *topos* Jesus goes to prepare and likened above to something like a courtyard. Also this multi-faceted knowledge of Jesus and the Father is a seeing: “henceforth you know him and have seen him.”

Despite this simple yet multi-fold description of Jesus’ relationship with his Father, Thomas still doesn’t get it as inferred by a lack of response. He remains quiet as well as his companions. In his stead, however, Philip chimes in with the same question, “show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.” From this point on Jesus rehashes his original words to Thomas. Thus it is not surprising to find the disciples confused after the Resurrection; even then they grasped only bits and pieces about Jesus and had to wait for Pentecost for a fuller revelation. And so the persistence of human ignorance revealed through Thomas and Philip (standing for the others) is one of the key insights of this Gospel, that innate ignorance that can be lifted only by an external intervention, i.e., the Holy Spirit’s descent whose expectation fills the remaining days of this Easter season.

29 May, Sixth Sunday of Easter

This is the last Sunday of the Easter Season which introduces us to the Ascension five days from now. In other words, today is a take-off point where a different type of divine presence is taught, that is, when the physical presence of Jesus Christ, even after the Resurrection, is no longer available. Rather, today is a kind of in-between time preparing us to make a transition of how to perceive Jesus Christ in his relationship with the yet to be revealed fully Holy Spirit. Also, today marks the first movements of the Church living in what is now called Ordinary Time. However, the exact point of entry for that period is several weeks off.

Today’s Gospel (Jn 14.15-21) takes place in the same context as last week, words uttered by Jesus shortly before his Crucifixion and Resurrection. Because of the Gospel’s proximity to that two-fold event, their words are well worth close attention. “If you love (*agapao*, verbal root of *agape*) me, you will keep my commandments” or all that Jesus had communicated over the course of his ministry. The word “if” (*ean*) implies an option, that the disciples do not have to keep Jesus’ commandments. While they did, right after the time when Jesus spoke these words they scattered, a far cry from keeping. That verb is *tereo*, the equivalent to the Hebrew *shamar* often used in lengthy Ps 119 about the divine Torah or Law. Thus to *tereo* or *shamar* the commands of Jesus is something the disciples understood readily.

Because this shift from a *tereo* or *shamar* or from a keeping of the Torah to the keeping of a person, Jesus Christ, is so radical, he “will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever.” Note that Jesus doesn’t come right out and give this Counselor but prays (*erotao*: to request, beg) the Father for this which leaves to him the decision, and obviously that means that the Father has the option to without this Counselor. As for the identity of this third person (Jesus and the Father being the

two discussed), the word “another” means that Jesus himself had been a Counselor or *Parakletos* among the disciples. Now it’s time for another *Parakletos* (literally as one who summons beside); whether Jesus as the first *Parakletos* departs or stays is not intimated for the disciples’ benefit.

Once revelation of this “other Counselor” is disclosed, Jesus identifies him as the Spirit of truth...“you know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” So to the disciples Jesus as First Counselor dwells outside them or alongside them whereas the Second Counselor dwells within them as opposed to outside them. That arrangements doesn’t preclude Jesus absenting himself, just an arrangements of how the two Counselors will interact with the disciples. Note the present tense: “for he dwells with you” already. The verb is *meno* (to remain, stay) and is the root for *monē* or a place to reside within the large *oikia* or house belonging to the Father as had been developed during last Sunday’s entry. All this at first sounds that it’s exclusively for the disciples, easy to understand, but Pentecost will take care of that exclusivity and say it’s for everyone who accepts Jesus Christ. Prior to Pentecost the disciples thought in terms of exclusivity, a tendency they could have inferred from Jesus’ words relative to the Second Counselor dwelling within them: “because it (the world) neither sees him nor knows him.”

2 June, Ascension

With today’s feast we make a transition from Easter to a time unique in the liturgical cycle, namely, the nine days from today until the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. During this short span of nine days Jesus is absent from the disciples, not so much to test them but to give them time to reflect on what is going on. Later on when the disciples had memorialized Pentecost or to be celebrated on a yearly basis they knew this period of nine days had to be commemorated. In fact, the two celebrations go hand-in-hand.

Today’s Gospel (Jn 16.16-20) begins with *mikron* (a little while), referring first to the disciples not seeing Jesus but then seeing him. *Mikron* is a good way to describe the important though fleeting time of Ascension; actually the *mikron* at hand is a bit longer than the one at the Last Supper. Both temporal durations Jesus wishes his disciples to experience despite their tendency to balk at anything which has to do with waiting. Jesus well knew that the disciples eagerly wanted to question him as to this *mikron*. And so he puts it in terms they could understand, of having to weep and lament after which “your sorrow will turn into joy.” Certainly true for what is about to happen and equally applicable to now or the Ascension, though the disciples have been with Jesus some fifty days. His presence was rather fleeting despite the impact they made on the disciples, but that mode of communication clearly was temporary and one that couldn’t last much longer. We could put this periodic communication in terms of Jesus showing himself more in the mode the Second Counselor would adapt, that is, minus a physical body. That means the Second Counselor or *Parakletos* mentioned last Sunday has to step in fully to sustain the Church soon to be begotten. In other words, we could view the *mikron* at hand as a point of transition from the First Counselor (Jesus Christ) to the Second Counselor (Holy Spirit). Despite the change of persons, the role of *Parakletos* or one who summons beside remains unaltered.

5 June, Seventh Sunday of Easter

Today’s Sunday is unique among all other Sundays of the entire year because Jesus has ascended into heaven several days ago and the Holy Spirit has not yet been bestowed upon the Apostles. Therefore it represents a time of waiting, of suspension and well as absence of both Jesus and the Spirit, this spread out over a period of nine mysterious days.

This special in-between time enables us to get a view of the Gospel (Jn 17.1-11) not unlike the disciples who heard it from Jesus just hours before his death and some fifty days before Pentecost, that day being

the furthest thing from their minds. “When Jesus had spoken these words” forms the opening verse, that is, after he had spoken in considerable detail about his relationship with the Father. Now his attention turns toward his Father directly as well as the disciples and others who will come after him in mind. “The hour (*bora*) is a specific time or period or a part of the day, more general than *kairos* which connotes a special event. It is one of glorification of the Son (*doxazo*), one when the Father will give *doxa* to the Son which is not to be taken in spoken words but by action. It is reciprocal, that is, “that the Son may glorify you.” In other words, the *bora* at hand consists of this mutual, wordless exchange. Such *doxazo* continues the one which Jesus had accomplished on earth (cf. vs. 4) yet different because Jesus wishes to enhance it “with the glory which I had with you before the world was made.”

Though the disciples were familiar with the general relationship Jesus claimed for himself with the Father, still listening to him utter these words must have gone over them. Only later some years after Pentecost once the disciples had established fledgling communities were they able to reflect back upon that experience in the upper room and see the full weight of Jesus’ words. To their delight, some of that original divine *bora* or hour had remained with them. Though we have only John’s account at the Last Supper, chances are that recollection of the extended discourse by Jesus was easy, for ancient people relied heavily upon their memories which turned out to be quite accurate. Then John had the added input of others who had been with him which refined his account even more. Something of that interval of time...another aspect of *bora* or “hour”...is instructive for this Sunday in-between Christ’s Ascension and Pentecost, descent of the Holy Spirit.

So if we sensitize ourselves more to this nine day interval we can perceive how the disciples managed to capture faithful all that Jesus had communicated, for such communication isn’t just the passing on of words but sets up a condition for perceiving the meaning of Pentecost as is the case this Sunday. One way of looking at this communication which took place in a specific *bora* is the keeping Jesus asked of his Father: “keep them in your name which you have given me that they may be one even as we are one. *Tereo* is the verb for “keep” and suggests constant guarding or vigilance. An apt duty for the Father who is the only one of the divine Persons “available” to us on this in-between Sunday with “no” Jesus and “no” Holy Spirit, those two Persons being set aside for nine days, if you will, in a spirit of expectation.

12 June, Pentecost

Today we reach a major milestone, Pentecost, which caps off some thirteen weeks since Ash Wednesday. That feast had set in motion a forty day period of fasting and almsgiving until Easter. That, in turn, was followed by a fifty day “alleluia season” until now or better, the Ascension after which we went through nine days of retreat for Pentecost. However, the celebration does not stop today. We have some more Sundays to go until 2 July, feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, when the Lenten-Easter-Pentecost liturgical cycle as we’ve come to know it finally exhausts itself.

In order to appreciate Pentecost, it’s helpful to consider the day after which this year is Monday of the eleventh week of Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time hadn’t been experienced since 8 March, Mardi Gras or the day before Ash Wednesday. In other words, starting Ash Wednesday the Church begins a slow ascent to Easter and then through to Pentecost. From today this extended sacred period which serves to define her mission comes to a sudden halt. Nothing could be more sudden than the shift from a prolonged period of “special” time to that which belongs to well, “ordinary” time (lower case ‘o’ to demonstrate the point). The contrast between the two modes of time couldn’t be felt more strongly than Monday morning either at the Divine Office or Mass.

The Church is presenting a valuable lesson here, one which can pass by without our even giving it a thought. She presents the heart of her life, the mystery of Jesus Christ, primarily through the perception

of time. Ordinary Time forms the bulk of her year; the term “ordinary” is after the Latin *ordo* or order denoting a sequence of events. Then there are times which are extra-ordinary—outside the Church’s *ordo*—broken up into two other major parts, Advent and Christmas (Here Ash Wednesday through Pentecost and those few Sundays beyond it are presented as part of one continuum).

