

## Liturgical Reflections, 2009

The entries in this document are brief reflections upon the Sunday Gospels throughout the liturgical year, including major feast days. Not all verses of each Gospel are commented upon, for that would be too cumbersome. Instead, attention is given to one or two aspects of a given Gospel. The Church's liturgical cycle is divided into three years. That means when a given cycle returns as with this document in three years' time, fresh insights may be garnered without repetition.

1 January, Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God

Today's Gospel (Lk 2.16-21) is short, falling on the heels of the one for Midnight Mass on Christmas. The entry For Christmas day 2008 spoke of the "thing" (rhema) which an angel communicated to the shepherds, that they should find it in Bethlehem. As was pointed out, rhema pertains to that which is spoken and may be contrasted with semeion (sign) in 2.12, the baby in a manger. Despite the value of the visual aspect of semeion, what really moved the shepherds was what they had heard, the rhema. That's why they went "with haste" and found Mary, Joseph and the child.

After having come across the family...no record is given as to what the shepherds did there...they "made known the saying (rhema) which had been told them." That is to say, already they had incorporated into their hearts the essence of the first rhema (vs. 15, 'Let us...see this thing that has happened') and wished to transmit it to other people. This supposes that the shepherds not only had a conversation with Mary and Joseph about the child but could appreciate in wordless fashion that which had transpired. For them—and this can apply to all subsequent Christian transmission of teaching—reliance upon hearing is more important than what is seen. Those persons to whom the shepherds were fortunate enough to hear their rhema expressed wonder (thaumazo). This second rhema was more significant than that of vs. 15, for by now the shepherds got a first hand report from the parents of Jesus, that is, it was a combination of that which was seen and that which was heard.

Vs. 19 reads, "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." The word "but" (de in Greek) is important insofar as it demonstrates a different response by Mary compared with the people (wonder, thaumazo). One gets the sense from this verse that while the shepherds were telling people about their experience, Mary was along with them or close by them and was paying close attention to everything they had said. In other words, Mary was not apart from them as commonly understood. Then again, the shepherds may have consulted her frequently in order to keep accurate their account. Chances are that her keeping and pondering were more centered upon the shepherds' second rhema than the events themselves that just befell her.

The Greek word for "kept" is suntereo; the preposition sun (with) prefixed to the verb intensifies its meaning. The other verb is sumballo, also with the preposition sum(n) which means placing things together with a view to comparing them and literally, to cast together. The object of both verbs is rhema, the third time it occurs in such a short passage. Mary engages in keeping and pondering...suntereo and sumballo...not publicly as with the shepherds but "in her heart." Vs. 20 concludes this episode with the shepherds returning: no specific place is given but presumably to their fields with their sheep. Since they had left their sheep with the angel's appearance, most likely they had to hunt for them scattered over the surrounding neighborhood. Still, the shepherds with joyful for both what "they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." That is to say, they rejoiced over the visible semeion or sign as well as the audible rhema. Once again, the latter's importance is confirmed by the added words, "as it had been told them."

#### **4 January, Epiphany of the Lord**

Today's Gospel (Mt 2.1-12) tells of the wise men or magi arriving in Jerusalem, magi being associated with Babylon and acquainted with interpreting signs as related to stars. They went directly to King Herod which doesn't seem like a wise decision, given his reputation. "When Herod heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him." The addition of "all Jerusalem" shows that either the people went along with Herod simply out of fear or were in league with him. Although there's no mention of the time when the magi visited Herod, somehow this image is more appropriate for the night. It is in keeping with Herod's paranoia who wished to find out in secret the Christ-child's birth from the visiting magi.

When King Herod asked his advisors as to where the Christ was to be born, immediately they responded with "in Bethlehem of Judea," a clear indication that they had had this knowledge beforehand. One gets the idea that despite this, his priestly advisors preferred to not to have told the king, implying a certain openness as to the prophecy. Regardless, the quote they give which backs up their claim comes from Micah 5.2 which reads a bit differently in the Hebrew: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." This verse has a personal quality, "for me," lacking in the citation. Also lacking are the concluding words, "whose origin is from old, from ancient days."

After Herod's counselors specified Bethlehem, he summoned the magi "secretly" to find out the time when the star appeared. Apparently his priests and scribes were unacquainted with such divinization as had been the case with Pharaoh when dealing with Moses. Such divinization was forbidden by the Jewish religion, most likely the reason for Herod's secret inquiry, secret from the priests and scribes. That may be why he Herod said "That I too may come and worship him"...not as a deceitful way to reach Christ and slay him but as a simple rhetorical device in face of his monotheistic advisors. Thus on a broader cultural scale we have the strict monotheistic religious establishment encountering the fluid, pagan or quasi-pagan one from Babylon. It turned out that both were correct regarding the birth of Christ.

#### **11 January, Baptism of the Lord**

Today's Gospel is from Mark (1.7-11), noted for its terse, right-to-the-point style. Also, today sums up the Christmas season though it lingers several more weeks to the Presentation on 2 February. The liturgy between now and then reverts to Ordinary Time, so you don't get a sense of a continuance of Christmas as during Lent and Easter.

Last Sunday was the Epiphany and here a week later we have Christ as a full grown man some thirty years later. These thirty years the Church passes by as if they didn't exist, however, the Church wants to get directly into the mission of Jesus. The thirty years of obscurity can represent that bulk of time, like the years John the Baptist spent in the desert, required for preparation. Thus time as we know it takes second place as to liturgical time. As for the liturgical year, it proclaims the Gospel which covered a mere three years of Jesus' ministry. All in all, the time in which the Church's essential message is compressed to a high degree. Not only that, these three years have sustained her for two thousand years which is remarkable among the world's religions. Obviously the events which had transpired in that brief period transcend time and space as we know it.

“But he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Words of John the Baptist about Jesus, but there are not accounts of Jesus baptizing, that is, of him immersing people in water. However, the Greek baptizo means “to dip” as one would insert an object in a bucket of paint to cover it entirely. Still the image here is of changing the surface of an object. Perhaps this image may be expanded or with respect to the making of candles. There a whole series of dippings are required to make the candle’s size increase. After each dip the wax must dry before assuming the next layer and so forth down the line. Thus at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel we have a sign (baptism) as to the completion of Jesus’ ministry. Unlike the other Gospels, Mark doesn’t mention the Holy Spirit. However, he speaks of Jesus bidding his disciples to proclaim the Gospel “to the whole creation” (16.15). The next verse reads, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” Thus the end of Jesus’ mission heralds the beginning of the Church’s which begins with baptism or that dipping. One so baptized doesn’t receive the fullness of Christian faith at once but does so over a lifetime, which gets back to the notion of numerous dippings or immersions in the Holy Spirit’s presence to achieve this fullness.

### **18 January, Second Sunday in Ordinary Time**

This Sunday resumes Ordinary Time after the Advent-Christmas cycle but not quite yet...we have the Christmas season lingering until 2 February, Feast of the Presentation. At the same time, this mini-Ordinary Time lacks the full-force, for example, of the days following Lent or Easter.

Today’s Gospel (Jn 1.35-42) continues, if you will, from last Sunday, Baptism of the Lord. Temporally speaking, it takes place “the next day” (vs. 35) or the day after John the Baptist recognized Jesus. Note that John’s Gospel does not say that Jesus had been baptized; emphasis is more on the Holy Spirit which “descended (upon Jesus) as a dove from heaven.” Only then does Jesus “baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” Earlier it was noted that the verb baptizo means to dip, and this image was applied to the repeated dippings of a candle which increases its size. Thus one can assume that the “final dipping,” or the completion of the candle, will take place at Pentecost with the descent of the Holy Spirit.

On the “next day” or after John saw the Holy Spirit descent upon Jesus we have John “standing with two of his disciples.” Chances are they were discussing what had happened, much like the disciples on the road to Emmaus after Christ’s resurrection. The image here is rather casual: John and these two men “looked at Jesus as he walked” (vs. 35) and thus recognized him not unlike at Emmaus when the disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Once John said that Jesus was the Lamb of God, those two men left John and followed Jesus, thereby leaving John behind. Nothing is said about John’s reaction. However, he perceived that his days of baptizing with water were completed since now Jesus takes up this baptism in terms of the Holy Spirit. Later in vs. 40 we read, “One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother.” Perhaps Andrew was one of the two disciples of John. When Andrew said to Simon “We have found the Messiah,” surely he had in mind the Baptist’s words of “Behold, the Lamb of God.”

### **25 January, Conversion of St. Paul**

Although today’s Gospel (Mk 16.15-18) speaks of Jesus commissioning his disciples after his resurrection, today’s notations will center upon the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus.

The first reading (Acts 9) begins with “But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” Such words intimate continuance which in this instance harkens back to 8.1, “And Saul was consenting to his (Stephen) death.” That is to say, chapter eight intervenes with the story of Simon the magician and

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, two occasions of conversion by prominent men to Christianity. Whether both know of Saul is conjecture although chances are good that they did, given Saul's well-known position among the Jewish rulers. One gets a subtle impression that Saul's threatening manner is hanging over chapter nine waiting to be resolved.

Vs. 3 recounts Saul's actual conversion: "suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him." The verb here is *periastrapto*, the only other use of this term in the Bible being 22.6 when Paul is recounting his experience. Actually, chapter 22 fleshes out the conversion in some detail and should be read along with the account of chapter three. *Periastrapto* signifies a strong, intermittent light in comparison with the "glory of the Lord" of Lk 2.9 which shone around (*perilampo*) the shepherds at Christ's birth. Still, both verbs have the notion of surrounding signified by the preposition *peri*, around. As for the shepherds, *-lampo* means light coming from a candle, gentle and persistent as opposed to the violent sort which made Saul fall off his horse.

Those accompanying Saul heard the voice but saw no one (vs. 7). Compare them with the disciples at the Transfiguration when "a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.'" Nothing further is said about the men with Saul except that they brought him to Damascus. Every so often the Bible mentions anonymous persons such as these who are instrumental with regards to a leading figure. They are like hinges upon which the story relies; once they have performed their duty, nothing further is heard of them yet without them the action could not have continued.

## **1 February, Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Today's Gospel (Mk 1.21-8) has three instances of the adverb "immediately" (*euthus*; also as 'at once') for which Mark is famous, vs. 21 and vs. 23. This word is in keeping with his well-known brevity and terseness which presents an image of Jesus on the move, quickly fulfilling his mission.

"And they were astonished (*ekplesso*) at his teaching." This verb is strong, which signifies striking a person out of his senses. Such intense astonishment to the point of being struck to the core stands in contrast to the scribes' teaching and focuses upon Jesus' authority (*exousia*). One can detect almost a subtle sense of humor: although the scribes were legitimate teachers, they must have been very boring in the sense of not knowing their subject matter. Better, they may have been acquainted fully with the Torah but in the rote sense. Jesus' ability to cause such excitement is highlighted by the sudden (*euthus*) appearance of a man with an unclean spirit, literally, "in an unclean spirit": all the more dramatic by the simple preposition signifying full possession of this uncleanliness.

"And they were all amazed (*thambeo*)." This verb is akin to the astonishment of *ekplesso* with regard to Jesus' teaching, for it and the healing of this man "in" his uncleanliness are one and the same. It is further enhanced by the people saying, "a new teaching and authority."

## **2 February, Presentation of the Lord**

Parts of this Gospel were commented upon in 2008.

Today's Gospel (Lk 2.22-40) is bracketed by mention of the Law or Torah: "purification according to the law of Moses" and "when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord." Thus what transpires in between is in accord with the Torah and frequent mention in the New Testament about Jesus coming to fulfill it.

Anna is presented as a prophetess "of great age," the other two major prophetesses being Miriam, sister of Aaron (Ex 15.20) and Deborah (Jdg 4.4). Two others are mentioned, Huldah (2Kg 22.14) and Noadiah (Neh 6.14), though the latter is simply presented in a more negative tone though not as a false prophet ('Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid').

Because only these women were recorded as prophetesses, the rarity of her appearance is all the more significant. She "lived with her husband seven years from her virginity and as a widow till she was eight-four" so had a lengthy time to prepare for her appearance. Anna remained in the temple (i.e., 'did not depart from the temple') night and day, implying that she may have lived in a room attached to the outer court perhaps as a kind of anchoritess. That means she witnessed the ebb and flow of daily sacrifices and vigils during the night as well as the yearly liturgical feasts. Since these feasts commemorated a lot of Israelite history, Anna became well acquainted with her country's history and relationship with God.

It may be added that in a sense Anna was a kind of John the Baptist preparing herself for her very brief appearance before fading into the background. During the short time left of her advanced age, she must have had a renewed sense of the liturgical events performed in the temple. That is to say, they were seen in the light of Jesus' future redemptive action. When Anna "came up at the very hour" she, like the Baptist, knew the time when Jesus would appear for his presentation. Nobody had to inform her, simply she knew the right time or *kairos*. Jesus and his parents must have been among many who went through the same ritual. Despite this, she was able to pick them out and again like John, could say something akin to "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1.29). However, what Anna said about Jesus is not recorded, just that she did so as a prophetess to "all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." Note that this verse specifies Jerusalem as opposed to Israel which implies the temple. Even the word "redemption" implies sacrifice, implying that Anna could foresee in spirit Jesus' redemptive sacrifice.

When Anna was speaking prophetically about Jesus, she did so "giving thanks to God." The verb is *anthomologeomai*, the only use in the New Testament. The compound preposition indicates thanksgiving for benefits and more specifically, *anthos* means a blossom or flower which could apply to the newly born infant Jesus.

## **8 February, Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

When the month of February rolls around, always there's a feeling of Lent in the air which this year begins on the 25th. Closely allied with Lent is the coming of spring, time of growth and renewal. There are only two more Sundays of "Ordinary Time" which doesn't re-commence until after the Lenten-Easter-Pentecost cycle, several months away.

As noted with the Gospel for 1 February, Mark is fond of using "immediately" (*euthus*), and today's (Mk 1.29-39) has two mentions of *euthus*, vss. 29 and 30. Actually, the excerpt begins with it, presenting Jesus on the run, as it were, and keeping with the brevity of Mark's picture of him. For example, today we have Jesus moving from the synagogue to the disciples' house to the house of Simon's mother-in-law to healing people to

a lonely place to Galilee.

As for the first moving, vs. 29 reads literally, “he left (went out or exerchomai) from the synagogue:” two uses of the preposition ex (out), coupled with euthus to show the haste with which Jesus began this series of passing from one place to another. Not only that, Jesus entered the house of Simon and Andrew along with James and John. In other words, Jesus left the synagogue in haste and went without transition, if you will, to the home of two disciples and two other followers. Although the two uses of ex (out) signify exit, the proximity of the house of Simon and Andrew...as though it were attached to the synagogue...can pertain to the close connection between the dispensation of the Old Testament to that of the New, not a sharp division between the two.

As for Simon’s (Peter) mother-in-law, her name isn’t mentioned; same with his wife. These two nameless women are like Anna in the temple noted with regard to the Presentation above: surely they must have played a crucial role in Peter’s life despite the lack of any record as to what they had done.

After Simon’s mother-in-law, people in the area brought Jesus “all who were sick or possessed with demons.” The time was evening, a period of twilight, or when the ability to see clearly is in an in-between state, not fully light nor fully dark. This time when people were healed and demons were cast out must have been haunting, added by the use of torch lights, etc. When vs. 34 says that Jesus didn’t permit the demons (who had just been cast out) to speak, they were hanging around in this twilight, all the more frightful. The twilight enabled them to remain present for a while, just enough to catch fleeting glimpses of their presence. Jesus must have taken into consideration that if the demons did speak during twilight, they would have cast tremendous fear into the people present.

Later in this Gospel passage Jesus “went out to a lonely place (eremos)” which signifies a place lacking vegetation or a desert. He did this “in the morning” or proi ennuxa: literally, “early at night” or early when it was still dark or again, the morning twilight which balances off the one of evening when he did the healing just mentioned. Simon pursued Jesus with other people, and most likely his nameless mother-in-law (and perhaps wife as well) were among this group. They had to grope their way in the semi-darkness to the eremos, not an easy task to accomplish.

### **15 February, Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Although today’s Gospel (Mk 1.40-5) did not begin with a typical Markian “immediately” (there are two instances of the Greek euthus here), the healing of a leper comes on the heels of last Sunday’s Gospel, namely, when Jesus arrived in Galilee. This man came on the strength of verbal report of Jesus’ earlier healings which must have spread like wildfire.

“Moved with pity” or splanchnizomai is graphic in that the noun means bowels. Thus Jesus did not feel sorry for the leper but felt for him deep from within himself. Just as forceful as this verb in the one for “he sternly charged him,” embrimaomai. Fundamentally it means to snort like a horse. The verb, strong as it is, is made even more so by Jesus’ sending the leper away, exballo, which also means to cast out. Not only that, Jesus dismissed him “at once” or euthus, another word for immediately.