So if Jesus Christ is the divine person upon whom we gaze in the sense of having *theoria* towards (contemplation), we can perceive our passage through space and time as passage through a *theoria* of various aspects of his mystery. This plays itself out fully in a given liturgical year. However, it’s a common experience that we grasp just one facet of his mystery at a given pass. That doesn’t mean we’ve missed the rest—true on hand but not so on the other—but have enough like the Jews with having enough manna in the wilderness for that given day. Then next day or passage through another liturgical cycle or feast day (certainly they are included) brings yet another morsel and so forth down the line. The most fascinating part about this yearly cycle is that never it becomes boring, that is, despite its cyclic or repetitive nature. That stands in sharp contrast to the closed, similarly cyclical systems of some ancient peoples.

Though this Sunday lacks the usual notations upon the Gospel, the short Gospel for today (Jn 20.19-23) suggests an important stage or point along the just mentioned liturgical cycle, namely, Jesus’ breathing upon the disciples in the upper room. While vital, it does not give birth to the Church proper. For that the disciples must wait fifty days until Pentecost for the “second breathing.” So if we could project ourselves back to Easter Sunday with this “first breathing” in mind, now fifty days later we can appreciate the growth experienced by the disciples. However, we are more fortunate than they. The disciples had a one time experience but our is continuous. Perhaps that’s one of many reasons why they established the Church, if it could be put that way.

19 June, Trinity Sunday

On Easter Jesus rose from the dead, on Ascension he ascended into heaven and on Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples. That is to say, by the time we reach today’s feast, all three Persons of the Trinity had revealed themselves, today being a summing-up of the Christian message. Also it recaps all that had transpired since Ash Wednesday which set in motion the entire Lenten-Easter-Pentecost cycle.

Today’s Gospel (Jn 3.16-18), short as it is, is quoted often as the essence of Jesus’ message: “For God so loved (*agapao*) the world that he gave his only Son.” This giving of the Son commenced at Christmas...the Incarnation...and as far as temporal sequence is concerned, covered the unknown years before Jesus started his three year ministry. Although his mission was compressed into that short time—and even more so by what we call Holy Week—those unknown thirty years were essential to this climatic period of his life. That is to say, Jesus quietly “increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man” [Lk 2.52] well before his ministry. The Greek verb for “increased” is *prokopto* which literally means to cut away in front. Jesus “increased” for an extended period of time unknown to people except his parents, Elisabeth, her husband and their son John who later became the Baptist. “Stature” or *helikia* applies to the prime of life and is indicative that Jesus achieved much of his mission during this time before his ministry. That mission was simply an overflow, if you will, of the years unknown to us but presented in tacit fashion.

Thus the *helikia* of Jesus was marked by an extended period of grace “with God and man” or *para* God and man...more beside them or in their company, a rather intimate way of putting his presence among us which isn’t rendered easily into English. As for the latter or those persons among whom Jesus had lived, they had a vague inkling that he was different but perhaps nothing more; certainly they were unaware of his divine status which was totally beyond them. Then there was John, Elisabeth’s son, who must have been as special as Jesus though in a different manner and over the same period of some thirty years. While all this was transpiring, God was showing his *agape* toward the world, making this love more manifest

though not in dramatic fashion. And so the giving of the Son or the giving of Jesus Christ to the world extended for a considerable time, something which Jesus himself became more aware of until “the day of his manifestation” [Lk 1.80]. That day of his *anadexis* (also a proclamation, declaration) is a reference to his baptism by John at the Jordan River. Such *anadexis* differs from the continuous *agape* of the Father, being a public manifestation of it.

Two more points regard today’s Gospel: as for the first verse quoted above, it occurs just after Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus who came to him “by night” [3.2] where they had a conversation about the Spirit and being born anew. So presumably Jesus’ words about the Father’s *agapao* is addressed to Nicodemus right after he compares himself to that serpent which Moses had lifted up in the desert.

The second point is to make a comparison of how two prepositions are used with regard to the saving of the world: “whoever believes in him may have eternal life” and “that the world might be saved through him.” The first has *eis* or into Jesus whereas the second has *dia* or through. Thus faith involves a “being-into” Jesus and salvation a “being-through” Jesus. Both are not separated temporally but form one and the same reality to which Jesus invites “the world,” in other words, to opt for both instead of being condemned (“not to condemn the world”), a function which belongs to a judge, not a savior.

26 June, Corpus Christi

Today’s Gospel (Jn 6.51-58) is part of a much larger whole, pretty much all of chapter six, where we find Jesus mid-course in identifying himself as “the bread which came down from heaven” [vs. 41]. In the verse before the Gospel at hand Jesus says “This is the bread which comes down from heaven.” Then there follows immediately, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven.” In other words, Jesus is both “this bread” and “I am the bread.” Though both are the same bread/person, the former pertains to the Israelites whereas the latter, building upon the former, amplifies it insofar as it makes this bread an eternal, not passing, reality. It is easy to sympathize with the Jews (or anyone else for that matter) as they disputed among themselves (cf. vs. 52) about Jesus and fairly clear references to cannibalism. That misperception happens when there is a failure to distinguish between bread as “this” or as “I.” Perhaps if Jesus had stayed with the objective words “This is the bread which comes down from heaven” as though he were speaking of someone else, he might have avoided conflict. That would not be true to his nature, and he had to clarify it with the subjective statement “I am the living bread which came down from heaven.” Even though use of the present tense in the first verse makes this talk about bread here-and-now to the Jews, some might accept the identity between it and Jesus grudgingly. It was a different matter, however, when it came to Jesus’ use of the past tense in the verse which followed immediately. There Jesus states that he has arrived among them (as living bread), an easier target for them to take aim.

Up to this point within chapter six Jesus had referred to himself only as bread which, despite its upsetting overtones of apparent cannibalism, is made worse when he speaks of his blood for all to drink. This is borne out by the words, somewhat of a paradox, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” It’s easier to understand the abiding of Jesus within a person who had consumed him compared with how this eating and drinking makes that same person be interior to Jesus. So somewhere in the actual consuming there’s a mysterious exchange of the person in Jesus and Jesus in the person, a point all his listeners seemed to have missed.

As for the origin of manna, it derives from the Hebrew *man hu* or “What is it?” in Ex 16.15. The Israelites hadn’t a clue as to the dew which lay on the ground, flake-like and quick to dissolve in the sun. Those Jews who were challenging Jesus outright to explain himself as to eating his body and drinking his blood were in a similar situation. However, they failed to “gather” [Ex 16.16] this new manna as their ancestors had done. And so they “did not listen to Moses” [Ex 16.20] or Jesus the new Moses. In defense of these Jews,

they were right to dispute with Jesus which made him clarify his position which despite words that were undeniably clear, made even his disciples say “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” *Skleros* is the adjective for “hard” also meaning that which is stiff, severe or unyielding. Perhaps they were close to the Jews as they posed their questions to Jesus and even egging them on, especially when it came to Jesus saying they must drink his blood. More likely both parties, usually presented as being at odds and even conflict, were in agreement here concerning Jesus and his *skleros* word or *logos*.

To date chapter six dealt with Jesus as bread which had descended from heaven after the heavenly manna. Now in response to the disciples and their attributing his discourse as a *skleros logos*, Jesus makes it even more *skleros*: he turn on its head their anger and wonderment with a question, “What if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before?” No one could respond, really, which is why “many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him.” It wouldn’t be at all surprising that if not more than a few joined those Jews who had challenged Jesus in the first place. Even though when asked what he’d do, Peter says “You have the words of eternal life.” He grasped both Jesus’ talk about manna, descending and even ascending into heaven but certainly not in full. It is for this reason that despite Peter’s volatility, Jesus decided to stick it out with him.

3 July, Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today we resume the observance of Ordinary Time, the first such Sunday since back on 6 March when we were in the last days of winter, a season quite different from now, the days of early summer. In other words, between the two phases of Ordinary Time the Church’s most important celebrations have taken place, Lent and Easter. From this point we set out on the longest, uninterrupted stretch of Ordinary Time of the year, right up to Advent. It is during this stretch that the Church favors instruction with regard to everyday human life compared with teaching about the divinity of Christ in such outright fashion. From this instruction we are prepared to move into different modes of liturgical time. Without it we would have difficulty in understanding such doctrines as Christ’s divinity and the Holy Trinity, let alone other matters. Five months isn’t a long period of exposure to this schooling, which means we are to make the most of it. After Christmas we return to a short period of Ordinary time, actually quite brief, but one we must make the most of in order to prepare for Lent-Easter.

Today’s short Gospel (Mt 11.25-30) opens with Jesus thanking his Father that “you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes.” What more precisely are “these things” (*tauta*)? They relate to matters of judgment upon the two cities of Bethsaida and Capernaum where Jesus had done “most of his mighty works.” However, both cities “did not repent” [vs. 20]. Such places are characterized by people who differ radically from the babes or *nepios*, a term with negative connotations and often applied to childish behavior. In society it contrasts unfavorably with the “wise and understanding” or *sophos* and *sunetos*, those who pursue *sophia* (wisdom) and those who are educated, implying that they hold positions of responsibility. Desirable as these two qualities may be, they are un-informed when it comes to being a *nepios*, a person who readily acknowledges the need for repentance in contrast to the inhabitants of these two cities. Jesus leaves it up to his listeners to draw any lessons or parallels, that is, of these cities with Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact, vs. 24 has Jesus mentions the former by name. Although Sodom and Gomorrah are archetypal images for human depravity, chances are the two cities to which Jesus compares them don’t come close. What appears a greater evil is for the two contemporary cities is not sexual deviance but not to have acknowledged Jesus’ “mighty works.” A tinge of jealousy, perhaps?...

Spontaneously Jesus thanks his Father as the one responsible for revealing the weighty matters of judgment to those who are *nepios* or infant-like. Such persons may lack wisdom and intelligence but are keenly aware of their past offenses. But unlike an adult, they don’t allow these offenses overwhelm them

and blot out awareness of divine mercy. After all, it was the Father's "gracious will" (literally, 'or so it was well-pleasing before you') which effect this. Those endowed with being *nepios* aren't described as to what they do with this awareness, a difficult thing to live with if you're focus is primarily upon being *sophos* and *sunetos*, wise and intelligent. No small wonder, too, that Jesus goes on at some length about his relationship with the Father. To grasp that requires being *nepios*; one who is *sophos* and *sunetos* would reject it outright as blasphemous or simply irrelevant.

While we don't associate labor with babes, Jesus switches gears to saying "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." So a person, despite being a babe or *nepios* (again, in contrast to one who is *sophos* and *sunetos*) can be burdened. This burden is the weight of constantly living in contact with places like the cities of Bethsaida and Capernaum, of having to deal with them while maintaining that innocence which enables one to perceive the relationship between Father and Son. This is not easy, and Jesus recognizes the fact. Hence he offers encouragement with the words "my yoke is easy and my burden light." Despite the adjectives easy and light, still they apply to a yoke and burden, terms applicable to bondage as well as weight. Jesus doesn't put this yoke upon a person—he doesn't say that one is to put on the burden—but invites a person to put it on himself ("Take my yoke upon me"). Then he says "Learn (*manthano*: to learn in the sense of being a pupil) from me" which itself is more demanding than learning to be *sophos* and *sunetos*, wise and learned, the two chief most desirable characteristics of society. While they are not to be negated, repentance is needed to flesh them out. And that repentance as a missed opportunity by the two cities as noted in vs. 21 is *metanoeo*, root of the more familiar *metanoia* or conversion. Thus *metanoeo* is highly desirable and more so should a person combine it with being *sophos* and *sunetos*.

10 July, Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mt 13.1-23) begins with the words "That same day" or the same day when Jesus was within a house speaking with people while "his mother and his brothers stood outside" [12.46]. That is to say, Jesus was speaking with apparent strangers in a confined space which implies he was dealing with a small, limited audience. Nothing is said about how many were inside or who they actually were; chances are they were the lucky few to have squeezed in. During his exchange Jesus said publically that those who do his Father's will are his brothers and sisters as well as mother. At this juncture "great crowds gathered about" Jesus when he exited the house which means people have been in the process of streaming to that house with the intent of listening in on his words. Word got out quickly as to what Jesus had to say and do. And so Jesus was compelled to move from inside the house to outside by the sea and finally in a boat onto the sea itself, a progression from being confined to being on the broad expanse of the lake.

Once on the boat Jesus goes on at some length with a parable not associated with the sea nor with fishing, namely, "a sower who went out to sow." Perhaps the broad openness of the sea made him come up with the image of a field or perhaps those who had streamed to him came from the interior with little sense of maritime imagery. Regardless, Jesus divides his example of a sower into three parts: rocky ground, thorns and good soil. At this juncture Jesus doesn't explain the meaning of the seed; he waits until vs. 18 to put it in terms of the "word of the kingdom" [vs. 18]. The reason? Jesus wishes first to stress the sense of Isaiah's quote which he brings up right after the parable about the sower: "You shall indeed hear (*shamah*) but never understand (*byn*), and you shall indeed see (*ra'ah*) but never perceive" (*yadah*). The Hebrew runs: "Go and say to this people: 'Hear and hear but do not understand; see and see but do not perceive.'" Note the two uses of "hear" as well as "see;" the first is related to understanding and the second to perceiving. Thus understanding or to be discerning requires that one first be attentive through listening, of focusing upon that sense. It leads into attentiveness with regard to seeing which, in turn, gives birth to knowledge in the intimate sense.

Apparently Jesus had in mind the verse preceding the one just quoted as designed to test the response from

people listening to him. That is to say, he would be thrilled if some...even a few ...would step to the shoreline exclaiming aloud the words of vs 6 which precede the Isaiah quote at hand, “Here am I! Send me.” It’s helpful to keep in mind that the verse (and those others which Jesus uses as related to sower) is set in the context of Isaiah’s vision in the temple. There the seraphim appeared to him who cried out “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts” [vs. 3] after which one of the seraphim cleansed Isaiah’s lips with a burning coal which removed his sin.

Even when after quoting the passage from Isaiah Jesus doesn’t expect a huge response. He intuitively only a handful of respondents from future generations, of those who will say “Here am I!” Regardless, this response suffices to keep his message alive and prevent the world from turning in upon itself and self-destructing.

17 July, Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mt 13.24-33) follows an explanation of the parable of the man who sowed seeds, the one Jesus spoke on a boat to crowds upon the shore, and does so with yet another parable. Apparently Jesus returned to shore in vs. 10 (“Then the disciples came and said to him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’”).

In this parable a man sowed seed, but his enemy—and Jesus doesn’t say exactly who this person is—came by night to sow weeds among the wheat. The man’s servants discover this foul deed, not he himself, although he had sown the wheat. “Let both grow together until the harvest” which means both wheat and the weeds were planted in the spring. That brings us to harvest time somewhere around mid September which means the man had considerable time to ponder what had happened. It must have been very trying for him and his household wondering whether the wheat could be salvaged. Nothing is said about him nor his servants attempting to find the culprit, just that they waited through spring, summer and part of autumn until harvest. During this extended period of time the man must have gone out to the field just about every day, counting down the days until autumn when at last the wheat would be separated from the weeds. In short, the parable at hand presents us with a man who proceeded with his usual work without becoming unnerved by an event over which he had no control. Perhaps he will never discover who had planted the weeds among his wheat, as long it was salvageable.

Jesus continues with two more parables in the same vein, and the Gospel concludes with the words spoken by Asaph who in 2Chron 29.30) is called a “seer” or *chozeb* (literally one who sees) to whom Ps 78.2 is attributed. This verse runs from the original: “I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old.” In the quote at hand, Asaph first opens his mouth in a parable followed by uttering or *navab* which means to bubble forth or gush out. The idea is that Asaph simply opened his mouth after which there came out in spontaneous fashion these words which were indifferent to what he thought about them. *Navab* is with respect to “dark sayings” or *chydab* which means something that is twisted and involved, almost too difficult to unravel. Such enigmas came from “of old” or literally “from days before” suggesting that they meant something different at that time yet can have implications for the present. If they didn’t, Asaph wouldn’t have bothered to open his mouth in the first place.

Jesus himself doesn’t speak the words of vs. 34 which were added by Matthew as an observation upon the parables just spoken. After Jesus had uttered the parables, “he left the crowds and went into the house” [vs 36]. That is to say, he left the boat from which he spoke about the sower and the three types of seeds, apparently returned to shore (cf. vs. 10, with the disciples) and went into what probably was the same house he was in at the beginning of last Sunday’s Gospel. Instead of Jesus’ mother and brothers being outside (cf. 12.46), now his disciples were inside where he explained the parable of the weeds of the field.

24 July, Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“The kingdom of heaven is like (*homoios*).” In today’s Gospel (Mt 13.44-52) these words occur three times for three short parables whose chief theme is searching. A person wouldn’t use a word such as *homoios* unless he knew what he was talking about and the inadequacy of language to express something beyond words. To engage in such a process means telling parables or stories, not rational explanations. Of course, Jesus knew what the kingdom of God was *homoios*...he was the kingdom itself. So when here and in other places he employs the word *homoios*, he is attempting to communicate what he is like. Once he has communicated this—that is, among those who were open to accept it—automatically *homoios* applies to the Father, Jesus being *homoios* him. Taking this one step further, we could say that the Holy Spirit is *homoios* itself, if the relation between all three divine Persons could be put that way. The Spirit is *homoios* the Son and *homoios* the Father, so much that the Spirit gets these two “parts” of *homoios* and combines them into himself.

The first two parables have the air of a treasure hunt about them: a treasure hidden in a field and a merchant in search of fine pearls. Strangely in the first the man who finds the treasure—and it’s not specified—doesn’t remove it for safe keeping but purchases the field. That means the treasure’s hidden presence in the ground mysteriously prospers the field. No fear of weeds for this field as was the case in last Sunday’s Gospel.

The third parable goes beyond searching into a sorting out of that which already had been obtained by searching. That is to say, a bunch of men sit around the seashore sorting through “fish of every kind” thus separating the good and discarding the bad. This serves as an analogy for angels who at the “close of the age” will separate evil from righteousness. *Sunteleia tou aionos* is the phrase for “end of the age” doesn’t mean the end of time but the consummation (*sun*: with & *telos*: end) of efforts required to get something done. Such effort is directed toward an age or *aion*, that term referring to a period of existence, an era or epoch. Jesus doesn’t elaborate on this nor is he too vague as to make this phrase unintelligible. Rather, he issues just enough insight through a down-to-earth parable that it entices his listeners. That’s why virtually all his parables are open-ended like the first two of today’s Gospel which touch upon our act of searching. Jesus implies that the search in and by itself is the end, not expecting the “end of the age” to be something other than he intends it. Searching for this *sunteleia*—this consummation of our efforts—applies to a specific period of time or *aion*. The trick seems to be knowing when such an *aion* is about to be completed and without equating this with prophesying the future.