Jesus situates his cleansing within the context of the Mosaic Law or Torah by bidding the leper to show himself to the priest and make an offering. The context is Lev 14.2-32 which gives detailed instructions as to cleansing a leper. Not only that, but Jesus used the Mosaic Torah as “proof for the people.” The Greek lacks “people”

and has “them.” The word for “proof” is *marturion* or witness...witness not just for fulfillment of the Torah but for fulfillment of what Jesus had done. Perhaps with this in mind, the leper felt he had no need to present himself to the priest, a kind of recognition of Jesus' role as priest.

Despite the stern warning (*embrimaomai*) from Jesus, the man who had been cleansed excitedly told everyone about the event. The two Greek verbs are *kerusso* (to proclaim, often used with proclaiming the Gospel) and *diaphemizo* (to spread by word of mouth). This prevented Jesus from showing himself in public, so he had to remain “out in the country” or in the *eremos* or desert. Nevertheless, people sought him out just as they had done when he went to a “desert place” (*eremos*) in last Sunday's Gospel. By this early stage in Jesus' ministry, people got wind of his preference for such deserted places.

## **22 February, Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**

This Sunday we can bid “adieu” to Ordinary Time for some months, for the coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday.

Today's Gospel (Mk 2.1-12) reports that Jesus was “at home,” that is to say, in Capernaum. Apparently this town was the place where Jesus resided which corresponds to Mt 4.13. Matthew reports that Jesus had moved there from Nazareth, his birthplace, after John the Baptist had been arrested.

The image presented at Jesus' home is that of him preaching to a huge crowd, so many people that there wasn't enough standing room even by the door to his house. It was this house that some men cut a hole in the roof in order to lower a paralytic inside for Jesus to cure. Jesus doesn't seem to be bothered by the destruction to his own home. While this was transpiring, some scribes “were sitting there.” Here is an image of dis-interested well-known elders at some distance from the commotion as they were taking it all in. Their thoughts reflected this sitting by the word *dialogizomai*, “questioning” in their hearts. This Greek verb connotes arguing and debating, all the more intensive by reason of the preposition *dia* (through)...a reasoning-through with the intent of finding fault in one's opponent. No mention is given of the scribes debating among themselves, just within their own hearts, that is, of each scribe pre-occupied with his own thoughts and oblivious to those of the other men doing the same.

Countering this *dialogizomai* by the scribes we have Jesus, hemmed in by the crowds and the dramatic event of the paralytic being let down through his roof, “perceiving in his spirit.” The verb is *epignosko*, literally a knowing-upon (*epi*), suggesting an advantage over the scribes' debating. That interior debate was occurring “within their hearts (*kardia*)” compared with Jesus' “in his spirit” or *pneuma*. In other words, Jesus' faculty of *pneuma* easily could penetrate the one of *kardia* or again, that of *epignosko* being superior to *dialogizomai*. The Gospel ends with everyone being amazed at the cure of the paralytic and no response from the scribes who, it can be assumed, continued with their *dialogizomai*. In other words, even at this early stage of Mark's Gospel the tension between Jesus and religious authorities moves on to further conflicts.

## **25 February, Ash Wednesday**

Today begins the most important single liturgical cycle of the year. That is to say, we leave Ordinary Time for the time of Lent-Easter-Pentecost-Ascension, this year the Ascension occurring on 21 May. In fact, we could label this time as *kairos*, “event,” compared with others such as Advent. And so we have three solid months or one quarter of the calendar year dedicated to the most important feasts related to our redemption. Being aware of this one quarter as something fenced-off with special dedication...not so much physically but temporally...helps bring home what the Church is communicating especially in a world where perception of sacred time, let alone sacred space, is virtually forgotten. As we move deeper in Lent after today, we can visualize leavening behind Ordinary Time and strengthen the vision it prevents for the bulk of the calendar

year before returning to it.

Today's Gospel (Mt 6.1-6, 16-18) is one which begins most Lenten cycles, and it was commented upon for the year 2008, notably the phrase "in secret" (en to krupto). Right after the Gospel with all this talk about hiddenness Jesus instructs us how to pray, that is, the Our Father. Chances are that his listeners had a difficult time coming to grips with this, so he wanted to show that the Father who sees in secret is not a disinterested observer. The familiar words "who art in heaven" appears radically different from the Father "who sees in secret" almost as two separate entities. Thus we're presented with two extreme points, not two heavenly Fathers: heaven above and the room where we utter these words below. These three months of fenced-off sacred time allow us to see that the two points are not as extreme as they appear. If we were to ponder them as such outside this time (as in Ordinary Time), chances are they'd be viewed as extreme.

Note that this complete transcendence of the Father is presented just before today's Gospel in the concluding words of chapter five: "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." The Greek adjective here is *teleios* signifying more the end in view of that which is intended. Thus "perfection" is less an absolute and more a goal, a good way to introduce Jesus' talk about the Father seeing in secret (the room) as well as the Our Father designed to be addressed to him (in heaven). So when we're bidden to ask the Father that his kingdom come and will be done "on earth as it is in heaven," it is a desire to effect the goal (that which which is *teleios*).

### **1 March, First Sunday of Lent**

The Church in her liturgical calendar speaks, for example, of the "Tenth Sunday *in* Ordinary Time" yet takes a slightly different approach when speaking, again for example, of "the First Sunday *of* Lent."

Today's Gospel (Mk 1.12-15), typical of Mark, is the briefest account of the three synoptic Gospels about the temptation of Jesus, and is an incident early on in Jesus' public ministry which traditionally begins the Lenten season. However, usually the Church views the beginning of his public career with his baptism, and the temptation occurs immediately (euthus again, that favorite word of Mark) right after it. Everything this and the other Gospels say about Jesus are on a level different from what they had recorded earlier, that is, pertinent to his birth and the preaching of John the Baptist. You might call them a kind of preface with today being the first chapter. The advantage of Lent's forty days is that the other "chapters" are compressed whereas during Ordinary Time they are spread out. Thus Lent requires closer attention to details, no luxury of the nine month Ordinary Time to sort them out.

The Spirit or Pneuma drives Jesus into the desert, the verb being *ekballo*, to cast out, at first a rather unceremoniously term almost as though the Pneuma wishes Jesus to get down to business and experience temptation. His being there forty days and forty nights finds a parallel to Moses being on Mount Sinai for the same length of time...this expression signifying not so much a specific temporal duration but an extended period. Since the words *euthus* and *ekballo* signify immediacy and urgency after Jesus' baptism, chances are that the desert was bordering upon the Jordan River where Jesus must have seen from a distance John continuing his baptizing ministry down below. Perhaps watching people come to John affected how Jesus viewed himself on the verge of his ministry, of how it differed from John's. Also John might have been aware of being watched by Jesus up in the mountains, a fulfilling of his ministry of "preparing the way of the Lord."

At one point towards the end of this desert experience someone must have known where Jesus was in the desert, so he fetched him with information that John was arrested. That was a signal for him to go to Galilee, a clear sign that John's mission was not only accomplished but taken up and inserted into that of Jesus. In Galilee Jesus said that "the time has come" or the *kairos*...proper time or event...has arrived. Also Jesus said to believe in the Gospel though at this point in his career, no Gospel had been written for, in fact, it was just starting to be written. But if we were to take this literally and with hindsight, the Gospel consisted in the account of Jesus' birth, early years and baptism, nothing more.

While in the desert Jesus was with the "wild beasts" which does not necessarily mean that he was in danger by them. Being with such animals can be taken as a foreshadowing of those wild beasts in human shape he will encounter during his ministry, that is, his opponents. At the same time, Jesus had the company of ministering

angels, again a kind of foreshadowing of being with those disciples who would minister (diakoneo) both to him and with him.

### **8 March, Second Sunday of Lent**

“There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” Concluding words of chapter eight which precede today's Gospel (Mk 9.2-10). The verb “taste” (geuomai) means a thorough absorption of what one consumes which in this case is not the finality of death. Thus if the Transfiguration often is seen as a comforting interlude half way through Jesus' career preparing the disciples for what will come later on, the verse just cited may be taken as a premonition of sorts, preparing the disciples for what will happen on the “high mountain.”

Actually the Transfiguration occurs six days after the conclusion of chapter eight, sufficient time for the disciples to have grasped what Jesus had said. Metamorphoo is the verb used for “was transfigured.” The verbal root is morphao meaning to shape or form to which the preposition meta (after) is prefixed. Thus in a literal sense we have something like to shape after, to adopt a form different from the one used within its native environment. In the Gospel context the verb is passive...Jesus is transfigured...he doesn't transfigure or alter his form on his own initiative. The agent for this change isn't given specifically but most likely can be attributed to the Father: “This is my beloved Son, listen to him.”

Right after Jesus had been metamorphoo, Elijah and Moses appeared talking with Jesus. Note that these two prophetic men appeared “to them,” the disciples...not to Jesus...because they did so for their advantage. As soon as Peter asked Jesus to build three tents, an expression of his desire to remain on the mountaintop, “a cloud overshadowed them” much as it had done on Mount Sinai. Then we have the adverb “immediately” (or equivalent) for which Mark is celebrated: “suddenly...they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.” Despite the cloud, it seems that the disciples could see Jesus within it. No intimation is given as to the whereabouts of Moses and Elijah, not even words that such important figures had left the scene. Even mention of the exit of an angel is given when they appear for one purpose or another.

There is no account of any discussion between Jesus and his disciples while they were ascending the mount, only when they were coming down. It was one of rebuke on Jesus' part, of telling them not to talk about what they had seen. Perhaps during the ascent they were discussing the concluding verse of chapter eight noted above, about not tasting death. They may have expected an explanation about it once they reached the summit, and that was an impetus for them to make the ascent. Compare this with the account of vs. 10 which has the disciples not so much talking with Jesus but among themselves. The topic was “what the rising from the dead meant” of which they had no clue, despite the recent transfiguration.

### **15 March, Third Sunday of Lent**

Around this point in Lent the Church brings out her Big Guns. That is to say, she brings out very best of scriptural passages from both the Old and New Testaments in such a stunning array and in such a relatively short period of time that it's virtually impossible to unpack in one given Lenten cycle. St. John's Gospel is considered the centerpiece of all this.

Today's Gospel (Jn 2.13-25), occurring early in Jesus' ministry, may be thought of as one after-the-fact. By that is meant a record of an event people had witnessed yet barely had an inkling as to what was going on until much later or after Jesus had been raised from the dead (cf. vs. 22). Another way of putting it in light of this Gospel, only after the temple of Jesus' body had been re-constructed. For people who were present as either observers or followers, it must have been a unique experience to have beheld all these events in Jesus' life and to see them in light of the resurrection. In a real sense they were in training for the transition from the old to the new covenant.

The importance of memory (anamnesis), not so strong as it is today, was the chief means of keeping record in ancient times even though writing was available, usually confined to members of elite classes. It was relatively easy for common folk to keep a mental record of events in proper order such as what Jesus did and what happened to him, a fact sometimes we're reluctant to credit them for. This memory, both personal and common, enabled the disciples and others to have a twofold belief: in the scripture and in the word (logos) of Jesus as noted in vs. 22. Scripture was that which had been written down, again from oral tradition and

therefore from memory. Logos is that which is uttered but more than that...a presence which the speech effects or in the case at hand, Jesus himself (as Logos). Thus the disciples had two forms of revelation.

In today's Gospel the logos—resting upon scripture—consisted of what Jesus had done as when he had driven merchants from the temple. Actually, nothing is recorded indicative of Jesus having spoken with his disciples who were witnesses. Rather, their attention was upon Ps 69.9 “zeal for your house will consume me,” a verse not attributed to Jesus himself. It should be noted that this is half the verse; the remaining words are “and the insults of those who insult you have fallen upon me.” Recollection or anamnesis of this verse reveals the sensitivity the disciples as practicing Jews had regarding scripture...graphe...what is written...which they had committed to memory and heard in the synagogue. This memory was so present to their minds as a kind of logos or uttered speech that spontaneously it popped out of their minds when they saw Jesus in action not only here but in other events.

## **22 March, Fourth Sunday of Lent**

Traditionally, today is known as Laetare (“Rejoice”) Sunday, half way through Lent.

As with last Sunday, today's Gospel (Jn 3.14-21) takes place early in Jesus' public career, yet one gets a distinct sense from John, compared with the other Gospel writers, that the temporal sequence of events is secondary compared with Jesus as Logos or Word of God.

“As Moses lifted up the serpent...so must the Son of man be lifted up.” The two small words “as” (kathos) are crucial here, bridging the two events, one past and the other lying in the future. The Israelites asked Moses to make a “fiery serpent” or saraph from which we get “seraphim” (num 21.9). Instead, he made a bronze serpent or nechash, almost to temper with bronze the harsh color of red. This noun derives from a verbal root meaning to hiss or whisper as when practicing some kind of enchantment or sorcery. Also it means to shine...as brass would shine...though not as brightly as an image made of gold or silver glimmering in the desert sun. When those bitten by the saraph looked upon the nechash, they were healed. No explicit mention is given as to having faith in this object; a look at it sufficed for healing. This healing came as a result of the Israelites complaining about a lack of food and water in the desert. Applied to Jesus, those who gazed (or will gaze) upon him on the cross were healed, healed from sin which comes about through vision. As for Jesus on the cross, having faith in him is mentioned explicitly, necessary for eternal life. Instead of dealing with a snake bite, failure to gaze upon Jesus results in condemnation, crisis or judgment, for there were people present on Calvary who viewed him with faith as well as those who did not. Such is the importance of this looking/believing which effects a memory of the event...memory in the sense of anamnesis...which is more than simple recollection of an event. Instead, anamnesis is a real presence in the person so remembering, and this fits in well with John presenting Jesus as Logos or Word which dwells in that recollective faculty.

As for the theme of ascent/descent, the verse prior to today's Gospel excerpt reads “No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man.” No specific reference as to Jesus' ascent is given this early in the Gospel yet the ability to both ascend and descend belongs to Jesus alone. The apparent disregard for temporal order (ascent first and descent second) is in tune with perceiving Jesus as Logos as noted above. That is to say a word...any word (which is a logos)..is more fluid and not constrained by space and time. When we transfer that notion to the divine Logos, its sense is magnified tremendously. Actually the ascent on the cross, like Moses' nechash set on a pole (the Hebrew word alternately means “banner” as in a military context), is midway between full ascent and the descent of Jesus which took place at his incarnation. It makes fuller sense in the words of the Song of Songs, “and his banner over me was love.”

## **25 March, Annunciation of the Lord**

The Christmas season...actually Christmas Day itself...was exactly three months ago today, and today's Gospel (Lk 1.26-48) reminds us of that event. More specifically, today marks the annunciation of Jesus' birth to Mary by the angel Gabriel which occurs nine months from now or the full term of a normal pregnancy. In a way the Annunciation is an oddity in the midst of Lent. We shift from our Lenten observance to this feast for twenty-four hours and once over, return to it. Nevertheless, it is vital to pause like this to commemorate an event that will remain with us for three-quarters of a given calendar year. Also we could say that Lent and the

Annunciation is an overlap of two sacred times: Lent's forty days and Mary's nine months of pregnancy. That leaves three months of non-descript time, if you will, between Christmas and Ash Wednesday.

As far as this overlap of two temporal segments, we could say that as the Transfiguration of Jesus towards the beginning of Lent serves to support us throughout the remaining weeks ahead, so it is with the Annunciation. It occurs three months into the calendar year and functions not unlike the Transfiguration to encourage us for the upcoming nine months which are fulfilled with Christmas. When the disciples were descending the mount of Transfiguration, they were pregnant, if you will, in their discussion among themselves "what the rising from the dead meant" (Mk 9.10). In a sense, this corresponds with Mary's physical pregnancy. It can be transferred to us during the remaining Sundays of Lent as a type of this discussion among the disciples about the forthcoming Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes the Annunciation has to be transferred when Easter occurs early. Nevertheless, it is a powerful reminder that the next nine months...the bulk of the liturgical and calendar years... are in a real sense pregnant or holy with the presence of Jesus hidden in them. During that period one can be attentive to Gospel excerpts bearing, if you will, Jesus within oneself much like Mary. This secret presence for most of the year calls to mind Ps 139.15: "My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth." The verb for "intricately wrought" is *raqam* which means to adorn with colors and applies not to the fashioning of an object but to something that has already been fashioned. We find this verb applied to the tent of worship in the desert: "And you shall make a screen for the door of the tent of blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework" [Ex 26.37]. In addition, such *raqam* can refer to the prophet Jonah in the belly of the whale though this verb is not found there.

## **29 March, Fifth Sunday of Lent**

Technically speaking, this is the last Sunday of Lent which begins Passion Week, next Sunday (Palm Sunday) heralding the beginning of Holy Week.

Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem for the final time and talks more specifically about his death as we see in today's Gospel, Jn 12.20-33. He begins by speaking about a grain of wheat which dies and later bears fruit. This is an image of descent...of hiding...which follows upon his death. It is somewhat reminiscent of a verse noted last week which precedes it immediately: "No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man." And that place of descent is the hidden place under the earth, necessary to be in order to effect the ascent. Quickly Jesus adds that "where I am, there shall my servant be also." That is to say, the servant will follow the same pattern of descent which is preceded by the ascent on the cross. There in the hiding place of the earth the Father will honor the servant...not just in the earth but through the "much fruit" that will follow. What prevents this following of Jesus is love of life noted in vs. 25, the verb being *phileo*. It intimates fondness for something, a kind of friendship bordering upon undue attachment which prevents a person from being honored by the Father.