31 July, Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mt 14.13-21) takes place immediately after the beheading of John the Baptist. It was only natural for Jesus to make good his escape lest Herod’s troops come after him. Constantly John has spoken of Jesus as the Messiah but in prison, had no information as to his whereabouts. Some visitors may have informed him, but Jesus was notorious for moving about. Since Herod was well-informed as to the miracles and crowds Jesus was attracting, it would be quite easy for the soldiers to discover him. Jesus’ withdrawal isn’t a sign of cowardice; instinctively he knew the time...the “hour”...of his death had not yet come. Jesus was destined to teach and heal more persons, the reason why we find him escaping on a boat “to a lonely place apart.” The preparation *eis* (into) is used for “to” signifying that Jesus was fully present within this welcome place of withdrawal called “lonely” or *heremos* which also applies to a place which is known for its solitude; the English “lonely,” on the other hand, is not as desirable and more suggestive of being isolated. This place is “apart” or *kat’ idian* or literally according to itself thereby allowing no one else to impinge upon this place’s solitude. Despite the “by itself-ness” of the place, “the crowds heard it” and “followed him on foot from the towns.” They too got wind of John’s demise and wanted to protect Jesus from the same fate. The people were so familiar with Jesus’ preference for withdrawal, especially after

being with crowds, that they knew every place he liked to get away. When they heard of this spot (they must have overheard the disciples speaking of it), immediately they knew it was one of several places along the lakeside. It was quite easy to follow the boat out on the water and follow its passage. One can only imagine what Jesus had thought, let alone the disciples, as they watched them running along the shore.

“As he went ashore he saw a great throng.” They had anticipated where Jesus would land and greeted him enthusiastically the closer the boat got to the shore. This verse continues with “he had compassion on them and healed their sick.” *Splagchneno* is the verb for “had compassion” and refers to the pouring out of one’s inner parts or intestines. Jesus had every right to express this after the crowd had come to defend him against Herod.

Once evening came, the disciples asked Jesus to send the people into neighboring towns to purchase food, the entire mass being approximately “five thousand men, besides women and children.” Instead, Jesus asks the disciples to feed the crowds which both he and they knew was impossible. It was an opportunity for Jesus to take the five loaves and two fish to bless and brake the bread after which the disciples would distribute it. Nothing, however, is said as to the distribution of the fish. The exact point at which five loaves and two fish became enough to feed the multitude isn’t given. However, we can locate it somewhere between when the time Jesus “looked up to heaven,” blessed the bread (not the fish but they multiplied anyway; bread has obvious Eucharistic overtones), gave it to the disciples who, in turn, passed it on to the crowds. Then again, the multiplication may have taken place once the bread and fish were in the hands of the people themselves. Now with a well-fed and well-rested mass of supporters, Jesus was safe from any intrusion by Herod’s men.

7 August, Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mt 14.22-33) simply picks up where last week’s had left off, that is to say, with Jesus having fed the five thousand “besides women and children” [vs. 21]. Jesus had arrived at this spot which vs. 13 describes as a “lonely place apart” and to which the people follow him. That is to say, Jesus was on a boat with his disciples rowing there. Now with the people fed and night about to descend, Jesus decides to make good his getaway “to the other side” [vs. 22]. If he couldn’t get away by himself now under the cover of the approaching night, he might as well forget it.

As noted last week, the feeding of the five thousand takes place shortly after the beheading of John the Baptist. This had been weighing on Jesus’ mind very heavily which is why he wished to be alone, to ascend a mountain “by himself to pray” [vs. 23]. The disciples agreed and left alone. Although the crowds were supportive of Jesus, always there was a chance someone might betray him or more likely, such a large gathering would attract notice and get to Herod. So once the group had landed—and they left the five thousand towards evening and got to their destination at night—Jesus descended the mountain from which he had a panoramic view of the lake below when a storm arose. Perhaps they felt the storm coming on in the near total darkness and hastened to the other side of the lake. Out of respect for Jesus’ desire for solitude, the disciples left immediately and with some hesitation at the gather storm. We have no words from Jesus cautioning them about the weather, wanting them to set sail so towards dawn he could perform a miracle.

So in a short time Jesus saw the disciples’ boat being tossed about by a sudden storm which must have been difficult to see by any standard. Perhaps Jesus got a glimpse of a light bobbing up and down violently upon the waves and knew it was them. He approached the boat walking on water during the fourth watch meaning towards dawn. Jesus had to descend the mountain after which he had to walk on the water out to the boat. A Syriac poem from the fourth century describes this by playing on the name Christ which means Anointed, and being anointed means having oil poured upon your head. Since oil tends to smooth

out water on which it is poured, Jesus as Anointed smooths out the water before him.

So when Jesus approaches the boat one of the disciples claims he is a ghost or *phantasma* which means an appearance. This was natural, given the stormy conditions and smooth path being formed before Jesus as he drew near. Finally when Jesus got within hearing distance he shouted “Take heart, it is I.” The verb is *tharseo* alternately as “to be cheerful.” Given the howling wind and tossing waves it was difficult for the disciples to actually know it was Jesus which is why Peter said “Lord if it is you.” He is implying if it is not you, then I will not leave the safety of the boat and walk upon the water.

14 August, Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mt 15.21-8) begins with “And (Jesus) withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon” or after Jesus has a dispute with the Pharisees and scribes. Such withdrawal (*anachoreo*) means that he had to get away for his own safety; while it was temporary, Jesus knew full well that these disputes will come to a head in the near future. It’s helpful to keep in mind what goes on in between each shift in the Gospel narrative, if you will, as the first half of Chapter Fifteen moves from the strife just noted to an encounter with this particular woman. So in the case at hand or while attempting to deal with the religious authorities, a local Canaanite woman—not a Jew—approached Jesus with a request for him to heal her daughter. This parable is renowned for the harsh manner in which Jesus treats the woman but is understandable from the rough experience he had just come off. It serves to demonstrate the full humanity of Jesus, that he couldn’t just walk away and forget something so unnerving. Also the encounter is short, for vs. 29 has Jesus going “on from there and passed along the Sea of Galilee.”

After an initial harsh treatment, the woman wins over Jesus by the retort “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ tables.” Jesus was very much impressed by her faith and latent sense of humor, especially from a non-Jew, and swiftly granted her request to have her daughter healed. As to the nature of this illness, we have no clue; the same applies to Jesus. Actually he didn’t care, if it may be put like that, so taken up was he by the Canaanite woman’s retort. “And her daughter was healed instantly” or in the Greek, “from that hour,” hour (*bora*) meaning not necessarily that particular time of day but from that time when the woman impressed Jesus with her words “even the dogs eat the crumbs, etc.”

As for people like this unknown Canaanite woman, let alone her daughter and let’s say still alive husband, they come on the scene quickly and pass off just as quickly. We have no idea what happened to them later on, of how they took Jesus’ betrayal, death, resurrection and ascension, let alone Pentecost. By no means were they ignorant of these events; word spread with a rapidity that would astonish us in such societies. Chances are that some, not all these anonymous people, had been impacted by Jesus’ words and deeds and formed the basic of the Church during her earliest years. No proof of this exists, but it’s not unreasonable to think otherwise.

21 August, Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mt 16.13-20) begins with Jesus posing a question to his disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” They had just fed the four thousand (15.32-38), so it was natural for the disciples to have picked up ideas about Jesus from these people among whom they had mingled. After all, multiplying bread and fish to feed such a large amount of people was extraordinary and gave rise to all sorts of speculation concerning Jesus’ identity.

The disciples—we don’t know exactly which ones—offered the names bantered around by the four thousand: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or “one of the prophets.” Not a bad choice, really, and consistent with what some of the multitude may have considered. Then Jesus asks the disciples directly, not what others

think: “But who do you say that I am?” To that question Peter is the only one of the group who says spontaneously that you are “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Perhaps others were ready to offer their own view, but Peter pre-empted them. None of the disciples nor any of the four thousand offer something similar to Peter’s response which is why Jesus says “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my father who is in heaven.” Peter was unaware of both the revelation and the one from whom it came which is understandable at this juncture.

Because Peter’s response was so out of the ordinary Jesus says that he, Bar-Jona, is now called Peter or rock on which he will build his church. The verb for build which Christ effects is *oikodomeo* which consists of two words, *oikeo* (to inhabit, occupy) and *domos* (house; can refer to a temple as well). So the sense of *oikodomeo* is to take possession of a building and then make one’s home in it, to settle down and be happy there. This *dokos* acts as a kind of foundation with regard to Peter-the-rock upon which we have the manifest part of the house, the *ekklesia*. This is a group of people set up by Christ, not Peter, or those persons whom he had called or summoned to inhabit...*oikeo*...it. The role of Peter, the new name of Bar-Jona, pertains to his transition from being a fisherman to a foundation, from an active to a more or less passive role. Note only that, Christ says that he will continue with his *oikodomeo*, not just walk away after he had established it. The details will be worked out (Pentecost), for at this point the future remains unknown to the disciples.

The strength of the *ekklesia* is demonstrated by the inability of the gates of Hades (Greek text) to prevail against it, the verb being *katischuo* or have strength against it. Mention of gates suggests a house or *domos* very close to the other *ekklesia* or the assembly of those dwelling in Hades, an unwelcomed neighbor, if you will. That’s why it is so important for Christ to entrust Peter with keys to the *ekklesia*, to keep an eye on it so that these gates of Hades, even if they slam up against it as banging in and out during a violent storm, will be able to keep the *ekklesia* safe with its own gates firmly secured during the storm. So if Peter can unlock the gates of the *ekklesia*, he can do so whether they belong to heaven or to earth, no difference. However, introduction of *ekklesia* is meant to unite—not in the sense to mix or do away with distinctions—the difference between heaven and earth. *Ekklesia* is the only place where the two meet and live in harmony.

The Gospel concludes with Jesus charging his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. *Diastellomai* is the verb which means giving strict orders, military-like, under the pain of death if they are disobeyed. By not speaking of Jesus as the Christ, the disciples are putting to rest the question “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” People can continue freely thinking he is John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or any one of the prophets. The resolution of Christ’s divinity will be revealed in due order but only in fulness with the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

28 August, Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last week’s Gospel had Jesus asking his disciples as to what they thought about his identity. With that out of the way and with Peter having entrusted with the keys to the *ekklesia*, Jesus can now speak more freely about his mission (Mt 16.21-7). He does this in a matter-of-fact way, for this had been on his mind all along. “God forbid, Lord!” was Peter’s response with *hileos* being the word for “forbid” which in Greek is an adjective meaning propitious, gracious. And so the words of Peter are more like “May God be favorable to you!” To this spontaneous remark, typical of Peter, Jesus says “You are a hindrance to me,” the word being *skandalon* or a trap laid for an enemy which connotes something upon which this enemy stumbles. Just a few verses ago Jesus made Peter a rock upon which he will build his church. Now this same rock has becoming a stumbling-block to trip up those who would inhabit the church. The fall of Peter from his master’s grace was so swift that barely he had a chance to grasp it. The same must have applied to the eleven disciples.

Jesus switches gears, if you will, to asking any follower of his to “take up his cross.” The meaning of a cross as instrument of capital punishment is well known, but here Jesus speaks of it as though his disciples had become familiar with it. Very much so. The Romans had occupied Palestine for some years now, so it wasn’t uncommon to see condemned criminals outside Jerusalem carry their crosses to their place of execution. In normal circumstances Peter would have burst in at this point, rebuking Jesus for using such a base example, but he had just been silenced and is reduced to listening to the rest of what Jesus had to say.

After Jesus speaks of the necessity to lose one’s life to find it, he says that the “Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done.” That means each and every person (including, presumably, those who have died) will be present to Jesus. For this to happen, each person living and each person who has ever lived will be alive. That sets the stage for Jesus continuing with “there are some here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.” Use of the word “some” implies a number of fewer people rather than more, so at first glance that sounds disappointing. However, it does not preclude that some will see the Son of man coming into his kingdom after they have died. The point seems to be not whether a person is alive before or after this coming but indifference he brings to it. By that is meant that death is not the final end-all and be-all as most people think. Rather, Jesus’ coming into his kingdom transcends that and is a value superior to whether one dies or not.

As for Jesus coming into his kingdom, it occurs after his death and resurrection clearly stated in vs. 21. It seems to refer to his ascension into heaven which forty days later is followed by the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. With the manifestation of that Person of the Trinity all talk about whether one is alive or dead before the Son entering the kingdom is rendered void. To drill this into his disciples, Chapter Seventeen introduces the transfiguration experienced by Peter and James. Jesus had to usher in this event rather quickly to lay aside his controversial remarks about some not tasting death, etc. If he hadn’t been transfigured, the disciples would have gotten the wrong message, even with the resurrection having occurred after Jesus’ crucifixion.

4 September, Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mt 18.15-20) lays out a straight-forward manner of handling disagreements which is just as valid today as it had been some two thousand years ago. It begins as follows: should a problem arise, deal with it one-on-one. If that doesn’t work, bring in two or three others as witnesses. Finally, there’s the option of telling “it to the church” or *ekklesia*. That term had been noted two Sundays ago or in conjunction with Peter’s ability to bind and to loose. In other words, situate the problem within the context of this binding and loosening which involves all members, not just a handful. This assembly has the benefit of lifting the problem at hand from the immediate context to the larger one not just belonging to the *ekklesia* but to the heavenly realm. As for *ekklesia*, it had yet to be created, so the disciples probably didn’t have a clear idea of what Jesus was talking about. Their only point of reference was the Jewish notion of assembly, *qahal*, which wasn’t far off the mark.

As for the binding and loosening power Christ bestowed upon Peter, in today’s Gospel it is given to all members of the *ekklesia*. While Peter’s role is important, that of *ekklesia* embodies a reality larger than any one leader and comes into being only when everyone has been assembled. Jesus goes further by saying that “if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” That means the power of binding and loosening—whether applied to Peter or others—is dependent upon the Father who is constantly looking on or over his *ekklesia*. Not only that, where “two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus will be in their midst.

And so the nature of a true *ekklesia* has the Father watching from without and the Son present from within, as though the Father had his eye upon the Son. As for any action members of this *ekklesia* take, it reverberates in heaven just as well, Christ being the mediator between the two. That means the action effected by this *ekklesia* has a two-fold application, one in the visible realm and the other in the invisible realm. Since those belonging to the *ekklesia* must partake in this double form of loosening and binding, care must be given to who joins it, not anyone who shows a cursory interest. Then again, this binding and loosening takes place only when the *ekklesia* is assembled, not outside it, so chances are almost impossible that its authority is skewed.

11 September, Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

We are approximately half way through the longest season of the liturgical year called Ordinary Time or half way between the conclusion of Easter (that is, Pentecost Sunday) and the First Sunday of Advent. All Gospels for Ordinary Time after Pentecost center around parables and stories about Jesus without, if you will, a particular liturgical theme found at other times. With the coming of autumn, it is a good time to take stock of this...not so much to prepare for Advent directly but to know we are starting to lean in that direction, the beginning of a new liturgical year around the end of November.

Today's Gospel (Mt 18.21-35) comes right after the binding and losing passage which pertains to the church as a whole compared with Peter as head. Emphasis upon the collegiality of the church is important and is summed up with "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Peter asks Jesus how many times should he extend forgiveness which serves to bridge these two Gospels. So in back of Peter's mind was the connection between this binding and losing, its relationship between what is bound/loosed in heaven as well as on earth as relative to forgiveness. Peter could have phrased his question as "How many times shall I loosen my brother?" Jesus says seventy times seven, a way of expressing an infinite number of times. In fact, Jesus wishes Peter and his band to shift attention away from forgiving which is not a denial of any accusations brought against you. Obviously forgiveness is the most difficult task any person can perform and can't be ignored. But this knotty issue is situated in the larger context of the church or *ekklesia's* communal binding and losing, some of its edge is taken off and made more acceptable to swallow.

Jesus deflects attention away from the current question-answer situation, always difficult to resolve, by a parable. This one is about a king who had forgiven a servant out of pity or *splagchnon*, a term difficult to translate because it involves that which is deepest or most human. This noun means one's inmost self which consists of feeling and affective love which normally isn't associated with a king as in this parable. If the servant at hand could have appreciated this, he would not have gone out and beat a fellow servant. Nevertheless this happened. The servant failed to show *splagchnon*, another way of stating forgiveness of sins seventy times seven.

This incident didn't go unnoticed. The servant's peers saw what had taken place and informed their king, the verb being *diasapheo* which consists of the preposition *dia* (through) prefaced to the adjective *saphes* (clear, manifest). That is to say, these servants saw the exchange in a public place, perhaps something like a court area and gave a thorough (*dia*) report which was backed up by plenty of other eyewitnesses. Both servants and any other people can be taken as the collective *ekklesia* who stood as one to accuse the wicked servant who lacked *splagchnon*. The incident was instructive for them as well, for once the king meted out justice, they were put in their place by an incident that easily could replicate itself in their own lives.

"So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." Such is the concluding verse of the Gospel, easy to take as threat. However, since forgiveness is so contrary to human nature, help in extending forgiveness is available through the collective nature of the

ekklesia with its power of binding and losing. Perhaps a person having difficulty with forgiveness can approach the *ekklesia* first and ask for a larger share of its bind/losing capacity. This is done by examining together other parts of Jesus' Gospel and sharing how difficult it is to forgive. In this way the dread as well as fear associated with forgiveness is blunted; more specifically, the inner dialogue is quieted. Even if one's mind is quieted to the best of one's liking, there remains the capacity to constantly hold before one's face traces of this inability to forgive which is a gift in itself. When a real occasion arises, one is caught off guard, if you will, by the incident and is too preoccupied with one's condition to worry about that of someone else even if it impacts one's own life.

18 September, Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mt 20.1-16) deals with a householder seeking to hire men to do field work at various times of the day. His function in Greek is designated *oikodespotes* which means he can have a wide variety of agricultural and even trade-related occupations going on more or less the same time. That means a large staff divided into several functions, the householder acting more as a director. Of all the possible industries under his domain, tending vineyards is among the most important: the better quality grapes, the better is the wine and hence, better is the income.