There's a certain connection between today's Gospel and the one of last week. That consists of the relationship between the serpent Moses fashioned and Jesus being "lifted up from the earth" (vs. 32). Today Jesus expands on this lifting up, that is, saying that he "will draw all men to myself." Those bitten by the serpents in the desert weren't drawn to the bronze image but were healed by gazing upon it. In other words, that image was one of distance between image and the healing it effected. In comparison, Jesus said that faith was necessary which now we could say is at the heart of this drawing. That means an active engagement between a person and Jesus. However, the exact word "faith" isn't mentioned.

Obviously Jesus could not draw all men to himself while upon the cross. We could say that he had in mind that recollective faculty noted earlier which is called *anamnesis*. Far from recalling past memories, *anamnesis* effects the presence of a past action within the present. Because John's Gospel speaks of Jesus as *Logos*, he excels in presenting this point of view compared to the other evangelists who focus more upon historical elements. Certainly they knew Jesus as *Logos* but did not describe him in this fashion as clearly as John.

## **5 April, Palm Sunday**

Today we have a reading from John's account of the Passion (12.12-16) which occurs the day after Mary anointed the feet of Jesus. The Gospel begins with the crowd which "heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem." These simple words are indicative of how quickly information spread from mouth to mouth, possibly originating from the "great crowds of the Jews" (vs. 9) at Bethany who came to see Lazarus recently raised from the dead. Perhaps they expected a similar miracle in Jerusalem and wanted to be present when it happened.

"So they took branches of palm trees" (vs. 13). Phoinix is the Greek word for "palm trees" which means something with a purple-reddish hue to it and applies to the mythical bird which dies in fire and then is reborn. In other words, the bird's wings are the same color of the fire which effects rebirth. Also, palm branches resemble the feathers of a bird. Thus phoinix is a fore-shadowing of Jesus' resurrection which had precedent in that of Lazarus, the subject of so much curiosity. You might say that Jesus is riding upon the feathers of this phoinix, already triumphant over death, a fact which completely escaped the crowds.

Next follows a quote from Zech 9.9, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold your king is coming, sitting on an ass's colt." The Hebrew text reads, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Should aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victories is he, humble and riding on an ass, on the foal of an ass." John inserts this verse which was beyond the disciples' comprehension (cf. vs. 16). The next verse, though not recorded, reads, "His dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth." Only later after Jesus "had been glorified" did the disciples understand the text and perhaps the meaning of phoinix with its mythic implications. Such is one of many Gospel examples of seeing a past incident within a later event, the Resurrection. As was pointed out with regard to last Sunday's entry, this ability rests upon the faculty of anamnesis or recollection which is more than remembrance of an event but the capacity to bring past temporal events within the present. Once we tune into this faculty, the truths about Jesus' ministry and later reflections on his divinity are made possible, very different from recalling past events in the mythic sense of pre-literate peoples. Such anamnesis also is in line with, for example, the intent of Jesus when he picked out that young ass and sat upon it. Obviously this ability is not learned at once but over an extended period of time.

## **II April, Holy Saturday or Vigil of Easter**

Today's remarks focus not so much upon the Easter mystery itself but because of all liturgical days in the year, that of Holy Saturday is unique. No Mass is celebrated which allows a period of rest from what transpired the past few days as well as preparation for what will happen later tonight. Yesterday was a day for sorrow and tomorrow is a day for joy whereas Holy Saturday falls into neither category. And so we have a narrow band of opportunity vital to catch our breath and consider what contributed to our redemption on Holy Thursday and Good Friday and how this will be lived out both in this life and beyond.

The darkened church evokes Christ laying in the tomb as well as the resurrection itself which takes place in the pre-dawn hours. Then in the middle of the night the Easter Vigil begins with an array of reading from Scripture, the first one being an account of creation recorded in Genesis. Holy Saturday thus offers a fine embodiment of the opening words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep." Today as an in-between day is akin to that which was "without form and void." The Hebrew *tohu* and *bohu* connote a lack of life which is re-enforced by "darkness." It's interesting that the Greek (Septuagint) translation has for these words *aoratos* and *akataskeuastos*, literally, invisible and unstable. Yet instead of creating a menacing picture, Genesis intimates that *tohu* and *bohu* are pregnant, that something is about to come to birth during the darkness of night. Because the church is dark all day today, this darkness heralds the darkness of tonight, the Easter Vigil during which Genesis is read towards the beginning of the liturgy. That's the value of Genesis as first reading...words such as "in the beginning" serve to capture one's attention.

In several previous entries reference was made to instances when the disciples failed to comprehend the meaning of Jesus' words and actions. Today speaks neither of that nor of the ability to comprehend them, again, because it is an intermediate stage of preparation. Yet deep within this in-between land of Holy Saturday the Holy Spirit is forming this ability to comprehend just like the "Spirit of God (who) was moving

over face of the waters” of tohu and bohu, aoratos and aktaskeuastos. Rachaph is the Hebrew verb for “moving” which intimates more a hovering or brooding over in the sense of cherishing. For another instance, refer to Dt 32.11: “Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that *flutters* over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions.”

Earlier it was pointed out that an understanding of Jesus' words and works are done through our faculty of recollection, anamnesis. This is more than just recalling past events but an actualization of them within the present, a difficult concept to grasp in this modern era of communication. Anamnesis is used for the consecration during Mass (“Do this in memory of me”). Just two days ago we celebrated the institution of the Eucharist. Thus being mindful of it now...of what Jesus really means by memory (anamnesis)...might not at the present moment endow us with the ability to recall everything he said and did. However, the darkness of Holy Saturday is that womb in which such understanding is being formed for future implementation. From here we can spell it out beyond the Easter season and throughout Ordinary Time when Gospel references will abound as to the disciples' inability to comprehend what Jesus said and did.

### 19 April, Second Sunday of Easter

Today brings to a close the Easter Octave where each weekday was celebrated with the same force or vitality as Easter Sunday itself. We are in a period akin to Lent insofar as being present within a forty day span of time in anticipation of Christ's Ascension and the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost. However, the anticipation for those two days won't become evident until later within this forty day pilgrimage. During Lent and Holy Week the Church presented us with the best from her arsenal, that is, an array of the most significant readings from the Old and New Testaments jammed into one unit. Having been exposed to that wonderful panorama, the time after Easter, important as it is, somehow lacks the vibrancy of those days. By comparison the readings are bland, if we may put it that way. Perhaps the earlier block of readings lacked a certain historical slant though that was present in some but not in all. Now during Easter we have readings from the Acts of the Apostles, historical material, along with Paul's epistles. While perfectly fine, they don't have that special feel we just left behind.

It was noted that the forty of days of Easter or up until Pentecost parallel those of Lent. During the recent forty days we've come through, often we heard Christ alluding to a future fulfillment of the significance of his deeds and words. The disciples could not comprehend them as they took place, but only later could they grasp their significance. We could say that this period from Easter to Pentecost is a time to sensitize ourselves for this ability to comprehend what Jesus said and did. Thus we can allow them to attain greater maturity which will come with the descent of the Holy Spirit.

Today's Gospel (Jn 20.19-31) has Thomas (“called the Twin”) arriving late to a meeting with Jesus and his fellow disciples. Thomas had just missed Jesus having breathed the Holy Spirit on the disciples, bestowing on them the power to forgive sins which differs from the Spirit's descent at Pentecost. Technically speaking, Thomas missed out on this ability to forgive sins.

Thomas is famous for his doubt: “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails and place my finger in the mark of the nails and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.” You wonder if he would have uttered these words if present when Jesus had breathed upon the other disciples. We have to wait yet another week until Jesus returns and addresses Thomas directly. That must have been a very interesting seven days for Thomas, especially his interaction with the others and even Mary, Jesus' mother. When Jesus did come, he invited Thomas to feel him. That means Jesus must have heard Thomas speaking with the disciples...absent yet very much present to that seminal group of the Church.

Thomas' desire to actually touch Jesus is reminiscent of 1Jn 1.1: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, touched with our hand, concerning the word of life.” It is interesting to surmise that John may have gotten his inspiration in part from Thomas. As for the verb “touch,” the Greek is *pselaphao*, kind of like feeling a piece of fruit or vegetable to discern its ripeness. Here the accent is upon touch, neither sight nor hearing. We find *pselaphao* in Acts 17.27: “that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel after him and find him.”

### **26 April, Third Sunday of Easter**

Today's Gospel (Lk 24.35-48) parallels that of John from last Sunday and begins with the verse, "Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known in the breaking of the bread." These words were uttered by two disciples whose identity is unknown and were addressed to the "eleven gathered together" (vs. 33) in Jerusalem, that is, the full body of disciples minus Judas. Taken literally, that means these two anonymous men were not part of the twelve yet privileged to encounter Jesus. Since the two men recounted their experience towards sunset (cf. vs. 29), they must have been relatively close to Jerusalem. That seems to be secondary; their overwhelming joy could have carried them a lengthy distance through the darkness which was of no concern to them. The burning in their hearts was sufficient light to find their way. This is not unlike the women running from the tomb at night to tell what they had beheld.

Upon meeting the disciples Jesus "stood among them" or in Greek, "in the midst of them" which suggests Jesus being in the center. While the two men had to race to Jerusalem, Jesus himself had no need to walk there, being present with his disciples. We do not hear of Thomas when Jesus bids the disciples to "see my hands and my feet." Actually, no specific disciple is named throughout this account.

On the road to Emmaus incident, Jesus eats with his disciples and shortly afterwards does the same. "And he too ate (broiled fish) and ate before them" (vs. 43). Most likely these words are intended to show the disciples' amazement as they looked on awkwardly, so much that they couldn't eat.

Right after Jesus ate the fish he said "that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." The verb is in the present tense and implies more fulfillment to come, (i.e., Pentecost). Note that in addition to the law of Moses Jesus adds the psalms, frequently quoted in the Gospels, for the Psalter is central to Jewish liturgical usage. Surely the disciples were familiar with the Psalter which triggered in their minds an inkling here and there of what they saw and beheld during the years of being with their master. To a degree, this familiarity mitigates the disciples' ignorance as to a fuller understanding. Only here after the Resurrection and before the Ascension does Jesus speak about scriptural fulfillment in preparation for the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The intimate connection between the Hebrew scriptures and Jesus required a fairly lengthy time to grasp. It may be tied in with Jesus saying "while I was still with you." During this "while" Jesus did not necessarily explain things; the disciples were required on their own to sensitize themselves to Jesus' connection with the Hebrew scriptures, especially through the psalms as just noted. The key verse to this is "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures." The Greek has singular "mind" or nous, implying that the disciples had one mind...i.e., "the mind of them." A similar verse is recorded on the road to Emmaus: "Did not our hearts (literally, the heart of us) burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" We have no details as to this opening of the scriptures except the disciples' later witness. Such opening forms the depository of scripture and tradition which the Church was soon to accumulate and pass on to its members, for example, through the practice of lectio divina, the slow, meditative reading of scripture which leads to silent prayer.

Jesus refers explicitly to Hos 6.2 quoted in Luke as "that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead." That verse reads literally, "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up that we may live before him." Here reference is made to "us" as opposed to Jesus himself.

### **3 May, Fourth Sunday of Easter**

The past three Sundays presented us with accounts of Jesus' resurrection which today is not the case; instead we have Jesus as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10.11-18). The Greek for "good" is kalos which more accurately means "beautiful, lovely" and thus is a more attractive description of him, suggestive of elegance, a quality we all recognize but find difficult to articulate. Kalos is highly suggestive to a Greek audience, for it is one of the three principle characteristics of living well according to the spirit of philosophia, the love of wisdom: the good, the true and the beautiful.

The Gospel begins with Jesus claiming to be the "door of the sheep." Only later in vs. 11 do we come across him described as shepherd. In other words, Jesus-as-door is just as important as being a shepherd. Thus we have Jesus not only as one who watches over the sheep but is the door or means by which the sheep enter

their shelter after having been out all day grazing in the fields. In addition to resting within the sheepfold, they go out (vs. 9: "and will go in and out"). One gets the impression that the sheep physically go through Jesus-as-door ("if anyone enters by me"). And so this passage through Jesus is both in and out. Where or what this "out" is not specified. By contrast, the "in" is identified with being saved.

Vss. 14-15 show a close identification between the sheep, Jesus and the Father. The connection lies in the small word "as" (kathos): "as the Father knows me." One could extend this knowledge of Jesus by the Father not to him in his function as the Kalos Shepherd but as being the Door. Important as Jesus Christ is in all this, he remains subordinate to the Father in the sense of being the agent who brings people to the Father.

### **10 May, Fifth Sunday of Easter**

About this time or midway through the Easter season we shifts gears, so to speak, from focus upon Jesus' resurrection to his approaching ascension and Pentecost Sunday, the latter coming three weeks from today. Both the Advent and Lenten seasons have Sundays commemorating the halfway point of their respective times whereas that of the fifty day Easter season lacks such clear a demarcation point. Today's Gospel (Jn 15.1-8) may be taken with expectation of the Ascension and Pentecost even though it does not speak of them outright fashion. It mentions the Father, Son but not Holy Spirit.

Last week Jesus presented himself as both good shepherd and door of the sheep. Today the image is that of the true vine and the Father as the vinedresser. Jesus and the person-as-branch or disciple are one and the same while the Father is not part of this plant but the person who had planted the vine. Thus a close identity between branch and vine exists, the latter being required to abide in the former. The Greek verb here is meno which also means to await, and that awaiting can apply to the process of bringing forth of grapes. Should a branch fail to produce grapes, the vinedresser or Father will not only cut it off but cast into the fire. In other words, avoiding this fate depends upon a person abiding or meno. Chances are the vinedresser went out into the vineyard daily to check on the grapes' growth...meno...and knew in advance which clusters would make it or would not.

Practically speaking, meno is realized by listening to the logos or word of Jesus, the Logos of God. Incorporating a word from the Word turns out to be an imitation of sorts. This meno involves keeping Jesus' logos in one's memory in the sense of anamnesis, much more than a recalling an event but signifying the presence of a living, active reality. And so, the Gospel contains an apocalyptic theme, of what will happen at the end. Applied to the Spirit's fire of Pentecost which consoles and illumines, the fire here is one of true burning, of final and complete rejection. No agent is given as to who will do this gathering and burning, but given the role of angels in other parables dealing with "end times," chances are that task will fall to them. This fate can be avoided by listening to the word (logos) of Jesus, vs. 3 or better, inserting it into the faculty of anamnesis just noted and meno...awaiting it to bear fruit. Here logos is singular intimating a close identity between it as something spoken and Jesus as Logos or spoken by the Father/vinedresser.

### **17 May, Sixth Sunday of Easter**

Today is the last Sunday before the Ascension on Thursday yet as with last week, the Gospel (Jn 15.9-17) has no specific mention of the Holy Spirit. However, the Gospel follows on the heels of last Sunday and should be viewed within the larger context of John 14-17 where Jesus speaks explicitly of the Spirit, that is, from 14.26+.

The Gospel opens with a set of the small words "as" and "so" (kathos and kai or 'and'), small though very important. It runs: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you." First, note that both verbs (agapao) are in the past; the agape given pre-existed before Jesus spoke of it here at the Last Supper. As/so, small though they may be, serve to introduce one of the most important features of divine revelation. That consists in a unity of agape both divine and human, the latter being allowed to share in the former or the agape between Father and Son. Use of the past tense (agapao) indicates that the unity applies to the Father, Son and disciples. Such may be taken as an intimation of the Holy Spirit as bond between them all. Though the Holy Spirit is mentioned throughout the Gospels, no real details of the relationship with Jesus and his disciples has yet been detailed.

Closely associated with agapao is the verb meno, "abide in my love." Earlier in vs. 4 (cf. last Sunday) Jesus spoke of it in connection with the image of a vine. Here it is spelled out further, by "keeping my Father's commandments." Not just this (which could apply to a keeping of the Torah) but to meno in the Father's love. Such meno/agapao is fulfillment of joy or chara, vs. 11: it gives Jesus joy to see all these elements come together in his disciples which he wishes for them.

In vs. 12 Jesus speaks of "my commandment" which differs, if you will, from the Father's just noted. The former is singular whereas the latter is plural. This singular commandment consists in practical agape, of laying down one's life. Psuche, often translated as "soul," is the Greek for "life" which means more than physical existence.

"You are my friends (philos, singular)." The noun connotes intimacy on a level among equals which stands in stark contrast to the disciples not being called "slaves" (doulos, singular). Such friendship is tenuous in this existence; it depends upon keeping not so much Jesus' singular commandment but in keeping "what I command you." That is to say, this verb is in the present tense which intimates that something or someone must sustain it after Jesus passes off the scene. It is not until Pentecost that the abiding nature of this command becomes apparent. Once it does, all three aspects of agape slam together: between the disciples themselves, between them and the Father, between them and the Son and between them and the Holy Spirit. This turns out to be quite a mix, really, complicated in the best sense of the term yet simple by reason of the unifying power involved, chiefly through the Holy Spirit.

By way of conclusion the RSV translation of the Bible addresses the nature of this Gospel in a footnote to chapter 14, summing it up perfectly: "It (Jesus' farewell discourse, chaps. 14-17) is a meditation which, like a love letter, is difficult to outline."

## **21 May, Ascension of the Lord**

Today's Gospel is the conclusion of St. Mark's account (16.15-20), typically brief and without embellishments. For a fuller account of Christ's ascension itself, we must turn to the first chapter of Acts. However, keeping in line with the fundamental theme of these notes, attention is focused on the Gospel of the day. The only specific intimation of an ascension is vs. 19, "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God." That is it, no more and no less, leaving little for the imagination. Such a taking-up occurred most likely when the disciples were "at table" (vs. 14), not somewhere out in a field or on a roof as commonly imagined. Acts seems to concur with Mark's "at table." It does this with the words, "So when they had come together" (vs. 6), presumably for a meal.

As for the mechanics of the ascension proper, that means Jesus didn't float up into heaven outdoors which Acts 9-10 could imply albeit mistakenly. The "gazing into heaven" does not mean looking into the sky (again, the perception of being in a field or roof top as with Acts 1.12) which concurs with Jesus' teaching about heaven being a non-localized reality. For example, refer to Lk 17.21: "behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." The Greek preposition entos means both in the midst of and within. So if Jesus is about to ascend into heaven, he does so by ascending, as it were, within/in the midst of the disciples and therefore the Church, a kind of pre-Pentecost.

Mark's terseness doesn't preclude viewing the Gospel from the vantage point of lectio divina, the intent of these reflections. As for the words Jesus did speak after his resurrection, they consist of the following elements between vss. 14 through 18: "he upbraided them," "go into all the world and preach the gospel," "he who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned," "these signs will accompany those who believe." Reduced even further, the words of Jesus can be boiled down to: he upbraided them, preach, baptize and signs." As for the last or "signs" (semeion), they are of the dramatic variety such as picking up serpents and drinking poison without harm. Mark's famous terseness leaves little on which to grab and to flesh out while at the same time is valuable for sticking to the basics in order to keep later generations grounded in the Gospel's fundamental message.

As for the ascension itself, we have a heightened sense of the Easter season which will draw close nine days

later. These are days given first to the disciples and later to us that we may shift gears, if you will, from the bodily presence of Jesus to that of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Thus this period is unique in the liturgical calendar. It lacks the manifest presence of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and even God the Father. Awareness of either one or or all three are suspended, to put it a bit awkwardly, though with the focus to move our attention upon a future immaterial way of view things which is proper for the post-Pentecost era. Should this period of nine days had lasted longer, for example, the same length as Lent or the post-Easter season, it would have been too much for most minds to bear. Although Jesus had spoken of the Spirit's descent, no disciple had a clue as to what that meant in actuality. Thus the disciples had nine days to get acclimatized and meet in "the house" (Acts 2.2), most likely the same place as "at table" in Mk 16.14. Chances are this reference has Eucharistic implications but also may be gathering for a regular meal in a familiar place. It was at such familiar surroundings that Jesus upbraided the disciples. To have done it elsewhere may have been too harsh.

## 24 May, Seventh Sunday of Easter

This Sunday is unique in the entire liturgical year by reason of its position after the Ascension and before Pentecost. That is to say, Jesus has ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit has yet to descend upon the disciples. If we take this Sunday literally, that means neither Jesus Christ nor the Father nor the Holy Spirit are present. It is a kind of necessary abeyance when we are left as orphans for nine days. "A little while and you will not see me and again a little while and you will see me" (Jn 16.19). Chances are that if this abeyance were not inserted within the calendar, we would lose sight of the role (and appreciation) of each of the divine Persons.

From this nine day period arose the tradition of a novena, a period of nine days of prayer. Surely the disciples were left in both a quandary and wonderment as to what this time was about. They must have gathered even more frequently than after the Resurrection and knew from Jesus' words about Pentecost, for according to Acts 2.1, "they were all together in one place."

All this anticipation and excitement dissolves, as it were, the day after Pentecost when the Church returns abruptly to Ordinary Time, that period of time which fills the bulk of the liturgical year. Nevertheless, this "ordinary" time is a period of prolonged reflection on all that had occurred from Ash Wednesday through Easter through the Ascension and finally, through Pentecost.

Today's Gospel (Jn 17,11-19) focuses upon what Jesus had to say in part about the Holy Spirit. Because it is both simple and rich, the following is an outline of these verses:

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

-Now: compare with the last two references which denote immediacy, vss. 5 & 7.

-In (en, twice) the world (kosmos, twice): compare with vs. 6, "the men whom you gave me out (ek) of the world." In the verse at hand has two contrasting "ins:" Christ not being present and the disciples being present (in the world).

-Am coming (erchomai): present tense to indicate a continued passage coupled with "to (pros) you" or in the direction-towards-which. Compare erchomai with 14.28, "I go away, and I will come to you."

-Holy (hagios) Father: compare with "Holy Spirit."

-Keep (tereo): noted in vs. 6 with respect to "your (Father) word." The place-where of this keeping is "your name." Here onoma is separate, as it were, from the Father.

-One (hen): with reference to the disciples though hen is lacking in the Greek text with reference to "we."

Vs. 12: While I was with them I kept them in your name which you have given me; I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled.

-With (meta) them: synonymous with kept (tereo; cf. previous verse) and in (en) the Father's name.

-Here the name (onoma) is more specific, as having been given to Christ by the Father.

-Have guarded (phulasso): to keep an eye upon a person as to his or her safety; can apply to someone in prison. "If anyone hears my sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him" [12.47]. Compare phulasso (guarding a person or something in one's custody) with the often mentioned tereo which is more specific with regard to who or what is in one's possession.

-None is lost: the Greek text literally reads, "no one from (ex) them."

-Is lost (apollumi): "and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up at the last day" [6.39].

-Son of perdition (apoleia): the only reference in St. John's Gospel and derived from apollumi. More specifically this verb applies to destruction and ruin. "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction" [Mt 7.13].

-May be fulfilled (pleroo): first noted in 15.11 with respect to "your joy" whereas here it refers to scripture. The references are: Ps 41.9, "Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me." Also Ps 109.4, "In return for my love they accuse me, even as I make prayer for them." The RSV also gives vs. 5, 7 & 8 as references.

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

-Am coming (erchomai): compare with vs. 11 or with reference to the "world." Also the preposition pros (to, towards-which) is used.

-In (en, twice) the world (kosmos): the place where Christ is speaking (present tense). Compare this en with the pros direction at hand.

-Joy (chara): compare with 16.24, "that your joy may be full (pleroo)." The same verb is used in the verse at hand; the difference is that the latter has "in (en) themselves."

Vs. 14: I have given them your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world even as I am not of the world.

-Your word (logos): here with respect to the Father; compare with 14.23 where it applies to Christ, "If a man loves me he will keep my word."

-Has hated (miseo): as in 15.18, both with respect to the world (kosmos, three times).

-Of (ek, from) the world: two uses of the same expresses, "they" and "I."

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

-Pray (erotao): as in 14.16 in the sense of asking or requesting, "And I will pray the Father."

-Should take (airo): first noted in 15.2, "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away."

-Out of (ek) the world (kosmos): last noted in vs. 6 where "from" is used.

-Should keep (tereo): last noted in vs. 12, here with respect to keeping from (ek) the evil one (poneros, "evil"). Ponerous is the only use of this term in St. John's Gospel. "...and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one" [1 Jn 2.14].

Vs. 16: They are not of the world even as I am not of the world.

-Of (ek, from): same preposition applies to both the disciples and to Christ.

Vs. 17: Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

-Sanctify (hagiazoo): next found in vs. 19 and addressed to the Father who is holy (hagios) as noted in vs. 7.

-Truth (aletheia, twice): with the definite article. Compare with 14.6, "I am the way and the truth and

the life," also with a definite article.

-Word (logos): note its identity with the substantive "truth" where here applies to the Father.

Vs. 18: As you did send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

-Did sent (apostello, twice): cf. vss. 3 & 8 with reference to the Father doing the action which here is transferred to Christ doing the action.

-Into (eis, twice) the world: i.e., full presence within.

Vs. 19: And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth.

-For their sake (huper): cf. 15.14, "for his friends."

-Consecrate (hagiazō, twice): cf. vs. 17 as "sanctify." The second as referring to the disciples depends up the first (Christ).

-In (en) truth (aletheia): compare with vs. 17.

### **31 May, Pentecost Sunday**

Today completes the nine day absence of Jesus Christ from among his disciples, an absence which began on Ascension and finds fulfillment with the descent of the Holy Spirit. As noted in last Sunday's entry, these nine days were unique insofar as we lacked the presence of Jesus, as it were, along with the Spirit and the Father. Thus for this period both the earth and the heavens have fallen silent as far as any divine communication goes. They have a rough parallel to Holy Saturday, though that day clearly marks a silence commemorating Jesus' death, let alone the absence of the other two divine Persons. And like Holy Saturday, this original novena invites reflection of a different kind. With this absence of all three Persons in mind, much insight can be obtained not only for today but for the time after Pentecost, Ordinary Time, as is discussed below. Also today completes the fifty day period of celebrating Christ's resurrection with the descent of the Spirit.

Both the incarnation of Jesus Christ and descent of the Holy Spirit come into a specific environment. The former is within Mary's womb whereas the Spirit is spread out among more people, that is, it fills the house and rests on the head of each disciple. This filling isn't specified except that it resembled the "rush of a mighty wind." The Greek term for "rush" is the verb phero, to bear, carry, not an especially graphic word. Nevertheless, the image is one not unlike a tornado within the confines of a room, quite forceful, as the adjective for "mighty" signifies, biaios...more like "violent." Such violence can be viewed as a dramatic conclusion to the heavenly silence which fell upon us since the Ascension, a divine wake-up call, if you will. This divine violence is expressed in Peter's address to the people which resembles that of Stephen just prior to being stoned to death.

A remarkable feature about today's feast, important as it is, is that it brings to an abrupt end the Lenten-Easter cycle. Immediately we return to "Ordinary Time" the day after, not unlike the change from Christmas Day to St. Stephen the martyr though that is not as abrupt a transition. As with that season, the Easter one lingers on but more so, that is, for a few weeks through the feasts of the Trinity, Corpus Christi and finally, Sacred Heart. Though one is squarely within Ordinary Time the day after Pentecost, wisely does the Church allow the Holy Spirit to breathe out instead of exhausting itself immediately, if you will. Nevertheless, this nine day period we just experienced braces us for the sudden change from Easter to Ordinary Time. Such suddenness itself is a lesson, provided we be attentive to it the day after Pentecost during the liturgy which now assumes a familiar regularity to it which it had lacked for the past few months. Nevertheless the period of several weeks through the three feast days following Pentecost gives impetus to the extended Ordinary Time before us, that

is, all the way to Advent which this year begins the very end of November. That means the Spirit must fill six months, June through November, no mean accomplishment. Such fulfillment is effected by looking back at the Gospels and reflecting upon them in a way that would otherwise have gone sterile if not for the Spirit's presence within them like the "rush of a mighty wind."

## 7 June, Trinity Sunday

In the last two entries (Ascension Thursday and Pentecost) it was noted that the nine day period between them was one of an "absence" of all three divine Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This may be taken as a period of retreat...the original novena...for the Church that she may appreciate better the mission of each Person as well as their relationship amongst each other. With this in mind, today's feast makes perfect sense and logically follows upon the close of the grand Lenten-Easter cycle which had begun with Ash Wednesday. That is to say, Trinity Sunday sums up the essence of Christianity.

Despite today's Gospel (Mt 28.16-20) being terse, almost like Mark's account, it isn't an exposition of the Trinity but a simple layout of the pattern which the Church is destined to reflect upon and deepen over the coming centuries. Development of that central doctrine the Church doesn't so much focus upon the sparse, post-Resurrection statements from the synoptic Gospels but from John's account in chapters 14-17. One could say that the early Christians read into the text and came up with the idea of a Trinity, that is, the doctrine is simply man made. True on the surface, but it fails to account for the fact that Scripture was intended to be read and pondered over in the spirit of *lectio divina*, and from that meditative reading sprang theology.

As for today's Gospel, it is the very end of Matthew's account. Jesus and his disciples go to Galilee, "to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them." Chances are this was the same mountain where Jesus had been transfigured (cf. 17+) though it has no specific name. Furthermore, Matthew lacks an account of Jesus' ascension though it is implied at the close of his Gospel. Then again, perhaps the disciples were expecting a second transfiguration. With this in mind, their present state of mind may have been similar to the words they had asked earlier, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" Compare this with Jesus saying "I am with you always to the close of the age." His words bear resemblance to the close of the Book of Jonah insofar as God is the last person speaking and in a sense, leaves the reader hanging. However, this suspense isn't one of no resolution of the situation at hand but an invitation to take up the divine words and implement them. As for Matthew's conclusion, we have no response from the disciples as we did when they descended the mount of transfiguration and discussed its meaning.

The phrase "close of the age" gives an intimation of what will happen to the disciples and shortly thereafter, the Church. The Greek term for "close" is *sunteleia* which means a completion: *sun* (with) + *telos* (end) or literally, an end-with intimating finality. Compare this *sunteleia* with the expectation of the disciples after Jesus' transfiguration noted above: "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" It applies to the "age" or *aion* which here means more specifically the consummation of that time preceding Christ's return or the time between then and his ascension into heaven. More generally, *aion* applies to either a human life time or an unbroken period of time, eternity. Thus we could say that the *aion* following Christ's ascent into heaven (again, not mentioned in Matthew but presumed) is that of the Church awaiting full maturity. Referring again to the transfiguration, the disciples with Jesus on the mount were unaware of the passage of time ("Let us build three booths"). Such lack of time's passage and even being unaware of the space gives an intimation as to what this *aion* consists and thus avoids speculation as to how and when Jesus will return. By pondering the just completed Lenten-Easter cycle as a kind of *aion*, we can get insight as to what all this means. It can't be explained outright but grasped only when a person has been informed by having read (and continuing to read)

Scripture in the spirit of lectio divina.

## 14 June, Corpus Christi

From Easter Sunday through the Ascension through Pentecost through Trinity Sunday the liturgy presented us with an ascent which became increasingly sharper towards the end. That is to say, after the death of Jesus on Calvary the atmosphere has become increasingly rarefied, for, paraphrasing Paul no longer do we know Jesus Christ according to the flesh. Once we hit Trinity Sunday as was the case last week, we reached the summit of Christian teaching about God. Then this process of rarefaction comes to a sudden halt as though the Church said “enough.” She seems to realize that while this emphasis upon the Spirit is important, something is lacking for us who must continue on earth. Members of the Church form a body, and this body requires nourishment. Thus today the liturgy plunges us right back into the humanity of Jesus Christ by dwelling upon the sacramental gift of his body and blood. And so the Church bestows considerable wisdom by tacking on Corpus Christi, as it were, after several weeks of this spiritualization. For example, we had a period of two weeks (from Pentecost) when the Holy Spirit prepared us for today's celebration of concrete bread and wine.

Today's Gospel (Mk 14.12-16; 22-6) emphasizes this corporeality by an account of the Last Supper...certainly not theologically rich as John's account...but all the essentials are present. It begins with an anonymous man who leads the disciples to a place for celebrating the Passover. If it weren't for the man carrying a jar of water, the disciples would never have found the room, and Jesus would not have celebrated the Last Supper. Such persons appear now and then, playing a pivotal role both in the present and for future consequences. Two come to mind: 1) the servant who directs Saul, searching for his lost asses, to Samuel which sets in motion a whole series of important events for Israel (cf. 1Sam 9.5-6). 2) A man wandering in the field who directed Joseph to his brothers (cf. Gen 37.15-17). With this in mind, one could even say that an anonymous person(s) had prepared the “large upper room” for the Last Supper.

As for this process of spiritualization relative to the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the Church has one more feast day left not unlike today's, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which is a modern insertion usually associated with a distinct form of piety. Although this feast is such, it recapitulates the entire Lenten-Easter-Pentecost cycle in the sense of keeping all the mysteries just celebrated down to earth and close to daily life. Yet there is one more feast day relative to all this. Right after the Sacred Heart we have the Immaculate Heart of Mary. If you look at the liturgical calendar, that day represents the very end of the liturgical line which commenced 115 days ago with Ash Wednesday. All in all, that represents about a third of any calendar year.

## 21 June, Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today marks the resumption of Ordinary Time, the last Sunday of this time having been 22 February or towards the second half of winter. As noted above, as of last Sunday we have run the full cycle of post-Resurrections celebrations and as of today are settling in for the rest of the year or until the last Sunday of November, Advent, when the Church begins a new liturgical cycle. That totals up to 5 ½ months, not that much longer, really, than the Lenten-Easter-Pentecost cycle. Awareness of these blocks of sacred time are important for an appreciation of the Church's life expressed through her liturgy. When thinking in this manner (which to a degree is visual and thereby bordering upon the spacial), we're in a better position to see in the entire life span of Jesus Christ the Church in miniature. Pausing to reflect upon a given “place” within each block of time enables us to unpack something here, something there. A common experience is being aware how short a given feast day happens to be, twenty-four hours, really. Nevertheless, the ability to savor its meaning imparts realization that any comprehension in this life is partial and must wait for later to be fulfilled. Yet instead of being disappointed, we can look at that feast in a given block of sacred time knowing

full well it will return next year...not just that, but it will return with a new fulfillment even though the scriptural readings are the same.