Because this *oikodespotes* puts highest value on his vineyard, he himself "went out early in the morning to hire laborers," *proi* being around dawn when work generally got under way. In other circumstances he'd have one of his underlings do this. It seems he required additional laborers to supplement his existing staff—perhaps it was harvest time—so he wanted to get these extras to work as soon as possible. He found some hanging around at that hour, men eager to get an honest day's labor for a denarius, typical pay for that time and work. The text says the *oikodespotes* agreed with the laborers for that sum which means some haggling was involved. Chances are he started off lower and gradually bargained up to a denarius. He couldn't afford to bargain further since the harvest couldn't wait.

The urgency of the just-mentioned grape harvest is demonstrated by the household going out again four more times: the third hour (nine o'clock), sixth hour (noon), ninth hour (three o'clock) and eleventh hour (evening). Where he actually went out at dawn isn't specified. It could be either at his gate (large estates usually attracted day laborers) or even in town. As for the other times of the day, he headed to the town's marketplace figuring he'd encounter more men looking for work. That means a lot of back-and-forth which detracted from other important work. As for the laborers he discovered in the marketplace, they are described as being idle compared with the early birds who came at dawn, presumably to the master's gate. In addition to getting a denarius for the day, they thought their early presence would impress the master for future possible work. That's why the text says "they thought they would receive more."

Finally at evening the householder orders his steward to pay all five groups (the amount of laborers in each group isn't specified; it could have varied considerably), that is, one denarius per man for all five groups starting from those who arrived at dawn to those who came at evening. It was natural for the first group to grumble over the fact that the last group received the same wage. Apparently the other three groups (those who came at nine am, noon and three pm) were content. On the other hand, they could have entertained the same thoughts the first group had about the last but opted for silence by reason of the loud complaints that were raised. The *oikodespotes* reminded one laborer of the first group—he could have been their spokesman—that he and his fellows agreed for one denarius. He then bids this man (and presumably the others) to take the money and leave. Nothing is said about whether or not he, his fellow laborers or even the other groups had accepted. Chances are all did; better to go away one denarius richer than with nothing.

Finally the householder says to the representative of the first group, "Am I not allowed to do what I

choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity (the Greek reads, ‘or is your eye evil because I am good’)?” A mere day laborer of the time wouldn’t think of arguing with his boss even if he had been insulted like this. Privately he would claim that his own eyes wasn’t evil but just. To make it worse, the householder says “the last will be first and the first last.” At least the laborer and perhaps his fellows learned how this man conducted business. Other householders may have acted the same but weren’t as straight-forward as this fellow. It was a lesson for the possibility of future work: don’t bother arriving early but hang around idle and wait for the master to come later...the later the better.

As for this “unjust” parable, Jesus lets it be minus any explanation. Action shifts immediately to him and his disciples going up to Jerusalem when he tells them that soon the religious authorities will hand him over for death followed by being raised on the third day. Understandably for the disciples these words and the parable coming so close was almost too much. Actually, the disciples were not unlike the first group of laborers for the vineyard who arrived at the crack of dawn. Their reward would be the same as those disciples who would come later, a sobering thought, for “he who is least in the kingdom of heaven (i.e., those who come to labor in the vineyard at the evening hour) is greater than he (John the Baptist)” [Mt 11.11].

25 September, Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Mt 21.28-32) requires perspective by examining what precedes it, namely, a dispute between Jesus and the chief priests along with the elders or when these two groups question Jesus’ authority. “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority” [vs. 23]? More specifically the *exousia* at hand is the teaching of Jesus in the context of the baptism of John the Baptist, whether it comes from God or from man. Upon being asked, the priests and elders took counsel among each other—how long this took isn’t specified, but it’s easy to picture them huddled together while Jesus stands apart from them—and decide upon “We do not know” [vs. 27]. Even before they said this Jesus could tell by the looks on their faces. And so Jesus responds, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” The story ends there without resolution. One can imagine the people whom Jesus was just teaching still there, slightly off to the side instinctively knowing the outcome by reason of having been taught. They too could tell by the look on the faces of the priests and authorities. While the people may have not known the source of Jesus’ authority, they were receptive to his teaching; the same applies to John. Acknowledgment of his *exousia* would come later to those who decided not just to listen but to follow.

Such is the context of today’s Gospel which opens with a question right after this incident with Jesus shifting attention as to include both the religious authorities and his audience. The question he posed: “What do you think?” That implies the people were fully aware of what had just transpired, since they were standing around and listening in. Instead of giving a direct answer—that isn’t Jesus’ way when teaching, thereby allowing listeners to draw their own conclusion and give their own assent—he gives a parable. A man asked two sons to work in the vineyard; the first said no but soon repented. The verb for “repented” is *metamelomai* (not related to the more familiar *metanoia*) meaning to be sorry or better, to be sorry afterwards (the *meta* or after prefaced to the verb indicative of this). This son is rather impulsive but compliant...first a no followed by a yes. The second son says yes but changes it to a no.

After this brief parable Jesus says that tax collectors and harlots—the dregs of society—“go into the kingdom of God before you,” a statement that enraged the priests and elders yet delighted Jesus’ audience, many of whom we can presume were still present not wanting to miss this confrontation with the religious authorities of their day. This turned out to be true, for after another more lengthy parable the priests and elders “when they tried to arrest him, they feared the multitudes” [vs. 46]. Jesus brings in again the example of John the Baptist whom the tax collectors and harlots believed but whom the authorities did

not. John's death took place back in Chapter Fourteen but his memory was very much alive. Chances are these authorities standing in front of Jesus were complicit in it, an ominous sign of things to come. Jesus accuses them for having seen the wonderful conversions wrought by John but "you did not afterward repent and believe in him." The verb *metamelomai* (to be sorry afterwards) is used, the same word in the parable where one of the two sons first said no to his father but quickly changed his mind. That means the authorities were labeled as the second son though Jesus is silent here. It's up to them to draw the conclusion. As for the first son, he is symbolic of Jesus' audience who were in the process of saying yes to his teaching even if they were struggling to comprehend it. This was a clever way of Jesus using them (tax collectors and harlots, if you will) to stand in for him. After this dispute the priests and elders got a clearer glimpse into the *exousia* (authority) Jesus was displaying which was in sharp contrast to their own *exousia*. It would have been impossible not to draw the conclusion.

2 October, Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mt 21.33-43) begins with Jesus offering a brief introduction: "Hear another parable," that is to say, he addresses the same listeners who heard the teaching of last week's parable about the man with two sons and their attitudes towards working in the vineyard. In this way they would obtain further instruction. That parable was followed by the chief priests and elders asking Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority" [vs. 23]? After an exchange about the source of John the Baptist's authority, the authorities answer: "We do not know." So the parable at hand follows directly on the heels of the first, both dealing with the image of a vineyard. We can assume that the religious authorities had walked away by this time allowing Jesus to exercise his authority; however, that was not to last for long.

In the earlier parable the man dealt with his two sons, one who said yes to working in the vineyard but didn't while the other yes no but agreed to go. The householder (*oikodespotes*: cf. 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time's Gospel) who went out to hire laborers at various times of the day (in a vineyard) can be taken as the same man here; also he can apply to the father and his sons. Here the *oikodespotes* plants a vineyard, sets up a protective hedge and tower, and leased it to tenants. The tower presumably was for one of his servants to keep watch over the workmen. Immediately afterwards the *oikodespotes* departs for "another (undetermined) country," thinking his measures were sufficient for this all-important vineyard. He was gone for some time—most of spring, all summer and part of autumn—for "when the season of fruit drew near," the master returned and sent servants to gather grapes. That means the *oikodespotes* returned in time for the harvest, not wanting to miss it and make sure everyone had done his job properly.

Instead of checking things out himself, the *oikodespotes* sent servants on two occasions when the tenants killed some and abused the others. What about the man in the tower? He must have neglected his job or from watching his fellow servants in the field and soon became complicit with the corrupt tenants. At first you'd think this tower was for a direct representative of the *oikodespotes*; his sending servants precludes this possibility. Despite these terrible incidents, the *oikodespotes* did not go himself but sent his son thinking "They will respect my son." The verb here is *entrepo* which means literally to turn about, hesitate and thus give second thought as to one's actions. It reveals incredible tolerance not so much to the household servants but to transitory tenants or those who had no real interest in the vineyard, just to make enough money and move on to the next vineyard like modern day migrant workers (the actual word is *georgos*, husbandman or one who tills the soil). But before these ancient migrant workers were able to get away after having murdered the householder's son, he puts them "to a miserable death" on literally, "will destroy wickedly," the adverb being *kakos*. Again keeping in mind last week's parable, the son who said no to working in the vineyard changed his mind and went. Thus he is the one whom the tenants slew. Not mentioned in the parable at hand is the other son who said yes to going but did not. Both sons knew the character of these tenants, having more on-hand knowledge of how they operated than their father, and

realized they would encounter serious problems. It is to the first son's credit that he consented to go (and get killed) compared with the second who refused. If this is applied to flesh out today's Gospel, the second son must have lived in considerable shame after his brother's death and needed pardon from his father.