Today's Gospel (Mk 4.35-41) is about Jesus calming the wind and waves when he and his disciples were on the Sea of Galilee. The time for setting out to the "other side" appears completely impracticable for fishermen familiar with the waters, the evening. No account of the disciples challenging Jesus is presented. Apart from poor to zero visibility, there's the threat of a storm made worse by reason of the darkness. It should be noted that Jesus and his disciples went in one boat which was accompanied by "other boats." Throughout the Gospel passage no mention is made as to their fate when the "great storm of wind arose."

We have a rather matter-of-fact description, typical of Mark, of the disciples waking Jesus and him rebuking the wind. The Greek verb is *epitimao* which pertains more to giving a command or order. As with the notion of rebuking, *epitimao* connotes a scolding. To carry this out effectively, a person must be very confident in himself, otherwise the action would be ignored. Although *epitimao* isn't applied to the disciples, certainly it is implied in the words, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" The effect of *epitimao* upon the disciples is revealed by their response, "who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?"

After this middle-of-the-night dramatic episode the boat reaches "the other side" which begins Chapter Five. As noted above, Mark speaks only of this boat with Jesus and his band; the "other boats" aren't mentioned, leaving us in a certain suspense as to their fate.

## **28 June, Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Today's Gospel (Mk 5.21-43) recounts Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue. "My daughter is at the point of death." The Greek literally reads, "has finally," the adverb *eschatos* meaning at death's door. En route to her, Jesus encounters a large crowd in which a woman with a flow of blood touches his garment. Mark says that this woman "heard the reports about Jesus," perhaps not unlike Jairus. Though a "great crowd" pressed in upon Jesus, chances are that Jairus was within it, he and the woman stand out by reason of their exceptional faith and boldness. *Ochlos* is the word for "crowd," more like an uncontrolled mob, which serves to highlight their determination. It is interesting to compare this human *ochlos* with the "great storm" of last week's Gospel, both being symbolic of human desperation. The Greek word for the latter is *lailaps*, a storm more on the order of a hurricane.

With this mob or *ochlos* pressing in, it is all the more remarkable that Jesus "perceived in himself that power had gone forth from him." The verb for "perceived" (present tense in the Gospel) is *epignosko*, to look upon, recognize, detect. The root is *gignosko* (from which derives *gnosis*) which here is intensified by addition of the preposition *epi*, "upon." This *epignosko* is a kind of knowing-upon which is more sensitive to the person of faith as in the case of the afflicted woman. In the case at hand or with this throng pressing in on all sides, we could say that the *epi* of *epignosko* allowed Jesus to stand above (*epi*) the throng and see more clearly what was transpiring. The verb is enhanced by two phrases: "in himself" (*en heauto*) the center of this *epignosko* along with "from him" (*ex autou*)...in other words, an "in" and a "from," *en/ex*. The text depicts "power" or *dunamis* which went from Jesus almost as though it were independent of him willing it.

Upon reaching the house of Jairus, Jesus encountered a "tumult" or *thorubos*, more a clamor or uproar, just as strong as the *ochlos* or mob outside the house. Thus we have two types of crowds, one outside the house and another inside. Once Jesus healed the little girl, he "strictly charged" everyone not to report the incident. Given the nature of both *ochlos* and *thorubos*, this order may have been easier to carry out because of the

confusion and raucous both terms signify. That is to say, both were so intense that the event could have passed unnoticed except for those immediately present. The beginning of the next chapter (six) intimates this, if you will, for it says "He went away from there." In other words, no mention of either the ochlos or thorubos following Jesus.

### **5 July, Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Each Sunday we are moving further away from the Lenten-Easter-Pentecost cycle spoken of in earlier entries and entering deeper into Ordinary Time. Still, the memories of that large, significant bulk of time remain fresh yet will fade and later require renewal, especially towards the end of summer. In the meantime, the Church presents us with numerous, familiar instances lifted from Jesus' life which are intended to sustain us until liturgical time takes up a new cycle in late November.

In last week's Gospel Jesus was pressed in by a crowd or ochlos, after which he departed from that region and "came to his own country" as the first verse of today's Gospel (Mk 6.1-6) recounts. Here in his native place Jesus began to teach in the synagogue. Although "many" heard him, that is in the synagogue, lack of more descriptive nouns such as ochlos (crowd) or thorubos (tumult) as in last Sunday's Gospel distinctively are absent. In other words, here in his "own country" attention to Jesus is very different because they have a long memory of both him and his family: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" The people recognized Jesus as a carpenter or by his trade and not by much else. Given the nature of a carpenter, Jesus must have had many dealings in his own village and became well acquainted with virtually every inhabitant. In other words, his reputation must have rested upon the quality (or lack of it) of his craftsmanship.

"And they took offense at him." The Greek verb is skandalizo, literally to trip up. Nothing is recorded of what Jesus has said in the synagogue. Presumably Jesus spoke with authority yet the memory of his carpenter days failed to move the congregation. The impression is that the people didn't "trip" over his words but over Jesus' family vis-a-vis the wondrous reports about him which came in from other locales. Most likely his family was present in the synagogue and suffered profound embarrassment at all their neighbors having been "tripped up" at his words. Perhaps some of them too felt this way but did not admit it. Furthermore, intimate knowledge of all the inhabitants of a small village is presumed. In the eyes of the people, Mary and the relatives of Jesus seem to be of no outstanding value within the community or at least outwardly so. "And he could do no mighty work there." The Greek noun for "work" is dunamis, the same as mentioned in last Sunday's entry with respect to the power which went out of Jesus when the sick woman touched the hem of his garment.

"And he marveled because of their unbelief." These words could be taken as a slight on Jesus' part. Even though the ochlos and thorubos noted above was intrusive, nevertheless, Jesus must have enjoyed the attention. Compared with that, here in his own place he was ignored. Such indifference is worse than being driven away, a fact enhanced by the small word "except." That is to say, Jesus couldn't perform miracles "except" cure a few sick persons. A desire to return to the limelight, so to speak, or returning to where he is appreciated is given in the closing words of today's Gospel, "And he went about among the villages teaching."

### **12 July, Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Last Sunday's Gospel presented Jesus as having been rejected by those persons "in his own country," so he left there for "among the villages" where he taught. Apparently it was either here or in the proximity of these same villages that Jesus countered this rejection by sending out his disciples on their first recorded mission. In other words, his rejection formed an impulse for this action. Such is the principle theme of today's Gospel

(Mk 6.7-13). As for the villages, nothing is said of their location; even though they were in the general neighborhood, probably they were distant enough so the inhabitants weren't that familiar with Jesus and his family background. This experience of personal rejection by fellow townsmen and perhaps even kin could have spurred Jesus to take the important step of setting his disciples out on their first mission which will form the essential structure of the Church for future generations. So in many ways we have Jesus' native country as an impetus for the Church's present day character.

Up until this juncture in Mark's Gospel, the apostles are more or less accompanying Jesus and listening to his words, not much more than that. All the while they are absorbing his wisdom until the present when Jesus gave his disciples "authority over the unclean spirits," *exousia* being the Greek noun for "authority" which also implies liberty and the capacity to effect supernatural deeds. Nothing is recounted as to how Jesus imparted this *exousia*...he could have breathed it upon the twelve disciples as he did later with the Holy Spirit after his resurrection. Usually such an impartation isn't given verbally but requires a gesture along the lines of a sacramental impartation. Presumably the disciples had no experience with regard to unclean spirits; they were in need of some kind of divine intervention to make this *exousia* effective. The last verse of today's Gospel says that the first mission was successful: the disciples did cast out demons and anointed with oil those who were sick. The verse prior to this one reveals an added feature to the divine *exousia* imparted from Jesus: the disciples "preached that men should repent." The Greek verb for "repent" is *metanoeo*, to change one's ways.

As was noted just above, Jesus sent out his disciples pretty much after his rejection at home. An echo of this rejection is found in his exhortation, "If any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them." *Marturion* is the word for "testimony," an important New Testament reality in reference to giving witness to the Gospel and all that implies. However, in the case at hand, *marturion* is the act of shaking dust off one's feet, a sign against the house which refused the Gospel.

### **19 July, Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Between today's Gospel (Mk 6.30-4) and the account of last Sunday an important incident occurs which is skipped over in this year's liturgical cycle, namely, the beheading of John the Baptist. Shortly before this tragedy Jesus had sent his disciples out upon their first mission. Though we have no assessment about what had happened during this missionary endeavor, 6.14 says that King Herod heard about it, indicative that word travels quickly; then again, Herod may have had spies keeping an eye on Jesus' activity as he must have done with respect to John. The apparent success of what had transpired was ominous news for Herod, for to him it has a direct correlation to the power exercised by John the Baptist, perhaps even more threatening, and needed to be curtailed. As will be remembered, John's essential mission was one of repentance and forerunner of the one "who is mightier than I" [1.7].

This Sunday's Gospel begins with the apostles returning to Jesus and giving an account of "all that they had done and taught." In other words, the beheading of John took place after Jesus had sent them or while they were still out in the field. Certainly they must have heard of this tragedy and were warned that King Herod might be after them as well. There is no record of Jesus telling his apostles about John nor *visa versa*. That may have been behind the words of Jesus when he said, "come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." That is to say, Jesus invites his disciples to withdraw and reflect with him on what they had just accomplished and to discuss all this in light of the Baptist's execution and perhaps even what John had preached about Jesus himself. All in all, it was a time for the disciples to clarify their apostolate relative to John the Baptist. The Greek phrase for "by yourselves" is *kat' idian*, literally "according to one's own."

To reach the “desert place” (eremos) Jesus and his apostles had to take a boat but could not escape notice by the crowds. Chances are the “great throng” (ochlos: the same term found in 5.31 from a few Sundays ago) raced along the shore and had a clear view as to where Jesus intended to land. Instead of being frustrated at not being left alone, Jesus “had compassion” or sphlagchnizomai. From this verb derives a noun meaning one’s inmost self or heart...literally, entrails. Nothing is said about the apostles’ reaction to the ochlos; chances are they were dismayed at being bothered incessantly and kept it to themselves. Thus by demonstrating compassion, Jesus indirectly trains his apostles to do the same in the future while spreading the Gospel. The transition from the first mission to a reflection of Jesus’ compassion was a huge one for them to make and could not occur through their own efforts. In light of John the Baptist’s role, the disciples were destined to have a greater and more enduring impact later on. Certainly they must have had John in mind in later missions, knowing full well how their message was the same as John’s yet of a different order.

## 26 July, Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s Gospel (Jn 6.1-15) recounts Jesus feeding the 5,000 and is a break from the Gospel of Mark which we’ve been following since the post-Pentecostal days or the first few weeks of Ordinary Time. Actually, chapter six of John is one of the longest in the New Testament, if not the longest, 71 verses, and deals with various aspects of the Eucharist the formal institution of which comes later.

As with last week’s account, here Jesus is hounded by the crowds and departs for the “other side of the Sea of Galilee.” Throughout all these instances of being hemmed in, the Gospels never give a hint of Jesus getting upset, just withdrawing enough with his disciples to re-group, as it were. The people see Jesus out on the water and wait to which direction his boat heads, thereby anticipating where he lands. Despite the multitude, Jesus “went up on the mountain” alone with his disciples. However, this relative isolation was not to last long, for people quickly came, the time of this occurrence being the Passover. Chances are Jesus wished to explain why during this holiest of times he was out in the wilderness instead of being in Jerusalem.

As had been noted with regard to Corpus Christi, on occasion an anonymous person makes his presence felt...felt long enough to impact the situation after which he passes off the scene. Such a person never lingers but represents a crisis in the literal sense of the term, as being present at a Y in the road, directing the event at hand to one unalterable direction from which there is no turning back. Such is the case here with the “lad who has five barley loaves and two fish.” His name or future history isn’t given, really not important. Suffice it to say this young fellow triggered the multiplication of loaves and fish...not only that, he was an entry point of sorts for teachings about Jesus as bread of life which extends throughout chapter six. Without him we would have nothing. Actually, it was Simon’s brother (Andrew) who saw the boy and may have known him or his family, again, not for sure. Then again, the boy, in his simplicity and willingness to help out, may have offered his bread and fish for what they were worth.

When the 5,000 people realized what had happened (being fed is always an attention getter), they called Jesus a prophet. Again, this event occurred during the Passover, usually celebrated in Jerusalem. Most Jews made the pilgrimage there, yet here we have 5,000 people out in the wilderness far from the holy city. Certainly news of this large crowd must have attracted the religious and political authorities. Perhaps they were more agitated about this event being a kind of anti-Passover celebration or alternative to it. In a sense it was, foreshadowing the Eucharist to be given later during the Passover but this time in Jerusalem. Being away from the holy city at this holiest time of the year is significant not so much for imparting the Eucharist per se but to get distance from the center of Judaism. In this way the Eucharist, when imparted, can be appreciated better both in its uniqueness and as having grown organically from the Passover meal. Even the fish which the anonymous boy had reveals a difference in what Jesus is attempting to communicate. Technically speaking, to celebrate the Passover one required to have a lamb. As in early Christian tradition, a fish is representative of

Jesus, ichthys. No small wonder that today's Gospel concludes with the crowd wanting to make Jesus king which would have put him in too early confrontation with the authorities in Jerusalem.

## **2 August, 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

This Sunday (Jn 6.24-35) we pick up from last week when Jesus fed the 5,000 and remain within chapter six which is central to an explanation to the Eucharist. This time of year is appropriate for such instruction: not long ago we came off the Lenten-Easter-Pentecost cycle and have embarked upon the long period of Ordinary Time which lasts through summer, autumn and terminates at end of November. During these few weeks when chapter six of John's Gospel is presented (it runs through 16 August, about a month), we are fortified for the journey ahead with emphasis upon the Eucharist, not unlike the Jews depicted throughout chapter six as they were with Jesus in the desert.

Today's Gospel is preceded by a rather frantic picture of people in boats attempting to find Jesus. The Greek term is ochlos or better, crowd, as noted in the entry under the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday. Eventually they did find him and said with some effrontery, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Right away Jesus perceives their motive: "You seek me...because you ate your fill of the loaves." We could take this as a rebuke but a rebuke insofar as Jesus wishes to communicate that they should "labor for the food which endures to eternal life." The verb for "endures" is meno which implies a constant abiding or remaining. It is quite different from that bread and fish which Jesus had multiplied earlier...important on the spot to feed the people but certainly not having the enduring quality signified by meno. As for the giving of this food which abides...which...meno...Jesus says that he will give it, yet it requires labor; his intent is not to give the food now but only in the future which at this juncture is not specified. Chances are that this future date will be the Last Supper. Of course, Jesus' words make the people (keep in mind that ochlos is the way they're described implying a certain unruliness) more curious and eager "to see and believe" in him.

Shortly afterwards the ochlos says much like a chorus "what work do you perform?" The Greek noun here is ergon which is derived from ergazomai used above in "Do not labor for the food which perishes..." Jesus then takes up this ergon and transforms it to a completely different plane, that of faith or belief "in him whom he (God the Father) has sent." At this juncture the ochlos brings up the miracle of Israel being fed in the desert, not entirely unlike the recent experience of the 5,000 who were fed, and not just fed but fed during the Passover when most Jews were assembled in Jerusalem. With respect to the miracle in the Sinai desert, the ochlos quotes Ps 78.24 ("as it is written"): "He rained down upon them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven." The Hebrew "manna" means, of course, "what is it?" and is found in Ex 16.15 when the Israelites did not recognize the manna as a "fine, flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost" (vs. 14). The same could be said of the ochlos here in dialogue with Jesus and is intensified not so much by the ochlos but later by the Jews who "murmured at him" (vs. 41). It was not until the Last Supper that the bread talked about in chapter six...i.e., the manna or "what is it?"...reached fulfillment.

## **9 August, Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

We continue with chapter six of John's Gospel (Jn 6.41-51) with the famous words, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." Actually, the first part of this verse has the Jews murmuring at Jesus because of such presumption. Their response: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" Knowledge of Jesus' parents means knowledge of his upbringing and his standing in his village. Here we have a striking ordinariness which implies that Jesus was no better than anyone else in a society where everyone knew the details of everyone else's life and family history. In other words, the Jews give the ultimate insult yet their

words can be taken as situating Jesus, the bread from heaven, squarely within the context of human society and history.