Since the grape harvest was still on and the vineyard at hand required people to gather it in, the *oikodespotes* lets out his field to other tenants. This time he has learned his lesson the hard way, for now he makes sure they "will give him the fruits in their seasons." Here the word *karpos* is used for "fruit" which is generic and does not specifically refer to grapes. The same applies to the "season of fruit" above or the *kairos* of fruit, *kairos* meaning a special time or event, often with theological implications. So when the next harvest comes around—and this is what the household refers to—he will make sure the tenants will get their fruit in their respective seasons. Since the plural "seasons" or *kairoi* is used, that means these new tenants, starting next spring, will be assured of harvesting their quota of not just grapes but of various other fruits. So this parable, beside foreshadowing the Father sending his Son whom the "tenants" of Israel will put to death, suggests that diligent tenants...those who are temporary works...will receive their proper reward. Since this has paid off handsomely, chances are they will return season after season or *kairos* after *kairos*. It was good that the religious authorities had walked away shamefully after the disagreement about John the Baptist ("We do not know"). If they remained to hear this parable, they would find themselves, the rightfully established religious leaders in Israel, designated as notorious tenants, lowest of the low.

As for the image of a vineyard used in this parable, the image is lifted from Isaiah 5.1-7 where Israel is likened to the vineyard which fails to yield grapes. The Lord who had planted it removes the protective hedges allowing it to become a waste. Nothing is said there about tenants; Jesus borrows from Isaiah yet adds tenants to enhance his parable.

9 October 2011, Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mt 22.1-14) begins with "And again Jesus spoke to them in parables." The last time he spoke was the leasing of a vineyard to tenants, i.e., 27th Sunday, which the chief priests and Pharisees had heard though they haven't been mentioned since 21.27 (Pharisees were excluded). That means the chief priests and other official religious leaders, despite knowing "that he was speaking about them" [21.45], nevertheless hung around. They weren't in the least bit interested in learning from Jesus but desirous to trip him up.

As for the parable at hand, it concerns a marriage feast thrown by a king for his son. Despite messengers being sent for the purpose of summoning guests who had been invited, all refused to come, quite unusual, perhaps due to the unpopularity of either the king or his son...or both. One has to give these people some credit for the courage to refuse because such behavior isn't expected from subjects. Also intimated is that these guests wished to make the celebration as embarrassing as humanly possible by not showing up for it. Those who were the angriest "seized his servants, treated them shamefully and killed them" [vs. 6]. The second verb at hand is *hubrizo* from which derives the English hubris, much less violent a term than the verb. So instead of sending out more servants, the king decides upon a military response. As for those who "made light of" the invitation, they weren't the object of such action though chances were high that all groups of people invited to the wedding came from one particular city noted for its insubordination to the king, the one which the troops had burned.

Because invitations had been issued and preparations had been made, the king was desperate to fill the banquet hall. Nothing is said of the marriage itself which took place in a local synagogue, a more private affair after, which the wedding was opened up to a public event. Both bridegroom and bride have no word in all this. They must have been horrified at the king's decision to fill the hall with less than desirable

people (but to him, more desirable than the original invitees). These people were easier to control, really, and just as easy to entertain compared with a more sophisticated group.

Since troops had been sent out to destroy the apparently rebellious city of the original invitees, servants had to distribute garments hastily for the feast at the banquet hall's entrance. These garments may have been tailored-made for the occasion in accord with the height, etc., of each invitee. Now they were distributed randomly to those off the street; they didn't quite fit each person which must have made them look a bit awkward. Still, having a new garment was quite a treat for generally destitute people. One invitee got in minus a garment and was summarily cast outside. The text says he was speechless at having been discovered. This fellow stood out clearly among the others by reason of not having the appropriate garment, so the servants quickly discovered him. The "outer darkness" into which he was cast was familiar not just to him but to the other persons gathered hastily and randomly off the street. Up until the wedding feast it was very familiar to them despite the constant danger. But now that the unadorned man had come in, got a taste of what was going on there and now was cast out, to the others the "outer darkness" now seemed more threatening than ever.

16 October, Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mt 22.15-21) takes place after the parable about the wedding, the king having sent out invitations to guests who mocked him. As a result, he did away with them and filled the banquet hall with people off the street. That's why the Gospel at hand begins with "Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk." Here Jesus' parables are presented as "talk" or *logos*, that term having a more expansive or inclusive sense of teaching not just with parables but with their explanation. The more direct reason for paying attention to the *logos* of Jesus is revealed below, about paying taxes, because as just noted, the previous parable dealt with a king. However, Caesar or any contemporary ruler wouldn't have the compassion to fill a banquet hall with common people.

The Pharisees always were present, hovering around the crowds listening to Jesus, a fact he was clearly aware of. Surely these religious leaders were smart enough to get the drift of Jesus' parables and their explanation, of how they applied to themselves. Perhaps the crowd listening to Jesus wasn't that much attuned to this, more enthralled by how Jesus spoke of common people, even outcasts, as being chosen by the Lord.

Instead of approaching Jesus himself (a clear sign of their cowardice and deceit), the Pharisees sent their own disciples along with Herodians, those supportive of King Herod, the one who had John the Baptist beheaded. They acknowledge Jesus as being true (*alethes* also means being genuine) and having "care for no man and do not regard the position of men." The last words read literally "do not look into the face of men" which suggests that Jesus could tell one's inner disposition by a facial expression. Use of the preposition "into" (*eis*) means a penetrating insight, one the people whom the Pharisees had send must have felt in a very uncomfortable way. So instead of allowing Jesus to start the conversation, they begin with a question with political overtones, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" So using his power to "look into the face of men," Jesus calls them hypocrites. When he uttered the well-known words "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" he stymied them on the spot. The only response was that "they marveled" and left him alone. At least their having marveled means that some of what Jesus was trying to communicate did sink in. The Pharisees' disciples and Herodians simply did not have the opportunity to return home; they had to give a report to their masters which assuredly did not sit well. We have no idea what happened to these men who confronted Jesus. Perhaps some changed their minds and returned to listen to Jesus, eventually becoming disciples.

23 October, Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mt 22.34-40) begins with the ominous words, "But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together." The verb *phimoo* suggests silencing with a muzzle, as though Jesus put such a restraint on the mouths dogs, namely, the Sadducees. Reference to their hostility is 22.23-23 when he spoke about the lack of marriage in the kingdom of heaven or more specifically, when the Sadducees sought to trip him up as to a question about marriage. We don't have the content of this meeting between two groups of Israel's religious leaders but easily can surmise they intended once again to catch Jesus in a verbal or legalistic trap.

A lawyer (from which group isn't specified) asked Jesus an obvious question to test him: "Which is the great commandment in the law?" Note he didn't ask which is the greatest in the law or Torah but the great commandment. If he did, that would set the commandment Jesus would choose over against the others, at least in their eyes. Then the people who were standing about would be swayed to their position and hopefully walk away from Jesus. Alienating his followers would be the best tactic of them all. To the question Jesus responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind" which is from Dt 6.5. In other words, heart, soul and mind (*kardia, psuche* and *dianoia*). All three are to be exercised through *agapao*, the verbal root for *agape*. As for the Deuteronomy passage, "heart" is used instead of mind which in Hebrew is *me'od*. Although commonly an adverb, the verse at hand has it as a noun. The adverb means "excessively," "exceedingly" and has an air of excitement and joyous anticipation about it. *Dianoia* or mind is a more abstract term by comparison.

Jesus was careful to situate the Deuteronomy verse within the larger context of the famous call to prayer used by Jews, namely, the verse before it: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord." Without a doubt, the religious leaders and people were intimately familiar with it. As for the hearing demanded by the Lord ('Hear, O Israel'), both Pharisees and Sadducees were closed to this summons. Perhaps that's why Jesus substituted *dianoia* or mind instead of the adverb/noun *me'od*. He wished that their minds would conform to their hearts and souls which, in turn, would lead to the "excessive" *agape* Jesus is attempting to impart or better, to love excessively.

It was only natural that Jesus should add the second command which resembles the first, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's lifted from Lev 19.18 and followed by the statement implicit but not explicit to his listeners, "I am the Lord." As for the Hebrew verb "love" used in both commands, it is *'ahav* which is fairly common and fundamentally means to breathe, desire after. Even its pronunciation comes off the lips easily and in natural fashion which suggests that this is not so much a commandment but something easy, if not desirable, to effect.

"On these two commandments depend all the law and prophets." The verb *kremannumi* means "to hang" suggesting that something...someone...is the agent from which love of God and neighbor hangs (down). So despite the importance of both commandments, that agent responsible for them transcends them yet is intimately bound up with them.

30 October, Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

This next-to-last day of October serves as a reminder that we are less than one month away from the First Sunday of Advent (27 November), the beginning of a new liturgical year. And so the Gospels of the next several Sundays can be taken as gearing up for that event.

"So practice and observe whatever they tell you but not what they do; for they preach but do not practice." Such is vs. 3 of today's Gospel (Mt 23.1-12), words directed to the scribes and Pharisees who occupy the place of Moses. This verse is reminiscent of Mal 2.7-8: "For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge,

and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi.” The word for “guard” here is *shamar*, often used in conjunction with observing the Law or Torah and frequently mentioned in Ps 119. Actually “instruction” is Torah. Interestingly the priest who is the guardian of instruction/Torah is a “messenger” or *mal’ak*, the same word for angel. All instances of angels in both the Old and New Testaments are noted for their brief encounters with people. They come on the scene, present their message and depart immediately. Jesus could have this in mind when speaking of the priests (i.e., scribes and Pharisees). Once the priests deliver the Torah to those people entrusted to them, they should depart just as quickly as the angels, thereby giving way and space for the Torah, not themselves. Such is the proper fulfillment of that *shamar* of guardianship of the Torah just not ed.