In light of this rather extraordinary chapter on the Eucharist (we stay with chapter six through the month of August) it is no small wonder that people, including Jesus' disciples, turned away from him as vs. 66 later recounts. To counter the Jews' retort, Jesus appeals not to himself but to his Father who draws people to him. Actually, today's Gospel is quite dynamic with verbs related to coming down, drawing and raising up. In light of this, we can outline the action beginning with the above-mentioned descent from heaven of Jesus which was paralleled by the descent of manna in the desert mentioned last week. Only when Jesus has come down, it is up to the Father to draw a person to Jesus, that is, elko. This Greek verb implies not so much a drawing against one's will but an attraction to which free assent is given. Once the Father's elko has taken root within a person, Jesus will raise that person; anistemi is the verb which is applicable to the Resurrection. Such anistemi is the other half, as it were, of Jesus' katabaino or coming down from heaven. The drawing or elko is situated between katabaino and anistemi; better, the Father effects this elko after which Jesus does the raising up. Such drawing is an intermediate stage between free assent to Jesus and the "last day" which transcends free assent. Chances are most people of the time were familiar with this "last day" as being the one of judgment, and it's coming, while undetermined, permeated the religious culture of the day.

After all this dynamic activity of having come down, drawing and raising up, Jesus shifts attention to a verse from Is 54.13 in which he may develop them: "And they shall all be taught by God." The original continues with "and great shall be the prosperity of your sons." The Hebrew verb for "taught" is the familiar lamad which means more a training than presentation of facts to be learned and often is applied to the Torah. Within the context at hand, such lamad isn't done by Jesus but by the Father. Since the Father is the one who draws (elko) a person to Jesus, lamad is a kind of being trained in what it means to be drawn, an active movement admitting of many degrees of knowledge-as-lamad. Note that Jesus says, "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me." That is to say, everyone who has submitted freely to learning or lamad automatically has it become a drawing...a coming...to Jesus. Lamad occupies the middle space, if you will, between Jesus having come down (as bread from heaven) and the raising up at the "last day."

Towards the end of today's Gospel Jesus modifies his opening words "I am the bread which came down from heaven" to "This is the bread which comes down from heaven." Here Jesus speaks of himself almost as an object which perhaps has been adjusted to his recent words with respect to the Father who does the drawing and teaching relative to him as bread of life. The verb katabaino is now in the present tense...a continuous coming down...of the heavenly bread which Jesus offers for eating. The consumption of this bread causes a person "to live forever," that is to say, eis ton aiona or literally, into eternity. Again, we have a dynamic process which continues forever which had begun by a person eating Jesus as the heavenly bread. And so we can say that the dynamism of descent, drawing and ascent as well as teaching (lamad) begins with eating, one of the most basic human gestures we do every day.

### **15 August, Assumption of the Virgin Mary**

Today is one of those feast days the Church presents us which defies explanation. At first glance, one would think it made up, a fantasy of sorts where throughout the centuries people read into some admittedly non-existent facts from Scripture. Whether or not Mary was taken up into heaven physically like her son at his Ascension is beside the point. That is to say, instead of debating the merits pro or con, at issue is the importance of viewing Scripture as a whole through the lens of lectio divina, that its original intent was to be read in this fashion. This approach is quite different from what we've grown accustomed yet directly is related to our deepest spiritual faculties. Although the practice of lectio divina was always present within the Church, in the past two hundred years or so it was overshadowed by developments in more scientific and historical

scholarship. While refreshing in many ways, this view is very different from the way Scripture had been used from the beginning. That is to say, lectio is not so much concerned with the truth or falsity of a text at hand but to employ it as vehicle to silence the mind and to reach God. Thus the text is secondary, a kind of vehicle (which doesn't denigrate the content at all) to be employed but left behind once you've reached the destination. Such leaving behind of the vehicle of lectio divina is different from abandoning it, that no longer we require it, for at a later time we return to lectio to deepen our spiritual understanding. Thus the Assumption is to be approached in this spirit, quite alien to modern sensibility, which has become insensitive to things spiritual.

Today's Gospel (Lk 1.39-56) is very familiar and used in various contexts such as Christmas and other Marian feasts. Obviously it doesn't speak of Mary's Assumption into heaven (that's lacking entirely from Scripture) but can be used for an appreciation of that end. First of all, the Assumption presupposes a familiarity with heaven or ouranos which originally referred to the sky or the starry realm above. Somehow...and to perceive this "somehow" doesn't involve rational thinking but an assent of our spirit...the Virgin Mary departed this earthly realm and entered ouranos where her Son had proceeded. Appreciation of ouranos has become so difficult that it's natural to doubt the validity of today's feast. There is no indication when Mary was assumed after Jesus' Ascension. Chances are it was several decades, sufficiently long for Mary to teach John, the beloved disciple, of what it was like to have lived with Jesus from his birth. Perhaps Mary was assumed when John set out to the island of Patmos to compose the Book of Revelation. Then again, perhaps John got some of the elements of Revelation from what Mary had handed over to him. As recounted in Jn 19.28, "from that hour the disciple (John) took her (Mary) to his own home" or took Mary after Jesus expired on the cross. Certainly the Church and succeeding generations would have been poorer if such were not the case.

As for the Ascension of Jesus, clearly Acts tells us that he "was lifted up" (1.9) or taken up in a cloud. As for Mary, the details of her Assumption remain undisclosed. Although the "assumption" and "ascension" differ, both suggest that another agent was at work, that is, a person (God the Father) who made possible the ascending and assuming. In the case of Jesus, not only was he "lifted up" but a "cloud took him out of their sight." While related terms are applicable to the Ascension, we have to infer that a similar though different action took place at Mary's Assumption, important though not proper to the divinity. The word "assumption" derives from the Latin *assumptio*, taken up, which is more passive, if you will, than the similar passive "having been lifted up" associated with Jesus' Ascension. Both have one thing in common: Jesus and Mary left this physical realm for the transcendent one but incorporated the former into the latter instead of shedding it like some kind of skin or covering. The inverse holds true at Jesus' incarnation: he didn't "put on" a body like a garment but became a body. And so with Jesus and Mary, the Church now has two physical bodies...a son and mother...present in a realm wholly different from that of earth or heaven.

In conclusion, we could say that lectio divina is a kind of Assumption under Mary's guidance as well as an Ascension under Jesus' guidance. It requires practice during which we are "assumed" from the scriptural text...leave it behind and "ascend" yet mysteriously take it with us. Such an experience is verified when we find ourselves in conformity with the Church's teaching which, in turn, is based upon the Gospel.

## **16 August, Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Today's Gospel (Jn 6.51-58) continues to develop that extended mediation, if you will, upon the Eucharist, inserted within the broader context of Ordinary Time. Here in mid summer it can be taken as a means of sustaining us until the end of the current liturgical cycle and the beginning of a new one with the first Sunday of Advent. Last week Jesus presented himself as the "bread which came down from heaven" whereas now the imagery shifts to "my flesh" or soma (body) which refers to the actual physical body of Jesus himself. Quite right the Jews "disputed among themselves" over such imagery, very strong and unexpected by any standard.

The Greek verb here is *machomai* which is more intensive than disputing and is akin to fighting, verbal or otherwise. With no softening of his words Jesus responds to the *machomai* of the Jews, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Certainly the disciples must have had these words in mind later at the Last Supper without which they could not have appreciated the mystery being handed over to them. Vs. 66 intimates a *machomai* among the disciples not entirely unlike that of the Jews: “After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him.”

What may be taken superficially as cannibalism is necessary for “eternal life” and is connected directly with Jesus raising up that person who partakes of his body and blood. So if a person eats and drinks Jesus, Jesus will more readily be able to recognize his own, making it all the more easier for a person to be raised up. Such close identity makes clearer the words “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (mt 25.40). As for “raising up” or *anistemi*, last week it was mentioned in conjunction with the “last day.” The consuming of Jesus under the physical entities of flesh and blood is not transitory; it remains or *meno*, a verb noted in the entry for 2 August in conjunction with vs. 27: “Do not labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endures...*meno*...to eternal life.” Note that the verb for “eats” is *trogo*, more a chewing or gnawing, an action associated with herbivorous animals as opposed to carnivores. The close association between the person so eating/drinking Jesus effects a *meno* which is enhanced by Jesus' words in chapter fifteen of John's Gospel. There *meno* is transformed into, for example, an abiding “in my love” (vs. 9). That chapter contains some eleven references to *meno*: the person abiding in Jesus, Jesus in the person, not to mention the Holy Spirit's indwelling.

Focus upon *trogo* as a kind of chewing is contrasted with further reference to Jesus as heavenly bread: “not such as the fathers ate and died; but he who eats this bread will live forever.” The fathers or Israelites ate the transitory manna, the verb being *esthioo*, a simple taking of food. *Trogo* is used with regard to Jesus-as-bread: “he who eats this bread will live forever.”

### **23 August, Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Today's Gospel (Jn 6.60-9) brings to a close the month long meditation upon Jesus as the bread which came down from heaven after which we return to the Gospel of Mark. In a sense, returning to the more matter-of-fact tone of Mark next Sunday will be welcomed compared with the lofty theological one of John's chapter six. Besides, it's summer, generally the least favorable season for more heavy-duty theological reflection.

The Gospel begins with many of Jesus' disciples observing that what he had presented was a “hard saying” or a *logos* which was *skleros* or unyielding, austere. That is to say, Jesus does little or nothing to modify his words about eating his body and drinking his blood, and for this reason they deserve to be called *skleros*. Jesus picks up on the attitude of his disciples to such unyielding language, that is, their murmuring which the Greek verb *gogguzo* conveys vividly. As for this *gogguzo*, Jesus “knew in himself” (vs. 61) all about it. He doesn't wish have *gogguzo* to remain inside the disciples where it'd eat away at them but come to light, hence the question, “Do you take offense at this?” The verb here is *skandalizo* which means tripping over an obstacle. We don't have a record of how the disciples responded but can surmise fairly well that they were caught by Jesus in the very act of *gogguzo* and knew it.

Instead of mollifying the situation, Jesus aggravates it, if you will, by posing the question, “What if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before?” By now Jesus knew the disciples were quite astounded, so why not push the limit of their patience (cf. vs. 66 bellow), right up to the point of abandoning him? At least he would have a clear idea as to where they stand. Throughout chapter six Jesus was attempting to bring to clearer light the identity of himself as bread, having been sent by the Father and his eventual return to the

Father. As for the Son of man ascending to where he had been before (to proteron: also as formerly), apparently the disciples hadn't a clue as to this to proteron despite Jesus having talked about it. Three examples stand out: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (vs. 30). In other words, his having been sent is effected by the Father. A second reference to to proteron is found in vs. 33: "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." There the people (no explicit mention is made of the disciples, though we can assume they were among them) said, "Give us this bread always." Finally, to proteron is identified again with heaven (vs. 38): "For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."

The entire discourse about Jesus as bread from heaven is in vivid, even astounding terms. To prevent the people and disciples from staying on the physical level, he says in vs. 63, "the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" or pneuma and zoe. Here zoe...earlier presented as body and blood...is transformed into pneuma, spirit, which should dispel any notions of cannibalism. Even this shift away from the physicality of eating and drinking did not prevent some of the disciples from withdrawing; the Greek verb is aperchomai, coupled with ta poiso or behind, signifies more than withdrawal, a refusal to follow Jesus. Such aperchomai is intensified by the verb found with it, peripateo, literally, to walk around or about which "many" disciples refused to do. When Jesus asks the twelve (vs. 67) if they would leave him, Peter responds with "To whom shall we go?" The verb here is aperchomai as in vs. 66 in reference to the drawing back of "many of his disciples." Peter's question could be re-phrased as something like "to whom shall we withdraw?" It appears a somewhat desperate question, of having no other person to follow (NB: Peter doesn't say, "to where shall we go?" which would infer going to a place as opposed to a person). Immediately afterwards Peter adds, "You have the words of eternal life," that is, he realized that Jesus' words (rhema) were spirit and life. In sum, we have Jesus as Logos of the Father uttering rhema or that which had been uttered by the living voice (logos) and which are more derivative.

Although Peter says that we (that is, he and the other disciples) have believed and known that Jesus is the Holy One of God, he gets no apparent support for such recognition, that is, for having stayed with Jesus and having refrained from withdrawing, aperchomai. Instead, Jesus responds with "Did I not choose you?...and one of you is a devil," that is, referring to Judas Iscariot.

### **30 August, Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Today's Gospel (Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23) centers around the "tradition of the elders" as observed by Pharisees and scribes. Here the Pharisees and scribes aren't going after Jesus himself; perhaps at this juncture it was too risky, so they attack his disciples who are more vulnerable. Word seemed to have gotten out early in Jesus' teaching career that his disciples did not follow the same paradosis or tradition handed down from time immemorial. This didn't come from them, obviously, so Jesus must have imparted it to them. Thus the Pharisees and scribes had ammunition to make an attack. The force of their complaint escapes us today because not to follow in the footsteps of one's elders is not just out of the ordinary but a rejection of one's entire tradition, a rejection of one's cultural and religious paradosis. It was absolutely vital in all ancient traditions, key to their preservation for future generations. This adherence to the past is highlighted by the preposition kata, according to, which indicates a close assimilation to what is being observed which here, of course, is that paradosis traceable to Moses and further back to Abraham.

Jesus responds to this accusation against his disciples by quoting from Isaiah 29:13 which runs as, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." The Hebrew of the same verse is as follows: "Because this people draws near with their mouth and honors me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote." This is an incomplete sentence which continues into vs. 14,

“Therefore, behold, I will again do marvelous things with this people, wonderful and marvelous; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hid.” There's an interplay between “draws near” and “far from me” which in Hebrew is expressed by the vivid words *nagash* and *rachaq*. Isaiah's complaint Jesus applies to the Pharisees and scribes which is a violation of *paradosis* or tradition (of the elders) of which they haven't a clue. “Learned by rote” in Hebrew is *melumadah*, from the verbal root *lamad*, which often is used with respect to the Torah and more vivid that the Greek “precepts of men.” Though Jesus did not cite the Isaiah passage in full, only vs. 13, certainly he as well as the Pharisees and scribes must have known the implications of vs. 14. In the context at hand, it's suggestiveness borders upon the condemnatory.

As presented to us today, the Gospel skips to vss. 14-15 and then to vss. 21-3 where Jesus turns attention away from the Pharisees and scribes, asking the people not to be like them. The Greek has *ochlos* for “people,” not a flattering word, noted earlier in the Thirteenth Sunday as a crowd or throng of people which pressed in upon Jesus. Nevertheless, in this instance the *ochlos* was more receptive to Jesus to hear and understand what he wished to communicate compared with the Jewish representatives. As for “the things which come out of him (a man)” and which defile (*koinoo*; *koinos* being the adjective) him, Jesus speaks about the same matter to his disciples “when he had entered the house” and had left the *ochlos* behind. *Koinoo* and *koinos* refer to that which is deemed common in the sense being vulgar and known by everyone. In vss. 21-2 Jesus gives quite a variety of such “common” things which emanate from within a person, thirteen in all. All have their origin with “evil thoughts” or *dialogismos* (singular). This term pertains to a kind of interior deliberating and questioning, neutral by itself but given the way human nature works, can degenerate quickly as all those qualities related to it testify. *Dialogismos* begins in the heart (*kardia*) and not the stomach (cf. vs. 19) which is contrary to the external concern of the Pharisees and scribes with respect to the tradition of the elders. *Kardia* is the source of that wisdom and discernment of Is 14 noted above and which isn't quoted by Jesus but certainly implied. In and by themselves both are among the noblest human qualities yet can fall prey to *dialogismos*, that inner questioning and deliberation when it focuses too much upon the *paradosis* of the elders or any *paradosis*, for that matter.

## 6 September, Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mk 7.31-7) recounts the healing of a deaf man who also had a speech impediment, *mogilalos*. The first three letters of this Greek noun are from *mogis*, hardly or scarcely, which suggests a person barely being able to communicate. Living thus is more difficult than being mute because the frustration is all the greater. We have no mention that this man came to Jesus on his own free will but was brought there by others. Perhaps they did so with good intent, considering such a person to be affected by demonic powers and thus a threat to the community. Chances are this man lived alone which would have made him all the more threatening.

Instead of curing the man then and there, Jesus takes him aside from the *ochlos* or crowd. This term had been commented upon several times above as that ever present throng of people both following and pressing in upon Jesus day and night. Alone or *kat' idian*, an idiom literally meaning “according to one's own,” Jesus inserts his fingers into the man's ears. The Greek verb is *ballo*, more a casting than a gentle insertion. Next, Jesus touches his tongue while spitting, two further gestures which can signify the difficulty of this particular cure or the earnestness at which he attended to the afflicted man. At last the man was able to speak plainly or *orthos*, an adverb which also can mean rightly in the sense of with coherence. *Orthos* stands in direct contrast to *mogilalos*, speech impediment.

Immediately after Jesus had cured the man who was both deaf and unable to speak, he charges the crowd “to tell no one.” It was though he wanted the man to speak and the crowd to remain silent or better, the man to

glorify God and the people refrain from doing so. The cured man would have done a better job at this...orthos in the sense of "rightly" just noted...compared with the ochlos which was more to watch Jesus perform miracles and leave him once he had stopped. It should be noted, however, that the ochlos (sometimes it appears to take on the role of a Greek chorus during the performance of a tragedy) has a proper assessment of Jesus: "He has done all things well." Perhaps they wouldn't have said thus on their own except for the cured man who urged them to speak orthos, rightly, about Jesus.