So with both Malachi’s admonition in mind and the Gospel at hand, they can be situated against two backdrops: the Pharisee and tax collector in Lk 18.10-14. There the tax collector said, “God, be merciful to me a sinner” in comparison with the Pharisee who boasted, “God, I am not like other men...even like this tax collector.” The second instance concerns again the Pharisees and scribes to whom Jesus is referring in their failure to observe the injunction, “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by men” [Mt 6.5].

This short Gospel concludes with “He who is greatest among you shall be your servant.” The Greek lacks a preposition for “among” but puts “you” in the genitive case...“the greatest of you.” Jesus concludes with “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” As for exalting oneself, the verb is active followed by the passive “will be humbled.” Whether that come from God or man is not specified. The person who (actively) humbles himself will be (passively) exalted, again unspecified whether from God or man.

6 November, Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

This Gospel (Mt 25.1-13) of the ten maidens is the first real indication of the approaching change of liturgical seasons, a herald of “last things,” and that theme will continue for the next few Sundays. As it will turn out, the first few Sundays of Advent...the new liturgical year...will continue the theme in seamless fashion. If a person couldn’t tell by the color of vestments and other minor changes, it’d be almost impossible to discern that a shift has occurred, but indeed it has.

Just the fact that Jesus says all ten maidens took their lamps means it was either evening or night when they were to meet the bridegroom. Given the pervasive darkness minus electricity or gas to illumine the way, bringing extra fuel was supremely important. As for meeting the bridegroom, a noun is used for this verb (*hupantesis*) and intimates a stepping forth or getting underway. We don’t know if the maidens had advance notice about leaving in the darkness or not; judging by the tone of the Gospel, it appears they did not. Still, all ten got up and willingly went on their way.

“As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.” *Chronizo* for “delayed” doesn’t spell out the reason, just states the fact. Since the bridegroom was intent on meeting his bride we can assume he was delayed against his will. He and his bride’s party must have been anxious to meet well before evening but could not. Thus the level of anxiety was very high all around. Since the ten maidens were summoned to meet the bridegroom, chances are that they formed part of a much larger group of the bride’s retinue. The need to take lamps seemed to have been done on the spur of the moment, for no one anticipated the bridegroom’s delay in the dead of night. The ten maidens were of vital importance without which no one of the bride’s party could make their way in the darkness. That’s why the foolish maidens asked their fellow maidens for oil, not anyone else in the party. To fail in bringing oil meant that both parties, the

bride's and bridegroom's, would be devoid of that much less light. Finally in the middle of night a cry came, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Given the late hour, it was easy to discern the bridegroom's approach which must have consisted of a retinue even larger than that of the bride's and easy to pick out long off in the thick darkness. Though the five wise maidens are credited with being prepared, the unknown person who uttered the cry was even more alert.

So during the interval between seeing the bridegroom far off and his coming to his bride's party—it must have taken considerable time for him to approach—those maidens who didn't bring extra oil went off to dealers to purchase some. At first glance it seems highly unlikely that these shops would be open. Then again, given the importance of oil, some if not many may have been open or at least their proprietors were accustomed to people coming at night. Apparently the mission to purchase oil was successful, for "afterward the other maidens came." However, the door was shut and the marriage feast began without them. Mention of this clearly states that the feast began well after midnight, highly unusual. Still it went on despite the bridegroom having been delayed, *chronizō*. The wedding feast took place more toward the pre-dawn hours, for the actual wedding had to take place first after midnight. You'd think that this delay which must have upset everyone else, especially the bride, would make her spouse more sensitive to the plight of these women, but not so. The bridegroom expected ten maidens (let's say five on each side flanking him) as he approached the synagogue in total darkness; the same applies to all who had entered the banquet hall afterwards. Not to have the expected ten virgins but half their light was indeed upsetting for the bridegroom and everyone involved, for they had more difficulty making their way.

13 November, Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mt 25.14-30) heightens the theme of expectation of the unknown hour as it pertains to a bridegroom (i.e., last week) and today, a man who goes on a journey. The parable offered today seems to be spoken at the same time as the one of the bridesmaids and thus forms a seamless connection: "For it will be as when a man going on a journey." "It" isn't specified but presupposes that Jesus is spurring the memory of a person who has listened to the parable of vs. 1-13. The layout of the parable is as follows: five talents to one servant, two to a second servant and one to a third servant. Keep in mind that these talents represent the man's entire property or *ta huparchonta*, a participle used as a noun; it comes from the verb *huparcho* meaning to begin to be, come into existence. Thus the participle/verb suggests virtually everything belonging to the man who must have trusted his servants very much with all that he had and in a sense, all that he is. In other words, this person is really laying his life on the line. What makes him go on an extended journey isn't mentioned; in fact, it's irrelevant to the parable except for the length of time and how it affects those servants who had *ta huparchonta* or his very livelihood in their hands.

Attention automatically is drawn to the third servant with one talent who "dug in the ground and hid his master's money." It was to his credit that he didn't go out and squander it, easily within the realm of possibility. The text says that the master returned from his unspecified journey "after a long time" and then proceeded to settle accounts with the three men. During this extended absence the three servants must have discussed their master's *ta huparchonta*, of how it was going with each one of them and how the bank was treating their investment. They saw interest accrue and indeed were delighted. The third servant probably worked himself into the habit of lying not at once but over time by saying that he too had invested his single talent while all the while knowing that it was buried. That must have made life difficult after a short while, of having to sustain a lie.

"Here you have what is yours" was this third servant's response upon the master's return. At last came the truth which must have surprised the other two most likely in the presence of their master. The price to pay for this failure to have a talent gain interest and thus increase *ta huparchonta*? "Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." Those whom the master

commanded this to be done could have been the two faithful servants, a difficult task but necessary in order to preserve their good standing. The time of this expulsion was at night, hence mention not so much of darkness but darkness which is outer or *exoteros*...compared with that darkness which, if you will, was “inner” or easier to deal with being close to a settlement. Better, it was that comprehensive darkness as experienced after sunset; *exoteros* suggests being far away from any human form of light, dim at best from candles and the like, and something to be feared, because one lacked orientation. That’s why it is a place of weeping and of gnashing of teeth, expressive of a desire to be within the fold of the light, tenuous as it is against the almost infinite back-drop of a night sky. The servant cast out could only hope that there be some moonlight and stars, not overcast, which it probably was, hence the wailing.

As for the two servants who returned to the security of their master’s household, they were that much closer to the place where they cast out their fellow servant. The verb *ekballo* is the verb at hand and suggests a genuine shove as far as strength could allow followed by a quick slam of the door and bolting it. If we take this and the previous parable literally, at least the servant unceremoniously thrown away had the company of those five foolish maidens. It was they who had provided the chorus of weeping and gnashing of teeth in that darkness which was *exoteros* or outer.

20 November, Christ the King

Today’s Gospel (Mt 25.31-46) begins with “When the Son of man comes in his glory.” This statement follows upon the heels of last Sunday’s parable about the man who went on an extended journey and upon returning home, dealt with the three servants to whom he entrusted what was his entire livelihood. “When the Son of man comes” is not unlike that parable insofar as refrains from giving precise information as to when he will actually come, let alone to what place he will come, just that “he will sit on his glorious throne.” Both the noun “glory” and the adjective “glory” are one and the same noun *doxa* in Greek. It thereby suggests that Christ will be coming in this *doxa* as well as taking his seat upon a throne consisting of the same *doxa*. Such intimations have the value of raising our minds from a literal or physical coming of Christ to one which consists more of expectation, in tune with the almost immediate presence of Advent, and without running the risk of spiritualizing the mystery and therefore allowing it to fade away quietly. Thus expectation becomes a matter of how to perceive a divine coming in *doxa* in conjunction with one which is a presence in *doxa*. Both are not unrelated nor separate from each other; divine *doxa* is not subject to such division.

The purpose of Christ’s coming? To separate the sheep from the goats, a distinction he makes based upon how people treated their fellows. But before this winnowing process gets underway, “before him will be gathered all the nations,” that is to say, people of the earth delineated according to political groups which also could include general ethnic divisions. Christ seems to be addressing not so much individuals but nations or those nations on his left and his right. Thus the identity (and lack of it, goats) between him and people are to be made within that context. This is more beneficial than at first glance, for each nation has its own history and customs as how their citizens relate to each other. Christ has to take this into consideration in order that the individual nations may comprehend him. Yet despite these important distinctions, all nations have people who are strangers, naked, in prison and hungry. Even more important, Christ identifies them with himself which cuts across all cultural lines. And so, the best way of trying to figure out how and when Christ will come, shift attention to seeing his *doxa* embodied within the unfortunate persons Christ associates. This isn’t to deny that Christ will be coming in *doxa*, manifest to all, but that already he is present. Despite the clarity with which Christ states this, it’s among the least understood or better, least put-into-practice aspects of the Gospel.

As for the process of separating sheep from goats, it concludes with “And they (i.e., nations) will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.” Not only does that sentence conclude the

Gospel at hand but Chapter 25, thereby setting the stage for the Last Supper and Christ's departure from mortal existence. And so this parable about the coming of Christ essential has nothing to do about it as commonly understood. Actually it has occurred; the task is to see that close identity between unfortunate people in society and himself.