### 13 September, Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

This Gospel (Mk 8.27-35) occurs a little over half way through Mark's account and gives a vivid picture of Jesus questioning his disciples as to his identity. They came up with John the Baptist (recently dead), the prophet Elijah and more generally, one of the prophets. Only Peter had the insight to say that Jesus was the Christ or anointed one. Usually confusion over Jesus' identity is attributed to the dullness of mind and heart of the disciples though given the way he presents himself both in Mark's Gospel and the others, Jesus deliberately seems to be coy as to cluing them in on the details...all this despite the disciples living with him constantly. After this exchange, Jesus charged them to tell no one about him. The verb here is *epitimao* which implies a censuring or laying a penalty upon someone; another meaning is to show honor. As for Peter's statement which often is given as the correct one and this with the advantage of hindsight, Jesus gives no indication whether or not his insight was correct. In fact, nothing at all is recorded.

After the warning to keep Jesus' identity secret he taught the disciples about his future rejection, death by the officials of Judaism and resurrection. Note the small sentence, "And he said this plainly" (vs. 32), that is, in reference to teaching about the weighty matters just taught to the disciples. Another way of putting this sentence would be "And he said this with full confidence." The English adverb is a translation of the Greek noun *parresia*. It applies to that freedom of speech belonging to the member of a city state or polis, that is, freedom from reproach...from *epitimao*...as arising from an ease and confidence obtained from life long presence in such an environment. Such was the manner of teaching to his disciples which they received in fullness by the Holy Spirit after Pentecost, the first instance of *parresia* being Acts 2.29: "I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried." This confidence of speech got the best of Peter who rebuked Jesus, the verb being *epitimao* as used above ("he charged them to tell no one about him"). Then in full sight of the disciples ("but turning and seeing his disciples") Jesus did the same to Peter, *epitimao*. However, this was a much stronger rebuke, identifying Peter with Satan. The English reads "For you (Peter) are not on the side of God but of men." A more literal reading goes something as follows: "For you did not understand the things of God but the things of men." The verb here is *phroneo* which signifies a value held dearly in the Hellenistic world as through the noun *phronesis* which means prudence, correct intention and sensitivity to the way other people think. Peter lacks such *phronesis* with respect to God but has it with respect to men. That can be taken in a not un-wholly negative way: Peter has an inbuilt way of dealing successfully with men, the potential for being a leader, or a *phronesis* to do it but must learn to apply the same *phronesis* dealing with God.

After this interchange with the disciples Jesus we see the multitude (*ochlos*, vs. 34), weaving in and out of Jesus' ministry as a kind of Greek chorus in a tragedy. Numerous instances of this term were mentioned above, including last Sunday's Gospel. To this fuller audience, the inner one of the disciples and the outer one of *ochlos*, Jesus speaks of taking up one's cross which often is taken as predicting his death. Then again, people were familiar with crucifixion as the worst punishment imaginable, related to treason, so to ask people to take up a cross and follow Jesus was an extreme statement. To follow him is akin to committing treason against Rome...not just that but provoking Rome to destroy Israel which already it had occupied.

### 20 September, Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mk 9.30-7) opens with Jesus and his disciples passing through Galilee. Suddenly the oft-mentioned ochlos or crowd is no longer present, intimidated by the words "and he would not have anyone know it." That is to say, Jesus during this passage through Galilee Jesus seemed to have sent out word either through the disciples or others tagging along to keep the ochlos at a distance. On the basis of how Middle Eastern societies work, we can assume that in addition to the twelve, Jesus had a larger network of relatives and followers. This intimates that although the ochlos does make its presence felt and frequently in an annoying manner, Jesus can hold it off should he so desire.

The next verse (31) slides in right afterwards, is part of the previous one: "for he was teaching his disciples." Such teaching about his forth-coming suffering and death, while mentioned earlier, requires that the disciples be alone to grasp its significance: not just for them alone but even more so for their future preaching in the church. Even though Jesus' teaching was done in rather intense fashion as we can tell through the exclusivity of the words "and he would not have anyone know about it," still the disciples didn't grasp his words. Furthermore, "they did not understand the saying." The verb *agnoeo* signifies close to if not absolute ignorance and even some surprise at what Jesus had just communicated. It's even more astonished in light of his earlier preaching and Peter's words from last week's Gospel, "You are the Christ." We could imagine that after that admission Peter would have taken time to spell it out to his fellow disciples either on his own or by them asking him. Note the use of *rhema* for "saying," a word encountered in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, "the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn 6.63). Contrast this with vs. 60, "This is a hard saying," that is, with respect to Jesus asking people to eat his body and drink his blood." There *logos* is used instead of *rhema*. In the case at hand, the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus to teach further on the *rhema* they could not understand. That led to them moving on to Capernaum.

"What were you discussing on the way?" Certainly Jesus knew but perhaps wanted to know if they had absorbed any of his teaching while they had passed through Galilee. Clearly they did not, for they were discussing "who was the greatest" (vs. 34). Again, with Peter's confession of faith in mind and Jesus' recognition of it, the disciples could have been jealous of him. Note that Jesus' question occurred in a house as opposed to being outdoors. It implies that other people were present within the confining nature of a house, making the question all the more sharp and inescapable. It was there too that Jesus took a child and "put him in the midst of them:" not just put the child in the general area but in *meso*. Such a phrase intimates being in the center of a circle but more than that, that in *meso* is the very source from which one draws inspiration and to which one's attention is drawn. It was easier to do this than outside where the disciple might have been more spread out; the confines of the house forces them to pay attention to the child and Jesus' identity with him.

As for this child or *pais*, Jesus said that by receiving him one receives not so much Jesus but "him who sent me." Thus there appears to be a fading-out of sorts with respect to Jesus, of putting attention to the Father...not totally, for Jesus says that a person is to receive this *pais* "in his name." Despite what we now know clearly as the Father, vs. 37 doesn't say it clearly but intimates him.

## **27 September, Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Today's Gospel (Mk 9.38-43, 45, 47-8) begins with the appearance of an unknown exorcist. Mention of him presumes that there were more people out and about preaching than the traditional band of twelve apostles or as we've come to believe. They must have had some impact upon local society, but it's lost to recorded history. "We forbade him because he was not following us." Such were John's words, apparently more concerned that neither was the exorcist in the company of the disciples nor was he following them as opposed

to following Jesus. It was Jesus who put this matter into perspective: "For no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able to soon after to speak evil of me." "Soon" or tachu...it implies hastiness...is enigmatic. It could apply to the coming death of Jesus or even the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost which will clarify the church's mission vis-a-vis isolated incidents such as the exorcist. Even though casting out demons is dramatic, it is not considered among the more enduring elements of the faith. One gets the sense that Jesus was aware of this fully and wasn't bothered unduly about it, hence his detachment which, at this stage of their development, must have set the disciples on edge.

The second part of the Gospel seems to harken back to last week ("Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me") though we have no introduction nor identity with respect to these "little ones" (mikroi) who seem to have come on the scene rather suddenly though conveniently. At first the mikroi, who come after the discussion about the exorcist just mentioned, appear to have little if no connection with it. Jesus is concerned about people causing such mikroi to sin. The verb, however, is skandalizo, to trip up (to scandal). Perhaps the exorcist was a mikros...small in that his activity wasn't informed directly by Jesus yet sanctioned by him. Right after the very strong words about "scandalizing" the mikroi, Jesus applies the same verb in another context: "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." The same applies to one's foot and eye.

Thus the fate of those who cause skandalizo is severe. It can be summed up by the concluding words of the Gospel, "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." This is lifted from the concluding verse of Isaiah (66.24) which adds the final words, "and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh." Previous to this section we have "And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me." The persons who do this are described more fully in chapter 66, that is, God's people who resemble the new creation. Perhaps Jesus had these people in mind when speaking about the little ones...the mikroi...who are the "brethren from all the nations as an offering to the Lord...in my holy mountain, Jerusalem" (66.20).

#### 4 October, Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mk 10.2-16) centers around divorce, the context of which may have arisen when someone from the crowd (cf. vs. 1) had asked Jesus about the subject. Actually, this is the first appearance of the crowd...the ochlos...in the Sunday Gospels for a while which acts as a kind of Greek chorus to help along the dialogue and action with respect to the main actors. Jesus' response to the Mosaic precept about a man writing a certificate to dismiss his wife was, "For your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment." The Greek noun, a compound for "hardness of heart" is sklerokardia: skleros or hard in the sense of unyielding and kardia. The context is Dt 24.1-4 which is situated within the much larger impartation of commandments to the Israelites in the desert where they had demonstrated sklerokardia towards God, a fact well documented in the Book of Exodus and Deuteronomy. Towards the end of this lengthy discourse we have an echo of Jesus' words with respect to the hardening of hearts: "though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart" (29.19). The Greek or Septuagint has the verb apolanao, to lead astray. It consists of the root planao (to wander) and the preposition apo, away from. Precisely the commandments, with all their insight into the minutiae of daily life, were given to prevent this moral wandering which was mirrored by the Israelites' physical wandering in the Sinai desert.

The tragedy of divorce recounted by Mark stems from breaking the divine words cited by Jesus, "God made them male and female" (Gen 1.27). Though unmentioned, Jesus implies the first half of this verse: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him." The Greek patristic tradition, notably Gregory of Nyssa, saw here a distinction between the singular "man" and the plural man and woman. The former in Hebrew is 'adam or a person different from that of a "man" or zakar and a woman or neqevah. 'Adam was created first before woman whom God fashioned from his rib. Thus divorce can be seen in a failure to recognize this 'adam which is made in the divine image and likeness. Jesus continues to quote Genesis, "and the two shall become one flesh" or attain that singular 'adam. Such a union...more along the

lines of a reunion or moving from the singular 'adam to the plural zakar and neqevah and then to "one flesh"...was given by God. That is to say, he "joined together" (zunzeugnumi) or harnessed together a man and woman in order to realize the singular 'adam.

After this commentary of sorts on Genesis, the scene shifts to Jesus "touching" the children, hpto being the verb. Vs. 13 says that people brought children to Jesus for this purpose, not especially to heal them. The people seemed to have an instinct knowledge that Jesus identified with children as borne out by his remarks, "for to such belongs the kingdom of God." In the next verse Jesus says that a person will receive this divine kingdom by becoming as a child. The act of receiving is more passive by nature, of being open, as opposed to achieving a condition to enter the kingdom of God. One does this, if you will, not so much by seeing or hearing but by altering the capacity to receive to one of touch, that is, hpto.

The touching of children and their identification with the kingdom of God was recounted in last Sunday's Gospel though with a different emphasis. There Jesus embraces a child more to teach his disciples about humility after they were discussing who would be greatest. That embracing was done to teach about receiving a child "in my name" which is equivalent to receiving Jesus. The verb for "embrace" in both instances is enagkalizomai and can be seen in light of dechomai, to receive, used in both instances: to receive/embrace a child "in my name" and to receive/embrace the kingdom of God.

## **11 October, Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Today's Gospel (Mk 10.17-30) begins with "And as he was setting out on his journey." That is to say, the incident of the rich man recounted today occurs when Jesus and his disciples were setting out to Jerusalem for the last time or when he would be condemned to death. It helps put into context the incident about the unidentified youth who asked about inheriting eternal life. Note the word kleronomeo which also means to gain possession. Presumably this man became rich by inheritance, so for it was natural for him to ask Jesus about eternal life in these terms. The crowds who followed Jesus would never approach Jesus in this way, for in large part they were too poor. Implied is that the man, obviously God-fearing, thought he was entitled to what Jesus had to offer. When Jesus put the question to him "Why do you call me good?," he does so not so much as a rebuke but to make this fellow realize that eternal life is given freely, not inherited. Jesus proceeds to list "the commandments" which deal with maintaining correct order in human relationships. The rich young man has no problem with them; he has kept the commandments which were pretty much in line with maintaining the right to his inheritance. If he disobeyed these commandments, chances are he would not have received it.

Apparently the young man demonstrated sincerity because "Jesus loved him." The verb is agapao from which is derived the well-known Christian trait of agape. In order to bring this agape to fulfillment, Jesus makes the observation, "You lack one thing" (hen, the number one) which he spells out in terms of selling his possessions before following him. Compare this "one thing" with the words of Jesus to Martha: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away from her" (Lk 10.41-2). Here the same word for "one" is used (hen), only as modifying the noun chreia or need. To some extent, Martha parallels the rich young man insofar as both are preoccupied by physical possessions; easily the latter can take the form of activity tinged with anxiety. Mary had the henos chreia and had it by way of choice, not by inheritance, for she "has chosen the good portion." We don't get specific details as to the nature of this portion but as with many instances in the Gospels we are invited to make an intimation from the surrounding clues. The chief clue here is Martha's distraction with much serving (cf. Lk 10.40) which can be just as consuming as the young man's wealth.

From the context of this Gospel, “treasure in heaven” is given only upon the condition of selling one's possessions. We have no record of the rich young man's response except that he manifested his attitude facially: *stugnazo* is the Greek verb for “his countenance fell.” Alternately this verb applies to gloomy or overcast weather and bespeaks much of the man's inner attitude.

“And Jesus looked around.” Such was his response after having dealt with the young man with “great possessions.” Next Jesus speaks of the difficulty of entering the kingdom of God if you have riches. The Greek has for “difficulty” the adjective *duskolos* originally applied to being hard to satisfy with regard to food. In the case at hand, such difficulty applies to having riches. The noun here is *chrema* which not necessary applies to wealth but to things used. This shifts the meaning a bit from emphasis upon wealth to having many things, and these things aren't necessarily expensive. In other words, *chrema* implies multiplicity, and multiplicity of any character is the chief hindrance to entering God's kingdom.

This being caught up with *chrema* (its antithesis is that hen noted above with respect to Mary) is illustrated by what Jesus says next, that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter God's kingdom. Camels are associated with caravans, one of the most important vehicle for transporting wealth to and from other countries, so it isn't difficult to make the parallel between them and a rich person. To this example the disciples express astonishment and ask “who can be saved?” Jesus responds by saying that “all things are possible with God.” This leaves the door open to the possibility failing to enter God's kingdom and giving no guarantees. Therefore it prompts Peter to say that the disciples left everything to follow Jesus. Surely he must have had in mind the rich young man who did not follow Jesus. Jesus expands upon what he had said to that young man by saying that a follower of him will receive an abundance of goods in this life as well as eternal life. The latter is located, so to speak, in “the age to come.” Jesus doesn't spell this out but leaves it for his disciples to reflect upon. Success at this reflection seems to come after the example of Mary as interjected earlier. It was she who asked no such questions of Jesus but “sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching” (Lk 10.39).

## **18 October, Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

In today's Gospel (Mk 10.35-45) we have the disciples James and John seeking honor from their master, Jesus. Such brashness comes across as not being offensive because they speak so directly, almost naively. In sum, they hadn't the slightest idea of what they were saying. The “glory” they wished to partake of was a rather vague if not crass idea obtained from events that have transpired up to this point in Jesus' ministry. For example, refer to the equally naive, direct words of Peter during the Transfiguration: “Let us make three booths” (Mk 9.5). The two brothers, along with the other disciples, may have had in mind the glory revealed there, thinking that they would share it as well. After all, in addition to Jesus they would have Moses and Elijah (who conversed with him on the mountain) to support them.

It should be noted that the alternate meaning of *doxa* (glory) is opinion. In other words, James and John were seeking favorable opinion which in essence is the idea...opinion...of human glory. In response, Jesus asks James and John if they are willing “to be baptized” with the same baptism he is about to undergo. Perhaps this confused the two brothers. It wasn't long ago that Jesus had been baptized by John. Early on in chapter one of Mark we have Jesus choosing his disciples, that is, after his baptism and forty days in the desert, so perhaps they had in mind that event. The baptism to which Jesus now refers has its origins in John and foreshadows the second one which isn't spelled out here. However, it alludes to Jesus' impending suffering and death which begins a few verses later in chapter eleven. James and John give no response to this, implying that they were completely unaware as to what he meant, not unusual for the disciples prior to the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The second baptism is destined to be a fuller “dipping” (i.e., a dipping in suffering) than the one at the Jordan, for such is the essential meaning of this Greek term.

Once the other disciples got wind of what James and John were up to, they became indignant, that is, *aganakteo*. This verb suggests irritation, made more intense by reason of the small band of disciples where it was impossible to keep secrets for long. Jesus recognizes the potential harm for such discord and responds with “whoever would be great among you must be your servant.” The Greek noun for servant is *diakonos* which later was applied to the office of deacon. *Diakonos* stands in contrast with *doulos* in the next verse: “whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” Compared with *diakonos*, a *doulos* has no social standing at all, almost holding the rank of a disposal item. With respect to *diakonos* Jesus says that such a person “would be great among you” whereas with respect to *doulos*, such a person “would be first among you.” Judging by this comparison, a *doulos*, despite its abject social position, is first or *protos*.

Jesus resolves the distinction between *diakonos* and *doulos* in the last verse of today's Gospel: “For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve.” Here the verb *diakoneo* is used from which *diakonos* is derived. Although *doulos* nor its verbal root is used, its inherent subjection and undesirability is surpassed in even more dramatic fashion. That is to say, Jesus says in place of being *doulos*, he is about “to give his life as a ransom for many.” A ransom or *lutron* is that which is given to gain release. Not even a *doulos* would be willing to do that. As in many other instances, Jesus doesn't explain what this means but leaves it to his disciples to figure out among themselves. After they have been exposed to quite a few apparently absurd statements about Jesus' mission coming directly from his own mouth, it is amazing the disciples are still accompanying him. That alone is testimony to their commitment, shaky as it was, and willingness to drink the same cup as Jesus and to be baptized...“dipped” in suffering...with him. In vs. 39 James and John say “we are able” which in the context can be taken at face value but in the end turns out to reveal the devotion and substance not only of the two brothers but that of the other ten disciples.

## 25 October, Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel (Mk 10.46-52) is the last instance of a healing we have in Mark before Jesus “drew near to Jerusalem” (11.1) or before he underwent his suffering, death and resurrection. It begins with a rather abrupt statement which reveals nothing about what Jesus may have done in that apparently short time: “And they came to Jericho; and as he was leaving Jericho.” Perhaps it indicates that Jesus was eager to get on with the ascent to Jerusalem in order that he may accomplish the last and most important aspect of his three year ministry. The blind beggar named Bartimaeus was “sitting by the roadside.” Chances are that Bartimaeus wasn't alone since other beggars were present in an attempt to receive offerings. Such persons were professionals in their own right, knowing when and where to maximize their presence just outside the city. After all, quite a lot of people were making their way from there up to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, and they may have felt more disposed to give alms compared with other times.

Bartimaeus heard from people that Jesus was going by. That is to say, he knew of Jesus' earlier healing and wanted to be cured. Even though blind, this may have worked to his advantage. Begging by the roadside put him in contact with many people, and easily he could have been informed with the latest news as well as gossip. His words “have mercy on me” are prefaced by addressing Jesus as “Son of David” or son of Israel's most famous king. They are prophetic of what is about to happen, the Romans putting to death a man who claimed to be king in the line of David, a direct threat to their imperial power. As with many earlier examples from Jesus' ministry, a “great multitude” or *ochlos* accompanied him. Some may have been following Jesus specifically and others many have joined along in the ascent to Jerusalem for Passover...in other words, a mixed *ochlos*. We can assume that this *ochlos*, great as it may have been, was focused upon singing those Psalms of Ascent (120-134) traditionally associated with going up to Jerusalem on special occasions. There we have a striking contrast between Bartimaeus (and possibly the other beggars) and the pilgrims.

Mark records two instances of Bartimaeus calling out to Jesus, the second being more intense despite the ochlos rebuking him to be silent, that is, not to interrupt their Psalms of Ascent. Once Jesus stopped, either voluntarily or because the crowd halted momentarily to push aside the beggar, he asked Bartimaeus what he wanted him to do. These words are an understatement of sorts, for obviously Bartimaeus was blind. Instead of saying outright words of healing or making a gesture, Jesus says "Go your way (hupago)." That is, go about your own business which turned out with Bartimaeus joining Jesus, his disciples and the ochlos in their journey. As the concluding Gospel words reveal, "and (he) followed him on the way." The Greek noun for "way" is hodos, the same term used earlier for the place outside Jericho where Bartimaeus sat begging (vs. 46). He was not entirely unlike the disciples who left their occupations and followed Jesus immediately.

Chapter Eleven commences with the words, "And when they drew near to Jerusalem." Another assumption we can make about Bartimaeus was his presence and witness to all that was to happen during the upcoming momentous week. Yet before Jesus was arrested, he had the opportunity to speak in several parables, foretell the temple's destruction, and discourse about the end of the age. One can only imagine what was going through the mind of Bartimaeus whom we could presume stayed as close to Jesus as possible, the man who bestowed him with sight. He may have been a principle source for Mark's account of Jesus' last days known for its attention to detail. That is to say, Bartimaeus' newly restored eyesight was primed to capture all that was about to happen in detail when compared with the witness of other persons.

## **1 November, All Saints**

As with the case of most solemnities, the same Gospel is read each year, and today is no exception. The Beatitudes (Mt 5.1-12) are especially important as the proper marks of sanctity, so they bear reflection year after year. Situated as we are towards the end of the liturgical year, they sum up all that we've heard through the liturgy. It should be noted that previous comments on the Beatitudes can be found in the years 2008 and 2007, both posted on this Lectio Divina Homepage. Because the Gospel is repeated, focus will be upon the first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Only one other Beatitude is identified with possession of the kingdom of heaven, "blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (vs. 10)." One Beatitude stresses poverty whereas the other, persecution. Traditionally the Church has taught voluntary poverty as a means of obtaining the kingdom of heaven. Thus it has a place of primacy among the Beatitudes from which hangs all the others. Matthew speaks of poverty "in spirit" compared with Luke's account which lacks this phrase. "In spirit" enables a wider variety of people to practice this virtue compared with those who opt for a more literal interpretation of evangelical poverty which isn't possible for everyone to practice.

By adding "in spirit" Matthew qualifies being poor or ptochos which more specifically pertains to the poverty of a beggar. A beggar necessarily doesn't have to be destitute, that is to say, he or she can make enough money and obtain sufficient items to survive even if sometimes it entails theft. Actually, this "profession" can be quite profitable. Still, being a beggar entails living outdoors and in public places where crowds gather, which makes the contrast between the two different life styles all the more obvious. Contrary to some readers of the Gospel, this phrase doesn't water down being ptochos in the least. Going by this first Beatitude itself, one gets the idea that once you've made yourself ptochos in spirit, automatically the kingdom of heaven falls into your possession. Actually, the process is more demanding, akin to detachment, in that it is built upon a keen awareness of one's personal poverty. Such poverty is common to everyone, and each person carries it around day and night not unlike a beggar sitting by the roadside after the manner of Bartimaeus noted in last week's Gospel. We don't have Jesus saying much more than yes, become ptochos after which comes the kingdom of God. Between the two may be a temporal gap, no so much a spacial one, so some precaution is required for each person in order to ease into it. Again, use of the phrase "in spirit" moderates the transition and admits of a number of degrees of ptochos and thereby degrees of possession with respect to the kingdom of heaven.

We encounter a sentiment similar to the first Beatitude later in Matthew, 19:21: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor (ptochos), and you will have treasure in heaven." There's a difference between ptochos here and ptochos "in spirit." The former is strictly on the receiving end whereas the latter does the giving. As with many instances when Jesus speaks about things divine and our relationship to it, he leaves matters vague. He does so intentionally in order to make the person listening to him think and ponder more deeply so his words, like the parable, don't fall on shallow ground where they can be eaten by the birds of the air. In the second instance ptochos "in spirit" is similar to those "who would be perfect" or teleios which signifies completion or being whole. These words Jesus speaks to the young man who had "great possessions" who failed to see the identity of being teleios and treasure in heaven. After this man departed, Jesus says that a person with riches will have a more difficult time passing through the eye of needle than a camel. Again, Jesus puts out there extreme harshness of following him yet modifies it by saying "with God all this are possible." This is yet another intentionally rather ambiguous statement left up to a listener to resolve it.

### **8 November, Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time**

In the Gospel for the last Sunday of Ordinary Time (25 October) we saw Bartimaeus, the formerly blind beggar, accompany Jesus from Jericho on his final ascent to Jerusalem. As noted in that entry, we can assume that after the ascent, Bartimaeus is tagging along with Jesus within and around Jerusalem, hanging on every word he uttered. Such is the case with today (Last Sunday was an interruption of St. Mark's Gospel, if you will, All Saints having superseded that day). Today's Gospel (Mk 12:38-44) takes place within the gates of Jerusalem, significant because we are moving towards the end of this liturgical cycle, three weeks from today being the First Sunday of Advent. And so we find ourselves within the holy city listening to Jesus who in a very short time will be condemned and put to death. Whenever a person knows that his end is near, it is wise to pay all the more closer attention to his words which have special meaning during the last days of this liturgical year. Actually, we have two occasions related to the last days of Jesus: now and towards the end of Lent or beginning of Passion-tide just before Easter.

In the verses preceding today's Gospel we see Jesus teaching in the temple (vs. 35) which was thronging during Passover, the most solemn of holy days. The nature of his audience isn't specified, but given the fact that he was speaking about the showy manner of religious professionals, we can assume that his listeners were common folk presenting their offerings. People of every class were dressed in their best clothes, so it's safe to say that the poor folk were similarly clad in their best for such a solemn occasion even though this clothing was inferior to that of the upper classes. Nevertheless, Jesus "in his teaching" (vs. 38) cautions his listeners not to be like the scribes who are fond of publicly displaying their importance. Even though their garb was less showy, still the less fortunate could take pride in it which would make them not unlike the scribes. The words of Jesus which take place within a larger context or teaching remain unrecorded. The Greek for "beware" reads blepo, the common verb for seeing, which is enhanced by the preposition apo (from). Thus the sense one gets from Jesus is that people are to look away from, that is, away from the scribes as they cast their donations into the treasury.

Shortly after attributing the scribes with a "greater condemnation" (vs. 40) due to their outward show, Jesus "sat down opposite the treasury." From that vantage point he could observe the treasury bustling with activity as the multitude (ochlos) deposited their offerings for Passover. The Greek verb for "watched" is theoreo which implies a closer examination of what was transpiring. The close attention signified by theoreo goes well with Jesus having sat down, for to sit down like this gives extra emphasis to the act of observation. It contrasts with blepo just noted, coupled with the preposition apo, "beware" or look away from (the scribes). Such looking-away-from is also applicable when the poor were positing offerings in the treasury. If they paid

attention to the rich scribes and people like them, they would be no better off.

Among the ochlos was a poor widow who had cast into the treasury what turned out to be her “whole living” or literally, all which she had. The Gospel ends on that note and is followed by chapter thirteen with Jesus and his disciples exiting the temple area. The disciples expressed to him their marvel over the magnificent buildings which suggests that despite Jesus having just explained the significance of the widow's donation, they didn't seem to grasp the situation. In other words, they did not sit down and observe...theoreo...as Jesus had done. Even though this woman may have given her all to the treasury, we could surmise that instinctively she knew what Jesus meant by “There will not be left here one stone upon another” (13.2). Then again, the widow may have overheard Jesus' words and concurred with them. An unspoken communion thus existed between Jesus and the widow even though they may never had exchanged words. If the temple were to be destroyed in the not distant future, why not give everything away during this Passover? Not too many of them were destined to be celebrated in the Jerusalem temple.

### 15 November, Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

With today's Gospel (Mk 13.24-32) we pick up a definite shift in tone...urgency is more like it...where Jesus speaks about “last things,” appropriate for these closing weeks of the liturgical year and in preparation for Advent on the 29<sup>th</sup>. Historically, his words are uttered within the holy city of Jerusalem during Passover, a few days just before his Passion. As noted in entries for the past two years, the transition from one liturgical year to Advent barely is noticeable as far as the readings and Gospel excerpts is concerned. With regard to the mystery of Christ's presence in the Church, there is no difference, but on the other hand, our passage through space and time exposes us to a wide variety of presentations of this mystery. Should a blind person listen only to the readings just before and during Advent without exposure to anything else, he'd be hard pressed to discern a change of themes: the end of a given liturgical year flows seamlessly into the other. The chief difference is that expectation of Jesus' return is put at the head of a new year instead of at the end of an old one. One could say that the same image of Jesus is given, a bridge between two liturgical seasons. This enables us, located as we are within liturgical time, to look both ways or consider the temporal realities of past and present without being subjected to the age-old cycle of continuous deaths and rebirths. Such a perception represents a liberation difficult to comprehend by reason of its totality.

“But in those days after the tribulation.” Such are the words that begin today's Gospel; tribulation or thlipsis (the Greek term suggests a pinching or being compressed into a small space) refers to Jesus' earlier words about the coming of “false Christs” (vs. 22). This constriction, if you will, is made even worse by the heavenly luminaries loosing their light and falling to earth. It is reminiscent of the ninth plague which afflicted the Egyptians: “that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt” (Ex 10.21). Vivid words where the constriction of thlipsis applies yet did not afflict the Israelites who “had light where they dwelt” (vs. 23). The plague lasted three days, compelling the Egyptians to remain in place...in their thlipsis...a foreshadowing of “the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory.” These words are lifted from Dan 7.13-14, a vision by the prophet Daniel in “the night visions.” Such visions the Israelites must have had in their illuminated land called Goshen where they looked all around to see the huge wall of darkness encompassing everyone else. Thus in place of the luminaries which had been darkened and fell to earth, the Son of man's power and glory become a new source of light which had been prefigured by the Israelites in Egypt enjoying light. As for those not included, the darkness produced by the fall of these luminaries certainly could be felt, that is, in a manner worse than that darkness which had afflicted the Egyptians.

The gathering of the elect is done by the angels. The absolute nature of such a gathering is described in terms of four winds, ends of the earth and ends of heaven. In other words, no person is exempt except for that the tiny spot of land in Egypt not subject to the ninth plague's all-encompassing darkness which is symbolic of the

elect. It was called Goshen, first given by Joseph to his brothers in order that they and their families might settle to avoid the famine (cf. Gen 45.10). Later during the plagues sent against Egypt the Lord “will set apart the land of Goshen where my people dwell...that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth” (Ex 8.22). Thus the Israelites were exempt from the angels' gathering, as it were, since already they were set apart. As for the vast majority of humankind, nothing is said about them. However, the Israelites among the Egyptians were not subject to that “darkness to be felt.” They are, in the Gospel's terminology, the fig tree (vs. 28) from which Jesus asks his listeners to draw a lesson or parable (parable). A fig tree puts out its branches just before the onset of summer, indicative of “that he is near, at the very gates” (vs. 29). In other words, the fig tree blossoms in spring when light is more perceptible in contrast to the dim light of winter just past.

Jesus says that the current generation or those persons to whom he is speaking will remain until what he had said comes to pass. In light of these words, the early Church lived in expectation of his immediate return which did not occur as expected which caused both disappointment and a re-evaluation of its presence within the larger society. At this juncture the Church resembled that tiny speck of land within Egypt...again, a presence within a huge territory experiencing “a darkness to be felt.” Jesus' words will “not pass away” like heaven and earth. Thus these words or logoi (plural of logos) are the foundation of the new society or Church which from this point onwards does not have to be concerned with the immediate coming of Jesus Christ. He the Logos is present within the Church through his logoi. In other words, these smaller logoi free up the Church members from speculating about Jesus' return. After all, such logoi were uttered prior to Pentecost or the descent of the Holy Spirit who added a new dimension to the Church, as already present within it. From that vantage point anything which Jesus had said beforehand about “the end” are put into proper perspective. Thus the Church is that new place where the logoi “will not pass away.”

## **22 November, Christ the King**

In a certain sense we could call last Sunday the end of the liturgical year because it was the last Sunday within Ordinary Time which extended all the way back to Pentecost, pretty much the bulk of the calendar year. Christ the King does not belong to Ordinary Time...that is, it stands out of the ordinary...because it is a recapitulation of all that had transpired during the past year and functions as a prelude to the First Sunday of Advent, one week from today.

What's remarkable about today's Gospel (Jn 18.33-7) is that it is almost “too historical.” That is to say, it gives little or no wriggle room for interpretation and lacks ambiguity by reason of it occurring within a specific time and place. Such an account is all the more remarkable in that it's situated within the most theological of the Gospels. Such historical facts keep any theological reflection well-grounded within the limitations of space and time as we move into a new liturgical year and season. On the other hand, the parables and words of Jesus, especially concerning “last things,” give room for his audience to expand their minds and hearts as well as to ponder deeper mysteries. Such was our privilege in the Sunday Gospels since Pentecost until now. For the most part they were not historical and thus stood outside space and time. Even names of people as the beggar Bartimaeus, recently encountered, are incidental because easily they could be lifted into the spiritual realm. However, today we have Jesus before Pilate, a concrete situation leaving no room for the imagination, a fact compounded by the tightly fortified military nature of the praetorium where a brief dialogue occurs between two very different types of kings.

Of course, this incident is not devoid of deeper meaning, for in the brief exchange between Jesus and Pilate, the topic of a kingdom comes up, the reason why Jesus is standing before him, a potential threat to Roman power. Jesus says to Pilate that his “kingship is not of this world.” The Greek has a preposition for “(not) of this world,” *enteuthen*. It can translate as (not) from here or (not) from this side. Instead of inquiring about the nature of this *enteuthen* relative to Jesus, Pilate is more concerned whether or not he was a king. For him it

was completely secondary whether Jesus was not enteuthen or enteuthen, not from this side or from the “side” from which Pilate derived his power. Jesus aligns his not being enteuthen with the truth, aletheia. Those who are “of the truth” or ek (from) the truth automatically hears his voice. Even though Jesus is speaking with Pilate face to face, Pilate did not recognize the truth since he was not ek...from...the truth but enteuthen (of this side, that is, of this side of the kingdom of heaven where Jesus has his kingship), hence his question “What is truth?”